



CNI

Comment - Fresh expressions in church planting - opportunities and current major pitfalls

No one can object to church planting. St Paul and his associates had a fair go at it and we are still coping with the advice which it is claimed he mailed to the elders or presbyters in various places. And beyond that certainty there are the mysteries which we can argue about - Did he go to Galatia? Was it to the north or south?

The early church exercises various influences on the church's activities today. For example - reputable scholarship claims that the distribution of the sites of a series of major churches still in daily use in Rome reflects the locations of identifiable church communities drawn from

specific ethnic backgrounds and races. Indeed some are said literally to have been house churches, formed in the very tenements where christians lived.

History has continued to throw up challenges regarding church provision. Political empires influenced the nature and style of the church's missions. The empires' civic cultures as well as their preferred christian denominations affected the theology and style of the churches planted.

All the Irish denominations have been involved in church planting at home and abroad.

In my own church - the Church of Ireland - various times and situations have presented the challenge of planting, redistribution and growth. In particular after World War 2, the church had to take into consideration the effect of the blitz upon Belfast and the later associated movement of the wider city centre population to various suburbs where state housing in one form or another was provided. More affluent areas of development also came along. The need and the

demand for church provision was heard, prioritised in the affairs of the dioceses and church, and another burst of expansion through parishes being sponsored and nurtured was underway.

Later civil planning initiatives also were to directly elicit the response of the church's governance at parochial, diocesan and national levels.. The Matthew Stop Line limiting the spread of Belfast, also identified a series of provincial towns to be growth areas - towns like Carrickfegus and Antrim. The creation of the new city of Craigavon from the existing towns of Lurgan and Portadown created another challenge. Other towns had to cope with burgeoning areas of state housing and private developments. Parishes like Larne and Ballymena had to grow from additional centres of worship.

However, there was in place a managed process and undergirding that an agreed policy. The church's response was assessed, planned, managed, and accountable to all levels of

church governance, from parish vestry, to diocesan sub-committee, diocesan council and synod, and importantly it totally involved the RCB as the church's overall trust-holding body. There was consultation and accountability. There was an open process. There was no hidden agenda.

There was for the greater part a unity of purpose and of sacrificial commitment by the majority of established parishes which nurtured the new growths.

The clergy in these areas of new growth which were identified, were for the most part 'enablers'. They were pastors who could attract support, and who in terms of a day's graft for the Kingdom of God, were not work shy. The overwhelming majority were supported by spouses who did not shirk from a wholehearted commitment to their partner's endeavour in ministry in a church growth situation.

One may be told it is invidious to mention names. But there were clergy of high calibre.

There was Jimmy Moore and then Brian Mayne in Belvoir. There was Edgar Hamilton in St. Molua's, Dundonald. Ned Darling in Carnalea. Terry Rodgers and Ted Hassan worked the growing areas of Muckamore, near Antrim.

And there was the long-distance specialist, Brian Moller who as a curate-assistant in Larne was formative in the growth of the church in Craigyhill, and afterwards he served a marathon stint in encouraging and developing growth in the parish of Rathcoole.

There were men like Norman Barr, Billy Lendrum and their successors in Whiterock Parish. They built a church community at the top of the Shankill and Ballygomartin Roads.

In more recent times Walter Lewis and Captain Scott McDonald of the Church Army, nurtured the faith of their parishioners in the most challenging environment of Glencairn - another parish where loyalist paramilitaries confronted the very essence of the gospel through their words and action - and where

church growth needed a sensitivity of touch and the capability of ministers who walked close to their Lord and Saviour.

I may claim to know a wee bit and at firsthand about this process of church planting and nurture. I followed in the footsteps of Fred Baillie and James Moore as curate - assistant in Dunmurry parish where Robbie Ellis was rector. I later followed them in ministering in the Seymour Hill and Conway estates between Belfast and Lisburn in what the church had determined would be the Parish of Kilmakee.

From the outset of this initiative undertaken at the request of the bishop and the diocesan council, the rector of the existing parish, Robbie Ellis, was the prime mover with the support of the Dunmurry Select Vestry. And it literally was development from the grass roots. Robbie together with the rectors of Derriaghy and Finaghy, selected a preferred site from the three sites offered as being available to churches on a Housing Trust development plan. They chose the best.

Following several years of nurture and hard-garnered growth, a new church was built to compliment the dual-purpose church hall which was erected after an incubation - a period of worshipping in the local Orange Hall. As the new church was in the process of building, the then curate in charge, James Moore, was called to another parish in the diocese and Bishop Arthur Butler promptly 'invited' me to succeed him. A few weeks after Bishop Arthur introduced me as the curate-in-charge, he returned to consecrate the new church of St Hilda. Part paid for by the sponsoring parish of Dunmurry, with a modest donation from the diocese, it was no sinecure. It was burdened with what was a whacking great loan in those days of 40,000 pounds from the RCB, which that responsible body rightly expected would be repaid under the conditions of their loan, and which the diocese was committed to extract!

It was a parish teeming with young life, and like many others around Northern Ireland, it was being affected by 'the troubles'. In truth my lot, whilst there were times of tension, was not cast

in as bad a situation overall as some of my contemporaries and their parishioners.

Let us move from the historic and the personal to the present possibilities of growth.

The stewardship of Christian resources demands consultation with existing parishes, and indeed other denominations. Joint plants with the Methodist Church in the light of our new relationship must be scheduled in. Church planting requires the best of planning. It must have agreed and open systems of accountability to which are compatible with the structures and ethos of the church.

Parachuting an initiative into an area without proper prior consultation and adequate short and long term planning falls far short of the due onus of responsibility the activity requires.

Church growth is a difficult enough challenge - and to paraphrase the words of the BCP marriage service... it should not be by anyone... be

taken in hand unadvisedly, or wantonly... but reverently, advisedly...

In the immediate wake of the sad situation at Knocknamuckley, a new church plant appeared to be almost immediately established for one part of the congregation and its rector. The rapidity and circumstances in which this decision was made has been noted. (According to a timeline in a provincial newspaper: The matter first surfaced in the media on April 21. On April 30 the diocesan team first met with the parishioners disaffected with their rector. On May 27 churchgoers were told the minister would be leaving and a new congregation formed).

It is hardly surprising in consequence that on social media there have been comments from persons whom I would regard as fair and responsible C of I clergy and laity. Their concerns have sustainable validity. There would appear to be no answers or policies extant in the public domain regarding these. Concerns have been expressed about other church planting

scenarios in the same diocese which, it has been stated, ignored the parishes into which they were parachuted and in one instance it was stated the rector was in effect ignored.

Likewise, concerns have been expressed about the availability of grants from the Priorities Fund for church plants and initiatives in areas which it has been claimed seem to be reasonably well catered for by existing C of I parishes and plant. Likewise there are areas where the anticipated growth on which the applications to the Fund must have been based, is currently beyond the sight of the complainants on social media.

Apart from these stated concerns, the role of Charities Commissions in both parts of Ireland cannot be ignored. In Northern Ireland any charity wishing to benefit from recovery of income tax on the subscriptions received from donors, needs to be increasingly circumspect in its procedures and in its public accountability to its donors and also for want of a better term, its “share-holders”. Likewise parishes who are

subjected to increasing diocesan levies are entitle to know whether or not this funding is being allocated to or applied to such plants.

There is also the not inconsiderable issue of payments for public liability insurance together with the responsible issue of the oversight of public safety, and upholding safeguarding policy. The use of diocesan and central church funding sources to meet such expenses demands open, responsible, accountability.

There are a number of confluent concerns which are readily identifiable.

Church planting needs:

(1) To have a policy drafted and if possibly agreed in the first instance by the House of Bishops, and accepted by the General Synod and available for those wishing to stimulate and practice ministry in such situations.

(2) That practice must conform to the ecclesiological formulae and discipline of the

Church of Ireland. No one should feel they have an entitlement to ignore the same.

I would dare to suggest that the time is overdue for such an agreed 'code of good practice' in church planting. As stated above, this would demand input from the House of Bishops - regarding its theological basis and the nature of pastoral oversight. However, C of I bishops, even when their house is in agreement, require the acceptance of the necessary and due authority of General Synod and the approval of the RCB in matters of funding.

As a first move, the House of Bishops could appoint a small and capable working party to draft such a code for development and consideration.

Such a working party would need also to tackle the dilemma of bishops and archdeacons who are too clearly associated with particular partisan groups and theological standpoints upheld by bodies external to the C of I. There is angst amongst clergy regarding this as well as

the concern that funds levied from parishes may be diverted to plants which they could perceive as being in preparation for a split in the C of I.

The RCB as the ultimate accounting body for the fiscal probity of the church and its dioceses, cannot but other than determine a fiscal policy with valid, recognisable and attainable benchmarks. Perhaps, until an adequate code of conduct and policy has been agreed resulting in a determined effort to ensure transparent processes of accountability, no further grant to any church planting scheme should be made at central or diocesan levels.

The impact upon the wider mission of the Church of Ireland of an appeal to the Charity Commission could be detrimental to every parish. This could affect the excellent work of the RCB staff and the greater majority of parishes who conduct the financial affairs of this part of the Kingdom of God with an excellence of Christian stewardship.

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