Rosita Boland Jan 12, 2019

‘IRELAND NOW IS TOTALLY DIFFERENT TO THE PLACE I LEFT’ – HOW RETURNED MISSIONARIES SEE IRELAND.

The people in the room with me have an astounding collective 2,000 years plus of missionary service between them. They are at a “transition workshop” for returned missionaries in south Dublin.

The two-day event was originally to be held at the headquarters of the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland, or Amri, in Donnybrook. But that was when the organisers thought they might have no more than 15 people. “And then 45 signed up,” says Sr Liz Murphy, secretary general of Amri, “So we had to change the venue.”

About two-thirds of the attendees are women, and most are well past retirement age. They represent many communities: the Missionary Sisters of St Columban, Society of the Sacred Heart, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, St Patrick’s Missionary Society, Daughters of Charity and Medical Missionaries of Mary, among others.

The countries they have served in include Pakistan, Brazil, Nigeria, Zambia, Chile, Kenya, the Philippines, Peru, Myanmar, Taiwan and Liberia.

The missionaries have returned to retire in a country and society that have changed immeasurably since they first left, and to a church they find unrecognisable

Many have only returned to Ireland this year after decades of service abroad. They have worked in a wide range of jobs: as nurses, teachers, pastoral ministers, chaplains, prison ministers, social workers, development officers, nurses and lecturers.

Now they have returned to retire in a country and society that have changed immeasurably since they first left, and to a church they find unrecognisable.

"The Irish church is traumatised – but it caused trauma," announces the workshop facilitator, Kevin Egan, and a sigh of agreement goes up in the room. He invites participants to speak up about what they found difficult about leaving their missions behind and returning to Ireland.

"The loss of a simple lifestyle. I'm overwhelmed even going into a supermarket, with so many choices."

"I miss the beauty of the sunrises and the star-filled nights."

"The sudden loss of space of discuss your missionary story; to tell stories of events that have shaped my whole life. You get maybe two minutes of someone's attention before they are on to something else."

There are all sorts of reasons why these retired missionaries have signed up for the workshop.

"Help to readjust to a different Ireland."

"Better understanding of how to cope with feelings of loss, rootlessness and anxiety."

"The opportunity to interact with others who have similar difficulties with the 'New Ireland'."

"How to live in hope in an Irish church that is shattered."

"Learning how to let go of mission years abroad and how to cope with the guilt of leaving mission.

At coffee breaks and at lunch, people sit at round tables, and introduce themselves to each other. They have come from all over the country to attend the workshop.

"People well into their 70s matter-of-factly trade eye-opening stories of human trafficking, blackmail, hangings, curfews and child soldiers"

They are here not just for the workshop itself but also for the opportunity to meet others like themselves, who are adjusting back into a society where they are now more or less invisible. Their collective stories form a jigsaw of social history that will die out after this generation do.

At lunch both days, I sit at one of half a dozen tables, listening to people ask which countries they served in, and how long they have been back. They may be with different communities, but they all share similar difficulties in trying to integrate back into Ireland.

Over soup and sandwiches, people well into their 70s or older matter-of-factly trade eye-opening stories of human trafficking, blackmail, hangings, curfews and child soldiers.

One sister tells me that one orphaned young boy she had worked with in Uganda had been given a gun by rebel soldiers and told: “This gun is your parent now.”

Another tells me of two parents dying of HIV/Aids, and of their children, aged four and eight, attempting to bury them in ground too hard for an adult, let alone traumatised children, to dig.

Everyone I meet has had to grapple with challenging situations uncommon to daily life in Ireland. The more I listen, the more I can understand the need for this annual workshop, and how difficult returning is for many.

------- INCURIOUS IRELAND? -------


ZIMBABWE AND SOUTH AFRICA: GREG KENNEDY. PHOTOGRAPH: TOM HONAN

One of the workshop participants is a Christian Brother named Greg Kennedy. He spent 54 years working in Africa – Zimbabwe and South Africa – and is back in Ireland less than a year.

“My main challenge was that I didn’t know anybody in Ireland any more: I’m talking about my own congregation here,” he says.

Kennedy left Ireland soon after ordination; as he never worked in this country, he was coming back to a community he had to start all over again with.

In common with many former missionaries I talk to, Kennedy points out that nobody, not even in his own community, has displayed any curiosity about the work he spent a lifetime doing.

“I was in Africa for 54 years and not one person has asked me anything about the work I did there,” he says, genuinely surprised.

One of the many things Kennedy did there was act as chaplain to those on death row, condemned to hanging. He spent the nights before execution sitting up talking with these men, and accompanied some of them to the gallows.

“A horrible experience,” he says.

> "Greg Kennedy spent the nights before execution sitting up talking with the condemned men, and he accompanied some of them to the gallows"

Kennedy tells one story of how one young man had been sentenced to death, even though he had not murdered anyone. At the same time, someone who had committed a murder avoided execution "because they had money".

He took on the case of the young man, whose family did not have money, and went to court on his behalf.

"I got his sentence commuted to life imprisonment. There's lots of stuff I'd love to be able to tell my confreres, but nobody seems to be too interested."

He misses the country where he spent more than half a century.

"There are so many things that I miss about Africa. I find going to Mass here terribly boring, whereas, where I lived, we'd have a Sunday Mass. There was no Mass during the weeks, so Sunday Mass became everything. There were parents' meetings, there were teachers' meetings. I was running the school there. Mass was an all-day affair. Pigs being cooked on the spit and all of that," he says. "I'm more African than I am Irish."

Mary O'Shea's community is the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary. She was a teacher and pastoral worker in three regions of Cameroon for 38 years. Now 74, she came back to Ireland in the spring of 2017.

"I found coming back very difficult," she admits. "We left a simpler society, where some people do not have enough to eat, and then you come back here where there is dog food and cat food for sale. We went out as missionaries and we worked very hard in very difficult circumstances. Then we came back and there is such negativity for the church here. That is very hard."

During another session, a microphone is passed around and participants are invited to reflect on what Egan, the facilitator, calls "disenfranchised grief".

"What am I being called to now?" asks one woman, who came back after 40 years on mission in South America. "I did not feel in way called to let my people there go.

"How do you talk to people in Ireland now? Everyone is looking at their phones. Nobody greets anyone by name.

"Sometimes I am depressed when I look back at our mission work. What difference have we made on an overall level?"

BAFFLED AND ANGRY


SOUTH KOREA AND MYANMAR: MARY DILLON. PHOTOGRAPH: TOM HONAN

In another break, I talk to Mary Dillon of the Columban Sisters. She spent 23 years on mission, first in South Korea, and then 19 in Myanmar. In Myanmar, she worked with people who had HIV. She returned in January 2018, and speaks frankly about the things that have struck her since coming back to Ireland.

“I am a person who has worked most of her life with non-Catholics. I worked in a shelter in Burma with 80 patients, and not one of them were Catholic; they were mostly Buddhist. My experience of South Korea and Burma was of different religions that have the freedom to be themselves.

“Here, you would be embarrassed to say you’re a Catholic. I think it is a very sad state we have arrived at. I think there is a place for everyone. I would have had 50, 60 funerals in a year in the shelter where I worked, and most of them were Buddhist, and we buried them all as Buddhist.”

Dillon is troubled by what she retrospectively sees as “abuse” of unmarried pregnant women by the “judgmental” church in Ireland.

“I knew when I was a young girl in Ireland down the country, if I became pregnant, my mother would have told me get out and they didn’t want me back. I worked as a midwife in Holles Street in the early 1970s, and wards were full of unmarried girls. Their babies went out two days after delivery, and we never questioned it.”

Her experience was completely different in the counties where she was on mission.

“Whereas when you go out to Korea or Burma, if there is pregnancy outside of a married relationship it’s no problem.”

The Government are not interested in the poor people. Look at the story of social housing. I find the Government here elitist to the end

She finds herself baffled and angered by aspects of Irish society now.

“The Government here are not interested in the poor people. Look at the story of social housing. I find the Government here elitist to the end.

“The whole thing of direct provision – for any Asian or African person, food is the centre of their lives.

They spend their time talking about food and cooking food. And we're putting them into a room where a meal is put in front of them in the middle of the day that they are probably not even interested in. It is wrong."

Like many returned missionaries, Dillon is keen to use her skills to contribute to the community by doing some voluntary work. She is frustrated by the bureaucracy involved.

"In Burma, you could set up a project within a church compound. It could be Catholic or Protestant or a Buddhist temple – some religious compound – and you could take care of people. Here, there is so much legalities if you want to do anything. There is child protection, vulnerable adults, data protection, Garda vetting; you can't move, really."

Michael Doyle is 74. He taught in Zambia for 36 years, and returned in the summer of 2018 to Trim, Co Meath, where he is from.

"It's important not to come back too old," he says. "Not to come back in your 80s, when you're sickly and that kind of thing."

Doyle says he joined the Christian Brothers when he was 14.

"It's such a big change to be back. One reason for coming back is that I have two unmarried sisters at home in the home place. They're older than me."

The town Doyle left as a young man has changed totally.

"Returning, I would have known almost no one in my own town. Anyone growing up with me there, most of them would have gone off. My street was vibrant when I was growing up, and now you wouldn't see a child around. Small towns have changed so much. Small shops are gone. So is the sweet shop. Everyone knew the sweet shop. Places are boarded up."

For Doyle, who stayed on in Zambia for eight years after retirement, his biggest challenge now is "finding something to do".

Throughout the two-day workshop, Egan's key focus are the topics of loss and transition.

> Who educated the people of Ireland? Who nursed them? It is time for religious sisters to stand up for themselves and their legacy

"You don't manage transition. You have to experience it," he says at one point.

The transition back to a country where most participants have not lived for decades includes all sorts of practical aspects. One of the leaflets handed out contains useful information about transport, social-welfare travel passes, libraries, mobile-phone networks and Garda vetting.

There is also information about places where people can volunteer their services; everyone I talk to is anxious to continue to make a meaningful contribution to society.

Over and over in the two days, these returned, retired missionaries speak of their bewilderment, anger and pain at the way the Catholic Church in Ireland is now perceived by so many members of the public.

“Abuse is totally, totally wrong,” one sister says to me. “But we nuns were the people who ran schools and hospitals. Who educated the people of Ireland? Who nursed them? All that has been forgotten now. I think it is now time for religious sisters to stand up for themselves and their legacy. We are being judged outside the historical context of the times.”

A SENSE OF DISLOCATION

Marie Galvin of the Columban Sisters, now 84, spent 24 years in Pakistan. She was near the Thar Desert, close to the Indian border. She returned in February 2018.

“It’s very hard to know what kind of place Ireland is now. It is totally different to the place I left. It will take a long time to settle back in here,” she says, admitting she is still in a state in transition.

“I suppose there are many emotions going on because you have left a place where you knew everybody, and everybody knew you. Then you come home here and you are in kind of in no place, and you kind of feel you are no one, and have a whole sense of being dislocated. It’s hard.”

Like many others I speak to, Galvin is appalled by the material consumption and attending waste she sees everywhere.

“Food. Clothes. Especially among young people: ‘Oh, that’s old, I’ll throw it away.’ When you have come from a country like I did where you saw people living on nothing, living so primitively, it jars with you.”

She is cheered, however, by the fact that Ireland is so “much more multicultural. That is good in a lot of ways.”

A very big thing that Galvin is getting used to is feeling safe again. There were only two of them in her rural mission house, both women.

“You always feel not safe. You are a sitting duck,” she says. “Pakistan is an Islamic state, and it is a theocracy more and more rather than it is a democracy. We religious sisters are an endangered species. The government gives a budget to the police to ‘take care’ of us. But their ‘taking care’ of us is really curbing our freedom. This security only draws more attention to you.”

In her community near the Thar Desert, Galvin was teaching and working with Hindu women.


PAKISTAN: MARIE GALVIN. PHOTOGRAPH: TOM HONAN

“I was trying to get them interested in sending their children to school. Especially the girl child. Because the girl child is a curse. The boy is a blessing.”

I ask if anyone in the area of Pakistan she worked in talked about Malala Yousafzai, the young woman originally from the northern region of Swat, who was shot in the head in 2012 by a Taliban gunman. Now 21, she is internationally famous for her activism in promoting education for girls, and a recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize.

“No,” Galvin says. “She was from way up north.”

Did the women she worked with in Pakistan even know Malala’s name, given how famous she has become since her Pakistani schooldays?

“Her name is very famous over here but it hasn’t melted down to the people I worked with. They are too occupied trying to eke out an existence. These events [like Malala’s story] are non-events for them. The real events are: survive. These people are living on nothing, and they have no future and their children have no children because of their Hindu name. Even if intellectually they might make the grade, once their name is looked at, they are off the list and someone from the Muslim majority will be put in their place.”

Galvin tells a story about a young Hindu woman she knew who was trying to get into medical school.

“She was a bright girl. She did the exam and she scored high and then, she didn’t get in. She found afterwards that her place was given to a Muslim girl, who was way, way down her list, but the father of the Muslim girl gave money, and that is how that worked.”

How did this make Galvin feel?

“It makes you angry. And then you get into thinking, What’s the use? You kind of give up on it. This is the way it is. People will say to you, ‘Sister, this is Pakistan and this is the way things are.’ It’s true, but you hate to admit that this is the way it works.”

At the end of the workshop, Egan passes around the mic again and invites participants to say a sentence or two about what they have learnt.

“Trying to find a new identity. When you let go of the ministries that have energised us for many years, who are you?”

“I am back two and a half years, and I realise I am still on the journey of transition. I hope I can now be more understanding to others in my community who are returning.”

“Leaving mission and transition is to aim for transformation. There is movement for a new life and for hope. Transition is not just sitting down in a chair when you come back to Ireland and waiting to die.”

And a murmur of affirmation fills the room.

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