

Talk by Dr Carmel Gallagher at the launch of her book 'Retired Missionaries and Faith in a Changing Society' on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2024 at Avila Retreat and Conference Centre, Dublin

Hello everybody and thank you for coming to my book launch.

Thank you, Minister Fleming, for your presence today and for your kind words of introduction and endorsement for my book. It is important that you as Minister for Overseas Development and Diaspora have taken time out of your busy schedule to acknowledge the legacy of missionaries. You alluded, for example, to the strong link between the work of Irish missionaries and Irish Aid. I also wish to acknowledge the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin who generously wrote the Foreword to the book. I also appreciate the interest of the civil servants involved in your Department and Mr. Karl Gardner, Director of the Irish Abroad Unit is with us today.

In writing the book I was very much a conduit for the people who 'walked the walk' as it were, the missionaries themselves who generously and openly shared their stories, experiences and insights from working with people and communities in difficult circumstances literally across the globe.

Before explaining the background to the study, I wish to pay tribute to my late friend and coresearcher, Dr Ricca Edmondson. It was Ricca who posed the question that inspired the book: "Why has this group been forgotten about and overlooked?" In 2015 Ricca wrote that an absence of discourse leads to the assumption that a group has nothing important to say. One returned missionary told Irish Times journalist Rosita Boland in 2019: "I was in Africa for 54 years and not one person has asked me anything about the work I did there." There was certainly little interest in either academia or media or social discourse in the work of missionaries and so, Ricca and I came to this project with a desire to record stories that might never have been heard.

But as well as capturing the stories, we also asked "In what ways did mission make sense?" We wanted to go beyond simplistic explanations of

missionaries being ‘products of their culture’ and explore whether mission was anything other than a period of Irish social history.

We sensed that this group had accumulated wisdom from life experiences uncommon to most Irish people either then or now. So, we wanted to present a rounded picture of people who served as missionaries through a research-based sociological study.

The methods we used had to be in keeping with this task and it was important to build robust ethical guidelines around the research. Ethical approval for the research was given by NUI Galway. Essentially, the interviews were open-ended, conversational and were designed to encourage reflection. The data was so rich that a book could well have been written based on any one of the 37 interviews.

There are many themes that shone through the interviews, and I would like to highlight what to me appeared most important:.

- First, missionaries developed critical and broad perspectives from working interculturally, crossing exclusionary boundaries of race, ethnicity, language, religion etc. The respect and admiration they developed for people of other cultures greatly enriched their lives.
- Second, missionaries developed a holistic missionary method that involved personal, social and spiritual impacts on people. They made no distinction between evangelisation or bringing the Gospel and social justice.
- Third, missionaries recognised the importance of the local community. They were grateful for the help of local people and the missionaries recognised their complete reliance on them. This led to real friendships and a sense of fraternity.
- A fourth theme was the importance of continuing personal, professional and spiritual growth and development. Missionaries who got sabbaticals and who were encouraged and supported to undertake courses were greatly empowered by their new learning. New thinking

and methods from Vatican II, Liberation theology and community development, for example, helped them approach their work more critically and with renewed vigour.

- Fifth, missionaries had to be adaptive and flexible. As one missionary said they had a “Freedom to explore alternative ways to do things.” These alternative ways sometimes brought strain and dissonance, but they also enabled missionaries to get things done.
- Sixth, women religious, lay missionaries and ordinary members of the Church voiced their deep sense of powerlessness within the Church. Yet, despite this or perhaps because of this they did tremendous work accompanying people who were marginalised and burdened in their society and community, by sharing lifespaces with people like prisoners, women in prostitution and people who had AIDS especially in the early days of the disease.
- Finally, and this refers back to the first point, the tenets of Christianity had to be understood and worked out in the culture and circumstances of the people among whom missionaries served.

There are many questions that arise from the book and in selecting the themes I spoke about I do not wish to imply that the missionaries or the mission movement were faultless. There have been many valid criticisms made of the mission movement and I was impressed by how the missionaries themselves acknowledged and reflected on how they might have done things better. I found that the missionaries were humble and insightful in holding up a mirror to themselves and to their Church.

It is important to point out too that the research was only concerned with Catholic missionaries and indeed missionaries who had stayed in their Orders, and it is important to acknowledge the work of missionaries from other Christian denominations.

One question for me is why missionaries appeared to have little real impact on the ecclesial church in Ireland or indeed in Irish society. Collectively,

missionaries had and hopefully still have much to teach us. But I am unsure that how they lived their lives and the wisdom they accumulated permeated Catholic Christian Ireland as much as it could or should have. This question must be examined honestly by people concerned about the future of faith and Christianity in Ireland.

Finally, I wish to thank the key people who helped me with the book.

AMRI backed the research idea from the start and provided some financial support and then stood back to let the research unfold. They also organised today's event in this beautiful venue and I wish to thank the AMRI team under Gerard and Anne for this.

Anne Fitzpatrick was especially helpful and was always available as a sounding board for any questions related to the themes of the book.

Fr Tom O'Reilly, Columban was so generous with his time in discussing questions that arose about Mission and religious orders.

Fr Donal Dorr was also very helpful when I was finalising the book and clarified a number of important theological points.

There are other people mentioned in the Acknowledgments to whom I am very grateful.

Fr Eddie Deeney from my homeplace of Rathmullan, County Donegal was the first person I spoke to when I was embarking on this project and he has remained helpful throughout. My father, Frank Gallagher was one of Eddie's first teachers and I think there is a nice circularity in that.

My own family, some of whom are here, were all supportive in many different ways.

And now a word to the missionaries themselves – and it is lovely that so many of you are here today.

Without the willingness of all of you to take part in the research and to be so open and honest and generous in sharing your stories and experiences, the

book would never have been written. There is, I believe, an authenticity to the 37 individual accounts that certainly gave me food for thought and resonated with the missionaries themselves when I shared the transcripts of our interview conversations with them. I thank you for the trust you placed in us at the earliest stages and throughout the three years of the project.

My last word is about Ricca. It is sad that she is not here to see her work come to fruition. As you know Ricca died unexpectedly in 2021 just after we had completed the interviews.

Ricca's family are very happy that the work has been completed and while they could not be here today, they send good wishes for the event. My dedication to Ricca in the book. Reads:

*In memory of Dr Ricca Edmondson, a woman of wisdom, exceptional intellect, integrity and a true friend to many.*

Finally, thank you all for coming today and for your support. Thanks again to you Minister and to your officials for your presence and support at today's launch. It is my hope that the book will provoke interest, discussion and further analysis.

Routledge are offering a 50% discount which can be used when ordering through the Routledge website and this is available up to the end of 2024. This applies when the book is ordered directly through [www.routledge.com](http://www.routledge.com). You should enter the code RMF24 at checkout.

AMRI have invited everybody for refreshments in the dining room.