

Vincentian Mission and The parish of the travelling people in Ireland

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The Parish of the Travelling People was founded in 1980 by Archbishop Ryan to respond to the pastoral needs of the Travelling People in the Archdiocese of Dublin. He advertised for a Community to take responsibility for administering this special parish as the Diocese did not have the personnel. The Irish Province saw this work as an opportunity to work with the Traveller Community who were, and are, as the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference described them "*the most discriminated against minority in this country.*" The province appointed a parish priest and a curate. These were shortly joined by two catechists, one a Daughter of Charity and the other a Christian Brother along with two parish secretaries.

I. The Traveller Community in Ireland

A) Culture

The Traveller Community in Ireland is an ethnic minority who, according to historical sources has been part of Irish society for centuries. While having much in common with European Gypsies, for example in terms of nomadic lifestyle, they are not the same. They have a long shared history, value system, language, economy, and nomadic tradition which make them a distinct ethnic group. Family life is highly valued by Travellers. They prefer to live together in particular family groupings. It is in and through the family structure that Traveller culture survives, thrives and continues to move into the future. There are about 29,000 Travellers in Ireland (approximately 5,000 families) of whom 50% are under the age of 15.

B) Discrimination

Travellers live out the everyday reality of their lives in a country which discriminates against them as individuals and as a group. They have very limited, if any, access to bars, hotels, hairdressers, discos etc.; they tend to be followed around a supermarket and if a family is given a house in a housing estate the local residents will often block their entry into the house and force them to go elsewhere. They do not have the experience of being treated as equal citizens. As one Irish sociologist stated in a recent study; "*The Irish people's prejudices against the Travellers is one of caste-like apartheid.*"

C) Accommodation

Access to appropriate and good quality accommodation is a fundamental human right. However, well over 1,200 Traveller families (7,000 approx) throughout Ireland live

without toilets, water, electricity and refuse collection. Many others live on sites that have been poorly constructed, badly managed, are overcrowded and are now without basic facilities, due to disrepair. In 1995 the government promised that by the year 2000 every Traveller would be properly accommodated through the provision of 3,100 new units of accommodation. In the five years since only 136 new units of accommodation have been provided. Yet these are the years when Ireland has had the highest economic growth in the European Community in a phenomenon known commonly as the ‘celtic tiger.’

D) Health

Due to the intolerable conditions that Travellers live in, they are at a significantly increased risk of developing health problems. The statistics in respect to life expectancy are startling:

- Travellers have more than double the national rate of still births
- Infant mortality rates are three times higher than the national rate
- Only 1 in 20 Travellers live over the age of 50
- Traveller men live on average 10 years less than settled men
- Traveller women live on average 12 years less than settled women

E) Economy

In the past Travellers were a rural people with an economy based on tin-smithing, seasonal farm labour, flower making, door to door sales, recycling, music and fairs. Today, self-employment, flexibility, nomadism and the passing on of skills within the family are factors which influence Traveller work, which includes buy-and-sell market trading, scrap collecting, tarmac laying and antique dealing. While the Irish economy has been the fastest growing in the European Community, the Traveller Community as a group have not benefited from this growth

II. History and development of the Parish

It is in this context that the parish has grown and developed in response to these needs. Pastoral visitation of sites, celebration of the sacraments and general pastoral care especially in regard to responding to situations of great crises constituted much of the work of the Parish in the first eight years after it was established under the leadership of Fr. Michael McCullagh C.M. Through this work a very clear picture emerged of the serious needs of Travellers; i.e., regarding accommodation, health, employment, personal development, adult education, etc. The relationships that were built up with Travellers through caring for them pastorally formed the basis of the Parish’s *raison d’etre*.

For the first ten years the Parish Office was based in a building called Exchange House which was the home of the Dublin Committee of the Travelling People. The care of Traveller children who were “glue sniffing” on the streets of Dublin was central in the early days of the Parish as these children were based there in Exchange house. In 1989 the decision of the Diocese to sell the property meant that relocation of the Parish centre would become necessary. As the parish was very much interlinked with the Dublin Committee the

change to an independent premises was a radical step and those involved found it very painful. However, under the leadership of the then Parish priest, Fr. Sean Farrell C.M., the move to the new premises in Cook St. ushered in a new phase of development and growth.

A) New premises; new directions

The Parish of the Travelling People now became independent in its own premises of St. Laurence House. The placing of the new Parish under the patronage of St. Laurence was symbolic of its Catholic identity and also signified that its ministry extended throughout the Diocese. The move gave the Parish an opportunity to establish its identity independent of the Dublin Committee for Travelling People. A number of important developments were now made possible especially as this coincided with the development and expansion of the parish team with two extra catechists and a parish sister joining the staff.

The parish team was now able to do its own thinking. It now realised, through appreciation and support of the culture of the Travelling People, its aim to help Travellers to build a strong Christian Community and to develop their own faith from within their culture. Members of the parish who went to Rome in 1990 for the International Meeting on the Pastoral Care of Travelling People heard Pope John Paul II say: " *You have all become especially concerned with Travellers, complete the task of knowing them, and let them be known as they really are and not as they are now so ungenerously imagined to be. Study their history, their psychology, their language, share their joys and their suffering and it is at this price that you can help them achieve their calling in the Church and in the world.*" Coming back with this message the work of resourcing the Traveller community took on a new impetus.

B) A more proactive stance with Travellers

Relocation also enabled the parish team to develop their work with Travellers who had experienced and were experiencing discrimination, racism, prejudice and in some cases addiction. The parish team now had the confidence to work in partnership with Travellers and with other Traveller organisations, an example of which is the "walking pilgrimage" which explored culture, faith and social justice issues and which has become an annual event. This enabled the parish to develop a more proactive stance and to support the growing acknowledgement of Travellers as a nomadic ethnic group.

A project to explore Traveller faith and customs was made possible through government funding. Travellers themselves were enabled to research and produce a book entitled "***Wrapped in the Mantle of God***" in which they explored the faith of Travellers in regard to christenings, communion, confirmation, marriage, funerals, etc. Subsequently they produced a book on "***Drugs and the Traveller Community.***"

C) Pilot projects and publications

Work to help bridge the gap between Traveller and settled people developed and a pilot project at the Marino Institute of Education for trainee teachers led to the publication of "**Do You Know Us at All?**" This was further developed and annual workshops were held at

Maynooth College (the National Seminary) and All Hallows College in order to help those who would be involved with Travelling people on a pastoral level to have some understanding of Traveller culture.

The production of culturally appropriate religious education programmes for use in schools was a constant focus of the four catechists on the parish staff. This resulted in the publication of the book entitled “*Coordinate Programme for First Communion and Penance and Confirmation with Worksheets.*” The programme of religious education for Traveller Training Centres remains the only culturally appropriate materials still available.

III. My arrival in the Parish - A new phase of consolidation

In 1995 when I was appointed as Parish Priest to succeed Sean Farrell another new phase of development and growth began. Like the previous phase this involved pain as new structures had to emerge to facilitate this new growth. When I took up the leadership a number of issues quickly emerged:

A) The national role of the parish

The publication of the Government Task Force Report on the Travelling People in July 1995, a month after I was installed, helped me see that the Parish had a National Role, especially in relation to the Church as we were the only full-time Church group working with the Traveller Community. The Task Force stated that “*The improvement of relationships between the Traveller and ‘Settled’ communities through the development of mutual understanding and respect requires an adjustment in attitudes towards one another and an acceptance of the other’s culture.... The Task Force believes that church groups have a significant role to play in this area, particularly in the improvement of relations between “Settled” and Traveller populations.*” So, within weeks of arriving I wrote to the Bishops’ Conference requesting them to make a response to the publication of this far-reaching charter for the Traveller Community. This role at National level was one that would develop in the years to come.

B) Strategy with local parishes – resource vs service

From its inception there has been a tension between the concept of a special personal parish and the local parish and the role of service versus resourcing Travellers. It gradually became clear to me that we had to work more with local parishes. We had an entry point as a parish into the life of the other 200 parishes in the Diocese of Dublin that no other Traveller group had. In the long run it was crucial for Travellers that they be named and accepted as equal members of their local parish with their settled neighbours. Only then could relationships be built up that might bring about real change in attitudes as both communities came to understand each other better. It became evident that we needed to be less visible so that the local priest and parish team could increase in visibility with Travellers. Every time we did a wedding, funeral, baptism in a local parish we deprived that local priest and parish team from building a relationship with the Travellers in their Parish. Some parish teams saw this clearly, others did not and saw us as the people responsible for Travellers (the weakness of having a special parish, enabling people to avoid taking responsibility). It applied to all

areas of our work; e.g., a member of a local parish was better to instruct a child for first communion rather than a catechist from the special parish as the child and family were linked into the parish structures. Priests and catechists from the parish would resource and help rather than do the service where possible.

C) Naming of the parish as a resource

Further reflection led in most recent years to a clearer focus in the parish on the movement to resource local parishes in enabling the equal participation of Travellers at local level, as part of a horizon shift in consciousness. This move to becoming an organisation whose primary direction is towards becoming a resource to local parishes in efforts to include Travellers in the life of their local parishes emerged and was agreed upon by the Parish staff as the way to proceed in promoting Traveller inclusion and representation in the life of the Church.

D) Provision of more resources

The provision of directives to local parishes in the training of personnel etc. is now an increasing focus of the work along with resources for use locally. These include the production of a Video on Traveller faith called *The Light Within*, the development of a *Touring Photographic Exhibition* on Traveller culture, faith, discrimination, accommodation, etc., the production of a *Pre-Marriage Video* with scenes written and acted by Travellers, and the publication shortly of *The Experience of Death in the Traveller Community* describing their rich customs and traditions around death and drawing comparisons with the North American Indian and aboriginal nomadic cultures. Resourcing the institutional Church in its teachings on Travellers also constitutes much of the work at present, and in partnership with the other national Traveller organisations we are drafting a document on the Traveller Community to be issued by the National Conference of Bishops next year. The tension between the provision of pastoral care in the context of developing relationships with Travellers and responding to their needs, and the increasing profile of the parish as a national organisation that has a role in resourcing local parishes is a constant concern of the parish staff and it is something we try to balance.

IV. Collaborative Ministry

Under Sean Farrell's leadership the parish tried to develop a collaborative model of working together. Sean had put in place the broad strokes of a collaborative approach to leadership and decision-making. In his final years many Travellers were employed in the parish through government funded employment schemes. At the same time funding was provided to employ two extra catechists. From being almost entirely Vincentian, male and religious (two Vincentian priests, a Daughter of Charity and a Christian Brother), women and men, lay and religious were now equal members of the parish team. New challenges and tensions emerged as the group faced the change that was going to be required from the challenge that professional women and men who were not religious posed. More importantly a bigger challenge was posed to all the settled members of the team with the employment of Travellers. Due to the fact that the staff was composed mainly of settled people continual efforts to include Travellers in the life of the parish office and especially in the area of

decision-making became an increased concern in the mission of the parish. The real involvement of Travellers in the parish took a further step in 1999 when Cathleen McDonagh qualified in Theology in All Hallows College and became a full-time member of staff. For me the employment of a Traveller as a professional theologian is a most significant event and one that I hope will have great potential in understanding and giving expression to Traveller faith and beliefs.

A) The challenges involved in working collaboratively

Successful collaborative ministry is built upon good personal relationships. In *“The Sign We Give”* a working party of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales stated about collaborative ministry that: *“People who want to work collaboratively need a strong sense of their own identity, of emotional maturity and a desire for mutual trust and commitment.... Sometimes relationships among those working collaboratively break down. It is caused by poor communication, misunderstandings, different temperaments, insensitivity and other human weaknesses.... When this happens, whether in a parish or in a team, a great deal of energy and time can be absorbed in sorting matters out.”* While there was an enthusiasm to work collaboratively the necessary factors to do so were not present. Our attempt to work collaboratively has been a particularly painful struggle for all the team but I now see that four years later there has been great personal growth for most members of staff. This cost a great deal of time and energy but has had very positive results such as in preparation for ministry whether in the parish or outside of it.

B) A time for pragmatism

The desire for shared decision-making is a natural outcome of working collaboratively. This however raised its own difficulties because no clear boundaries in regard to responsibility for decision-making had been in place before this process of collaboration began. There were unrealistic expectations that all decisions could be made by the whole group together. As a result of this and after consultation with the team, I employed two Family Systems consultants to work with the team and compile a report on the parish staff and make recommendations on the way forward. The consultants prefaced their report by describing the different *“Mindsets/Ideologies/Frameworks”* that shaped the way that those involved in the parish or connected to it operate out of. They concluded; *“... a wide variety of ‘mindsets’ are at play within the parish context. This should be a source of richness. It seems however to lead instead to considerable fragmentation because there seems to be no mechanism by which cohesion is easily achieved... in our opinion pragmatism is needed in the parish at this point.”* We were experiencing what parish groups everywhere have and are experiencing; namely, that men and women, lay and clerical, and in our case Traveller and settled, are all coming from different backgrounds and mindsets and so there is a lot of work needed to try and reach a common vision.

Since that report I adopted the “pragmatic approach” to leadership suggested and so my style of leadership has been more consultative, concentrating on what works. Policy decisions are now talked out by all the staff. Decisions are based on wide consultation and I try to get the best thinking applied to a situation. I believe this has been successful and the parish has progressed and grown. The right conditions have been created for individuals to take on leadership in different areas and this is encouraged. There is a desire to move on in a

more open and trusting atmosphere. It should now be possible to start working towards a more realistically collaborative model of leadership.

C) Networking with other Traveller organisations

The Parish is strongly committed to networking with other organisations and people working with Travellers. In striving to create a more just society where Travellers are accepted as equal citizens, the need to work in collaboration with other Traveller organisations has grown. Networking with other Traveller organisations, such as the Irish Traveller Movement and The National Traveller Women's Forum, etc., developed to try and bring about effective change and justice-making structures at statutory, relational and social levels. This added another dimension to the work of the parish. Last year the Parish of the Travelling People took the initiative and invited into partnership the three other national Traveller organisations (Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and The National Traveller Women's Forum) to lobby the government for money to provide a positive media campaign to promote Travellers as an ethnic group. They were successful and the government granted them one million Irish Pounds over a three-year period. This programme is now called "*Citizen Traveller*" to help Irish people recognise and accept Travellers as a separate ethnic minority who are equal citizens of Ireland.

V. Mission

In responding to the experience of being in relationship with Travellers and to their expressed needs, the mission of the Parish includes:

- *Solidarity*: In offering culturally appropriate services to Travellers, the Parish stands in solidarity with them. Justice is a key concern for the Parish who serves a people living on the edge of a society that does not welcome Travellers "with great joy" (words spoken to the Traveller child at baptism). The Parish in its work began to focus on a more profound response to the Gospel message's call for justice echoing in its mission the words of Pope John Paul II when he stated that "all discrimination against Travellers is unjust and harsh, because it is clearly against the teachings of the Gospel, for which each person is a child of God, and a sister or brother of Christ."
- *Positive Christian Community*: We believe in the possibility of both the Traveller and settled communities being a pilgrim people of God journeying together with confidence and dignity in witnessing to the Kingdom of God. In order for this to come about the Parish encourages and develops a positive Christian community through building relationships between Traveller and settled and through challenging the settled faith community about its role in this oppression, so that Travellers do not remain witnessing to the Kingdom in isolated sites on the margins of society.
- *Faith*: Traveller faith continues to be a feature of the culture and way of life throughout the generations. For Travellers, faith is a part of their culture and way of life which flows into and out of all aspects of everyday life. The work of the Parish includes the delivery of traditional and culturally appropriate services such as pastoral care, visitation, the celebration of the sacraments, and the opportunity for faith development. Traveller

culture is a dynamic, not static entity. So too the faith expressions of Travellers are changing.

- *Ethnic Identity*: The Parish works in partnerships with Travellers to help ensure their distinct ethnic identity is valued and celebrated. To bring this about, the Parish constantly reflects on: 1) how to resource the cultural spirituality of this ethnic minority and 2) how to bring about anti-racist practice at Parish level.
- *Local Parishes*: The Parish encourages and resources Church leaders and local parishes to actively include Traveller people in participating equally as parishioners in their local Church. It is hoped that initiatives such as the present Photographic Exhibition, for example, will assist in developing right relations between these two groups of people. This area has developed as one of the main focuses of the mission of the Parish in the last five years.

VI. Vincentian Mission

In 1986 in Rome Pope John Paul II addressed the Delegates to the 37th General Assembly saying “*search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short-and-long term solutions; adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the Gospel and of the Church.*” Through the Parish of the Travelling People the Irish Province has been able to do exactly this. Like Vincent de Paul the members of the Irish province who have had the privilege of working with the Traveller Community have come not to bring Christ to the Travellers but to find and make visible the Christ who is already there in very real ways. Through our work with the Traveller Community we are there with a people who are suffering discrimination and prejudice on the margins of Irish society. We work in solidarity and partnership with the Traveller community in their struggle for liberation. We struggle with them in a way that their struggle becomes our own. At different levels we try to change the social, economic and political structures and attitudes of oppression.

For me it has been the most challenging and enriching period of my life in the Community. I have felt that through the Parish and at a personal level I have been able to make a difference to some people individually and to attitudes at a more general level. I have met people who have been daily oppressed as they faced their own personal tragedies of sickness, death, burnings, appalling living conditions and have seen the “face of Christ” and this has humbled and made me more human.

The Traveller community live in the present. Everything is very immediate and so there is a suddenness to everything that happens. I have had to respond at very short notice to requests, deaths, tragedies, to do interviews in newspapers, on radio and television. It has all enriched me and helped me grow as a person. As a leader of the Parish team it has challenged me to grow in leadership skills. I have always demanded high standards of myself and others so that what we do reflects the best we are capable of. I have had to deal with a lot of struggle and conflict at a team level. This has been very challenging and I am gratified to see that over the course of years great progress has been made. In taking responsibility for the pastoral care of the Traveller Community in the Dublin Diocese the

spirit of St. Vincent is very much alive and my hope is that it will become incarnated in the members of the Traveller community in the years to come.