Crossing the Boundary – implications for leadership in the C of I

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Introduction

THAT THERE has been a significant growth in the Church of Ireland population in the Republic of Ireland since 2002 is clearly indicated by Malcolm Macourt[i] in his recent "Counting the People of God? This growth can largely be explained by two phenomena. The first, inward migration of people from across the world who are Anglicans, has been relatively visible within the Church of Ireland and has been the subject of some research, discussion and policy-making during the last decade.[ii] The second, noted by Archbishop John Neill in a speech quoted below, is the movement of indigenous Irish people born into Roman Catholic families who have chosen in adulthood to journey to the Church of Ireland. This latter issue has not been equally visible nor has it been the subject of research.

Speaking at the launch of Macourt's book, Archbishop John Neill speculated that perhaps this latter factor was underplayed.[iii] He said:

> These [immigration, end of Ne Temere decree, etc.] are all important observations, but I feel that there is one that has been left out, though almost mentioned, that is very significant indeed, and one that must be mentioned – and which Anglican reticence is all to slow to identify in many instances! The Church of Ireland is changing, and in many of the parishes that I visit, indeed probably in the majority, I discover those of the majority community who have opted for membership of the Church of Ireland – not because of marriage, and not because of simply drifting, but because of conscious personal decision. In many of the parishes, these are now the churchwardens and the youth leaders – these are lay people employed at the level of diocesan church life, these are the parish clergy…..
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> This phenomenon is going to have an effect on many of the features of the Church of Ireland so accurately portrayed by Malcolm Macourt. All Churches may be suffering numerically in today's Western world, but they are also changing. Although tribalism is not a word that we relish as members of the Church of Ireland – there was tribalism among us, particularly in rural areas (perhaps we might call it defensive tribalism), and in other areas where the Church of Ireland could be tribal through strength of numbers (we might call it complacent tribalism) – but this is changing. The increasing numbers of new members of the Church of Ireland drawn from the wider population, who are definitely now 'Church of Ireland', are different in respect of not sharing traditional tribal characteristics. They share none of the prejudices, customs or memories of the 'tribe'. This is going have an effect over time and mould a different church.

We are two of those people. We both made a conscious decision to leave the church of our upbringing, the church that serves the majority population in the Republic of Ireland. We both made a spiritual journey in adulthood and found our home in the Church of Ireland. However, unlike many of those mentioned by

Archbishop Neill in the speech above, we now both find ourselves in positions that are visible both within the Church of Ireland and beyond it - in positions of leadership, roles where we have an opportunity to serve the community we have come to be part of. We both also find ourselves in positions that bring with them the potential to mould and change the institutions where we work as well as potentially influencing certain elements of the culture of the Church of Ireland.

This article grew out of a series of conversations that we had, with one another and with a small number of others[iv] who, like ourselves, made a journey that brought them from the Roman Catholic church into the Church of Ireland. This article explores a number of shared themes that emerged in each of the conversations between us as authors and with our other contributors.

Maintaining the boundary between cultural groups

In the speech quoted above, Archbishop Neill argued that the tribalism that characterised the relationship between the Roman Catholic majority and the Protestant minority in independent Ireland is diminishing. That tribalism was complex in its origins and its perpetuation.[v] Shared memory, mythology and cultural experiences are all crucial elements that define a tribal or community group.

Communities are also partly defined by their boundaries, by what and who is *outside* as much as by what and who is *inside*.[vi] The Church of Ireland community has experienced the sense of being "the outsider" or "the Other" within its own society, in particular since independence in the early twentieth century. Irishness was (and as Heather Crawford's[vii] recent research reveals) remains synonymous in many people's understanding both with Catholicism and nationalism.[viii] The Church of Ireland community has, at times, been represented as a colonial remnant in an independent Ireland.[ix] Consequently, the Church of Ireland community has tended towards social insularity. This was partly in response to the very small size of its population. It also reflected concerns regarding *ne temere* and fears (often rooted in memories of specific atrocities or hurtful incidents) in certain parts of the country arising out of sectarianism.[x]

The Church of Ireland minority survived in independent Ireland in part because of that insularity. It maintained itself within strong boundaries and remained segregated from the Roman Catholic majority. As a community, it acted as a homogeneous group that socialised, worked and worshipped within its own cultural and institutional boundaries. It educated its young people and cared for those members of the community who were sick in its own institutions, separate from the majority population. It should be noted that the State supported the community in maintaining these institutional boundaries.[xi]

We both grew up in different parts of rural Ireland. Our childhoods were spent in places that were characterised by different degrees of closeness and social engagement between the majority community and members of the Church of Ireland and other Reformed Christian church adherents. However, we were both very aware of the boundaries that existed between the communities; and we learned the signifiers of that difference such as schools and churches people attended. We learned that

children's tribal affiliation could be often identified by their first names and surnames. We also grew up with the backdrop of inter-tribal conflict in Northern Ireland.

Crossing the tribal boundary

When we were children and teenagers very few people "crossed the boundary" from one tribal group to the other, and when they did it usually caused much trauma and talk within each community. Generally, those who did cross it did so because of marriage. When we were growing up, the Roman Catholic church was still a very powerful social, cultural and political institution in people's everyday lives. Visible engagement with the church and its institutions could provide people with opportunities for career and social advancement.[xii] It wasn't easy to leave – particularly in rural areas where anonymity was impossible, this could have negative consequences for the individual of independent mind.

The tribal boundary has become much more permeable than it used to be. The institutional structures such as education and health-care are much more pluralist and shared than they were. The social and cultural power of the Roman Catholic Church in Irish society is much diminished. Many people are either opting out of organised religion entirely or are embarking on spiritual quests in search of a faith with which they can be comfortable.

Even with those changes, crossing the boundary from the Roman Catholic majority community to the Church of Ireland minority community carries with it social and cultural meanings that have little to do with faith and a great deal more to do with different community memories, mythologies and cultures. As Terence McCaughey[xiii] has argued, the two main Christian groups on the island of Ireland have tended to be defined as much by tribal and political identities as by religious belief.

When we discussed our own experiences of crossing this boundary we were struck by the similarities in relation to the journey that we both made. The other participants in our conversations also recounted stories that resonated with our own. All those who took part in these conversations noted that there were push factors that nudged us to away from the church of our upbringing during early adulthood. Each of us, for a variety of reasons, experienced a sense of spiritual vacuum in our relationship with that church. *THIS IS A BIG VAGUE – COULD YOU BE MORE SPECIFIC? I SUSPECT THAT THE AUTHORITARIANISM AND FORECLOSURE OF DEBATE IN THE RCC IS A BIG PUSH FACTOR FOR MANY.IF YOU AGREE, LET'S MENTION IT. IF NOT, MAYBE YOU CAN IDENTIFY SOMETHING ELSE?* In all cases, that push factor preceded the pull factor into the Church of Ireland. There were a number of those pull factors that seemed common across all of our experiences.

The first pull factor was contact with someone who became a guide or mentor. In the case of both of us and each of the others who contributed to these conversations, a particular member of the clergy was very influential. The reasons for this impact, and the type of relationship varied from one person to another. In some instances, there was a pre-existing friendship that led to increased curiosity about Anglicanism. In other cases, someone who started as a guide became a mentor and a

friend. In all cases, these people provided information and explanation that led us more deeply into an understanding of Anglican faith and they did so gently and in response to our queries and expressed needs.

The second pull factor was of an intellectual nature. In the case of each person who engaged in the discussions that led to this article, the space that exists in the Anglican church for questioning, for differences of opinion, was a deep attraction. It was noted by one of our contributors that this may result in the Church of Ireland attracting many people from the majority community who are of a very liberal outlook. That contributor noted that this factor, in and of itself, could influence and change the Church of Ireland, especially in the Republic.

What was particularly striking about all these conversations was that each one of us described finding the Church of Ireland as being a kind of homecoming. However, what each of the conversations also demonstrated was that we are all conscious of the cultural differences between us as "incomers" to the Church of Ireland and those who have spent all their lives as members of the community. Each one of us is conscious that because of our experience of crossing the tribal boundary we bring a particular insight that results from sharing perspectives with those within both communities. Anne described this as being somewhat like the little mermaid – you never fully leave one community and never fully belong to the other. This brings with it a particular insight and understanding, one that differs from those who have spent all their lives within one of the tribal groups.

Reactions to the boundary-crossers

It was clear from all the conversations that informed this article that each of our contributors experienced welcome and acceptance in the parish groups that we joined. None of us have been subject to prying questions as to where we came from or what our motives were in attending that particular church. It should be noted that all of us initially began to attend Church of Ireland churches in urban areas where a certain amount of anonymity is possible.

One of our contributors noted that he has never told others in his parish about his Roman Catholic upbringing and that he suspects there are other "turners" like himself who regularly attend the parish but their transition isn't spoken about and does not appear to be of importance. Anne would have had a similar experience during most of the twenty years that she has been a member of various Church of Ireland parishes. She experienced being made welcomed as an equal and being especially welcomed when indicating any willingness to help or contribute to the life and work of the parish.

However, Crawford's[xiv] recent book indicated that the tribal boundaries remain deeply embedded in Irish society. These differences have a tendency to remain unnamed, to be perpetuated in silence. As noted above, none of the contributors to this article ever experienced suspicion or concern about their motives in attending Church of Ireland services, in becoming involved in parishes as lay people. However, that experience can be somewhat different when those who cross the tribal boundary take up leadership positions within the Church, whether in an ordained or a lay capacity.

Since we took up the leadership positions that we now hold, both of us have been more aware that some of our fellow members of the Church of Ireland are conscious of our difference of origin, and in some cases, uneasy with it. Dermot became Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in June 2008. Prior to that he was a Rector in Wicklow. In both positions he has been made aware that some people suspect that his background as a Roman Catholic priest remains highly influential in the way that he thinks about and organises liturgy. Anne took up her position as Principal of the Church of Ireland College of Education in September 2009. She was made aware some months after she took up the post that the following comment had been made when her appointment had been made public: "You will have to watch her. She isn't one of us. She doesn't know our ways."

Anne welcomes this comment for two reasons. Firstly, from her perspective, it is good that someone could so honestly express a genuinely held concern. Secondly, it is absolutely true. As noted above, those who cross this boundary bring with them the culture of their childhood and upbringing. We take on a type of hybrid identity that includes elements of the culture we have come from as well as the culture of the community we now call our own. And differences remain.

To conclude

As Archbishop Neill indicated in the speech quoted at the start of this article, tribalism has certainly diminished in the society of the Republic of Ireland; however, Crawford's recent research indicates that it nonetheless remains deeply embedded in Irish society. It becomes particularly apparent when the boundary between tribal groups is made visible. Those of us who cross the boundary highlight it, especially if we take up positions where we have the potential to bring about change to institutions that have significance within the particular community.

We noted at the beginning of this article that there has been little discussion or research about the experiences of those who leave the Roman Catholic church and join the Church of Ireland. It is important that their motives and experiences of their transition are explored and discussed. It is equally important that the experiences and perceptions of the communities that they join are examined. All of us in the Church of Ireland, whether it is our community of upbringing or the spiritual home that we found in adulthood, have a chance to discuss and explore together how we are moulding a different church.

As St. Paul reminded the early Church, there is no space in Christianity for tribalism, for "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3: 28). However, we can only move beyond that sense of tribalism if we honestly acknowledge and engage with the cultural, social and political differences between tribal groups on this island that have shaped so much of our history over the last several hundred years.

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[i] M. Macourt (2008) *Counting the People of God? The Census of Population and the Church of Ireland.* Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing.

[ii] e.g.: G. I. Higgins *et al.* (2003) *The Hard Gospel. Dealing Positively with Difference in the Church of Ireland. A Scoping Study Report to the Sectarianism Education Project.* Unpublished report; Report of the Archbishop's Working Group on Combating Racism (2005) *Welcoming Angels.* Dublin: Fodhla Books; P. Comerford (2007) *Embracing Difference: the Church of Ireland in a Plural Society.* Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing.

[iii] Speech by Archbishop John Neill at the launch of Malcolm Macourt's book, 13th February 2009.

[iv] We respect the wishes of the other contributors to these conversations that their identities remain confidential. These few contributors were a mixture of ordained and lay people.

[v] J. Ruane and D. Butler (2007) "Southern Irish Protestants: an example of de-ethnicisation?" *Nations and Nationalism* 13, 4, pp. 619-635; K. H. Crawford (2010) *Outside the Glow: Protestants and Irishness in Independent Ireland.* Dublin: UCD Press.

[vi] A. P. Cohen (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community.* London: Tavistock.

[vii] H. K. Crawford *Outside the Glow.*

[viii] R. McVeigh (1995) *The Racialisation of Irishness.* Belfast: Centre for Research and Documentation.

[ix] J. Ruane and D. Butler, "Southern Irish Protestants".

[x] K. Bowen (1983) *Protestants in a Catholic State: Ireland's Privileged Minority.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; J. White (1975) *Minority Report: The Protestant Community in the Republic of Ireland.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

[xi] A. Lodge and K. Lynch (2004) *Diversity at School.* Dublin: IPA / Equality Authority.

[xii] T. Inglis (2000) *Moral Monopoly: Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland.* Dublin: UCD Press.

[xiii] T. P. McCaughey (1993) *Memory and Redemption: Church, Politics and Prophetic Theology in Ireland.* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

[xiv] H. K. Crawford *Outside the Glow.*