



IRISH CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
COMHDHAIL EASPAG CAITLICEACH EIREANN

*Researching in the Church in Ireland*  
Conference report

Maynooth  
October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008

Council for Research & Development,  
Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference,  
Columba Centre, Maynooth, Co. Kildare

## Introduction

This conference, jointly hosted by the Council for Research & Development, ICBC and the Department of Sociology, NUI Maynooth, had three broad aims:

- Facilitate a dialogue that is already taking place about the role that research can play in a changing Church
- Build confidence and capacity to participate in good quality research and evaluation, and
- Strengthen the research and evaluation links that exist across the 26 Dioceses

It was held in Renehan Hall, St Patrick's College Maynooth from 9.30am to 4pm on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008. Approximately 40 people attended the day itself with representatives from religious communities, Dioceses and parishes present. The conference was open to all interested in the research process in and about the Church in Ireland. A small number of Diocesan Communications Advisors also attended the conference.

The day consisted of 4 papers plus a question and answer session in the morning with three discussion groups on a variety of themes after lunch. The conference was opened jointly by Most Rev Dermot Clifford, Archbishop of Cashel and Emly and chair of the Council for Research & Development and Dr Mary Corcoran, head of the Department of Sociology, NUI Maynooth.



Their opening remarks referred to the tradition of sociological research in Maynooth and the role that the Council has played in this tradition since 1974. Both Archbishop Clifford and Dr Corcoran remarked that cooperation between the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and the university in Maynooth is to be welcomed.



## Morning Session (10am to 1pm)

The first session was planned as an introduction to the breadth and diversity of the research work that is being carried out on and about the Church in Ireland today. It consisted of a presentation on the motivations for the conference, four papers and a question and answer session. The aim was to highlight new ideas and projects that have been carried on at parish and Diocesan levels.

Eoin O'Mahony, Social Researcher with the Council for Research & Development began with a reminder of main purpose of the conference: to facilitate a dialogue that is already taking place about the role that research can play in a changing Church. Over the last three years or so, conversations with people interested in research tend to take the following format:



- “Wouldn't it be great to do some research on....?”
- “I'm thinking of doing some research and....?”
- “Could you do some research on....?”

In the practice of the work to be conducted for the Council, there is the very practical sense that the time

available to one or two people is always less than the resources that can be allocated. While this is true of almost every other project, there is a pent-up demand for research within the Church right now.

Talking about this demand with others for the last number of years, four themes in particular recur:

- There might be an artificial distinction made between the research that is carried out within the Churches and *on* the Churches.
- What is research in a faith context *for* exactly? What use are the findings put to?
- An interplay between faith in and evidence for.
- Trust and responsibility – trust in our own abilities and a responsibility toward others to do justice to their experiences and situations and in their own contexts.

Eoin stated that research is about a clear relationship between wondering if we could do something to actually doing it. It is in the service of local action and not merely rhetorical but it also has to make sense in that local context. This is increasingly pertinent if there is a real commitment to a Church with more lay involvement. He laid out what he thought an active research network within and between the Churches in Ireland might consist of:

- Sustainable
- Loosely defined and inclusive
- Not just a sociology of religion *or* a Catholic sociology
- Developmental for parishes, communities and Dioceses
- Facilitated, but not owned, by Council for Research & Development



Eoin introduced the chair of the morning session, Breda Grey, senior lecturer at Sociology, University of Limerick. Breda welcomed those in attendance and introduced the first speaker, Maeve Mahon. Maeve works with the Faith Development Services in the Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin and was central to the coordination of a Diocesan project called *Reach Out*.

Maeve spoke of the context for the Reach Out initiative in a Diocese undergoing many different types of change. The initiative consulted with the people of the Diocese and the Bishop committed to facilitating the implementation of the priorities that emerge from these consultations. Over

the course of 2004, the faith development services team were charged with coordinating parish meetings, recording the details of these discussions and established priorities. The aim of the consultation was:

- ▶ to agree key priorities for the whole diocese.
- ▶ to work out a collective action plan.
- ▶ to manage the timetable and resourcing of the campaign.

Maeve outlined the priorities that emerged following these consultations:

- To reach out to the youth, newcomers, and those who do not regularly attend church.
- To make the Liturgy, especially the Sunday mass, alive and relevant to all age groups.
- To assist people in their personal faith formation.

Reach Out was the name of the programme that was agreed for the following years but there were a variety of approaches used to deliver the message. In September 2007, the team

undertook to carry out an evaluation of the work that had been done up to that point. In doing this they were completing a cycle of consult, act, report in 2007, facilitating accountability and carried out a postal survey distributed to over 84,000 homes with a further 13,000 distributed by other means. The survey was probing the awareness of the Diocese's population to the Reach Out programme. The results were collated in conjunction with the Council for Research & Development's researcher and future directions for the ideas were developed into five key areas:

- The principles of the campaign are excellent. The structures to support it are not in every parish
- Continuing formation of lay people to help them take on more active roles in their parishes
- Implement 'professional' standards in the area of employment, training and staff development.
- To continue and expand the Reach out Campaign particularly concentrating on the youth of the diocese
- Faith Formation needs a lot more attention



The *Reach Out* project is an example of how a research project can complement a larger project involving consultations with people and the management of change at an organisational level.

Breda then introduced the next speaker, Susie Donnelly who is an IRCHSS Scholar and a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, UCD. Susie's paper presented the main ideas of her thesis and was entitled *Media Representations of Clerical Child Sex Abuse: Understanding Secularisation in 1990s Ireland*. Susie's paper addressed two questions:

1. What can media coverage of CCSA tell us about the relationship between the Catholic Church and the media in Ireland?
2. How have transformations of power between these institutions shaped the secularisation process in Ireland during the 1990s?

The decline in the social capital of the priest in Irish life and the disclosure of the number of clerical child sex abuse cases over a relatively short period were especially significant in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2005, there were a number of very high profile cases of clerical child sex abuse in the mass media and this is reflected in both the local and national press. Susie spoke of the challenge to the religious and moral authority of the institutional Church as reflected in both tabloid and broadsheet headline formats.



Using a longitudinal analysis based on the 1981, 1990 and 1999 European Values Survey data, Susie then traced changes in personal and institutional religiosity. Her paper showed the changes in these for Irish Catholics comparing them with data from Malta, Italy and Spain. She stated that coinciding as it did with a period in which clerical sex scandals were the focus of widespread media attention in Ireland, personal religiosity has remained relatively stable in Ireland over time.

However, institutional religiosity has significantly declined over time, particularly between 1990 and 1999.

Following much of the more recent discussion on this topic, she re-emphasized the broader point that secularisation is occurring on a micro-level in Ireland and that we should make clear distinctions between personal and institutional religiosity. In terms of a greater understanding of any secularization model for Ireland, the role of the media and its relationship with dominant religious institutions should be considered.

Following a coffee break, Breda introduced Ursula Lawler who is a member of the Presentation order working in the parish of Leixlip, county Kildare. Ursula spoke about the way in which Church documents on education have asserted the centrality of the Catholic school to the mission of the Church. The *Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* refers to the need “to sensitize parochial and diocesan communities to the necessity of their devoting special care to education and schools.” This is generally operationalised within schools as faith formation within schools; this takes five distinct forms:

- A programme for students
- The support of catechists
- Support for the Board of Management in taking responsibility for the faith formation programme
- Support and development for teachers
- Support and development for parents

Her paper suggested that engagement with parents on the character and values of the Catholic school is one way to address this need, as parents are a natural link between school and the parish in which the young person will live out a Christian commitment. There are, she reminded us however, no blueprints for parental collaboration in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic school. In this regard, she recounted two practical initiatives undertaken in her own parish:

1. a dialogue process conducted with the parents’ association in nine voluntary secondary schools over a period of two years;
2. a questionnaire survey of parents of primary-school children in three primary schools in one parish.

In each case, the aim was to develop a programme that would inform parents of Catholic values in education and empower them to act as partners in the implementation of its vision. As part of this, a four-stage dialogue process with parents was organized:



- Initial Meeting
- Purposive Conversation
- Focused Conversation
- Values workshop

What this aim encountered however, was a culture of non-participation by parents in school-related meetings and reluctance to engage in discussion of religion or religious values. Amongst the findings of the project was that education in faith ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the 12 themes identified by parents in their hopes for their own children. Predominance was attached to the issues of the emotional and psychological well-being of the child. Amongst the challenges identified facing the Catholic school:

- Faith issues and multi-faith society
- Youth culture
- Home values and home-school relationships
- Social and cultural context

Nevertheless, the dialogue process did yield insight into factors contributing to this state of affairs – parents’ own experience of their schooldays, a lack of theological literacy, a lack of school choice, and no ready association between the benefits of value-clarification and needs rooted in the social context. Ursula concluded her paper by calling for more systematic research in order to obtain a more holistic picture of this complex relationship between parents, Church and school. She suggested that the dialogue process presented could be a basic instrument in such an enterprise.

The final speaker was Francis Davis, Co-Director of the Centre for Faith in Society, Cambridge and Director of the *Las Casas* Centre on Social Justice at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford. Francis’ paper was entitled *the rise of evidence-based policy and the problem of Episcopal statements: reflections on religion and public policy*. His paper commenced with setting a context whereby the Catholic Church is not in the same place as it used to be. Due to the increasing numbers of new faiths and in-migration, the “unchanging theology” of the “universal Church” raises some crucial questions about believing, belonging and behaviour. Francis raised some additional questions about the Church and the public sphere, particularly in the post-Vatican Two setting. We now find ourselves in a public sphere where Church issues are dealt with by establishing a working party, issuing a statement, a letter or a sermon, these receiving some press coverage and then we move on to the next topic.



In distinction, the politician sees an opportunity, issues a press release, receives attendant media coverage and then move on to the next topic. Francis spoke about the pressure faced by many in the public sphere for legitimacy and the challenges posed by performance. He also asked the question does the fair use of opinions polls realistically represent good policy-based evidence. In seeking a way forward for Christians in this public sphere, he charted a map of the work of a policy maker. As such, she begins with a problem, identifies a time limit and the scarce resources at

her disposal. Very often, the policy maker evidences locally but also looks keenly toward the global for other evidence. Issues of replication and scalability of other measures put in place elsewhere or devised over the course of a project. This is even before she has to measure and manage the performance of the policy as enacted.

He spoke of the work carried out for the *Moral, But No Compass* project. In the UK, there is a misconception and misrecognition amongst the Government as to what constitutes ‘faith-based policy’. When the Churches interact with the UK Government, through the Charity Regulator for example, it is often based on the “size matters” question: the smaller the organisation, the less likely the Government authorities will see you as a faith-based organisation. As a result, organisations with a defined Christian ethos are frequently not recognised as such. To illustrate these points, he gave examples from Ireland, Sweden and Austria. In summary, the Churches in Ireland and the UK can assist policy by building a common grammar, gather evidence that others do not and remain attentive to the conversations about constant change.

## Questions and discussion

Following the papers, all of the speakers were asked to return to the table at the top of the hall and take some questions from those in attendance. Breda Grey chaired the questions session. Many of the questions related to the content of Susie Donnelly's paper. There were questions about the thesis work she is carrying out and the scope of the investigations. Some of the questions for Susie's paper related to the representation of clergy in the mainstream mass media and how perceptions of the Church changed over a short time frame. Other questions related to the secularisation data presented from the European Values Survey.

There was also some discussion of the work conducted by Ursula Lawler and her team in Leixlip. In particular, the questions related to the priority accorded by the parents asked of the education in faith in school. If this part of their child's education was accorded a relatively lower priority, what might explain the priority given to other aspects of their child's development?

## Second session (2pm to 4pm)

The second session for the afternoon consisted of three small group workshops and one final plenary session. The aim of the workshops was to facilitate some discussion of a range of themes related to researching in and about the Church in Ireland. This session was primarily concerned with a dialogue about research and not problem solving. There were three workshops and the themes for these were:

**1. Experiences of working in parishes and communities** – this workshop is for those who wish to hear other, and share their own, experiences of conducting planning and development projects in parish and community settings. Research in this context can be work carried out to guide pastoral planning or to assess local needs.

**2. Research and managing change** – change at local and Diocesan levels can be assisted by a research project. The purpose of this workshop is to reflect on what is happening in the current situation and how research can assist change and this reflection process. The focus here is on research and social justice.

**3. Church and research resources** – this workshop is about what resources for research are (and could be made) available. The workshop will help parishes and communities to map their resources for planning purposes.

The workshops were facilitated by staff of the Bishops' Conference and comprised of about 8 people in each. Each workshop was asked to nominate a *rapporteur* to report to the plenary at the end of the session. The workshops lasted for approximately 45 minutes. One of the common threads from each of three workshops was that of the lack of awareness of other people's work. Many people are conducting research projects of various formats across Ireland but there is little seeming awareness of this diversity of work. It was proposed that a network be established amongst those conducting researching within and about the Church in Ireland. This could be organised from Maynooth or elsewhere and might be a network that regularly meets or merely pools its resources.

Additionally, many of the groups expressed that there should be an interdisciplinary nature to the proceedings. This might be supplemented by a central store of data in Maynooth from which students and others can draw upon.

### **Final remarks**

This was the first time that a conference on research within and about the Church in Ireland had been held. As such, it was an attempt to bring those with an interest in related fields together to facilitate a broader dialogue. It provided an opportunity for those from Dioceses, communities and universities to meet and talk about shared interests and the ways in which research can be carried out in Ireland.

One of the key messages emerging from this conference was the need for a network of researchers with an interest in research in and about the Church in Ireland. No formal proposal was made to develop such a network. It remained undecided if this should involve the other Churches and denominations / faith groups as well. The Council for Research & Development can facilitate the development of a network and many of those present saw this as a next step.

As convenor for the conference, Eoin thanked the chair of the Council for Research & Development Most Rev Dermot Clifford and Dr Mary Corcoran for opening the conference. He thanked Breda Grey, the participants, the workshop facilitators and finally the speakers particularly Francis Davis for having come from the UK. Finally, Eoin extended his thanks to Hilary O'Carroll, Irish Bishops' Conference without whom the conference would have been much more difficult to organise.

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