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Journal of the Irish Baptist Historical Society

Volume 14 [New Series]

2006 - 2007

association of
Baptist Churches
in Ireland

IRISH BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

(Founded 1968)

JOURNAL

Volume Thirteen (New Series)
2006-2007

Editor

Pastor John Gault

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ISSN: 0075-0727

Membership of the Society is open to persons interested in the history of the Baptist Churches in Ireland.

The individual membership subscription is £15.00 (€25.00) and entitles to the Society's Journal, published annually in May.

A husband/wife membership is also available at £25.00 (€40.00) including one copy of the Journal.

Overseas members' annual subscription is US $30.00.
All subscriptions fall due on 1 January.

The cost of Journal to non-members is £10.00 (€15.00) or US $17.00 per issue, plus postage & packing

Published by

The Irish Baptist Historical Society

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Editorial

Changes in the editorial and production processes of the Journal have delayed the publication of the 2006-07 Journal. The possibility of publishing a 'Double Journal' covering years 2006-2008 had been explored but was eventually considered to be impractical. We are pleased, however, that this Journal has now been completed and published alongside the Journal for 2007-08.

It is always a source of encouragement when Irish Baptist Churches reach significant milestones and in May 2006 the story of Sion Mills Baptist Church was presented to the Society by John Birnie, a former pastor of the church, in which he traced the history of the church from its beginnings in 1976 until the present day. The various stages of the development of the church together with historic details of the origins and development of the village of Sion Mills and its community remind us that a local church must exist and work within a particular social and economic context and that each church, although a part of the Body of Christ, must relate to its own particular community as it seeks to reach out into that community with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In March 2007 Pastor Philip Brown of Newry Baptist Church delivered a paper on "Contemporary Roman Catholicism." Living for many years in the South of Ireland has enabled Philip to identify and draw attention to the fears and suspicions of and resentments towards Roman Catholics that can be part of growing up in a Protestant community and that still exist within Christian communities today. In addition, the changes that he has observed within Roman Catholicism and the secularisation of a nominal Roman Catholic society make this paper not only an important contemporary document but a great challenge to the evangelical church in the light of the opportunities and need for the gospel in today's Ireland.

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About Our Contributors

John Birnie began his career as a teacher of Religious Education in a Belfast Secondary School . After further theological studies at the Irish Baptist College he joined the staff of the old Irish Baptist Home Mission in 1974 and engaged in evangelism and church planting in Sion Mills.

A six-year long pastorate followed in Lisnagleer Baptist Church, from where he moved to join the staff of the Irish Baptist College as Secretary/Director of Studies and Lecturer in Pastoral Studies for a period of seventeen years.

He is presently serving with Slavic Gospel Association, engaged mainly in the training of Christian workers in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Philip Brown was born in Belfast, converted as a teenager and, as a young man, worked in a company for a nine year period in Dublin, Galway and Cork. During this time Philip and his wife, Lorraine, developed an all-Ireland family with either children or parents having been born in all four provinces.

Philip became a member of Cork Baptist Church in 1973 and then joined Baptist Missions in 1978 serving in both Cork and then Carrigaline, where he served as pastor, before moving to Newry in 2001 where he presently ministers.

Philip has been involved with Baptist Missions either as a missionary or on committee for 40 years and that is still his passion.

Sion Mills ... the Village

John Birnie

Sion Mills is situated about halfway between Londonderry and Omagh, near to the town of Strabane, and close to the border with Co Donegal in the Republic of Ireland. The Mourne River makes its way towards Lough Foyle, and provides a very picturesque backdrop to the village, as well as some of the best salmon fishing in N Ireland!

A 'Civil Survey' of 1640 records the fact that a Corn Mill located at Liggartown was part of the Abercorn estate. Liggartown is the townland on the immediate south edge of the village of Sion, which incidentally was not known as Sion Mills until that name was given to the railway station erected there in 1883. Sion or 'Seein' is from the Irish meaning 'mill of the fairy hill'. The original name still exists as a road name in the village . . . Seein Park and Seein Road.

Liggartown will figure again in the history of the beginnings of the Baptist witness in Sion Mills.

In the early part of the eighteenth century a Bleach Green was established nearby but did not prosper, and was abandoned around 1779. In the 1780s the Corn Mill was substantially rebuilt, having fallen into disrepair, and the then Marquis of Hamilton personally financed the purchase of two French millstones at a cost of £39, and a wheat-drying stove, costing £36. More than £1000 in total was spent in this refurbishment. Interestingly the designer/builder of the mill was Alexander Stewart, who was later to be the Clerk of Works supervising the building of Castlecoole.

It was in the 1820s that the mill became incorporated into the flax spinning mill which still exists today. The Herdman brothers, James, John and George, in association with the Mulholland brothers and Robert Lyons, purchased a 500 year lease on the property, and eventually bought out their partners, becoming the sole owners in 1849. Exact dates are in some dispute, with some sources giving the beginnings of the Herdman flax spinning business as 1835. The existence of an adequate water supply, the River Mourne, had a direct bearing upon the location of the Mill.

A map of 1846 shows the "Old Mill" as measuring 248ft long by 48ft wide.

In that year the erection of the original 'Sion House' was completed and James Herdman moved in on May of that year. The designer of this original house was Charles Lanyon, celebrated and remembered at Queen's University through the Lanyon Building which he also designed. This is the front (more accurately the west façade) of the University Building which by any standards is impressive and attractive.

In 1879 a third storey was added to the mill which became known as the Tow Mill and was where the hackling of the flax took place.

So began the tradition of flax-spinning, and the industry around which the village was built and developed.

A series of developments and improvements during the late 1880s including the complete transformation of Sion House from its previous classical design to the new Tudor design popularised during the late Victorian years gave Sion the appearance of an English country village of the late 1500s.

The houses built for the mill workers were situated on the opposite side of the Strabane-Omagh road from the mill and Sion House. The neat little streets were Main Street and Victoria Place and Albert Place, the last two names after the reigning monarch and her consort. A special step forward in the housing situation occurred in 1843 when all houses in the village were provided with a gas light, the shop with four lights, and gas lamps were situated on the main through road.

Sion Mills was one of the most successful model villages of the nineteenth century. Designated as a conservation area since 1977 the village has been officially identified as one of special architectural and historical interest. In my opinion it has substantially retained its unique charm and though expanded and developed considerably, there is still a real sense of community. The linen industry has fallen upon hard times, and this was reflected recently in major redundancies in Herdman's Mill, but the village continues to grow and appears to be thriving in the twenty-first century.

The beginnings of the Baptist witness

It is nothing less that fascinating to reflect upon the providence of God in bringing together the circumstances and the people leading to the eventual establishment of the Baptist witness.

The Londonderry church in its outreach programme had occasional open air meetings in the village in the 1960s. A couple in Ballygomartin were praying for relatives who were living in the Strabane area, that God would establish a

Baptist witness somewhere locally. A number of recent converts through a mission in the Glentimon Orange Hall were disturbed by the absence of a clear, distinctive, evangelical church in the area, and were meeting together for home Bible Studies. Two Baptist men, W J Hewitt and Sammy Howell came to work in Omagh at around that time, who were to give support and encouragement to those who were interested in a Baptist witness in the area. The pastor of Omagh Baptist Church at that time was the late J C Henry, always an evangelist at heart, and never daunted by an opportunity and challenge to advance the cause of the Gospel first, and the spread of Baptist life and witness second.

David and Connie Aiken had been baptized some years previously in Londonderry before moving to live in Strabane, and became increasingly unsettled and then unhappy with their paedobaptist church connections in Strabane. Inclined towards Baptist convictions, they contacted Pastor Henry, and with his encouragement, began to attend the Baptist church in Omagh. David Aiken wrote of this time:

> *'We could never express in words what it meant spiritually to us to attend the services in Omagh. It was like an oasis in the desert and our desire was to see a New Testament church established in our area.'*

By a 'New Testament church' David Aiken meant a church *'where believers' baptism is practised, where they meet on Lord's Day for the Breaking of Bread'* and which is *'composed of believers only'*. There were believers living in Sion Mills, including a small but stable Brethren assembly, but the 'main denominations' as they are termed were decidedly non-evangelical, and in some cases anti-evangelical. Inexplicably a number of believers continued to support churches where the latter was the case.

Prayer meetings were commenced in the Aiken home in Strabane in November 1970, and a regular Sunday afternoon service in Strabane Orange Hall, the only building made available to the interested group. Jim Henry and the friends from Omagh supported this work wholeheartedly, and the small group of believers began to think about some kind of an evangelistic outreach in the area. Again the providence of God was evident in that a young Sion girl, Sheila Craig, had married an enthusiastic Baptist, Clive Johnston, and Sheila's father Tommy (Curly to his friends) was happy to grant a site for a tent mission in one of his fields at the edge of the village of Sion Mills, in Liggartown, hence the shift in focus and location from Strabane to Sion Mills.

The tent mission was conducted by Jack Johnston and Ian Dixon, Home Mission evangelists, and significant interest was created so that when

the mission itself concluded in early July 1971, Sunday evening services and midweek prayer and Bible Study continued to be held in the tent until mid-September. The believers then obtained the use of a portable hall which was erected at the top end of New Street, and this was to serve as the meeting place for just over a year. Those who met in it, and those like myself who preached in it, recall the gas lighting, the pedal organ, and the stones thrown onto the tin roof by some of the local kids. No coronaries were reported as a result of this regular occurrence, but years were taken off some lives I fear!

Ian Dixon remained to lead the work for six months after the mission, and then accepted a call to a pastorate in Greenock, Scotland. Local preachers, and regular visits from the students of the Irish Baptist College, backed up with help from the Omagh church constituted the basis for the ongoing ministry in the fellowship. By this time the little Sion fellowship had begun to meet on Sunday mornings independently of the Omagh church of which a number of them were members. This was with the blessing of the Omagh church, some of whose members continued to support the work by their constant visits and unwavering support.

In the Spring of 1972 a small cottage on the present church site became available for purchase, and through the kindness and generosity of the late Tommy Campbell of Omagh, who loaned the little fellowship the asking price of £1700 for the property, the purchase was made, and work began to renovate the cottage and make it suitable for meeting in. This was only one example of the generosity of Tommy and his family, whose commitment to the establishment and progress of the work was wholehearted, practical and prayerful.

Help was offered from members of the 'local' Omagh, Derry, and Knockconny churches, and from others further afield and the cottage was transformed into a little meeting house, small and simple, but comfortable and a definite step-up from the tin-roofed hall in New Street! No more bricks on a hot or cold tin roof!! The contribution of Pastor Jim Smyth of Knockconny must be singled out, for he gave a sterling lead in getting the sleeves rolled up and getting stuck in to the hard labour.

In the summer of 1973, Clive Johnston was preparing to enter the Irish Baptist College to follow a three-year course of pastoral training. He was given a summer appointment by the Irish Baptist Home Mission to work with the Sion fellowship in ministry and outreach. At the same time John Birnie was also given an IBHS summer appointment to work with Pastor J A Smyth in the Tyrone area, with special emphasis on open-air evangelism. Robert John Ferguson, an IBHM colporteur joined this trio, and for six weeks the

four man team engaged in visitation, open-air meetings and personal evangelism in the towns and villages on the more westerly part of Co Tyrone.

A report in the IB Magazine (Sept 1973) records:

> *"At the beginning of the month they concentrated on the south of the county. As many as six meetings were held on one day and in most cases a meeting for children was also possible. Literature was distributed and a fine interest is reported. Such work holds excellent potential for the advancement of the Gospel. It was hoped to move to the north of the county in the latter part of the month."*

That summer arrangement did two things. It provided the Sion fellowship with a period of consecutive ministry and concentrated outreach headed up by Clive, and it was the means of giving John Birnie, who had preached several times already in Sion, a deeper insight to the challenges and the potential of the work in Sion, and the possibility of a church plant there. In the event he made application to the Home Mission and was appointed as an Evangelist to the work in Sion commencing in September 1974. David Aiken, the first Church Secretary, in a report given at the constitution of the Church (7 September 1976) made grateful reference to help received first from the old Northern Baptist Association in sustaining and developing the work, and then to the Irish Baptist Home Mission under whose auspices Mr Birnie was appointed.

The structures in place at that time for church planting and the nurturing of new work are worth examination. The Missions department of the Baptist Union of Ireland was organised under 'Home' and 'Foreign' Missions. The Irish Baptist Home Mission supported and encouraged the work of evangelism throughout Ireland by means of colporteurs and evangelists. Arrangements for the supervision of church planting work were designed to include representation from the 'mother' church where applicable, the potential or new church plant, and the Home Mission through personnel on the IBHM Committee. In this way it was hoped that the resources of the wider Baptist family in Ireland could be channelled into the development of new work to an extent impossible for one local church on its own. It was a case of doing together what could not be done as well individually, or even at all.

It is a fact that these arrangements worked better in some situations than in others. In the case of the work in Sion Mills, it was largely a very happy and helpful arrangement. Two members of the Omagh church, including the current pastor, Archie Hanna, two from the Sion group, including the resident evangelist, and two members of the Home Mission Committee made up the co-ordinating committee. There were a few issues in the years

1974-76 on which opinion and/or approach differed, but these were always satisfactorily resolved, usually with the help of the wisdom of the Home Mission representatives who could be and were objective in their opinions and advice.

From the beginning of the work there was a depth of commitment and faithfulness on the part of the small group of believers which was truly commendable and augured well for the future. Early reports submitted to the Home Mission speak of encouragement and blessing as the various aspects of the work developed with this quality of support and involvement. Sunday School work was initially small but steady, and the Children's meeting was at the beginning a shared work with local CEF involvement. The reasons for this were partly historical, and partly on account of a shortage of manpower, a matter for which prayer was requested. Some time later that prayer was answered, the needed manpower was supplied and the Children's work came under the sole leadership and direction of the Baptist fellowship.

Youth Work a priority

From the beginning Youth Work was a vibrant and promising part of the work. This was due in no small measure to the early work and the many contacts made by Clive Johnston in the years preceding his entry into the Baptist College and subsequent ministry in the North-West. John Birnie too had had wide experience of working with youth both at a local church level and in the context of schools outreach and summer camps. The result was a marked degree of interest and involvement in outreach to youth. The Saturday night Youth Meetings were well attended, and included up to ten regular non-Christian young people. This sharpened the focus of the youth leaders and they kept a clear evangelistic focus in the development of the youth work.

Already in October 1974 plans were being laid for the summer of 1975, which included a six-week visit by the group 'Mathetes', three weeks to be spent in outreach in the Sion area, and three in Donegal where contacts were already being strengthened with some believers in Letterkenny. Two of this group were David and Dorothy McMillan (nee McConkey) now working in the Windsor church. It is significant to note that though the planned outreach was by young people and to include young people, it was not exclusively aimed at young people. A varied programme of open-air work, home visitation, and schools work was included along with church-based youth outreach.

'Mathetes' made a number of visits to Sion Mills, as did another group 'Agape', from the Gilnahirk Baptist church, and these proved to be times

of real encouragement and blessing. As well as the direct benefits of intensive periods of evangelism, these events brought us into contact with believers in a number of the surrounding towns and villages, including Dunamanagh and Castlederg, which were to prove significant later.

Constitution of the Church

Initially the Home Mission through the steering committee had envisaged the constitution of the church within five years. It was thought that this period would be sufficient to consolidate the group of believers there and perhaps add to their number to provide a satisfactory base for a church. In the event, due largely to unhappy circumstances in the Omagh church in 1976, and also in light of the commendable commitment of the members of the Sion fellowship, the decision was taken to constitute the church in September 1976. This was done in full fellowship with the church at Omagh, and with the guidance and help of the Home Mission.

Tuesday 7 September was the date set for the Constitution Service. The preacher was Pastor J C Henry whose involvement and input at the beginnings of the work had been so influential and encouraging. My personal memories are of a beautiful warm early autumn evening, which was just as well, since there was no way of the little cottage housing the very many friends who gathered for the service. The 'overflow' congregated outside in what had been the cottage garden, and through the open windows were able to follow and be involved in the service.

Twenty-one members signed the church covenant and constitution as founder members of the church. One unusual feature is worth noting. One of the founder members, and a 'father in Israel' to the little fellowship, was Jim Dougan. Jim had been converted from a life of alcoholism. He had often slept in the open air or in the 'doss-houses' in London, financing his lifestyle through his dangerous work in bridge construction. Jim's testimony in the village and beyond was exemplary. The change in his life was remarkable and many said that if God could change him, He could change anyone!

Jim had undergone a routine hip operation in the first week of September and it was decided that he should be the first to sign the membership roll of the new church. So on the morning of the service of constitution John Birnie visited him in hospital and witnessed his signature as the first founder member of the Sion Mills Baptist Church. Sadly, on the following Thursday morning early, Jim died in hospital from a blood clot. So the first week of existence of the new church was a mixture of joy

and sadness. In a strange way I think the members of the Sion Church saw that Jim's work was done. He had been such an enthusiast and such an encourager from the very beginning, and his spiritual knowledge and maturity was remarkable for a man who had spent most of his years far away from God. A communion table in memory of Jim's life and service to the work was later purchased by the church.

Appointment of office-bearers

At the first church meeting held on 2 December 1976 Mr John Birnie was recognised as a church elder. Arrangements were also made for the election of one more elder and two deacons at a meeting to be held on 5th January 1977. At that meeting Mr David Aiken was elected elder and Mr Ivor Lucas and Mr David Wolfe were elected deacons. David Aiken was also elected to serve as Secretary of the church, and Ivor Lucas as Treasurer.

Other items on the agenda of the earliest church meetings included preliminary discussions about an evangelistic mission, later finalised for October 1977; the possibility of buying or building a manse; and the upkeep and repair of the cottage in which the church met. The minute book reports that by the end of May 1978 the purchase of a manse at 41 Laurel Drive, Strabane had been agreed.

On 20 February 1977 the church agreed to apply formally for membership of the Baptist Union of Ireland.

Evangelistic outreach, conversions, baptisms and additions

Over the next few years many man hours were spent in various forms of evangelistic outreach. Regular home visitation was a large part of John Birnie's activities and in this he was often assisted by members of the small congregation as and when they were able. In the late spring and summer months open air meetings were held regularly (at least twice a week), not only in Sion Mills itself, but also in a number of villages round about ... including the various 'bridges': Victoria Bridge, Douglas Bridge, Crew Bridge, Plumbridge. Ballymagorry, Artigarvan and Donemana were part of that regular programme, and occasionally outreach was also done in Newtownstewart and Castlederg. Camus and the Glebe, outlying small housing schemes were also visited on a regular basis.

Open air meetings were also held in Strabane near the Market yard when we had the help of the singing groups Mathetes and Agape.

These attracted significant attention on Friday morning market days, and many useful conversations were held with people from both sides of the border. Regular visitation was also carried out in these places, with mixed reception at times. One outlandish action was experienced by John in the village pub in Plumbridge. He had asked permission to distribute leaflets to the patrons, and was allowed. Having given a leaflet to one man who was in Ulster parlance 'a bit the worse for wear', he watched in amazement as this man ate the tract! Waiting until he had finished, John then offered another in its place! He didn't attempt a second snack!

Although there was little evident fruit from all this direct outreach activity, the church began to grow numerically. The original group of fifteen had been supplemented over the years 1974-76 so that there were twenty-one founder members. The members present at the church meeting in November 1977 were asked to pray for a series of Baptism and Church Membership classes which were being held on Sunday evenings after the evening service.

This resulted in the first of a number of outdoor baptismal services in the River Mourne near the Mill building, held on 28 May 1978. Mr Birnie preached to a large gathering on the river bank, estimated in his report to be about two hundred, and including many unbelievers from the village. Five young people who had professed faith were baptised on that occasion and on 4th June six were received into membership, one having already been baptised.

A further service was held at the same spot at the river on Wednesday 19 July 1978. On that Occasion Mr Clive Johnstone was the preacher, and Mr Birnie baptised two more young people who were received into membership on 8 October 1978.

The next baptismal service was conducted in the Omagh Church building on 28 January 1979 in fellowship with the friends there. Five were baptised on that occasion and were received into membership of the Sion church on 11 February following.

Evangelistic missions and events were held at regular intervals in the Sion church building and in portable halls in a number of other places, including Drumquin and Newtownstewart. There was an annual visit of a BYE team from Baptist Youth, and a great deal of valuable work was done during the times that those teams were in operation. A Holiday Bible School was the focal point of summer outreach each year, but before and after the regular pattern of open air meetings and visitation was carried on. The church sometimes conducted three open air meetings each week in Sion and other villages, as well as the regular meetings of the church.

A number of baptisms over the years were also conducted in the sea at Castlerock, Rathmullan, Co Donegal and Rossnowlagh. These were always valuable opportunities for witness and a means of encouragement not only to the Sion church but to many Christian friends from other places who joined them on those occasions.

Church Building

From the beginning of the work it was recognised that the cottage purchased and renovated to some extent, could not provide a long-term meeting place for the church. The decision had been taken to first find a manse, and when that had been achieved in 1979 thoughts naturally turned to the provision of a more suitable meeting place.

The formal decision to erect a new building was taken at a church meeting held on 22 November 1978. Initial drawings were requested and these were eventually presented to and accepted by the church in October 1979. Detailed plans for submission to the planning authorities were subsequently prepared and building work began in January 1981. Mr Birnie's report for that month includes the following:

> *"As I write this report the mechanical diggers are busy down the road in Sion. Our building project has begun. Already after just one and a half days work, the digging of the foundations is well on the way to completion, and we expect to see the bricks rising next week, in the will of God."*

The building was completed and officially opened in the first weekend of September 1981, and the enhanced facilities and extra space were soon put to effective and busy use.

The first baptismal service in the new building took place on 14th February 1982, when four were baptised and, along with one other young man already baptised, were received into membership of the church. The report to the IBHM for that month indicates that there were . . .

> *". . . over one hundred present in the congregation including about a dozen of our Thursday night Youth Club lads and a good number of other unsaved visitors."*

There is one interesting reflection worthy of consideration at this point. I had always considered the matter of 'bricks and mortar' of relatively minor significance in the life of the church, maintaining that the church is the people, and that the meeting place makes little difference to the church's life and witness. My experience subsequent to the erection of the new building in Sion pointed me in a different direction. Although it made little difference to

the believers where they met, it was of immense significance to the people of the village generally, for several reasons:

◊ The investment in bricks and mortar signalled that the Baptists were here to stay;

◊ The sacrificial giving on the part of the small group to be able to erect its own building was not lost on some;

◊ The Baptists had a 'proper church' (ie building);

◊ Consequently there was more of a willingness on the part of some to come to meetings.

The first bomb

In the providence of God the 'bricks and mortar' issues were to have an even greater impact upon the people of the village, as well as to the members and friends of the church. David Aiken, the church secretary recorded the following in the minute book:

> *"On Thursday morning around 9.30am on the 27 January 1983 a car bomb which had been placed outside the Police Barracks detonated causing extensive damage to the church building. We are thankful to say that no-one was injured in this explosion. Our God will undertake as He has in the past."*

I remember that morning vividly pacing back and forward behind the police line, straining to see what damage had been caused, hopeful because things from a distance did not seem to be too serious, and eventually hurrying inside the building when given permission by the police. The sight which met us was heart-breaking. Parts of the outer and inner doors were to be found inside the building and outside in the car park, such was the force and shock pattern of the bomb. The suspended ceiling was down; all the windows were broken and many of the window frames. But worst of all was a series of serious cracks around the walls of the building. Those with more expertise than me, were downbeat in their assessment of the damage. Their fears were well founded, and it transpired that the building had to be razed to the ground and almost entirely rebuilt.

'Where is Romans 8:28 in all this?' That was the question which refused to go away in those first hours and days after the explosion. However it is remarkable how, with hindsight, one sees the hand of God in even the most destructive of circumstances. The weeks and months which followed showed

the Sion church that God was very much in control.

◊ There was a wave of sympathy on the part of the people of the village, across the community divide which resulted in a warmer reception at many homes during subsequent periods of visitation. The local mill, Herdman's, put their workers' dining room at our disposal until we were able to put a temporary building in place.

◊ There was a volume of prayer support from friends and believers across the world, which ensured that the real work flourished even in the wake of the destructiveness we had witnessed.

◊ There was unexpected and generous financial support also from across the world, due to coverage in the media and in particular an article written by H M Carson for the Evangelical Times telling the story of the Sion church. We had financial gifts from India, from Tasmania, from Canada and America, as well as nearer home.

◊ There was the fresh realisation on the part of the Sion Mills church that people were infinitely more important than buildings. The fact that no-one was injured or killed in the bombing was a cause for great thanksgiving to God, and the means of re-focussing the minds of the church members on what was of ultimate importance.

◊ The opportunity to rebuild allowed us to make a few beneficial adjustments to the building, eg the replacement of the suspended ceiling with one of solid wood, a help to both appearance and acoustics!

The end of the first decade

At a church meeting held on the 21 September 1982 the members issued a call to John Birnie to the pastorate of the church. With help from what was then known as the Tithe Fund, the church was encouraged to call and support its own pastor. John responded positively to that call in November, and subsequently resigned from the staff of the Home Mission.

The reinstated building was opened in September 1983, and two new church members were received at the opening service. There were, however, subtractions, as well as additions. Several members had moved away and were attending other churches; several others were in a backslidden state and did not respond to pastoral counselling. The church took the decision to remove such from the membership after repeated unsuccessful attempts to reclaim them.

I think it is fair to say that the church at Sion Mills over these years was both gentle and firm in handling matters of discipline. High standards were

set regarding church membership from the beginning, and every attempt was made to keep to those standards, while at the same time recognising that all believers have peaks and troughs in their Christian experience, and in the low times need to be treated with gentleness and patience. To what extent the balance was struck will have to await the day of judgement!

A new phase in the work

The work in Sion had entered a consolidation period. The minute book shows that there was a steady, if unspectacular growth through conversions and baptisms, and a strengthening of the church base both spiritually and numerically. It is also true that a number of members were lost, some due to move of location, but others because of spiritual coldness and backsliding. There was no room for complacency, and to their credit the church members did not succumb to that. Evangelistic vision and involvement remained as the highest of priorities, and with the annual help of BYE teams and other groups of interested friends and supporters, summer outreach activity in particular was concentrated and intense.

May 1984 signalled a new phase in the work. The minute book records the following:

> *"On Sunday 27 May there was a special meeting of the members after the morning service. Pastor Birnie intimated that he had received a unanimous call from the membership of the Lisnagleer Church to take up the pastorate there. He asked for prayer and sympathetic consideration at this time that he might know God's will."*

Subsequently, a letter was read to the church meeting held on 26 June in which he indicated that he had responded positively to that call. The first Sunday of September, Anniversary Sunday in the Sion church, was to be the date of Mr Birnie's farewell services.

The church lost no time in beginning to plan for the vacancy, and at that meeting arrangements were made to invite college students to preach during the vacancy. Members were asked to prayerfully suggest names of possible candidates for the pastorate to the church leaders, and to prayerfully remember the Birnie family as they made preparations for this move.

In the providence of God a number of church members had suggested a name which was also very much to the fore in the minds of the church office-bearers, and happily the approach to Pastor Clive Johnston, then ministering in Eldorado, Texas, met with an affirmative reply, and a happy re-uniting with

an 'old friend' of the Sion work, was eagerly anticipated. The next period in the life of the Sion church was to prove eventful and exciting, and is a story in its own right, to be told at some later date.

Other church planting involvement

The late 1970s proved to be a fruitful period in the North-West of Ulster. A number of factors, humanly speaking, contributed to that. These could be summarised as follows:

◊ the commitment to evangelism and the vision of a number of the pastors in Co Tyrone

◊ the willingness of the IBHM to get involved at an early stage in the work in Sion Mills, Letterkenny, and Castlederg

◊ the support and co-operation of the old Northern Baptist Association under whose auspices relevant and useful literature was produced for distribution

◊ the sheer volume of evangelistic work undertaken by the Home Mission evangelists

◊ the wholehearted and generous support of the Home Mission Committee (as it then was) whose members were not imprisoned behind desks, but got out 'into the field' to see and share in what was happening

The Sion Mills church had the joy and privilege of entering into and being involved in a wider programme of evangelism and church planting, the account of which can only be given in the briefest form here.

Letterkenny

From early on in the witness in Sion Mills, there were links across the border into Donegal. Clive Johnston had established contact with a small group of believers who ran a bookshop and outreach in Letterkenny, and the Sion Mills young people willingly involved themselves with John in assisting at outreach events. The Letterkenny Folk Festival attracted many visitors to the town, and open air meetings and street contact work were carried on sometimes into the early hours of the morning by the believers. The monthly reports of the work in Sion often alluded to the help given by the Sion Mills young people in particular to the friends in Letterkenny, as they engaged in regular outreach in the town.

This interest and involvement with Clive and the Letterkenny group continued

over a number of years, and was further developed some years later when John Shearer was also appointed to work initially in Donegal town and later in Letterkenny. An American Baptist, Rick Markham, was also at work with a small group of believers in Creeslough and for a number of years Clive, Rick, and the two Johns engaged in team outreach work, alternating between the different centres of witness on both sides of the border. In this way the church in Sion had an interest in and made a contribution to the eventual planting of a Baptist witness in Letterkenny.

Castlederg

In 1978 a young man from Castlederg, David McAnirn, joined the church. His family had been involved for many years in outreach work in that town and David encouraged the church to become more involved in outreach to Castlederg. Each summer we had engaged in visitation and open air work, but the possibility of establishing a more permanent witness in the town developed. In March 1979 this was first reported to the Home Mission Committee in outline terms, and more regular visitation in the town was undertaken. Several believers from Castelderg began to attend Sunday morning services in Sion, and so the links of fellowship were strengthened.

In April 1980 a two week series of teaching meetings were held in the Missionary Centre. John Birnie was assisted by Clive Johnston and John Shearer, and the NT teaching on the church was presented in detail. Afterwards, according to the monthly report to the Home Mission Committee:

> *". . . a decision was taken in light of a definite interest in a future Baptist work in the town, to commence a weekly Bible Study meeting. A home has been kindly opened to us and in the first number of weeks of the Bible Study we have been greatly encouraged by the extent of the interest."*

With help and support from a newly elected deacon of the Sion church, Ian Aiken, and other members who attended from time to time, John Birnie conducted these weekly Bible studies, and the links of fellowship continued to be strengthened. The possibility of a church plant was always in the minds of the Sion church and in 1982 a plot of ground was bought for £6000, backed by interest free loans and the financial support of a Christian businessman. The NBA had purchased a portable classroom and were willing to erect it on the site for use as a meeting place. The church planting possibility was also recognised by the Home Mission who appointed Winston Jordan to the work there in 1982, and so another story was begun which bears telling in its own right. Suffice to say that the Castlederg church has developed and been

strengthened and continues its own invaluable work today both in the town itself, and, interestingly, reaching across the border into Donegal.

Donemana

In the late 1970s a number of believers from Donemana became acutely unhappy with their membership of one of the established churches in the village. There was a deep feeling of estrangement because of markedly anti-evangelical activity, and these believers felt constrained to withdraw. They began to attend the services in Sion Mills on a regular basis, and receive some spiritual help and support. Donemana had always been a part of the 'circuit' of villages visited by the Sion church members and open air meetings were held regularly during the summer months. Fellowship links were strengthened and help was given where possible as this little group sought the way forward for witness in their own village.

Not all were convinced Baptists, and although they deeply appreciated the fellowship and support of the Sion church, at that time they felt they could not establish a Baptist witness. A church was constituted in 1978, and affiliated itself to the FIEC whose support base was in England. With the passing of time, the Donemana church declared itself a Baptist church and joined the then Baptist Union of Ireland, while still retaining its FIEC links . . . the only church in Ireland with such!

In this way the Sion Mills church played a part in the planting of the Baptist witness in Donemana.

Lessons to be learned?

Partnership If ever there was a recommendation for the churches working together in partnership, it is to be found here. What one church could never have accomplished on its own, was accomplished under God, in partnership with the churches of the Union as it then was. The Irish Baptist Home Mission, Northern Baptist Association, Baptist Youth's BYE teams, the input of neighbouring churches such as Omagh and Knockconny and their pastors; the willingness of young people and others from our churches to come at their own expense and spend time and effort in the summer months . . . all of these were vital features of the outreach in this area at this period of time.

Teamwork The privilege and joy of working together in a team of eventually four full-time Christian workers was immense. And it was

profoundly encouraging and effective. The ground covered from North Donegal south to Donegal town, and on this side of the border around the area of Strabane, as far as New Buildings to the north, Newtownstewart to the south, and Castlederg to the west, would have been impossible without such teamwork. In the early 1980s it proved itself again as Winston Jordan and John Birnie co-operated regularly in outreach.

Evangelism the priority J C Henry gave the new 'greenhorn evangelist' John Birnie one piece of advice never to be forgotten: 'Never fail to keep a sharp evangelistic edge to your ministry!' It was advice which was to be proved authentic and effective, not only in the case of Sion Mills and the establishment of the work there, but in the wider context also. If the methods used then are considered less effective or ineffective today, then it is the responsibility of the churches to find other ways of effectively reaching into their communities . . . ways which respect Gospel principles and at the same time touch and confront people with eternal issues. It remains true also that pastors must 'do the work of an evangelist'. In all their busy-ness they must never neglect this.

Hard work While it is true that all the human effort in the world without the blessing and power of the Holy Spirit is useless, it is also true that God does not bless sloth! Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved cheaply, and in the work of the Gospel consistent and persistent Spirit-directed effort is absolutely imperative. The labours of our Lord during his earthly ministry were demanding in the extreme. One can only imagine the depth and quality of effort applied by the Apostle Paul and his team of co-workers as they preached and discipled and planted churches. The work of the Christian ministry is no '9-to-5' employment. It is a calling which demands sacrificial application and commitment, and should only be entered into when the full implications of this are appreciated by both the Christian worker and his/her family.

Local church with a larger than local vision The small band of founder members of the Sion Mills church had a vision which reached beyond the boundaries of their own village. To their credit they took the Jerusalem-Judaea-Samaria pattern seriously, so that the surrounding towns, villages and housing settlements became their 'parish' and their responsibility to evangelise. The church was later to have the joy of adding an 'ends-of-the-earth' dimension when it commissioned one of its members, Julie Curtis (nee Browne) to Baptist Missions work in Europe (France).

Contemporary Catholicism

Philip Brown

At the recent debate over the political implications of the England-Ireland rugby match in Croke Park, the commentator said that the Irish never forget their history and the English never learn from it.

John Shearer, at a recent Pastor's conference, said, and I give the gist of it. "If you keep one eye on the past you will be blind in one eye. If you do not look back you will be blind in both eyes"

There are elements of truth in that statement which affect us also. In order to understand the present and make plans for the future we must learn from the past.

In this paper I will be using commonly understood terms like Church and Catholic. These words are for convenience and are not meant as theological understandings.

Short personal history

I was converted in Belfast during the mid-sixties and fairly soon afterwards was involved in attempts to reach people from a Roman Catholic background. I remember forays into "black and dark" Dundalk for open air meetings. We gathered as a small group feeling like spiritual SAS troops operating in enemy territory. We felt fear and out of context, like jigsaw pieces from another puzzle.

I was a product of my upbringing, soaked in the sponge of a supposed Protestant superiority. Catholic uprisings, the moral rightness of British policy and a general ignorance of Irish history marked by limited thinking. I was, in short, a normal Protestant, unsure, suspicious and even afraid of Catholic people. In many ways, although I was unaware of it at the time, I was an unreasoned bigot with sectarian views. It was my understanding that Protestants were by definition more affluent and liberated, generally freer, whereas to be Catholic was to be in poverty and countries like Italy and the Republic were called as evidence for the prosecution! I was completely duped as social history and my own personal family experiences hardly proved that point, but it was a convenient coat hook on which to hang all my prejudice.

I moved to Dublin in 1969 to live as a Christian and be part of the Christian scene. Evangelism then was a tense affair. Open airs were held at Middle Abbey Street every night and were opposed by the Legion of Mary. It was an exciting confrontational time when groups clashed over belief systems.

Public debates, organised by Chris Robinson and involving Herbert Carson who challenged priests on various subjects that were seen as fault lines of difference. It was a time of clarity, an energizing time when everybody knew where they stood. Catholics believed their own teaching and people really understood the cost of becoming a Christian.

Geographically my life went from Dublin, Galway and then to Cork in the line of business. Spiritually I became more baptistic and joined a Baptist Church in Cork in the 1970s, where Lorraine and I brought the membership to16, and culturally I began a self searching process that challenged my previous understandings. I was a Unionist living in the Republic and that forced a rethink in the light of Scripture. (How would Jesus have reacted in my situation. Would he have been a Unionist?) I was challenged by new thinking from Christians who had grown up without my particular bias, although they had their own. I was challenged to work out what being a Christian meant without the chains of competing cultures!

While living in Dublin I met and married Lorraine, who had been brought up as a Catholic. When we met she was attending a Christian church where there was good biblical teaching but she struggled with bitter attitudes directed against her culture by those who were not from the Protestant culture. It gradually dawned that by becoming an Evangelical Christian she was cut off from her cultural identity as an Irish person, not only by those in the Catholic Church, of which she was formally a member, but more hurtfully by those of her new found family in the Church of God.

At that time the North was alive with Christians from all shades of church life. Churches were able to function well in a self sufficient way and little thought was ever given to reaching Catholics with the Gospel in a culturally sensitive way. They felt safe in demographic areas where their culture was unchallenged. Christians from a Protestant background (the vast majority) thrived on the stories that came out of the Republic about persecution against converts being carried out by demonic priests and monks and many a good collection was taken up for men who were at best good story-tellers and at worst charlatans! All these things confirmed a cultural and political mindset.

Secular history that shaped Ireland

Ireland was conquered by the Protestant state of England in the course of the 16th century. However the Elizabethan state and the dynasties that followed, failed to convert the Catholic Irish to English Protestantism. Catholicism in time came to be identified with a sense of nativism and Protestantism came to be identified with the English State.[1]

Anti-Protestantism in early modern Ireland 1536-1691 was also largely a form of hostility to the colonisation of Ireland and a rejection of British policy. English policy intertwined the Gospel message and the civilizing influence that the church spread as part of its ministry. This took place not only in churches but also in the education system which was English based.

The Penal laws, first introduced in the early seventeenth century, were initially designed to force the native elite to conform to the state church by excluding non-Conformists and Roman Catholics from public office, education etc but were later, under Queen Anne, also used to confiscate virtually all Catholic owned land during the Plantation periods. The Penal Laws had a lasting effect on the population, due to their severity (celebrating Catholicism in any form was punishable by death or enslavement under the laws). The religious houses were dissolved; expulsion of priests from Ireland, enforced churchgoing to Anglican churches, and the favouritism granted Anglicans only served to polarise the community in terms of religion.

It is usually thought that the Catholic Hierarchy was consistently opposed to the state but that was not always so. The Catholic leadership in the early centuries of this struggle was also allied to the state and this is confirmed by the leading role they took in outlawing some of the groupings that were actively opposing the state at such times.

In 1775, in an excommunication statement which referred to the "Whiteboys" (a secret oath-bound group formed in Tipperary, who were opposed to the enclosure of common lands), Bishop Troy of Ossory condemned them with these words:

"May they be subject to everlasting hell . . . when they shall be judged, may they be condemned . . . may their posterity be cut off in one generation. Let their children be carried about as vagabonds and beg and let them be cast out of their dwellings. May the usurers search all their substance and let strangers plunder their labours. May there be none to help them, nor none to pity their fatherless offspring. May their names be blotted out . . . let their memory perish from the earth. Let all the congregation say, Amen, Amen, Amen."[2]

That is one serious curse!

Other things of note . . .

The famine with its surrounding issues of souperism, institutional neglect and suspicions of the situation being used for wrong ends has tainted feelings between "Christian" communities ever since.

"The wounds of history are deep. The imagination still bears the scars of the famine that was endured, the land that was fought over and the language that was suppressed." [3]

A great deal more could be said on this subject and can I commend to you a study of Irish history as an entrance of understanding the mindset of Catholics both North and South.

Doctrinal history that shaped Ireland

We restrict ourselves to the nineteenth century as a century of spiritual conflict that shaped present day Ireland.

The early part of that century saw a determined evangelistic effort by Protestant churches of every ilk (often with a cultural, civilizing agenda) and at the same time the Counter Reformation of the Catholic Church vied for the hearts and minds of Irish people. By and large the Counter Reformation succeeded and the census figures of 1861 showed that the vast majority of Irish remained practicing Catholics.

Baptist work during that time is recorded by David Kingdon.[4] *"Itinerant evangelists, circulating schools (which went against the English only principle and taught in Irish using the Bible as the text book) and Scripture readers" were the methods employed by Baptists. The circulating schools were innovative using various teachers including some Catholics. An amazing itinerant evangelist was McCarthy. He travelled over 20,000 miles on horseback and founded churches in Athlone, Ferbane and Clonmel. He was a fluent Irish speaker. In his own words "He preached every day, and sometimes three times a day. I have about 30 stated places where I regularly preach the word"*

When the responsibility for directing that work moved to Ireland and after the shrinking of Baptist work largely because of the famine it was suggested that a "base of operation must be secured . . . in the North . . . in order to act successfully on other parts of the country. When this has been done, evangelists may go forth from the North to the South and the West . . ." [5]

The years leading to the first Vatican Council in 1870 were times of re -structuring when the Catholic Church moved away from the restrictions of previous ages which forced localised and informal arrangements and became more controlled and building based. During Penal law times there was a strong emphasis on ministry within homes and the significant place of the parents as guides and instructors in the faith but this changed and many of the traditional practices were stopped. Irish Catholics became a church-going population. House masses were stopped; corpses were removed to churches. Everything moved to the church. Further attempts were made at ridding the people of their link with folklore and Celtic festivals with little success.

This period of a new centralized authority was crowned with the dogma of the Infallibility of the Pope introduced in 1870 during the reign of Pius IX during the First Vatican Council.[6] It is worth noting that a fair amount of opposition to this move was voice within the Catholic Church.

Applications

It is worth stopping here to ask and answer a few questions.

How did the Catholic Church survive and prosper during this time of intense evangelism?

A strong emphasis on teaching the catechism. Children learned by rote the basic tenets of Catholic faith. This involved both priests and schoolteachers.

The home became the focus of Irish Catholicism for over 200 hundred years or so. (The practice of station masses in our day, when the priest visits homes to offer mass and hear confessions for the neighbours can be traced to this period.)[7]

Why did the Reformation have little impact on Catholic Ireland?

Gospel message was confused with cultural and political ambition. The Gospel came in a foreign language (English) dressed in the garb of a foreign culture that was considered superior to enforce a political agenda. Becoming a Christian meant taking on a package of cultural and political change as well as trusting in Christ . . . you had to become English to be a Christian!

Mission through the centuries has often been tainted with cultural colonisation. We are still at it!

Catholic influence in Ireland in the Twentieth Century

Again we stray into this mish-mash of crossover influence between the church and state. The Roman Catholic Church had a powerful influence over the Irish state for much of its history. It formed as a separate political entity in the 1920s and when De Velera became Prime Minister it was said that he was protected by a large bodyguard of priests. This strong influence meant that the Irish state developed conservative social policies. Divorce was banned as was contraception, abortion, pornography, as well as the censoring of many books and films. The church became the providers of medical care and social services[8] and during this period the Catholic Church had a special place within the Constitution itself. The edict that made the education of the children of a mixed marriage a Catholic affair was another mark of control.[9] All this had a marked influence in the emigration of Protestants from the Republic.[10] Many of them felt alienated in what had become for them a foreign state.

This attitude of "being out of place" continues among Protestants in the Republic. It was possible to visit homes during the 80s and see a picture of Queen Elizabeth II hanging on the wall. Another man from a Presbyterian background who was born in Ireland, but whose family came from the Black country of middle England referred to England as home.

These were the heady days of an almost absolute influence and control over the affairs of the individual and the state. The theological authoritarian stranglehold was complete and often negative. It made evangelism a difficult and often unwelcome activity although religious freedom was upheld through the "troubles" when preaching in the open air was difficult in the North. But it was not all negative. The Catholic Church influence did provide restraints that affected society with a sense of right and wrong and of sin, albeit a distorted one. Society was a safer and more moral place.

How the change came about . . . the 1960s onwards

Doctrinal confusion

If an emigrant who went away in the 1960s returned in the early years of the twenty-first century he would have entered a state unrecognizable to him. It is arguable that Ireland has changed more than any other European country in the last 20 years in religious, social and economic terms. What brought about the changes in Catholic influence? It began with creeping changes in personal sexual behaviour that gradually affected the teaching authority of the church.

The introduction of birth control in the 1960s and 1970s altered the previous norms of behaviour and obedience. It was hoped by many that Humane Vitae would change the teaching of the Church on this matter and allow contraception to be used responsibly by married couples. That didn't happen and in time a state of dual thinking and action was arrived at. Many simply ignored "official teaching" and while the Bishops confirmed the official teaching, room was left for difference of practice and belief.

This introduced an element of what was seen as "Catholics acting like Protestants" and freedom of conscience and subjective thinking became a habit for many.

The loosening of Catholic authoritarianism that had characterised the previous decades had begun.

Scandals eroded

The affair of Bishop Casey of Galway and Annie Murphy was a major blow. They had a child in 1974 and when the affair became public knowledge in 1992 he resigned. It was probably the use of church funds to fund this hidden family that sealed his fate!

Child abuse cases

The majority occurred from the 1960-90s. Some cases occurred in the nineties while others had a much more obscure history dating back decades. As it became apparent that some of these cases were known and cover ups attempted the credibility of the Catholic Church suffered seriously.

Some of the worst cases were in the Wexford area (Diocese of Ferns) and led to the resignation of Bishop Comiskey. The Fr Brendan Smyth case in the North and various scandals that involved the Dublin area which badly damaged the reputation of Archbishop Connell. Names that bring disturbance include Jim Grennan and Sean Fortune (who committed suicide before his trial for rape)

Materialism/ secularism

Media revolutions brought confused thinking into living rooms. The Late Late Show was a watershed television program at this time. Gay Byrne, the host is blamed by many for introducing subjects that explored new and dangerous

ideas but it is probable that financial freedom is the major player in this drama. The past ten years have seen the Republic transformed economically. In an article entitled "Secularism, prosperity and sexual abuse scandals are weakening the church's influence" by John Daniszewski (Times Staff Writer) on 17 April 2005 the following observations were made:

"Overwhelmed by a tide of secularism and economic prosperity, challenged by a new mood of independence in the population and devastated by a decade of scandals involving serial child abuse by clerics, the Catholic Church in Ireland finds itself demoralized, almost in shock."

Desmond Connell, the retired archbishop of Dublin, said;

"Irish Catholicism as we knew it in Ireland is gone. Ireland has become part of the Western European scene. We have been moving in a secularizing direction. But the pace of all this has been accelerated by the extraordinary leap forward in our country's prosperity,"

Even the Pope's visit to Ireland drawing the largest crowd ever seen in Ireland could not halt the slide that was already taking place.

In Ireland, amid the rapid change that came with unprecedented economic prosperity in the past decade, few disputed the notion that the edifice of Catholicism was in danger of cracking along its foundation.

The Rev. Brendan Hoban, a priest in a rural parish in County Sligo,[11] said the country's economic gains have come at a cost. *"Material prosperity has struck us like lightning in the last 10 or 15 years, 'We are a modern and prosperous country, and many Catholics no longer find their faith useful."*

Church attendance

In the 1970s more than 90% said they went to church once a week. Now that figure is 44% and there is more than a hint of suspicion that people answer the question with the answer they would like to be true!

The decline in church attendance is a major issue especially in the Inner city of Dublin where it is estimated that 5-10% attend church, many irregularly. The influx of Catholic, Polish people into Ireland has increased attendances and hidden the desperate situation to some degree. Many churches in the centre of Dublin and around the country have been sold and schools have only a token religious presence.

At the Most Precious Blood parish in Dublin's Cabra West, parishioners over age 30 say they remember when the church, which seats 1700, was packed for all four Sunday Masses. There were about 75, including only five children,

at the 11am Mass at Most Precious Blood on a Sunday last month. (2006) (article in Irish Times)

Rev Thomas McCarthy said after the service *"There were fierce crowds coming back then, the message was clear: come to Mass or go to hell. Well, that doesn't work anymore,"*

Statistics regarding seminarians

In 2004, 15 men were ordained as Catholic priests for the entire island . . . population 5.6 million people (4.2 million of them Catholic).

At Easter, 2005 it was announced that the Archdiocese of Dublin would not graduate a single priest from one of its seminaries in that year.

Ordinations in Dublin in 2006

Three men, all aged over40, Pádraig O'Sullivan (*an Artane native; former nurse and nurse tutor*), Robert Coclough (*a Dundrum native; former engineer*) and Joseph McDonald (*a Belfast native; former teacher*) were ordained by Most Reverend Dr Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin on 9 July 2006 to serve in the Dublin diocese.

A further 8 ordinations were expected that same year from a student body which totals 67.

Changing trends in the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland.

At Our Lady of Help, on the Navan Road, a middle-class section of Dublin, the new archbishop, Diarmuid Martin, conceded in his homily that *"the relationship between the community and its parish has changed."*

On the fourth Sunday of Easter, 2005, at a gospel Mass at the Church of St Francis Xavier in Dublin, young men and women belted out rocking renditions of gospel arrangements such as "Something So Wonderful" and "Shackles." The church, which holds 1000, was packed; hundreds stood in the back and along the aisles, swaying and clapping to the music. The Rev Brendan McManus, who presided over the Mass, said the gospel service was established to bring young people back to the church. "We're trying to bring the message in a different way, through music, through a creative, dynamic liturgy, and through participation," he said after the service. "This is the direction the church will have to take in Europe if it is going to address the problem.

The Alpha Course is in present use in Parish life as an attempt to bring spiritual reality to the lives of parishioners but must be understood in that context.

Radical change of belief patterns

The result of all this change is a transformation of belief patterns. We have witnessed change within the same generation. People who were once avid, loyal Catholics are now at best, pick and mix Catholics, but it is probably more true to say that we have arrived at a situation where people have no conviction that religious convictions are important. Doctrinal laziness pervades and "belief apathy" is evident everywhere.

Diversity is the new conformity

The umbrella of the Catholic Church covers everything from Evangelical Catholics to the Tridentine Latin Mass. You are more likely to have seminars on Angels and Yoga as you are to have a Bible study within the walls of Catholic Church property.

There is a drift not only in the practice of individual Catholics but the teaching of the Church is also moving. Limbo is no longer a teaching of the Church. Purgatory is also on the slide. Rarely would you hear the subject dealt with except around All Souls Night or at the blessing of the graves ceremony. Most priests talk about the deceased being in heaven and a struggle for clarity exists about death. A schoolteacher in Dundalk told her class that purgatory isn't believed or taught anymore.

Interestingly the more recently ordained priests are more conservative and the appointment of the conservative Benedict as the present Pope confirms that trend. When trouble comes, form a circle, protect yourself! A response we are all aware of in our own circles.

Movements of particular significance

Charismatic movement

Forty years ago at Duquesne University, the Holy Spirit ignited the flame of a new Pentecost within a small group of faculty and students . . . a powerful burst which resulted in the "baptism in the Holy Spirit" and the beginning of the Charismatic Movement.

In a history by Evangelical Catholic Initiative they state that between 1972 and

1978 there was a major move of the Holy Spirit in Ireland when some 10,000 Catholics came into a deeper, or first-time, personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour and were baptised in the Holy Spirit. Within a short period there were vital charismatic prayer meetings in nearly every town and village in Ireland. A feature of this revival was its trans-denominational nature. It was a movement without any church structures or clergy involvement.

In 1978 this revival seemed to dry up as major efforts were made to promote "single identity" renewal within individual Christian denominations, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church. From 1978 to 1988, while many Catholic Christians held on to an inter-denominational vision, most of the 400+ Charismatic Prayer Groups gradually became exclusively Catholic, while some left to form House Churches. It was not many years before this broadly based Charismatic movement became the Catholic Charismatic Movement. A pastoral guidance paper praised the work of the movement but reminded them that any group came under the control of the church.[12]

From this beginning came the work of Evangelical Catholics in ECI.

Evangelical Catholics

In an article published in the 'Lion and Lamb', Paddy Monaghan, the leader and drive of the Evangelical Catholic movement gave a short history about what are called Evangelical Catholics. After the survey (already quoted above) he talked about the work of this group and their crossover involvement with other churches and individuals.[13] He said their motivation was to build bridges between Evangelicals in the Protestant and Pentecostal churches with Evangelical Catholics.[14]

One of the stated aims of ECI was to *"foster reconciliation among Christians. For there to be effective evangelism in Ireland there needs to be a growth in relationships between believers within all of the Christian churches".*

Teaching authority of the church

There has been a definite rise in interest in reading the Bible among lay people beginning at the Second Vatican Council, and at the same time a growing slide away from any felt need to attach dogma and doctrine to Scripture. In recent times that attempt has been set aside by some pleading that it is unnecessary because of the role of the Magisterium.

A Catholic catechism argues like this[15] and concludes:

"119 For, of course, all that has been said about the manner of

interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgement of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God. . . . But I would not believe in the Gospel, had not the authority of the Catholic Church already moved me."

A recent document published by the Catholic Bishops of England, Wales and Scotland "The Gift of Scripture" warned that total accuracy should not be expected from the bible.[16] They even went as far as to give instances of accurate and inaccurate passages.[17]

On the other hand some Evangelical Catholics have a view of the Bible that is closer to our own understanding. In an article written by Paddy Monaghan the subject of Mary is discussed with an obvious submission to Scripture.[18] In gratefully acknowledging the unique role of Mary as Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, he says, ". . . *we see no scriptural warranty for ascribing to her any other role in excess of that. Jesus Christ alone is the one Mediator between God and human kind.*"

Evangelicals and Catholics Together . . . in USA

Just a note to acknowledge the influence of this grouping on the thinking of people in Ireland. They included some notable and surprising contributors who together published Evangelicals and Catholics together. Their purpose in forming this group was not primarily a doctrinal unity but a unity of diverse people from the main Christian groups to form a common front against the perceived evil of the states they live in. Although they do stretch towards doctrinal unity as an important common ground.[19]

They have produced papers on *"The Gift of Salvation"* (1998) which deals with justification, with at first sight seems orthodox but this is challenged by various understandings of a common baptism.[20]

"Your Word is Truth", issued in 2002, dealing with Scripture emphasises that the "mind of the church" approach to discerning truth.[21]

"The Communion of Saints", issued in 2003, deals with historical creeds and stresses their importance in agreeing truth.[22] It reduces the basis of agreement to Trinitarian acceptance.[23]

"The Call to Holiness", issued in 2005, explores transformation in a holy life.[24] This document contains some core truths as understood by the participants and again baptism qualifies everything.[25]

"That They May Have Life", issued in 2006, deepens the original intention of a shared social platform from which to address the nation and government.[26]

Evangelicals and Catholics Together . . . in Ireland

This process was taken up in Ireland but with a significant difference. While the US participants understood a difference between Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics the position of those in Ireland who are called Evangelical Catholics is that the Catholic Church is at core Evangelical with Add-ons!

Again the main reason for this approach was a joint social platform. They wanted to influence opinions at all levels particularly Government and this unity of purpose was seen as a way forward.[27]

We are living in a land of shifting sand. Things have changed beyond recognition over the past decades and the sands will continue to move around.

Issues to face

In understanding all this, how are we able to address the people of this age who live in a Catholic context in a Gospel sense? It is my conviction that Baptists because of their roots have a wonderful opportunity to speak to all peoples on all sides. We are in a position to offer a third way that does not talk about conversion to Protestantism from Catholicism.

In order to do this we need to ask ourselves some serious questions. Are we cultural Protestants with a faith package committed at least in part to earthly kingdoms and agendas or are we Biblical Christians committed to the Gospel mandate and Christ's Kingdom?

Do we believe that the Gospel transcends culture and politics and that people should be able to come as they are, be spiritually transformed and still leave cultural practices that are consistent with Scripture? To put it bluntly ... Does our view of conversion involve becoming a card carrying supporter of the Union or can people become followers of Christ and still have a national and cultural allegiance apart from the Union?

Why do we accept more easily the convert who stays within a Dodo Protestant Church using the "I am a witness within" argument and not allow the same arguments from someone who is a Christian and remains within the Catholic Church? (my argument is that the first is as wrong as the second)

Is there another way to live and witness in a Catholic culture apart from the two standard approaches. Is there another way apart from either having

nothing to do with anything Catholic or else immersing ourselves in an ecumenical approach which denies difference and involves itself in various forms of worship. Is it possible to be involved in a way that keeps us in the world but free from its corrosive effects?

I want to put another approach for your consideration. It is not a middle of the road or safe approach. It is a dangerous proposal that involves following the model of Christ who allowed nothing to get in the way of bringing the Gospel to people. He broke social convention by talking to women alone, lived dangerously in visiting homes of dubious people. I sometimes think that if we lived at the time of Christ some of us might be more comfortable with the attitude of the Pharisees . . . keep the rules, don't rock the boat!

This alternative approach calls for trust of one another, a judgement of our motives more than our actions and a risk taking that will try something that springs from a genuine desire to reach people with the Gospel. It means we won't write each other off without a careful Biblical approach to finding the truth. It means not living in the shadow of fear caused by other people's shadows! We need to be God's men in God's world and that I believe means taking some risks.

Can we do this in a Catholic culture without compromising truth? . . . I believe we can.

A story to finish this paper. In Cork a number of years ago a group who had come from the Charismatic movement wanted Bible teaching. They invited some of us in the area to help them. They were still Catholics and included in the group were some nuns and one or two retired priests. We could have taken the safe approach but chose instead to take risks and help a fringe grouping. The first night I went along a nun led the evening. A candle was lit on the table. They sang a song from Mission Praise then handed over the evening to me. I was able to preach for 50 minutes on any subject I chose. They were a thirsty group for the Word. At the end the nun who led the meeting said to me that she had become a Christian through listening to Transworld radio. She pointed to another nun and said "She is not a Christian yet". The first nun later left her convent as she put into practice the Word of God even though she was in her sixties. Many of those people are now members of Evangelical Churches in the area. I am glad I had a part in that situation.

Notes

1 Wikpedia

2 The Irish hedge school and it's books 1695-1831 by Antonia McManus. Page 26.

3 Religion in Ireland, Past, Present and Future edited by Denis Carroll. Article – Neither Pagan nor Protestant. P 24

4 Baptist Evangelism in 19th Century Ireland. D. Kingdon P12

5 Baptist Evangelism in 19th Century Ireland. D. Kingdon P30

6 We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed that the Roman pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, by the Divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals, and that therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves and not from the consent of the Church irreformable. So then, should anyone, which God forbid, have the temerity to reject this definition of ours: let him be anathema.

7 Religion in Ireland, Past, Present and Future edited by Denis Carroll. Article – Neither Pagan nor Protestant. P 15

8 The influence of the Catholic Church was strong in the 1950s. Noel Brown as minister of Health lost his job because of the ill-fated Mother and Child Scheme. The scheme was designed to give medical services free to all mothers and children, without any Means Test, to provide mothers with specialist gynecological care, and to give health education to both. To avoid friction with the religious authorities, the Health Minister specified in advance that the "education" would be physical and not moral. Doctors, it was directed, were to help in the promotion of these new measures.

9 Known as *Ne Temere*, whereby the children of marriages between Catholics and Protestants had to be brought up as Catholics.

10 With the partition of Ireland in 1922, 92.6% of the Free State's population were Catholic while 7.4% were Protestant. By the 1960s, the Protestant population had fallen by half. Although emigration was high among all the population, due to a lack of economic opportunity, the rate of Protestant emigration was disproportionate in this period. Many Protestants left the country in the early 1920s, either because they felt unwelcome in a predominantly Catholic and nationalist state, because they were afraid due to the burning of Protestant homes (particularly of the old landed class) by republicans during the civil war, because they regarded themselves as British and did not wish to live in an independent Irish state, or because of the economic disruption caused by the recent violence.

From 1945, the emigration rate of Protestants fell and they became less likely to emigrate than Catholics - indicating a kind of "quiet" integration into the life of the Irish State.

11 "Change or Decay: Irish Catholicism in Crisis

12 One of the fundamental rights of the faithful in the Church is the formation of groups and associations (Canon 215). But they also have an obligation to remain in communion with the Church (Canon 209). **Fruitful associations and groups of clergy and laity arise from the charisms of the Holy Spirit. But there is always a necessity of discernment which ultimately belongs to the pastors of the Church** (Vatican II, Church n.12, 27; Bishops n.17; Priests n.9; Laity n.3). From time to time movements arise which are not authentic in their aims or activities; human frailty may distort even genuine gifts on the Spirit. In such cases it would be the task of the bishops to warn the faithful against association with them. The present document can be seen as a positive exercise of the Episcopal discernment with regard to Charismatic Renewal.

13 In 1988, a group of Catholic Christians in Ireland produced a 6-page document. *"What is an Evangelical Catholic?"* published with the official permission of the Roman Catholic Church.

It was updated in June 1992 with comments of welcome from Bishop Joseph Duffy, Dr. George Carey and others. It has now been translated into different languages and has helped build bridges between Christians in many different countries. This led to the birth of the Evangelical Catholic Initiative (ECI).

14 We believe that what unites us is far greater than what divides. Indeed, what divides Christians in Ireland is often not doctrine, so much as history, culture, language and politics. Another aim was to foster genuine evangelism, while avoiding proselytism. We are convinced that it is only as Evangelical Christians within the Protestant and Pentecostal Churches find their brothers and sisters in Christ in the Catholic Church and vice-versa, that a real spiritual revival will sweep Ireland. The II Chronicles 7:14 principle surely applies that "If my people will humble themselves, turn from their wicked ways and pray God will hear, heal and forgive".

15 889 In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility. **By a "supernatural sense of faith" the People of God, under the guidance of the Church's living Magisterium, "unfailingly adheres to this faith."**

890 The mission of the Magisterium is linked to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ. It is this Magisterium's task to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error. Thus, the pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates. To fulfill this service, Christ endowed the Church's shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. the exercise of this charism takes several forms:

891 "The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when. as supreme pastor and teacher of al l the faithful - who confirms his brethren in the faith he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.... the infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter's successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium," above all in an Ecumenical Council. When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine "for belief as being divinely revealed," and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions "must be adhered to with the obedience of faith." This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself.

16 "We should not expect to find in Scripture full scientific accuracy or complete historical precision,"

17 But the first 11 chapters of Genesis, in which two different and at times conflicting stories of creation are told, are among those that this country's Catholic bishops insist cannot be "historical". At most, they say, they may contain "historical traces". In the document, the bishops acknowledge their debt to biblical scholars. They say the Bible must be approached in the knowledge that it is "God's word expressed in human language" and that proper acknowledgement should be given both to the word of God and its human dimensions. They say the Church must offer the gospel in ways "appropriate to changing times, intelligible and attractive to our contemporaries".

The Bible is true in passages relating to human salvation, they say, but continue: "We should not expect total accuracy from the Bible in other, secular matters." As examples of passages not to be taken literally, the bishops cite the early chapters of Genesis, comparing them with early creation legends from other cultures, especially from the ancient East. The bishops say it is clear that the primary purpose of these chapters was to provide religious teaching and that they could not be described as historical writing . . . The new teaching has been issued as part of the 40th anniversary celebrations of Dei Verbum, the Second Vatican Council document explaining the place of Scripture in revelation. In the past 40 years, Catholics have learnt more than ever before to cherish the Bible. "We have rediscovered the Bible as a precious treasure, both ancient and ever new."

UNTRUE

Genesis 2:21-22; Matthew 27:25 The words of the crowd: "His blood be on us and on our children." ***Revelation 19:20*** And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with brimstone."

TRUE
Exodus 3:14 God reveals himself to Moses as: "I am who I am."
Leviticus 26:12 "I will be your God, and you shall be my people."
Exodus x20:-17 The Ten Commandments
Matthew 5:7 The Sermon on the Mount
Mark 8:29 Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ
Luke 1 The Virgin Birth
John 20:28 Proof of bodily resurrection

18 Mary is God's guarantee that His Son truly took on human flesh. He who was God drew His humanity from Mary, his mother, through the Holy Spirit. Mary is a model for us of walking in obedience, in humility and in the fear of the Lord. Luke 1:48 tells us that all generations will call her blessed. Jesus himself points out that Mary's blessedness is in hearing the word of God and observing it. Mary, as a disciple, is saved by faith in Jesus. Mary's natural relationship to Jesus as His mother was put in proper perspective by Jesus, in Matt. 12:48-50 ("Who is my mother? ... For whoever shall do the will of my Father...is my brother and sister and mother.").

19 This group involved leading scholars from both the Evangelical wing of the church and Catholic theologians and leaders. Supporters of **The Evangelicals and Catholics Together** document maintain that it is not a statement of theological agreement, but of unity for the cause of moral and social reform. However, ECT states, "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ." And *"existing divisions that obscure the one Christ and hinder the one mission of the Church"* are confessed as *"sins against the unity that Christ intends for all his disciples."*

20 "We agree that justification is not earned by any good works or merits of our own; it is entirely God's gift, conferred through the Father's sheer graciousness, out of the love that he bears us in his Son, who suffered on our behalf and rose from the dead for our justification. Jesus was "put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25). In justification, God, on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so." "The New Testament makes it clear that the gift of justification is received through faith. "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). By faith, which is also the gift of God, we repent of our sins and freely adhere to the Gospel, the good news of God's saving work for us in Christ. By our response of faith to Christ, we enter into the blessings promised by the Gospel. Faith is not merely intellectual assent but an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life. We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone".

"While faith is inherently personal, it is not a purely private possession but involves participation in the body of Christ. By baptism we are visibly incorporated into the community of faith and committed to a life of discipleship

21 "There always have been, and likely will be until our Lord returns in glory, disputes and disagreements about how rightly to discern the teaching of the Word of God in Holy Scripture. We affirm that Scripture is to be read in company with the community of faith past and present. Individual ideas of what the Bible means must be brought to the bar of discussion and assessment by the wider fellowship. "The church of the living God is the pillar and bulwark of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). **Because Christ's Church is the pillar and bulwark of truth, in disputes over conflicting interpretations of the Word of God the Church must be capable of discerning true teaching and setting it forth with clarity."**

22 A detailed exploration of the doctrine of Purgatory and related questions is beyond the scope of this round of our conversation. Nor have we examined adequately suffrages for the dead, the question of indulgences, the role of Mary in Christian piety, or the sins of denominationalism against the communion that is God's present gift. Together, however, we do affirm that no true Christian, living or dead, can be outside the communion sanctorum, the fellowship of all who live in the crucified, risen, reigning, and returning Lord. Within the body of Christ, we know that we are to pray for one another and to offer up our sufferings for the sake of the Church (Colossians 1:24).

23 "Evangelicals and Catholics both confess the Apostles' Creed, which speaks of the *communio sanctorum*. In this statement, we address four aspects of that article of faith. First, we look to God as the one who is holy in Himself and in whose Trinitarian communion we must participate in order to be holy. Second, we examine the relationship of communion among all those to whom God has imparted a share in His holiness. Third, we discuss our participation in sacraments or holy ordinances, which are means of manifesting and fostering the communion that we share. Finally, we reflect on the communion that we now share with those Christians who have gone before us, including those who have exemplified to an exceptional degree the fidelity to which we are all called, whom many Christians honour with the special title of "saint."

24 "This transformation manifests itself differently to different people. For some it is experienced as a powerful and specifiable moment, engaging the deepest affections. For others it is experienced as a deepening of faith in Christ and a peaceful sense of being welcomed into the communion of believers. For all it is the knowledge of being called out of darkness into God's marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9). However differently experienced, the gift of grace is to be preserved and cultivated throughout the life of the Christian." It is a great scandal that so many Christians of our day, while continuing to be identified as members of the Church, fail to respond to the call to holiness. Too many, misunderstanding the nature of faith and presuming upon the grace of God, disregard the commandments of God. Such Christians rely on what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," evading "the cost of discipleship." They have drifted far from the biblical precept: "Confirm your call and election" (2 Peter 1:10), which is expounded as meaning, "Supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness. . . ." (2 Peter 1:5-6). It is time, therefore, for Catholics and Evangelicals, corporately and individually, to recommit ourselves to the life of discipleship that ought to be the distinctive mark of Christians.

25 "Our different traditions, notwithstanding their doctrinal differences, agree that faith and baptism, as the sacrament of faith, belong together. Christian faith should always lead to baptism, and baptism, conversely, should always be accompanied by Christian faith. Baptism is mandated, not optional. It is the gateway to the Christian life. Some of our traditions reckon baptism as a sacrament of constitutive importance for Christian existence. Others see it rather as a sign and expression of a new Christian life already received. But on either view, baptism involves a lifelong engagement to grow in union with Christ and labour in the service of the gospel"

26 The present moment in American public life is frequently described in terms of "culture wars," and there is some merit in that description. We need not and must not, however, resign ourselves to unremitting warfare. A culture is composed of many parts, but different cultures are distinguished by different understandings of reality, of the meaning of life and death, of rights and duties, of rights and wrongs. "In the present statement we intend, however briefly and inadequately, to make the case for what is commonly called "a culture of life" - and to do so in a way that invites public deliberation and engages questions of public policy. Our primary purpose, however, is to explain to our communities why we believe that support for a culture of life is an integral part of Christian faith and therefore a morally unavoidable imperative of Christian discipleship."

There is what is called a Judeo-Christian worldview, a worldview that was crucial to the formation of our civilization and is, we believe, clearly reflected in the convictions that inspired the American founding. To speak of American culture today is to speak of a culture marked by different worldviews in conflict. So severe is the conflict, also in the political realm, that many despair of finding any commonalities by which warfare can be replaced, or at least tempered, by civil discourse.

27 We believe that the rule of God concerns all aspects of life in society at national and international levels, whether it be politics, economics, law, government, industrial relationships, education, welfare, the media or whatever other aspect. Personal and cultural values must be based on moral truth derived from the Word of God and godly reason.

The pattern of convergence between Evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians is, in large part, a result of common effort to value, respect and protect all human beings, especially the lives of the most vulnerable among us. As a consequence, we share a deep social concern about abortion, the rights of the child, men, women and children as victims of war, the exploitation and inequality of women,

the growing culture of violence and death and the evil of oppression and torture.

Together we support the poor, the addicted, the excluded, the abused, the homeless and all who experience rejection in our society.

We contend together against all that devalues or damages human beings, families and communities. We share a deep concern on issues such as drug misuse, pornography, sexual abuse, euthanasia, marriage breakdown, prejudice and racism.

"In the context of Ireland we share a particular concern to reduce and eliminate sectarianism in our own lives, in our churches, and in our communities. We want to work together to bring to an end sectarian murder, bitterness, hatred and division. We want to help shape a society in which people are inclusive, a community in which we have mutual respect."