

# Local Partnerships

A theological &  
pastoral reflection

Church in Society Committee  
Social Justice & Theology  
Group (Republic of Ireland)



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# Table of Contents

Panel Members	4
<b>The future of the community and voluntary sector:</b> extracts from speech of An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern T.D.	5
<b>Introduction</b>	7
<b>1. Church and society: a new model of engagement</b>	9
<b>2. The Bible as a resource for local partnerships</b>	15
<b>3. Church tradition</b>	23
<b>4. Examples of local partnership:</b>	31
Barrow Valley Enterprise for adult members with learning difficulties (BEAM), Very Revd Gordon Wynne	31
Youth work, Hazel Pervical	33
<b>Appendix: A guide for use in the parish</b>	40

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## The future of the community and voluntary sector

An Taoiseach,  
Bertie Ahern, T.D.

“The important role of the non-profit sector in our economy and society has been reflected in the development of relations between the Government, the public authorities in general and the community and voluntary sector. Nowhere is that better reflected than in the evolution of social partnership to include the sector as a full partner over recent years.

...It is right that organisations with direct, personal experience of the circumstances and problems of those who might, otherwise, be almost voiceless in Irish society, should be heard at the table of social partnership.

...I believe that the quality of life in society, and the ultimate health of our communities, depends on the willingness of people to become involved and active.”

*Extracts from speech by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, T.D., at the Conference on the Future of the Community and Voluntary Sector, Croke Park Conference Centre, 14 April, 2006*



## Introduction

OUR COUNTERPART in Northern Ireland, the Social Justice and Theology Group (NI), has produced many examples of local partnerships in its report *Go and do likewise*. Rather than attempt to replicate or even parallel its report, we from the Social Justice and Theology Group in the Republic of Ireland, offer some complementary thoughts. Our contribution is more theological and reflective than practical.

Local partnerships are organisations that define services to groups in need in particular localities. They use the principle of partnership between the statutory services as current funding providers, on the one hand, and the energies and abilities of local people to provide a board of directors, or of management, on the other.

A general problem commonly arising in local partnerships is that standards and professionalism required of the service may greatly exceed the capacity of the voluntary board to manage. This gives rise to a requirement of training for board members, and for their being provided with a range of resources they may not even perceive they need. Local partnerships also require a level of commitment that many would regard as burdensome, considering the other demands on their time.

The Church is well placed to find people of an adequate calibre in the field in question, and it should also assist in motivating and otherwise resourcing potential board members.

All biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford, 1989) and the guidelines at the end of this booklet are designed to make these reflections practicable in parish life.

The panel would like to take this opportunity to thank Ms Hazel Percival, St Edan's Youth Club, Ferns and the Board of Directors of BEAM Services Ltd, Bagenalstown, county Carlow, for their invaluable contributions.



# 1

## The Church and society: a new model of engagement

*I hate and despise your festivals  
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings  
and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them  
And the offering of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your singing;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an ever flowing stream.  
(Amos 5:21-24)*

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters,  
if you say you have faith but do not have works?  
Can faith save you?  
If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food  
and one of you says to them  
'go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill',  
and yet you do not supply their bodily needs,  
what is the good of that?  
So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.  
(James 2: 14-17)*

FOR AS long as there has been institutional religion, believers have divorced themselves from the God-given imperative to work for the well-being of others, content to make meaningful comment, ritual or intention a substitute for real action.

In our age, established contracts exist between statutory and municipal bodies and the Church on such matters as primary school education, hospital management and chaplaincy, taxation, heritage conservation and community employment schemes, to name but a few. These links are mutually advantageous, pragmatic and hewn from hard negotiation on both sides. But when the issue is not one of mutual advantage, such as sheltered housing, commercial exploitation, securing the rights of immigrants, conserving the environment, sexual harassment, denial of the fundamental rights of people with learning disabilities, medical care etc. the question arises as to *how* the Church should become involved in social and political issues.

### **New models of engagement**

If Christians engage as the ‘enlightened’ with a message to give society at large, and utter meaningful statements from pulpit or press, this may have little or no relevance for those involved at the coalface of social engagement or reform. As Christians, we know that the message of Christ is acutely pertinent to the needs of the silenced and disabused in society but the

sins of religion have meant that few hear when his teaching is preached from some higher moral ground.

On the other hand, when Christians can stand in solidarity with those who work for the well-being of others - as one community agent in partnership with NGOs striving to work for the betterment of people's lives - there can be a denial of the spiritual conviction that underpins such engagement. Social commitment can become so enmeshed with the day to day grind of combating poverty, providing drug rehabilitation, lobbying for better medical or structural care of the most vulnerable among us, that our proclaimed convictions that good has overcome evil, that life is stronger than death, that we are accountable before God for our treatment of others individually and structurally, gets silenced in practical engagement.

Between these two extremes is a route of engagement that avoids paternalism on the one hand and denial of our specific worldview on the other.

The message of Christ on the justice of the Kingdom that is the will of God, needs to be translated not into words (no matter how deep and meaningful) but into action. A Church simply uttering 'condemnations' or aspirational comment has little to offer society. However, a Church that is willing to research, fund, resource projects on the ground that are worked out in an interagency manner will have regained its moral

authority on the social issue in question. In others words, by solidarity with those who are passionately committed to the well-being of others, by putting money where our preaching is, greater credibility is given social critique and great attention to social vision. The vision of the Kingdom needs translation into action and when this is seen to be genuine, the message can then be proclaimed. The will of God is the well-being of all. It is life, not destruction. The Church has a vision of the good that has bearing on society, less as word and more as praxis.

### **Implications of interagency partnerships**

A Church that engages as one agent for change in tandem with others, within a local community, will have lost its paternalistic standing. Thus it will have become answerable to society itself, not just in the allocation and use of resources and personnel but also on its internal policies and procedures. A Church without thorough methods of recruitment and training of its staff, that operates without a code of accountability, confidentiality or professional behaviour, without internal enforced policies on racial, ethnic and sexual equality, that has no complaint procedures on harassment or bullying, that has no benchmarking codes of best practice in ministry or leadership will become open to a scrutiny from society which it has eschewed to date. To engage with other agencies of social reform is to become accountable to shared norms of

structural ethics - it is hypocritical to seek a reformation of society without striving to put one's own house in order as well.

### **Conclusion**

The biblical imperative is clear: faith without working for the well-being of others is deluded. The work of the Kingdom cannot be undertaken alone, but necessitates that with agencies at the local, NGO, municipal and statutory levels we within the Church work for solutions to complex social problems. The message of hope given by Christ needs practical and structural translation. In this translation the Church must face its own structural sin. Having done this, when it takes seriously the call to reform, to follow Christ in the manner in which it operates institutionally as well as in the content of its preaching, will it have reclaimed authority to proclaim the teaching of Christ afresh in a radically pertinent manner.



## 2

### **The Bible as a resource for local partnerships**

**S**TORIES OF both origins and ends embody a concern with purpose - a concern with why things are the way they are, with how they came to be that way, and with how things should be. In the first of the biblical creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, the divine act of creation is presented as an ordering of chaos into cosmos. From the outset, the Bible is concerned with order at all levels of experience – political, cosmological, biological, moral.

Moreover, in these creation stories the capacity to discern order has a particular significance for human beings. On the sixth of the days of creation, God introduces people to the world, created – we are told – in the image of God. Much theological ink has been spilt on teasing out possible meanings of the phrase ‘image of God,’ but the context suggests that the phrase refers simply to the divine act of ordering. These stories are, therefore, not only a depiction of God as creator, but also stories of who we are as human beings in the community of creation: formed in the image of God, with the royal and priestly responsibility (the ‘dominion’) of discerning and respecting the divinely-structured order of things. Thus the scene is set for events following the six days of creation. These stories serve as prologue to an open-ended story: the six days begin and end, but the

seventh continues as the great Sabbath on which God rests and celebrates this ‘very good’ creation.

The biblical writers and editors did not, however, see the unfolding of subsequent history as a progressive scheme in which humankind – since it was ‘like’ God – grew ever more responsive to the divine order. Following the second creation story, and as part of the Deuteronomistic anticipation of Israel’s history, another aspect of creation is highlighted, one that has sometimes been referred to as its ‘fallenness’. Here the key actor is the serpent, the cleverest of God’s creatures, who points out that the forbidden fruit will not in fact kill the man and woman: on the contrary, it will make them wise. ‘Eat it’, the serpent says, ‘and you will be like God, you will know good and evil’. As a consequence of this moral awakening, God expels the man and woman from Eden so as to deprive them from access to the fruit of the tree of life and the immortality proper to a god.

These two stories, therefore, invoke human ‘likeness’ to God in different ways: being created in the image of God is presented both as divine gift, and as an object that provokes temptation. Sometimes, it appears, the divine ordering of things is discerned by violating that order, and by having to live with the consequences. Discerning the order of things may provide an opportunity for some to contemplate divine wisdom, yet it may also present others with an opportunity to impose



self-interested ‘order’ on their world, thereby acting with the ordering capacity that belongs to God alone.

This concern with holy order – with upholding good order and calling into question disordered behaviours and structures – lies at the heart both of biblical critiques of injustice and also of biblical attempts to re-imagine an alternative order of ‘holiness,’ in which the radical otherness of God supplants human self-interest as a source of value and meaning. Noah and his ark of animals, for example, become the nucleus of a new, or renewed, creation after God despaired of the violence and wickedness that had consumed the world, thus provoking the purgative flood in Genesis 6-9. The covenant that God makes after the flood in Genesis 9:8 *et seq.* is a covenant with every living thing: the waters of chaos shall never again threaten the whole community of God’s creation.

To a culture of modern individualism, the biblical texts present a difficult way of construing reality. Rather than individual consumers facing an exploitable and passive ‘natural’ world, the biblical covenants are resolutely social in their emphasis. Men and women are part of the wider community of creation, within which they are called to exercise the royal and priestly role of discerning and respecting the divinely-disclosed order of things. This involves duties and responsibilities towards maintaining holy order, such as those presented in the books of Leviticus and

Numbers in which the role of the cult in ordering social existence is especially prominent.

The best known of the Old Testament's ethical materials are probably the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, in which the same concern with holy order is apparent. Set in the time of Moses and the sacred origins of Israel as a people, the Ten Commandments are clearly modelled on political vassal treaties, thereby embodying a subversion of political reality. They provide the way of proclaiming that Israel's primary loyalty is not to a political overlord, but to the God of the Exodus story. The order that really matters is made evident in the central location of the commandment to observe the Sabbath day, to 'keep it holy.' Perhaps the significance of this is lost to readers for whom keeping the Sabbath had purely trivial or negative associations, but the text of Exodus 20:8-11 makes plain the cosmic significance of Sabbath, in which every creature is invited to participate in God's celebration and hallowing of creation.

Crucial to the discernment of holy order is the notion of remembrance. Israel is a people shaped by the experience of slavery, homelessness and liberation - hence the repeated concern in legal material for the welfare of the stranger or alien living in the land with Israel. Hence also the repetition of God's liberating acts to emphasize that the creator and liberator are one. The maintenance of holiness carries theological,

political and ethical consequences, as Moses' farewell to the people makes clear:

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*

(Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

In the prophetic literature of the Old Testament we encounter the same concern with order and holiness at a social and political level. The prophets denounce the breach of holy order (e.g. Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12), they challenge the 'infidelity' of Israel's tolerance of idols or other gods than YHWH (put in graphic terms by Hosea), and they appeal to the one God's ordering of history in order to subvert xenophobic travesties of Israel's election (see, for example Isaiah's willingness to present Cyrus as the Lord's anointed, Isaiah 45:1-7). The prophets re-imagined life as lived according to God's holy order, and this often placed them on a collision course with those who had a vested interest in maintaining a status quo that was unsympathetic to the prophetic vision.

A similar concern is evidenced by the wisdom literature, in which the sages emphasize repeatedly that a wise person is one who takes careful note of how

God's wisdom and justice are seen in the ordering of creation. This would provide the early Christian churches with a clue to the cosmic significance of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they identified with Lady Wisdom (see Proverbs 8) - the wisdom of God, through whom all things were created.

In the New Testament period, prophetic concern with God's ordering of history had become focused on the inauguration of a realm in which God ruled: this would be the Kingdom, or Realm of God, and it is this Realm that was anticipated in the preaching and other activities of Jesus of Nazareth. The parables of Jesus, for instance, present a subversion of conventional expectations concerning God's future, in which the rich are ultimately disadvantaged, where the despised Samaritan is the neighbour to be loved alongside God and self, and where God is like a crazy farmer, hurling the creative seed into weeds and onto footpaths rather than sticking prudently to the good soil.

Throughout the biblical texts – from the creation of the heavens and the earth in Genesis, to the vision of a new heaven and new earth in Revelation – God's ordering of the cosmos, together with the human capacity both to discern and violate that order, is an abiding concern. Prophets, priests, sages and warrior kings have pursued this order and have sometimes tried to enforce it, whilst others like the Pharisees or

Jesus and his followers expanded the pursuit of holiness beyond the cult. This concern with order is not, however, confined purely to distant, abstract or theoretical terms, but is frequently presented in the political and ethical setting of historical, concrete, human relationships – a setting in which we as persons are responsible participants, and not mere bystanders. Concern for a neighbour that common-sense would tell us to despise, or even for one's victim (see Acts 4:8-12), is invested by Christianity with a salvific urgency that galvanizes Christian efforts to act in anticipation of the order of God's realm.



### 3

## Church tradition

SOMETIMES IT is thought that the Church of Ireland is poor in its history of social concern. That is not really so, as a quick look at some historical experience can show.

The Church of Ireland inherited the tradition of the early Irish Church, which worked outwards into society in each area from religious communities, which were not conventual, formal or surrounded by walls. Rather, they presented a model of ministry by which there was a free offering of talents over a wide range – spiritual, educational, medical, veterinary and so on – by clerical and lay members of the monastic family towards all those around them. Many examples of this come to mind, not least St Brigid's, Kildare or St Laserian's, Leighlin. The medieval religious orders which followed the Norman Conquest of Ireland worked according to their familiar model, common to western Europe, by means of which there was constant well-organised service to the poor, the sick, the needy and the ill-educated. A community such as the Augustinian canons of Christ Church, Dublin, is an outstanding example of that.

It is tempting to skip over the tumultuous and violent sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries as a time when

social care would be far from the mind of the Church. The Reformation, for example, eliminated a vital component of outreach into society: the religious house, but we forget at our peril wonderful works like *The rule and exercises of holy living and holy dying*, published in 1650-51, by Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore during the reign of Charles II.

During the eighteenth century (the age of King, Swift and Berkeley) Georgian philanthropy was a powerful and vigorous movement within the Church. We recall the Dublin Society, founded in 1731 and later to become Royal; the Charitable Infirmary of 1728, later to be Jervis Street Hospital and now part of Beaumont Hospital; Dr Steevens' Hospital of 1733, the oldest general hospital in this island, and much more. It was not simply a matter for Dublin. Throughout the Church of Ireland the weekly collection for the poor was a custom that was part of everyone's life.

Church of Ireland philanthropy was frequently viewed with suspicion by the Irish poor. At times a proselytising purpose for charitable work was indeed a motivating factor, but this did not necessarily take from the beneficial results of much that was achieved. Dean Jonathan Swift, Dr Bartholomew Mosse and the founders of Dr Steven's Hospital and Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, for example, were motivated by com-



passion. There were certainly the charity schools, but it has to be recognised that the Church of Ireland – as the Established (state) Church had a strong evangelistic component to its educational policies. Organisations like the Incorporated Society for Promoting Protestant Schools in Ireland aimed to bring up children (mainly the children of the Roman Catholic poor) in husbandry, domestic service, and the tenets of the Established Church. Swift certainly cared about the poor – but he also strongly approved of the Incorporated Society. For him and others, Roman Catholicism was part of the system that condemned the Irish poor to poverty and ignorance. The evangelistic and downright proselytising examples notwithstanding, the Georgian era was nevertheless, a time of important social engagement and outreach for the Church of Ireland.

In the later eighteenth century, John Wesley passed through Ireland like a flaming torch. He and many others, not least the Christian Socialists, Lord Shaftesbury and F. D. Maurice had great influence in ensuring Anglican involvement in social ills throughout the Victorian era.

Evangelical piety of the sort commonly espoused by influential members of the Church of Ireland spurred many into action well beyond the saving of individual souls. Nowhere was this better shown than in the response to the Great Famine (1845-48). We recall

with thankfulness the labour of so many during that tragic period, not least Dr Robert Traill, the rector of Schull, county Cork who, like many, lost his life in the process.

While much has been made of those religious schemes that offered soup with one hand and the bible with the other, we now know that much unconditional relief was administered by the clergy and laity of the Church of Ireland – sometimes at the cost of their own lives. But the ‘Second Reformation’ of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in particular, its focus on the poorest parts of the west of Ireland, certainly came to be associated in the popular mind with proselytism. To the modern mind, such an approach is to be deplored, but we have to consider people’s actions in the context of their times, and many evangelicals conscientiously believed that they had a duty not only to the physical welfare, but also the spiritual salvation, of the people among whom they ministered, often at great sacrifice to themselves.

The Liberal political victory in the general election of 1867 made Church of Ireland disestablishment from the state inevitable, considering the importance of the newly enfranchised nonconformists of England and Wales to Prime Minister William Gladstone. Increasingly, the Church of Ireland community became in a sense an excluded minority – and indeed self-excluding minority - in more ways than one, largely

withdrawing from influence over local administration and justice.

In spite of the loss of state endowment and political influence however, there was Church of Ireland philanthropic activity amongst the poor of the later nineteenth- and twentieth centuries. A surviving organisation that still has a high profile was the Protestant Aid (formerly the Association for Relief of Distressed Protestants). Imaginative schemes were initiated by clergy: Canon Hayes who founded the non-alcoholic public house: The Crown and Shamrock in Belfast, and Canon Hall's housing utility in Dublin's East Wall area. With the new century came new opportunities for community work, not only for work among members of the Church of Ireland but for the community in general. Much of the incentive for the founding of the Civics Institute in Dublin, providing day care and playgrounds for the children of working mothers, came from members of the Church of Ireland. Alexandra College, a trend-setter where the higher education of women was concerned, imbued its students with a sense of social responsibility, expressed through the Alexandra Guild, whose members visited and brought relief to the needy in some of the most deprived areas of the city.

In rural parts in the Republic of Ireland it is curious but true that the relationship of the incumbent of the Church of Ireland to the people at large within his

parochial area is closely similar to the analogous relationship between the incumbent of the Church of England and the people at large within his area. Superficial acquaintance with history would suggest that the relationships would be very different from one another. It is only upon a better understanding of that history, especially the history of a particular locality, that we are led to see why things are as they are. That renowned portrayer of clerical life, Anthony Trollope, had it to a tee in his portrayal of Mr Armstrong, the rector of Ballindine, county Mayo, and his excellent relationship with all the residents of his parish, according to that classic *The Kellys and the O'Kellys* (1848, or see reprinted edition, Oxford, 1978). Anglicans in the Republic of Ireland know, from their twentieth-century experience, what it is to move from exclusion and introversion to acceptance and growing confidence. That is what is needed for those among whom and with whom the Church seeks to minister today.

This leads us to see how well placed the Church of Ireland is to take part in local partnerships, whereby statutory and voluntary agencies combine together on a local basis, to provide services in a great variety of ways for those in need. In most places there is a long and close relationship between the local Church of Ireland and the community at large, a relationship that operates in trust and friendship. Furthermore the Church has the enormous advantage of sound local

knowledge. It knows, accurately and genuinely, what is happening and what the needs are.

### **Conclusion**

Enough has been said to show that the tradition of Christian social concern in the Republic of Ireland is not simply a matter for Catholic social action on the one hand and the Methodists and the Society of Friends on the other. The historical experience of the Church of Ireland makes it well placed to combat social ills. Indeed it is especially well placed to appreciate the dilemmas to which minorities are prone, since experience is the best teacher.

### **Recommended reading for church tradition:**

The general histories applicable to the Church of Ireland are the most useful source material of this sort. Prominent among these include a Church of Ireland Publishing edition produced for the Church of Ireland Historical Society (see Milne below, and a number of other useful titles):

Alan Acheson, *A history of the Church of Ireland 1691-2001* (Revised edition, Dublin, 2002)

Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in early Irish society* (London, 1966)

Kenneth Milne (ed.), *A Church of Ireland bibliography* (Dublin, 2005)

Kenneth Milne, *A short history of the Church of Ireland* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, Dublin, 2003)

T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, F.J. Byrne (eds.), *A new history of Ireland. 3: Early modern Ireland, 1534-1691* (Reprinted edition with corrections, Oxford, 1991)

J.R.H. Moorman, *A history of the Church of England* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London, 1973)

C.J. Stranks, *The life and writings of Jeremy Taylor* (London, 1952)

## Examples of local partnership

Very Revd Gordon Wynne,  
Chairperson of the  
Board of Directors,  
BEAM Services Ltd

### Barrow Valley Enterprise for adult members with learning difficulties (BEAM)

**B**EAM is a young, greatly respected and fast-growing organisation based in Bagenalstown, county Carlow, providing services for adults with learning difficulties.

It was started in 1993 with local fundraising. By 2006 there is a new, purpose-built centre catering for 26 people. The approach is person-centred. Each member decides his or her own needs and how they should be met, with help and cooperation from the staff. The service is growing into residential and respite care. There is a large project involving garden development and the use of the Barrow Navigation. There is a coffee shop and will be a garden centre. Services offered range from supported employment in many areas to the skills of daily living. Recreation and leisure are actively pursued.

BEAM has no formal church or parochial affiliation. The work of its Board of Directors is entirely voluntary and precluded from receiving fees or expenses. Yet it has to deliver a highly professional service in a

closely regulated and monitored environment. It must work within the norms of the Health Service Executive in every way. It must respect and enthuse the voluntary principle. This is not easy. A large bundle of skills are required for the directors, as is much training. The Church of Ireland is ideally placed to meet some of these requirements with its local resources. The Church's members provide excellent local knowledge and skills in administration technique, horticultural and garden design, and a general commitment to those in need of the services of BEAM.

The chairperson of the board is the local rector, seen not simply as individual but as a representative of the Church of Ireland. One other director is prominent in the life of the Anglican parish. There is enthusiasm and also ecumenism in the strict sense of a right attitude to the whole environment, human and natural. The Church has an important involvement *as the Church*, because of its motivation for the work that it is seen to provide. That motivation is to conform to the love of God shown forth in Jesus Christ.



**Hazel Percival**  
Former Director of Ferns  
Diocesan Youth Service,  
1994-2001  
Former board member of  
the National Youth  
Federation,  
1999-2001  
Leader with St Edan's  
Youth Club Ferns,  
since 2002.

## Youth work

AS SOCIETY urbanised, youth work evolved in the early twentieth century in response to the challenging circumstances of young people. As young people became more independent and began to associate with peer groups, rather than within the family, it became recognised that new responses were required and youth work is one of these responses.

While youth work has changed considerably since the early 1900s, there has also been continuity of its essential characteristic as a relationship between young people and adults in pursuit of a quality informal learning within which young people can safely work, learn and play.

The model of youth work practiced has changed. The earliest youth work was remedial and character building in approach. Adults were in control and they:

saw their purpose as being to instil in vulnerable or unruly young people the requisite personal qualities e.g. of discipline, obedience, honesty, knowing your place, to build their moral fibre and to provide them with practical knowledge and skills appropriate to their station in life.<sup>1</sup>

In this situation young people had little say. Youth work was about containment, not facilitating, young people to mould their world for themselves.

Contemporary youth work is very different. *The National Youth Policy Committee report* (the Costello report) published in 1984 stated:

Youth work must be addressed to the developmental needs of the individual: through social education, it must be concerned with enabling the individual to develop his/her own vision of the future and the social skills needed to play an active role in society. If youth work is to have any impact on the problems facing young people today then it must concern itself with social change. This implies that youth work must have a key role both in enabling young people to analyse society and in motivating and helping them to develop the skills and capacities to become involved in effecting change.<sup>2</sup>

This is much different from the traditional character building model and in fact is the precursor of what was to become in the decade of the 1990s known as community development. It is the youth work model for social change. It in fact advocates a partnership between adults and young people in youth work whereby the young people involved are encouraged to take control and responsibility. It challenges us to build relationships with young people, to 'enable them mobilise collectively to identify shared needs, issues and concerns and to act in response'.<sup>3</sup>

In youth work as it is practised in Ireland today we can see these two models in place. The youth work as

practised by the uniformed organisations and some youth clubs tend towards the character-building model, whereas those involved in specialist youth project work with disadvantaged youths, ethnic and rural development groups tend to aspire to bringing about change.

Our work tends to fit into the former model and yet we need to challenge ourselves and to ask are we best serving the needs of the young people with whom we engage by continuing to do things as they traditionally have been done? Or is it necessary now to be a little more radical? How can we practise youth work in a situation where young people themselves tell us what they want and where they call the agenda?

**What are the current opportunities available to young people to practise youth work in the Church of Ireland today?**

Youth work as practised tends to be delivered by:-

- The Boys' Brigade
- The Girls' Brigade
- Brownies & Girl Guides
- Cub & Scout Groups
- The Girls' Friendly Society
- Youth Clubs

All of the groups listed above are members of the Church of Ireland Youth Council, which is affiliated to the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI). Through participation on NYCI, the individual organisation has the opportunity to inform government policy as it pertains to young people. In fact all agencies affiliated had the opportunity to feed into the 2001 Youth Work Act. Yet very few young people in the Church of Ireland knew at that time that this opportunity is there for them.<sup>4</sup>

Outside the youth groups that are seen to act within the community of the parish we must also recognise that many young people born into the Church of Ireland are now active participants in varied youth organisations that exist around the country such as sports, political, hostelling, environmental and arts groups and many more. Yet while these offer great opportunities for group association and they fulfil a need for socialisation they are not youth work organisations. Their central mandate is not concerned with allowing the young people develop their own opportunities for informal education in the community. However, maybe the Church of Ireland should consider how its youth work can help support young people fully participate with other groups and organisations with which they come into contact.

## **What is youth work?**

The 2001 Act defines youth work as:-

a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is:-

(a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training;

and

(b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

The challenges for the Church of Ireland in the area of youth work are:-

1. To **inform** young people of youth work and what it has to offer.
2. To actively **engage** with young people to enable them to develop youth work initiatives in their parish or most probably between a group of parishes.
3. To build on the base young people have within the parish setting to explore their **spirituality**.
4. To enable young people to develop their own viewpoints and become **advocates on issues** to which they are committed.
5. To facilitate them in building a **sense of belonging**, a sense of pride in where they belong and the confidence to take an active part in the wider society in which they live their daily lives.
6. To enable them to gain the **skills** required to play an active and full part with other groups and organisations in their community.

Strong leadership and commitment from the Church's authorities in conjunction with the Church of Ireland Youth Council and of course in partnership with young people is required to bring this about.

Youth work is a recognised method of actively engaging with young people and in giving them the opportunity to develop their voice, their viewpoint and ultimately to realise their leadership abilities. It is a challenge the Church should embrace.

**References:**

1. Maurice Devlin, *In rural youth work in county Wexford* (Wexford, Ferns Diocesan Youth Service, 2000), p. 3.
2. National Youth Policy Committee, *National Youth Policy Committee: Final Report – Chairman Mr Justice Declan Costello* (Dublin Stationary Office, 1984), p.116.
3. Devlin, *op. cit.* p. 5.
4. For information on each of these organisations and on all youth organisations active in Ireland today please see the National Youth Council of Ireland website at [www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie)
5. Department of Education, *Youth Work Act*, 2001.

## Appendix

### A guide for use in the parish

The following questions suggest ways in which this booklet can help to enrich parish life and make it useful in God's world. With adaptation these questions can also be used in schools or colleges or young people's organisations.

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#### **WHAT are the needs in our area?**

Here are examples. Think of others:-

- Women
    - Families at risk; homework clubs, etc.
    - Immigrants
    - The elderly
      - The lonely
      - People with intellectual disability
      - Those suffering from addiction
- 

#### **WHAT are the resources that we have?**

Again, these are some examples:-

- The buildings used by the parish
    - The skills of the Church community
    - The knowledge that the Church has
    - The history of relationships in the area
    - Our willingness to learn and serve
- 

#### **HOW are social ills fought locally?**

- List the agencies at work
  - Divide the list into those run by the government, those run wholly by



volunteers, and those run by both in partnership

- Be surprised at how many partnership services there are
  - Find out the answers to the above by asking around, if you do not know the facts already
- 

### **WHAT can we do?**

- Become a director of a partnership board
  - List our skills so that we know our capabilities
    - Use our knowledge
    - Tell others what we know
    - Become a volunteer helper
- 

### **WHY do we do it?**

- God's will and Jesus' command
  - The requirements of the Kingdom of God
    - The teaching of the Bible
    - Response to God's love for us
- 

### **WHERE can we find hints and ideas about these things?**

In this booklet there are chapters on engagement, on the Bible, on Church tradition, on examples. Read each chapter. Look up the biblical and other references. Ponder the examples. Think about your local situation. Then go out and do all you can.

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