



IRISH CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

# **Council for Research & Development**

## **33rd ANNUAL REPORT**

**2008**

The Council for Research & Development  
A Commission of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference  
The Columba Centre  
Maynooth  
Co. Kildare  
[www.catholicbishops.ie/research](http://www.catholicbishops.ie/research)

## **The Council for Research and Development**

In 1970, the Irish Episcopal Conference set up a specific unit within the Catholic Communications Office, with the purpose of conducting religious research and monitoring social change in Ireland. It was proposed that the reports produced by the Unit would assist the Episcopal Conference with pastoral planning and programming in the future. In 1973, The Council for Research and Development was established as a separate unit from the Catholic Communications Office. The main function of the Council was to carry out large scale quantitative research projects on behalf of the Episcopal Conference.

This form of research activity continued until 1991, when it was decided that Research and Development should no longer carry out national surveys. The Council was re-established as a Resource Centre, with the main functions of up-dating the Bishops on new developments in religious research and carrying out the *Annual Vocations and Personnel Survey*. In 2003, the office for Research and Development was re-located to the Columba Centre in Maynooth, providing new opportunities to work with other Commissions and Agencies of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

The Council for Research & Development reports to the Department of Planning & Communications of the Irish Episcopal Conference, currently chaired by Most Rev Dermot Clifford. The Social Researcher is a member of the Sociological Association of Ireland, the Irish Social Policy Association, the Social Policy Network and the European Anti-Poverty Network - Ireland.

### **Priorities of the Council**

1. Undertake specific research projects at the direct behest of members of the Episcopal Conference
2. Act as an Information and Resource centre for the Episcopal Conference, clergy and religious, as well as media personnel and the general public.
3. Generate specific statistical information regarding vocations and other data on numbers of clergy and religious in Ireland
4. Provide summaries of recent research in the sociological study of religion to members of the Episcopal Conference.
5. Update the Episcopal Conference on recent studies in the areas of divorce, marital breakdown and abortion.
6. Continue to monitor reports on the incidents of child sexual abuse amongst clergy and religious in Ireland

7. Liaise with other agencies and commissions of the Episcopal Conference, and provide them with research support whenever possible.

## **Council Meetings**

Council meetings generally take place four times a year and coincide with the meetings of the Bishops' Conferences. In the period January to December 2008, four meetings of the Council were called and these took place in March, June, October and December of that year. The Council currently has eight members:

Chairman: Most Rev. Dermot Clifford,  
Archbishop of Cashel and Emly

Members:

Most Rev. William Walsh,  
Bishop of Killaloe

Dr. Darach Turley,  
Dublin Business School, Dublin City University

Mr. P.J Moran,  
Co. Meath

Ms. Anne Morash,  
Co. Meath

Ms. Louise McCann,  
Disability Federation of Ireland

Dr. Brian Conway  
Department of Sociology, NUI Maynooth

Mr Eoin O'Mahony,  
Social Researcher, Council for Research & Development

The work of the Social Researcher is supported by the staff of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and in particular by Ms. Hilary O'Carroll.

## Part 1. Review of Research

2008 was a very busy year for the Social Researcher of the Council. Over the year, further efforts were made to produce high quality research projects and to increase the capacity of the Council to provide timely and relevant data to the members of the Episcopal Conference. Support and information to a number of Conference-related issues was also provided. In responding to a changing policy context and a changing Church, the researcher sought to explore new means by which research is used within the Conference's structure.

This section of the report outlines the main research activities of the social researcher during 2008.

### **Factors Determining School Choice**

The Council, in cooperation with the commission for Education, published *Factors Determining School Choice* in April. This was the first survey of its kind in Ireland and it asked parents of primary school children what were the factors that led them to send their child to a Catholic school. In the report, school choice was characterised by a plurality of choices and not the influence of merely one factor. In all 1,065 questionnaires were distributed, with 254 of these being sent to schools in Northern Ireland. 54.6% of the Republic's questionnaires were returned with 23.6% of the Northern Ireland questionnaires returned. Overall, the response rate was 47.2%. The questionnaire was translated into 6 languages including Irish, Polish and Lithuanian.

Assessing the data as a whole it was clear that religious factors are important for parents in choosing a school for their child but not as important as more formal pedagogical factors. The school's approach to discipline within the school and the school's ability to encourage

imagination are important factors in school choice for parents. It was also evident that high percentages of parents wish to see a continuing role for the Churches in the provision of primary schooling and for most parents, faith in education retains its importance. Additionally, parents choose a school because of the chances it gives to allow their child to progress through the education system. This project was a logistical and methodological challenge for the Council and involved considerable expense and resources. The response to the report was favourable and provides a basis for further work for academics and policy-makers alike.

### **Intercom readership project**

During 2008, the Council was engaged by the Editorial Board of *Intercom* magazine, the pastoral and liturgical resource of the Irish Bishops' Conference, to conduct a readership survey. Building on the 2004 survey carried out by the Council, the aim of the project was to increase readership of and widen the subscription base for *Intercom* magazine. It was to utilise a method involving discursive, qualitative focus groups organised on a Provincial basis. Each group was to be composed of people who are:

1. Current subscribers,
2. Members of Parish Pastoral Councils who are not subscribers, and
3. A mixture of the above two groups.

This involves approximately 150 people being asked to participate. Groups are to partake in a general discussion followed by the presentation of a number of back issues of the magazine. It was intended that the groups will be of one hour duration and held in a Provincially-central location. Firstly, the focus groups were to determine the likes and dislikes of the current readership. Which are the features of the magazine most and least in favour? What do participants see as most and least important in a resource like *Intercom*?

Can design and content be improved, and if so, in what ways? Are subscriptions managed well? Is there clarity in the liturgical resources available to subscribers? Secondly, the focus groups were to assist in the planning to reach out to new groups of subscribers. There is some evidence to suggest that Pastoral Parish Councils are not getting adequate access to the magazine. The groups were to be asked about content accessibility and how might this influence content as time goes on. Previous research has shown that lay subscription and readership is very low. If the magazine is to adequately reflect parish life as it exists now, it is from the Pastoral Parish Councils that some sense of new readership could emerge. The project's fieldwork was commenced in late 2008 and a report is expected to be available in early 2009.

### ***Kildare & Leighlin Reach Out project***

The Council was asked to assist in the analysis of the qualitative data arising from the 2007 survey conducted by the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Group itself. The report tabulates the thematic, qualitative data contained in the questionnaire distributed to select locations around the Diocese in 2007. Respondents were asked to provide comments on an initial rating of the approach that was taken by the *Reach Out* campaign. Most of the comments received back from the respondents were of a general nature. In particular, the four following themes emerged:

- The campaign seemed to have worked differently in different parishes.
- The campaign should get involvement from more people.
- Some of the respondents wished to use the space to convey their appreciation for conducting the campaign.

- Many of the respondents also sought the recruitment and involvement of young people via the campaign.

The researcher worked alongside the Diocesan Group to produce a grounded and balanced picture of the data gathered by the qualitative survey. The report is available directly from Kildare & Leighlin Diocesan Group.

### ***Diocesan and parish boundary mapping project***

In 2008, the Council undertook the first digital mapping of Catholic Diocesan boundaries on the island of Ireland. Ireland is sub-divided into 26 Catholic Dioceses, covering the entire land mass of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. These Dioceses are not coterminous with any currently existing administrative boundaries. No Diocese matches county boundaries, no parishes exactly match electoral or other divisions. Individual Dioceses had compiled electronic pictures of the parishes and Dioceses for their own websites but these remain static images that cannot be scaled in conjunction with other datasets. Furthermore, there was no known electronic database of Catholic parishes across the entire island although individual Dioceses do have static images of parish boundaries on a gross scale. There was a need for a digitised map of Diocesan boundaries and a select number of parish boundary maps. These maps can be used for comparative research as well as the allocation of financial resources.

The Council hired Mr Omar Sarhan, a postgraduate student of Geographic Information Science at NUI Maynooth to carry out this project. Following ten weeks of rigorous and technically complex work, Mr Sarhan produced a digital map of Ireland's Catholic Dioceses and parish boundaries for selected Dioceses. This has been made available to the Irish Bishops' Conference website. As a resource of the Irish Bishops' Conference, it can be used across projects in the coming years.

## **Researching in the Church in Ireland conference**

This conference, jointly hosted by the Council for Research & Development, IBC 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 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.

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.

A more extensive report on the Conference is available from the Council's website.

## ***CIDP school amalgamation project***

In late 2008, the Council was asked to undertake a research project on possibility and feasibility of the amalgamation of St Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys, Cabra, Dublin. These two schools are under the trusteeship of the Catholic Institute for Deaf People. This project was scheduled for the early months of next year and is due to report before April 2009.

## ***Religious Practice in Ireland***

The European Social Survey (ESS) continues to provide researchers with valuable data on religious practice and belief, alongside a myriad of other social and cultural variables. In August 2008, the Council produced a condensation of the religious belief and practice data. In recent years, there has been a steady decline in the rate of decline of the proportion of Catholics in Ireland attending Mass weekly or more often. In the 2006 ESS report compiled by the Council, it was seen that 63.4% of Catholics in Ireland attend religious services (apart from special occasions) once per week or more often. The most recent data from round 3 of the ESS shows that weekly or more often Mass attendance in the Republic currently stands at 56.4% of the Catholic population. 43.6% of Catholics in the Republic of Ireland attend Mass once per week with a further 12.5% attending more often than that. 16.4% attend at least once per month and another one in ten Catholics in the Republic of Ireland attend only on special holy days. The weekly or more often attendance figure of 56.1% is down from recent surveys. In Northern Ireland, smaller percentages of Catholics attend Mass on a weekly or more often basis when compared to the Republic. 45% of Catholics in Northern Ireland attend Mass weekly or more often. More detailed

data is available from the report itself, accessible from the Council's website.

## Part 2. Information and Resource Centre

The Council for Research & Development also acts as an information and resource centre for the members of the Irish Episcopal Conference, the other Commissions and Agencies of the Conference, priests and religious throughout Ireland and members of the public at home and abroad. More often than not, these requests for information are enquiries for data on the personnel within the Church in Ireland or the most up to date data on Church attendance. These enquiries are generally dealt with in a matter of hours by e-mail or return telephone call.

There have been a number of other, more substantial, enquiries to the Council. These often take the form of consultation on expertise or related information in support of another project. These other enquiries are listed below:

- Assistance with a reply to an audit by the Department of Education on enrolment policies
- Provided support for a Diocesan planning process in Killala
- Papers presented at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (April) and SAI Annual Conference, Galway (May)
- Applications for project funding with Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs

and the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development

- Hosted of a meeting of the Social Policy Network in Maynooth, November 5th
- AVPS questionnaires and 2008 survey (ongoing)
- Ongoing support for the Year of Vocation initiative
- Assistance with Diocesan planning, Armagh
- Two papers for *Studies* in early 2008
- Provided SPSS and needs questionnaire data training for *Accord*
- Support for the ICPO post-release survey
- Attendance at European Values Survey briefing in Brussels
- Briefing on the decline of sub-post offices in the Republic of Ireland

These initiatives and others are being progressed for 2008 and beyond.

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