

## **Columban Missionaries Britain – Regional Convention 22-25 January 2024**

The Convention was attended by all ten society members plus two Lay Missionaries and eight co-workers. Also attended were two members of General Council and a member of the Lay Missionary Central leadership team and the Irish Regional Director.

The focus of this Convention is on the survival of the Society.

The Regional Convention was divided into two parts the participants were invited to consider and respond to the recommendations from the IRMU meeting in March 2023 and five questions raised by the External Review. Following the synodal pathway.

The Participants were divide into groups to consider the recommendations and questions.

The invitation was to reflect, discuss and then present back to the whole group. The presentation and the plenary discussion that followed forms the basis of the Region's Convention report. The aim was to capture the mood and spirit of the Convention, rather than devise and vote on firm proposals, and to feed this into the General Assembly meeting in May.

### **IRMU Recommendations**

What are the challenges and opportunities presented by these recommendations, locally and globally?

**1/ To create a culture of accountability supported by rigorous policy procedures and ongoing monitoring.**

#### **Feedback from the Groups:**

This raised a number of questions.

How do we as a Society practice accountability now? We need to have an awareness of what is currently happening before we can look at how a culture of accountability can be created or improved.

Is there currently a level playing field for accountability – for ordained, lay missionaries and co-workers?

Is there evidence of clericalism (in Britain) – whereby a priest's views are considered higher than laity?

Do we have or want a hierarchical structure of accountability or one based on a culture of trust and a partnership of equals?

How can we ensure that all are comfortable with accountability and feel supported? How does our behaviour affect this?

Should the emphasis be on 'mentoring' not 'monitoring' based on a clear understanding of support needs individually and collectively?

We must be accountable to each other, but also to our supporters, external partners and authorities – e.g. UK Charity Commission.

Our safeguarding officer could be brought in more often to update and guide us in the area of safeguarding. What else should we be more aware of?

British Region Co-workers and lay missionaries currently operate within a framework of line management and support... we should review this and ask what is working and what could be improved.

We need to be more familiar with what priests are accountable for in their RMU – e.g. a good example is those involved in Mission Appeals Team – how does this work in other ministries?

It can be an issue if a Columban individual goes off to do something not sanctioned by their RMU – often good work, but how does it impact on the rest of the RMU? This needs to be managed.

What has led to this recommendation? What policies are being disregarded and how? This needs clarity.

The members of General Council commented that there is much evidence of a general lack of awareness of Society policies and procedures.

#### **Conclusion:**

We need a culture of accountability based on mutual trust and support. If the structures and environment we create for the Society are built on this, it will facilitate the creation and implementation of policies and procedures that are owned by everyone.

We need to introduce a culture of evaluation across all ministries that is constructive and non-threatening, where all members share in the success of what works and take responsibility for what needs to change or improve.

## **2/ The second and 5th Recommendations added together:**

**To grow our partnerships with Columban Lay Missionaries and co-workers as an integral part of the Columban mission and gospel witness to the universal Church**

**To create a culture of mentoring and support for leadership that is shared and sustainable and includes co-workers**

### **Feed Back:**

We should begin with gratitude and recognition of the existing, diverse teams of ordained, Lay Missionaries and co-workers in the British Region, which are already prophetic and working together for the Lord. These already combine people of different genders and age.

Can these 'Columban partnerships' be a model for the future?

We can grow these partnerships by creating opportunities for people – Lay Missionaries, co-workers, volunteers, etc. – to develop the skills and mission awareness they need. i.e. formation of the laity.

We need to think more about how lay people are introduced to the Society and how the Columban experience links to their experience of faith and life, by providing opportunities to experience mission and to become immersed in the Columban charism.

Could older Columbans become mentors and accompany lay people?

Will lay people be interested? It is a matter of choice and needs commitment, which is not a strong feature in modern society.

A vision was shared of the 'clerical' Columban Society coming to an end and transforming into a lay missionary society. Some found this difficult and it led to discussion on vocations and recruitment.

Should we not simply accept that if vocations to the priesthood dry up the Society will end and that is God's plan?

COVID impacted vocations recruitment and there no sign that this will recover soon.

Is it ethical to recruit young people for priesthood into a Society with no future beyond 15 years' time? The generation gap is widening, and it is increasingly challenging to provide the mentoring needed.

CLM has not recruited for time. Should new people show interest in CLM, are they able to facilitate training. There has been some interest in shorter term commitment eg. Gap Year.

The original idea of Columban lay mission was to send people from the local church overseas for a short cross-cultural mission and then for them to return to their local church enriched. Perhaps we need to return to this as the basis for exploring new forms of lay mission.

It is not clear if or how the Society plans to invite lay people to join/ become part of the future?

There is still no clear or shared understanding in the Society of the term 'co-worker'. What is expected of them and how are they different from 'staff/employees'. Not every employee is called to leadership.

We need to reduce the number of leadership roles. To achieve this, we might need to reduce the number of places/countries where we work.

Combining RMUs does not seem to have reduced greatly the number of leadership roles. Has it increased the burden on leaders? We need to take the weight off leaders and make their task more realistic.

It is important to be aware of the differences between 'priest leaders' and 'co-worker leaders'. A co-worker leader is usually appointed and remains until they resign, retire or are dismissed due to poor performance or behaviour. A priest leader is usually elected and serves for a term only. What kind of leadership is suited to each type?

A weakness of the Regional leadership structures, especially as the number of candidates for leadership roles decreases, is that you end up with often reluctant leaders not suited to the task; and the suitability of candidates is not always the basis on which they are elected. This leads to ineffectual leadership teams.

Could to a communal leadership model in which all members or participants share the responsibility of leadership? e.g. Mission Unit model?

There is no need for a 'one size fits all' solution across the Society... could each RMU develop its own form/style of leadership best suited to its needs and plans? Could some aspects of General Council leadership be devolved to the RMUs?

The motivation that still drives many donors to give to the Columbans is that they believe they are supporting a Society of priests – the idea of missionary priests committing their lives and leaving the comfort of their homes to bring the Gospel to people in far flung places is still a draw, especially for older supporters.

Careful consideration would need to be given to how the growth of lay involvement in the Society is communicated to supporters, especially as priests begin to feature less.

It is important to have Society-wide ministries to facilitate partnership and communication between RMUs. An international network that shares grass-roots experience of mission from a diverse range of places is why Columban mission is so special.

Can we use successful examples, to inform how ordained/lay partnership/leadership can work ? Joined up forms of leadership is working in Britain.

### **3/ Recommendation 6**

**To explore and define a new expression of Columban missionaries: identity, language, image, etc.**

#### **Feedback:**

The British Region has transitioned from its original identity as a 'home region' serving the international Society by providing vocations and donations, to a Region that, while continuing to raise funds for mission overseas, is responding to the call of mission in Britain. There are now established JPIC and IRD ministries. This has been facilitated over many years by Irish and British missionaries 'returning' from their mission assignment overseas and using their experience to facilitate cross-cultural mission in the local context – a form of 'reverse' mission.

For the future of mission, we need to engage the younger generations, especially those in their 20s, 30s and 40s. How can we build on the excellent work being done with schools and teachers to reach parents and to engage young people when they leave school?

We must learn from current trends in how people practice their faith – e.g. online Mass, 'pray as you go'? We can see from the schools competition submissions about what motivates young people. We must communicate the Columban story in a way that will appeal to a younger generation, to people of other faiths and none.

Important to start by looking at current Columban media that is succeeding and why – i.e. Far East and Vocation for Justice magazines, website, e-Newsletter, social media, etc. What is missing? We do not know enough about our audience and what they like or don't like.

The complete story of Columban Mission is not being told. Why are we sometimes reluctant to share the story of what we do? We need to share more across our ministries and to focus more on the outcome of mission, not just what we do. Mission 'works'? Spread the good news!

Many younger Columban priests are less invested in JPIC and IRD and seem to be more focused on parish and pastoral ministry. As members and the future leaders of the Society in its current form, they have a right to define and lead on future priorities.

The generation gap is growing between Columban Missionaries and younger Catholics. We should take confidence from examples of how priests continue to engage diverse audiences across the generations.

## **Part Two External Review – Headline Summary Report**

### **1. What can be done by reconfiguring organisational arrangements of the Society to reduce the demands on clerical leadership?**

#### **Feedback:**

RMUs must delegate tasks and responsibilities to both Lay Missionaries and co-workers. Could this be a model for reducing the demands on leadership?

The Clerical (hierarchical) leadership model has to change to reduce the pressure on individuals, especially when the number of people available is reduced due to age and ability.

RMUs should focus on fewer ministries rather than be expected to cover all of the Society's priorities? This will surely reduce the demands on leaders... but at what cost to the overall mission of the Society?

One leadership model for all RMU does not work. It might be helpful if each RMU concentrated its efforts on fewer ministries according to the skills and strengths of its personnel. This might mean that RMU leaders are less stretched and have a role that is focussed on and inspired by the local vision and purpose as defined by its members.

Merging regions in South America and Oceania is still being evaluated, but it does not appear to have reduced the burden on clerical leadership. There are overlapping areas between Britain and Ireland and closer collaboration could help reduce the burden of work overall, but the impact of a merger on our ability to fundraise would need to be considered carefully.

Merging with another missionary society would need careful planning and could create more problems than it would solve.

The synod calls us to be a listening priesthood, but it seems our young priests are more inclined towards the Eucharistic leadership model (there is a noticeable change as students go through formation to ordination).

### **3, Is there any approach to vocations that appears canonically sound, secularly legal, ethical and practical, or should the Society cease to accept priestly vocations?**

#### **Feedback:**

Given the current position of only one or two ordinations per year and a death rate of more than 18 per year, the future of the Society is not sustainable. It is painful to admit and accept the conclusion that it is not ethical or practical to accept priestly vocations.

Vocation levels are not going to dramatically change. The vision of a Columban missionary priesthood as a partnership between ordained and lay focussed on evangelisation, IRD and JPIC is being eroded as younger Columbans retreat into sacramental ministry.

Is there still the capacity to run a formation programme effectively. Finding vocations from Non-Columban countries is not desirable, ethical or viable.

#### **4. Since vocations for lay missionaries also rely fundamentally on leadership afforded by clergy, how might the Society similarly manage that nexus?**

##### **Feedback:**

Columban Lay Mission operates within and as part of the Society, with independent structures that do not rely on clerical leadership. It has been a deliberate choice to remain as part of the Society. With the necessary funding it could survive and thrive as a wholly independent group?

The future of CLM vocations and recruitment will be discussed at the CLM Assembly (29 Jan to 9 Feb).

RMUs need to evaluate our capacity to receive and support lay missionaries. Do we have the personnel?

#### **5.**

#### **What can be done to sustain the Society without vocations sufficient to stabilise or grow the ordained membership?**

##### **Feedback:**

Finance – other missionary groups do not rely on central funds to support their work, but take on ministries only if they can support themselves financially from funds generated locally and collectively by the 'RMU' they are part of. The Columban model currently invests a lot in fundraising and this has created a lazy dependency on centrally generated funds to support mission activities. This luxury has passed. Can we change the mindset, reduce dependency on a shrinking central pot and enable RMUs to become financially independent?

Mission will then grow where there is energy, capacity, skill and faith enough for it to be sustained through local effort and resources.

The Mission of Jesus is much larger than the Society... Our challenge is to **use the time between now and 2036 effectively** to foster and support new experiences of mission, while facing the reality of the Society and continuing to live life to the full.

Environmental destruction and the impact on biodiversity, etc... how can we announce the word of life in the face of mass extinction of life? what is our word of faith and hope in response to this context, the signs of the times? John 10:10 - I came that they may have life and have it to the full.

This can be a time of transition and hope...

We need to listen to the voices of young people in the Society... and to support Columbans to share and leave behind their rich experience for future generations (legacy).

We can craft a future... Galvin faced disaster and the end of his mission dream in China, but he left behind a foundation on which new missionary endeavours could be built...

#### **10 Ordained Columbans Met to Discuss Changes to the Constitutions and Directory Proposed for the 2024 General Assembly.**

##### **General comments:**

1. It was felt that the language of the documents could be better clearer and less gender orientated.

2. there was awareness of the differences of culture in the suggested amendments from the different Regions/Mission Units.
3. There was a consensus that only the proposed amendments that the Canon Lawyer considered having merit should be discussed.
4. LM amendments were not to be considered.

The proposed amendments to C. 310 , applied to a 'New Entity', the original is OK.

C.230, the original is OK

C.330 the original is OK

C.303 & D.303 ambiguity in wording but no further comment.

C.315. No comment

C.328 No Comment

C. 407 the original is OK

Final Comments:

The decisions of the delegates to GA will go beyond the proposals under discussion as they seem to be more appropriate to the formation of a New Entity or Association that includes a wider membership.