

SUPPORTING MIXED MARRIAGES

Anne Odling-Smee

We came to Northern Ireland in 1970 as my husband obtained a post here as a surgeon. We are in a Mixed Marriage and have raised our children within our two traditions, baptising them alternately as Roman Catholic and Anglican (Church of Ireland). In 1974 I was introduced to people who were starting a support group for couples planning or in a mixed marriage. We had experienced a certain amount of critical and indeed unchristian comment because we had married outside of our tradition and so had the people with whom we decided to become involved.



In the early days of the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA), as we called the support group, we spent a lot of time helping and supporting each other and the couples who

made enquiries by letter or telephone. It was not safe to use our own numbers as many people felt it wise to be ex-directory but Corrymeela House sheltered us as a postal address and telephone enquiry point.

We were helping couples to understand the guidelines which the churches were supposed to follow about the conduct of a mixed marriage ceremony or baptism, but also to provide support when they faced other obstacles. For example, we had a couple where the bride was a Catholic and her family were very hostile to her marrying a Protestant and so would have no part in the wedding. The ceremony was arranged but where to celebrate it? NIMMA decided to provide the food and the reception took place in the nearby home of hospitable members.

Another issue we worked on was housing. It was at a very troubled time in Northern Ireland and a couple came to us who were living in a Catholic housing estate, but the husband as a Protestant felt unsafe and they needed to move. So we contacted our friends in the Association of Inter Church Families in England. They found a clergyman who with the help of his congregation found a house into which our couple could move.

Housing has been a big issue, particularly if as a couple you did not have enough money to choose where you lived. When people were intimidated we could put them in touch with Housing Aid and other organisations and we began to campaign for Housing without Labels, but a big change needed to happen.

After the Good Friday Agreement the Housing Executive announced that they were working out a strategy for Shared Social Housing as so many of their estates were segregated and not safe for people in mixed marriages, nor often for ethnic minority people. NIMMA was given a place on the Advisory Board and so we were able to explain what our couples needed and urgently. The housing application forms had three categories 'Catholic,' 'Protestant' and 'Other' - but we are not other. We are inter church, cross community and mixed. We bring two traditions to the table. After a good discussion it was agreed that a category 'Mixed' would be added so that couples could apply for a house in a Shared Neighbourhood, or in a Shared Development – housing without labels.

In NIMMA we know that as a group you can make structures change so that those people who want to be together, not separate, can be so. We think this is what being a Christian means. A great many people in Churches and wider society have done their best to help. It just needs to become infectious - NO LABELS.

