

New Communities in Northern Ireland: The Christian Response

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This article focuses on the response of the Christian communities to members of the 'new' communities who have settled in Northern Ireland since 2004, looking mainly at the practical contacts between the churches and those communities. The 'new communities' who have come in recent years are mainly those from the A8 countries of Eastern Europe who became members of the European Union in 2004. The majority of those who have settled in Northern Ireland are from Poland and Lithuania. This essay also deals with migrants who have come from the Philippines, most of whom are working in the National Health Service.

The response of the churches to these new communities is different from that of earlier immigrants such as the Indian community who first settled in Northern Ireland in the 1940s and the Chinese community who began to arrive here in the 1960s (Irwin and Dunn 1996, Hainsworth 1998, Kapur 1997). The early experience of communities such as Chinese and Indian arriving in Northern Ireland was that the welcome from many members of the Christian community, while not overtly hostile, was at best unenthusiastic.

There were two possible explanations reasons for the tepid reception. Firstly, there was far less awareness of any need to bring these people into the community; secondly, the majority of the newcomers did not belong to the Christian tradition and were either viewed with suspicion or, at best, not explicitly included in invitations to Christian events. In various interviews which I had with members of the Chinese community they have mentioned this fact. They often felt that they were not deliberately excluded, but it seldom occurred to the host population that they might wish to be included.

An exception to this was the Belfast Chinese Christian Church (<http://bcc.co.uk>). The church's origin dates back to Easter, 1975, when the Reverend Ronnie McCracken and Mr. Nai Bob Cham started some evangelistic work among the local Chinese community in Belfast. As a result of the work, a small group of believers started to meet together regularly every Sunday at the Methodist Chaplaincy at Elmwood Avenue, Belfast. This group of believers became known as the Belfast Chinese Christian Fellowship (BCCF). The BCCF did not really expand until September 1987 when a sudden influx of new Chinese students started to attend the Sunday meetings. The church currently has around one hundred members and up to two hundred people regularly attend, making this one of the biggest Chinese congregations in the United Kingdom.

Relations with Other Churches

As the BCCC is a 'Chinese' Church, most members of the congregation are of Chinese origin. Members of the church community feel that its ethnic uniqueness and independence have helped it foster good relationships with other denominations who hold similar doctrinal views. Indeed, some members of the congregation were members of other denominations, such as the Brethren, Baptist and Elim, before they joined the BCCC. Pastors and Ministers of those churches and other local churches are often invited to speak at the BCCC and members of BCCC have often been asked to take part in other church services. The BCCC also has contacts, through ex-members and COCM, with other Chinese churches in the UK, Canada and Hong Kong. One difficulty, however, for those who preach Christianity to the Chinese community is that it is still felt to be a 'Western' religion and therefore not to have a great deal of relevance for those from a different background (Source <http://bcc.co.uk>).

As part of research for an earlier project I was undertaking, I spoke to some members of the Chinese community who belong to the mainstream Catholic or Presbyterian churches. A few of those to whom I have spoken cited this as a way in which they were made to feel like outsiders – they were insulted because they belonged to the 'wrong' religion. This is particularly a problem for young people who have mentioned the difficulties of being the 'wrong' colour as well as belonging to the 'wrong' faith. These remarks came both from the local community and also on a few occasions from within their own community (Delargy 2007, Rankin 2004).

The Polish Community

The Polish community is the fastest-growing of the new communities in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and 99 per cent of its members are Catholic. This is reflected in the fact that at the time of writing, there are Masses in Polish held monthly in fourteen venues throughout Northern Ireland including Belfast, Derry Ballymena and Portadown (<http://www.polish-chaplaincy.ie/index.php?lang=en>). This situation has come about very rapidly to serve the needs of an ever-expanding community. The first joint service for the Polish and local communities was held in April 2005 following the death of the Polish-born Pope John Paul II. On that occasion, members of the Polish community working in Derry were invited to join local people for a special Mass held in St Eugene's Cathedral. They were also invited to become involved in the service through readings, reciting the Prayer of the Faithful and taking part in the offertory procession.

The first Mass specifically for the Polish community in Derry was held in St Eugene's in October 2005. Although it was to be conducted in Polish local members of the parish were also invited to attend in order to welcome the Poles into the community. Mass began at 9.00 pm with half an hour set aside beforehand for hearing confession. The local community was amazed to see rows of young men waiting to have their confessions heard – a sight not seen in Irish churches since the 1960s. The Mass was concelebrated by the Polish chaplain in Ireland and the Bishop of Derry, Reverend Seamus Hegarty. He welcomed the Polish community to the city and stressed the links which existed between the two countries especially in matters of faith. He also gave a blessing in Irish and spoke a few words about the Irish language and culture. After Mass, the Poles were invited to the parish hall for tea, where they had an opportunity to meet the local parishioners. Mass is now celebrated on the fourth Friday of every month in St Eugene's cathedral.

When the Polish chaplaincy in Ireland was established in 2005, there was only one Polish chaplain serving in the thirty-two counties. This was obviously problematic as the number of Poles living in Ireland at the time was around 150,000 (Irish Times 2006) and many of them wished to attend Mass in their native language. In an interview for *Lion and Lamb* (the magazine of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland), Fr Mariusz suggested that Poles 'who are more integrated and have been here longer are happy to come to Mass in English'. In contrast, those who are recently arrived will look for a Mass in Polish. 'It is difficult for them, they are far from home and their families, in a new place and they can find community and find support. It is important for them to integrate with the wider community, but, as a first step,

it is good for them to make contact with the Polish community' (<http://www.contemporarychristianity.org/lionandlamb/043/neighbours.html>).

As the Polish population of Northern Ireland increased, serving the religious needs of this growing population had become increasingly difficult. Seamus McAreavy, Bishop of the diocese of Dromore found a novel approach to rectify the situation. In June 2007, he traveled to Poland along with a representative of the Irish Bishop's Conference to see if he could persuade some Polish priests to come to Northern Ireland to minister to the needs of the Polish community in his diocese. The arrangement was made through the Society of Christ an organization established in 1932 to ensure that there were Polish-speaking priests in countries in which there were Polish emigrant communities. Arrangements have been put in place defining the role which the two priests will play in their parishes in the diocese of Dromore. They will fulfill the normal duties of a curate in addition to ministering to the specific needs of the Polish community both in their own parishes and neighbouring ones. One of the priests described the experience as follows:

Shortly after the visit of Bishop McAreavey to Poland, I received a telephone call from the Provincial of the Society of Christ, who resides in Manchester, offering me an assignment in Northern Ireland; immediately, I knew that I wanted to serve there. My term as the financial director of the North America Province of the Society of Christ came to an end in September 2007, so I was free to come and discover Ireland. I had never been to Ireland, although I had seen part of its coastline from the shores of North Wales many years ago. I am very excited at the prospect of serving the Polish people who have immigrated to this beautiful island and of engaging, at the same time, in pastoral work for the people of Newry parish. (www.polskikosciol.co.uk/pictures/Two%20Polish%20Priests.doc)

It would appear that the Church wishes to promote greater interactions between the Poles and the host community. One of the agreements put in place is that Polish children will be baptized along with other children from the parish instead of having a separate ceremony.

The Filipino Community

The Filipino community in Northern Ireland has grown steadily since nurses were brought to Craigavon hospital in 2002 (see McElhinny this journal). Nurses from the Philippines are also working in hospitals in Belfast and Derry and in care homes throughout Northern Ireland. Mass for that community in their native language, Talalog, is normally held once a month and as with the services for the Polish community, locals are invited to join in

the event. One difference is that there are clergy from the local community who can celebrate Mass in Tagalog. The Columban mission (formerly the Maynooth Mission to China) was established in the Philippines in 1928 and there are currently around one hundred missionaries working there. Many older members of the community who have retired home to Ireland welcome the opportunity to interact with the Filipino community both through the celebration of the Mass and through the social interaction afterwards.

A Cross-Community Organization

Embraceni is a cross-community organisation set up to provide assistance for asylum seekers and refugees. To find out more about the work of the group I interviewed a member of the organisation about its aims and objectives. It was originally founded by members of Catholic religious communities who had worked abroad and had experience of working abroad and who felt that the newcomers were not being welcomed in Ireland. They got together and some volunteered with the Red Cross on orientation work with the new asylum applicants. They brought together members of other Catholic orders for a few seminars so that they could form some sort of organisation. Before the group was formed, they thought they should find out what the other churches were doing. Some of those who came together at the first meeting were in official positions within their church; others were not, but the group was born. The steering group was made up of people from the four main churches.

My informant became involved through a Church of Ireland diocesan community initiative. Before long, she found herself going on courses to find out more about refugees and later on about issues of racism. With the intercommunity group she had already gone on visits to the Indian community centre in Belfast and she would have known members of the Bahai community. I asked her if she found it difficult to get information out to members of the new communities and those working with them in Northern Ireland. She explained that there were many difficulties. In the first instance, much of the information available relates to the United Kingdom, rather than to Northern Ireland. Moreover, the situation with regard to the migrant communities has changed rapidly. There are Portuguese-speaking people coming, there are those from the A8 countries in Eastern Europe and there are the health workers coming from India and the Philippines. It was, she felt difficult both to get the information and also to find a meaningful way to convey this information through the churches, finding the right people to contact and encouraging membership and groups has been difficult for her.

She felt that they had not really tried to promote themselves to any great extent in the wider secular media except on a couple of occasions when they had responded to letters in the papers written by people who seemed racist or particularly uninformed. The group felt, however, that their role was to inform and resource the churches and they had tried to concentrate on this aspect of their work. In terms of getting the information out to the communities, they do not work directly with members of the groups. Instead they collaborate with those who represent them. In particular they deal with organisations such as the Refugee Action Group and NICEM (the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities). Members also attend as many diversity events as possible and network with local groups.

Although the organisation is mainly Belfast-oriented, my respondent does not feel that the issues are confined to the city; in areas such as south Belfast where there has been friction, there is a clear need for anti-racism work but racism could occur anywhere where there is the smallest pocket of a new community. She would like to see a network of workers throughout Northern Ireland who could let her know what is going on in different places and the issues that need to be highlighted. I asked her about hostility towards the work that Embraceni is doing. While she felt there was very little overt hostility, she also acknowledged a small number who felt that such work was distracting from the main mission of evangelism. Moreover, some members would not be happy working on an inter-church basis. On the whole, however, there seem to be strengths in working together.

The type of information disseminated by the group helps individuals to reflect on gospel values based on respect for individuals. It also emphasizes values of hospitality and recognition not just of people as 'other' but as being intrinsically worthy of respect. As well as the reflective, theological dimension, there was also a practical level: 'people want to know who's here, why they're here, so there's a bit of "myth busting" on issues relating to immigration and refugees'. The organisation tries to get people to respond on a local level. This can be done firstly by finding out who is out there and secondly how the skills of the church community can be used. Some ways in which this might be done include advice centres, toddler groups or basic language classes. Several churches are combining with their local Further Education colleges to provide classes and the local congregations can provide support networks to help with the language - especially the local idioms. Church buildings could also be made available to organisations such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau to hold advice sessions. She went on to explain that for some people, particularly those who had grown up in Eastern Europe,

it was an unusual experience to see the church as an integral part of the community.

Moreover during the 'Troubles' the churches were often regarded as places of refuge but were not particularly outward-looking. That change in attitude on the part of the church is confusing for some people. My respondent felt that the main aim of the group is to inform and resource local people to look after themselves. Generally they do not provide direct support to people, rather they channel support for them.

There is also a programme called 'Embrace in the Streets' which is not directly managed by the committee but comes under their remit of Embraceni. Congregations of various churches provide material goods for members of other NGOs who go round the streets at night and check up on people who have 'fallen through the net'. The rule that those from the A8 countries who have not had one year's uninterrupted work are not entitled to benefits has meant that a number of migrants are unable to claim financial assistance. 'Embrace in the Streets' has six or seven inner city parishes who are involved, they provide practical support in the form of toiletries, clean underwear, shirts for people going for interview etc.

Father Patrick Delargy is a member of Embraceni. He is parish priest of St Colmcille's, a small Catholic parish of just under 3,000 people close to Stormont in east Belfast. The last few years have seen significant changes in the population of the parish. He explained to me that many of the members of the new communities living in his parish had come to live in Northern Ireland because they had been asked to do so, usually to take up posts in the health service. They came with their partners and children and often the partner would also take up a post in Belfast.

This was particularly the case for members of three groups in particular. Members of the Indian community, he felt, would be very supportive of the church; one member of the Indian community serves on the parish pastoral council. In addition to taking part in religious services members of the Indian community would also on occasion use the parish hall for functions such as wedding parties as some of them would not wish to hold the event in a hotel where alcohol would be served.

Members of the Filipino community who live in St Colmcille's require support from the parish as they are likely to be intimidated by others in their neighbourhood. Forms of intimidation included throwing stuff at their houses

as well as breaking windows. One member of the parish was able to help the Filipino community by making them aware of their rights when they were intimidated. Others, who are not working in the health services, are sometimes underpaid and again members of the local community help them to know their rights. After some time of receiving help from their local parish, members of the Filipino community have been able to set up their own self-help group.

A third 'new' community in the locality is the Polish community. The children attend the local school and the parish has organised English classes in the evenings for the parents to attend. These are some of the ways in which he feels that a parish can provide practical support for members of the new communities. Fr Delargy is also a member of the Episcopal conference for migrant communities, where he is representative for the bishop of Down and Connor.

Conclusion

The churches have become much more conscious over the last ten years of the need to reach out to the different communities who have chosen to settle here. This has taken a variety of forms both in dealing with social issues and also in addressing the cultural sensitivities of the 'new' communities. In 2003, the All-Ireland Churches Consultative Meeting on Racism (AICCMR), made up of representatives of the four main churches, was established to explore issues of racism throughout the island of Ireland. The organisation commissioned a research report into the expectations of minority communities of the churches' role in tackling racism. The report cited a number of examples of good practice in Northern Ireland. These included the Kingham Church in Belfast which has made its facilities available to the Women's Group of the Chinese Welfare Association for several years.

Although those who were consulted for the report felt that much had been done to reach out to members of the new communities, there was still room for improvement. Some churches did not seem to acknowledge racism as a local issue as well as a global concern. The church was felt to have a prominent role in Irish society and an ability to influence at both governmental and local level as well as influencing what appeared in the media; some respondents felt that this influence could be used to much greater benefit. The majority, however, felt that the churches are responding to the needs of a multicultural Irish society.

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