



Report and Reflections on the Children's Ministry Network Conference in Southern Ireland

Spring 2017

Who do we think we are?

Exploring the influence of culture and context on our ministry among children

There are many good things about travelling to visit new places. It gives us an opportunity to step outside our normal working environment to see our ministry with new eyes. There is also the challenge and the blessing of meeting difference, always a stimulus to personal and spiritual growth, but perhaps even more so when that difference is subtle, in a context where we feel we should and can recognise much that is familiar while at the same time there is a distinct otherness about the places and situations we encounter. For most of the 17 of us from the Children's Ministry Network, southern Ireland was just such a new place to visit, deceptively similar in terms of language and geography and within the western Christian world, but also in so many ways a very different place, where we could learn not only about other approaches to our work but also where we could reflect on what that might mean for us in our ministry among children.



Our host was Rev James Mulhall, who did a splendid job in pulling together a fascinating and enriching conference. Through a carefully crafted programme of speakers and visits, we all grew to understand more deeply some of the blessings and challenges of Christian ministry and mission in this part of Ireland, and, in particular, in the Diocese of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, which contains no fewer than 6 Cathedral towns serving this large rural south-eastern part of the Emerald isle. It is a part of the world where Christian identity is complex and conflicted, with roots in a painful history and with worries about an uncertain future.

This important background was opened up for as through two really helpful presentations, the first from Jacqui Wilkinson who lectures in Primary Education in Dublin City University and who is a leading RE specialist for the 176 Church of Ireland Church Schools; and secondly by Bishop Michael, whose expertise in history helped us to understand how Ireland has arrived where it is today and in particular he focused on some of the past wounds that sadly the Brexit vote in the UK could well reopen for Ireland as a whole.

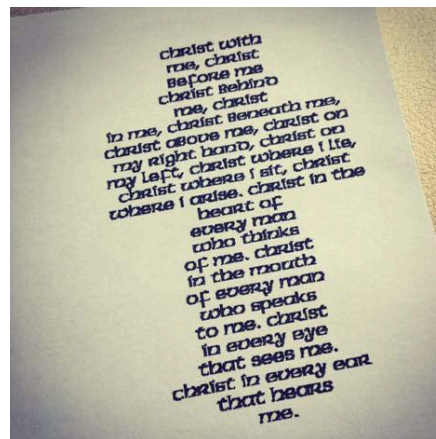


Jacqui explored the crucial role played by Church Schools in the Church's ministry among children, while acknowledging that faith schools are currently under threat from those who would wish to take religion out of the education system. The Church of Ireland as a disestablished Church and, as its own Province within the Anglican Communion, is a uniting force between north and south, straddling the political and religious border which has historically divided this land. It is a Church that has embraced ecumenism but it is also challenged as to its way forward in evangelism, particularly perhaps, as the Bishop observed, because its membership is very small – only 2.8% of the population identify as Church of Ireland and only 15 per cent of this number attend church regularly – but also because it has such a huge number of buildings to maintain. There is nevertheless still a residual belonging to the faith among many Irish people and, as Jacqui observed, this is probably the last generation who still remember the Christian story and could pass it on.

There was no doubting the spirituality of children and young people – something which Jacqui has researched. However, going to church was another matter, particularly with the very strong pull towards sports events on Sunday mornings. The Catholic Church has met this challenge by offering Saturday evening Mass and this led to an interesting discussion about how the Church of Ireland might also need to rethink when and where church happens for this generation. Ministry and mission among children was hugely dependent upon a large army of volunteers, many of whom were very busy and often untrained. Nevertheless, Sunday Schools still flourish in many places, though monthly rather than

weekly attendance by many is now the norm. Most of us in the group could recognise this story as one which we have encountered in the United Kingdom and it led to a dialogue about what we could learn from each other to enable the faith here to be kept and passed on.

On the evening of our first day we heard some local stories of this is happening in this part of Ireland. Although many of us were very tired from long and disrupted journeys that day, nevertheless presentations from Carolyn Good and Rosemary Wallace – both Head Teachers of Primary Schools – as well as Rev Alec Purser and his daughter Emma, were both stimulating and informative. It was interesting to note what innovative and ground-breaking projects among children were happening in schools that helped them both understand their own faith history as well as hear the Christian story afresh, and this challenged us how we talk about faith on a Sunday morning with those who still come to Sunday groups. Alec talked about the success of the summer camps in this part of the world and how it brought generations together, as young teenagers could be leaders and work with the younger children. There was no doubt that this was an excellent discipleship experience for young people such as Emma, who told us that it was relationships that matter most when it comes to passing on faith: ‘people may not remember what you say but they will remember how you make them feel’. Finally, we heard from Rev Jane Galbraith, who like James is a Children’s Diocesan Officer as well as being a parish priest for many churches - in her case 12 in County Clare - who talked about her work across a very sparsely populated rural diocese. One positive message that came out again and again from all the speakers was the strength of community in this part of the world, which because of the size of population in the small towns is naturally intergenerational. This was something good on which the church could build a positive future.



Bishop Michael’s talk on the second day was entertaining and stimulating. He raised questions about Irish identity and the relationship between the Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church. Any evangelism needs to be conducted with great sensitivity lest it be felt that one Church was poaching another’s flock. Relationships locally can be positive but

boundaries still needed to be respected. One of the greatest mistakes, Bishop Michael observed, following the Reformation in Ireland was that the local Irish language was not part of the equation. English was used rather than the local vernacular and this has had far reaching consequences for the mission of the Church in Ireland.

However, not only has there been a problematic past which has shaped Irish identity, the future too is uncertain. Ireland has always had a good relationship with Europe and a 'friendly closeness' with the UK but this is now in jeopardy since Brexit, which could undermine the complex negotiations on which the peace process was built in Northern Ireland. He also noted that children's ministry for many years in Ireland had all been about conflict resolution and peace-making rather than faith-building. All this might be opened up again because of Brexit. Conversations around this presentation focused on how we saw ourselves. What is our identity and how does that affect our understanding of the faith and, importantly, how we pass on that faith to our children? Thankfully children have resilience and 'a bigger vision of the possible' and the Bishop thought that maybe he and many of his generation are like Moses 'seeing a promised land' but not able to enter it themselves. Being with children is being with those who may well see this vision realised.

The Church of Ireland has been slow to break into new areas and it may be that new ways of passing on our faith, such as are far found in approaches like Godly Play, and new ways of being Christian together expressed in intergenerational worship, could be this new ground and new vision. He was thankful for our visit because he felt we could help them see new ways of breaking through barriers which previously they had thought were impenetrable. He was also thankful that The Holy Spirit blows powerfully outside the Church bringing true renewal and reflective discipleship.



On the Tuesday afternoon, we travelled to visit two Cathedral centres, in Kilkenny and then Waterford. Here we heard from leaders who embodied the very tensions and challenges that we had heard spoken about in the presentations. At the Cathedral in Kilkenny we met Rev Catherine Poulton, who is Dean, along with Claire and Linda, who works in one of the

linked rural churches. They still have a strong Sunday School and they are working hard to pass on the faith creatively with the children who come. These are faithful ministers of the Gospel but also people who recognise that culture is changing and that Sunday morning attendance is under threat. It was interesting for us to reflect what we would do in their situation to maintain the good that they have. One suggestion was to listen more carefully to the children themselves and allow them to influence patterns of church and worship. Children can lead us into new creative ways, if we listen to their voices.

At Waterford we met the Dean, Maria Jansson, who takes a different approach to the challenges facing the Church of Ireland today. She has made this Anglican Cathedral a centre for creative partnerships with the other Christian groups in the city and a venue for innovative, ground-breaking exhibitions and conferences. It was clear that the presence of many ethnic groups within Waterford has played its part in enabling Maria to think out of the box when it came to the role of the Cathedral. She has made it a rallying point against some of the racism that has emerged in the city, making it a 'city of sanctuary' where the *Joy Bells* could ring out against such prejudices.



They have put on events that welcome migrants, those without a voice or others who have been marginalised. She feels that it is important to make this unique space a creative hub, and, while no doubt she may have upset some within the traditional ranks of the Church of Ireland, it was clear that her maverick approach was winning many new people back to the faith and was re-awakening the God-flame that had been burning low in some people's lives. This work was however organic and paradigm-bending (her own words) and so perhaps it was not a model that others could easily copy, but nevertheless it gave us another side to the picture of ministry and mission in this part of the world.

This was a rich conference, not only with lots to think about that many of us will be processing for some time but also great memories of our time together with good food and on the final evening the opportunity to enjoy traditional Irish music in the bar! And indeed, we had additional sessions alongside our focus on the context and culture in Ireland, with times of prayer and reflection and time looking at 'children's wellbeing' based on the first chapter of the recent Children's Society report on this topic. For this we chose different



ways to think through the findings in groups, addressing the question of how we might make opportunities to explore wellbeing and resilience among children both in an intergenerational and peer group context. We all felt it was important to help them think through what defines our 'self-worth' and indeed to explore what the Bible says about this. As Christians, we all too often belittle ourselves and contributions both in church and our community for fear of becoming victims of pride or arrogance. We also thought about how we might help parents and grandparents not to buy into 'designer culture', particularly for girls, and maybe also whether we needed to challenge Christian publishers when they 'conformed to this world' by producing Princess or Hero Bibles! Of course, being real and authentic with each other, is bigger than gender, and learning how to be truly present with the other was something we all need to work on



Following our business meeting on the final day, we spent a short while reflecting on what we would take back from this conference. This was set within the teaching of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, asking ourselves what gifts we were taking away from our time in Ireland and how we would be investing them for the good of those among whom we minister. The following brief thoughts were expressed:

- We need to find ways to let our children young people lead us rather than feeling we always need to lead them.
- We need to find ways to enable all generations to value each other within our churches and communities

- We should recognise, value and celebrate the passions God has given us.
- We must remember that small numbers are not a barrier to God's work.
- It is good for us to see ourselves through the eyes of others.
- We had received the gift of hospitality that we should pass on.
- The outsider can often help us see things we have missed.

Our brief time in southern Ireland left its mark on all of us. We were all very moved by the welcome we had received and the willingness of so many people to share their stories and their time with us. Each of us must work out our Christian faith in the place and among the people that God has put us and it was encouraging to see how this was being done in this part of Eire. Finding our identity, understanding who we are and what has made us who we are, is a vital part of our own Christian journey and impacts on our ministry. Only when we know where we're from, where we're going and how we will be sustained on the way, can we hope to have the grace and humility to serve others with integrity and authenticity. It is no accident that St John records at the beginning of the passion narrative, just before Christ stoops to wash his disciples' feet, that he knew 'he had come from the Father, was returning to the Father and that the Father had given him all things'. Because he knew who he was, he could serve and give himself up for each one of us. This is a truth and insight for us and for our children to seek after, wherever we come from.

