

**DIALOGUE FOR DIVERSITY MINUTES of the Annual General Meeting  
13 June 2024 at 5.00 p.m. by ZOOM**

**Present:**

**Directors:** (Chair), Tom Layden (Chair and Company Secretary), Terry Howard, Yvonne Jennings, Roma Carlisle.

**Apologies:** Gerry Clarke

1. **Minutes:** The minutes of the 2021 AGM were unanimously approved  
Proposed: Tom Layden; seconded: Roma Carlisle

**2. Appointment of Directors**

The following were confirmed as continuing Directors for the coming year: Tom Layden, Roma Carlisle, Yvonne Jennings, Terry Howard, and Gerry Clarke.

Proposed: Terry Howard; seconded: Tom Layden

**3. Appointment of Chair**

Tom Layden was unanimously appointed Chair of the Directors

Proposed: Terry Howard; seconded: Roma Carlisle

**4. Appointment of Company Secretary**

Tom Layden was appointed Company Secretary

Proposed: Terry Howard; seconded: Roma Carlisle

**5. Appointment of Treasurer**

Gerry Clarke was appointed Company Treasurer;

Proposed: Tom Layden; seconded: Roma Carlisle

**6. Appointment of Management Committee**

The following were unanimously appointed as members of the Management Committee: Rosemary Murray, Jarlath Fields, Roma Carlisle, Martina Killeavy, Kathy Wolff.

Proposed: Terry Howard; seconded: Tom Layden

**6. Treasurer's Report**

The accounts for the financial year which have been prepared by Padraig O'Connor, Accountant, Armagh, were approved. A summary of the accounts are laid out below as Appendix Two.

Proposed Tom Layden, seconded Terry Howard.

**7. Appointment of Financial Overseer**

Padraigh O'Connor, Accountant, Unit A, 49 Keady Road, Armagh BT60 3NW was unanimously appointed Financial Overseer.

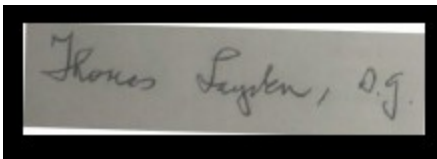
Proposed: Tom Layden, seconded Terry Howard

**8. Chairman's Report**

The Chairman in his comments thanked all who had taken part in the Projects for their hard word. His report is attached as Appendix One.

Proposed by Tom Layden, seconded by Roma Carlisle: Signed:

Date: 13 June 2024

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Thomas Layden, O.G.".

There being no other business the meeting concluded at 6.00 p.m.

## **Introduction**

Dialogue For Diversity runs several projects: Community Support for ex-prisoners, Dialogue Between Divided groups, ACRE (Active Communities Restoring the Earth), and Church Reform.

We aim to reduce prejudice and to build respect between different groups through promoting understanding and empowerment. Our projects cover the four Universal Apostolic Preferences adopted in 2019 by the Society of Jesus:

- Accompanying marginalised people
- Working with young people
- Care of our common home
- Using the discernment process of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius in each of these.

## **1. Community Support**

Community Support is a volunteer project that offers support and encouragement to newly released prisoners.

### *Mentors*

We have 5 mentors. Nothing could happen without them. Their continued commitment and enthusiasm makes it possible to support our ex-prisoners. As each of them freely admits they get more out of volunteering than they give. Their commitment is very high. They turn up as arranged and on time for all meetings with mentees.

Supervision is really important for all of us, and our monthly meetings, as well as one-to-one support meetings are a great help.

Mentoring is not easy: it can be frustrating when people do not answer calls at pre-arranged times, and slip back to old ways. Nonetheless, volunteers all said that they found their work very fulfilling, and were often moved by the way mentees struggle against big odds to make sense of their lives. We have found that offering regular meetings to mentees is very important. Learning is constant.

### *Impact*

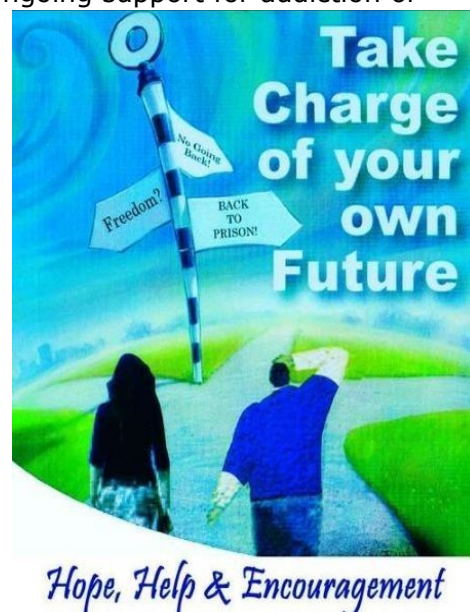
Support is really important for many coming out of prison as they reintegrate into society. Sometimes this is because they have served a long sentence, and both they and the wider society have changed a lot. Sometimes it is because they need ongoing support for addiction or other issues. All the mentees at different times have expressed appreciation for the support they received.

We made approximately 250 visits to individuals in this period. Some of these were by phone. We find this works well with men that we had previously met and built a relationship with. But face-to-face visits remain our normal way of meeting.

### *Mentees*

We supported 13 individuals on a regular basis. Going over the logs for the year one is struck by the sheer volume of meetings that took place. Also how many show a slow but gradual progress in confidence. One person started talking almost exclusively about farming issues, but gradually moved on to talk about not being able to meet his young son from whom had been barred. Over time he was able to engage in a parenting course arranged by Probation and the outcome has been that he now meets his son every two weeks. A big moment for him was when the son called him 'Daddy'. CS support helped him in this process.

Another has completed the release process after a very long sentence. Many fall back during this, so it was great to see this happening. Again he is grateful for our support, and stresses



how important it is to him that this is very regular. He experienced real financial problems in moving off prison payments and on to social welfare because of the gap in the changeover. Another went back into prison, but only after the longest period in his life outside. When he was released there was no accommodation for him, so he in on the streets, hoping that he will get a bed from night to night. We have re-engaged with him, and homeless groups are helping him. He got another spell inside which he was grateful for in the winter because it meant that he had a bed.

Quite a number are socially isolated and our meeting with them is the only time they will be with someone other than a statutory body. Several had medical issues and needed support dealing with the health service. One had a bereavement, and managed to get through this without going back on the drink. Another stopped regular contact with us because he went back on weed. But recently he has come off it and has started to re-engage. Another with a serious gambling addiction returned to jail but is now out and is contacting us on an occasional basis. On a number of occasions we have finished with men because they felt they would be ok on their own, but some time later they have asked for more support.

### *Themes*

Several themes emerged from these visits:

a. Housing: it is a disgrace that in one of the richest countries in the world men who have served their sentence are being released on to the streets with no accommodation. This is guaranteed to impact negatively on their mental health. It is also a public safety issue since many will have addictions, and some of these will be violent or sex offenders.

Of course this is part of a wider housing crisis facing younger people looking for a home and migrants. It is surely time politicians got their act together on this issue.

b. Medical: many of the men needed more than usual medical support and this was often difficult to access – as it is for so many others in society.

c. Social isolation: Many of those we dealt with were socially isolated. This often exacerbated their mental health issues.

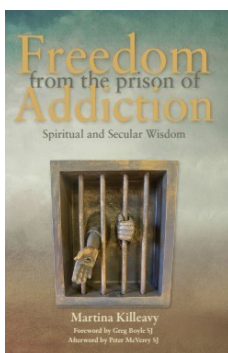
### *Relations with other bodies*

We continue to have a good relationship with Probation and are now getting more referrals than we can accept. Mentees also engage with Prison Fellowship, Extern, AA, and other groups. We continue to have excellent relations with prison staff in Maghaberry.

### *Funding*

We continue to rely on the Assets Recovery Community Scheme for funding, and we very much appreciate this. The project makes a real difference to a number of isolated men. We are very conscious that any progress that mentees make is first and foremost due to their own efforts to deal with the multiple issues that many face. We also see ourselves as one of several organisations, voluntary and statutory, that are together offering support and encouragement. Supporting prisoners is important also because it helps to reduce crime. This in turn reduces the terrible trauma that many experience when they suffer crime.

## *2. Other prison work*



We continue to give a short version of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius in Maghaberry, and they remain popular. Martina Killeavy's book *Freedom From The Prison of Addiction: Spiritual and Secular Wisdom* has sold approximately 800 copies in the past year. This is good for a book of this type, and has helped fund Community Support. The book was supported by the Jesuit Centre For Faith and Justice (who also help out on the management committee of our ACRE climate project) and we are very grateful to them. Copies are available on our web site:

<https://buy.stripe.com/9AQ7t7dongyEa2s9AB>

We have been successful in an application to the Peggy McCorry legacy. Peggy was from Portadown and was always a great supporter of Jesuit work there. The grant will enable us to set up a post for a Jesuit Prison Reform Project. We hope to be able to hire someone this for this in the Autumn. Our sincere thanks to Peggy.

### **3. Dialogue Project**

During this period we ran another dialogue project. This involved two residentials, each 1.5 days a day seminar and three site visits. 17 people took part from mixed Republican, Loyalist, Unionist and Southern backgrounds.

As always dialogue was difficult at the beginning but got easier as people got to know each other. We had two inputs from Katy Hayward (Queen's University Belfast) on constitutional issues which were very helpful. A frequent comment from participants is how little knowledge they have of these issues, yet they are asked to vote on them continuously.

Brexit is an example. Republicans and Loyalists almost all lined up on opposing sides, but most knew very little about it. Similarly on the issue of a United Ireland: Southerners, who were from a working class area, almost all voted for Sinn Fein and would support a United Ireland. But all admitted they knew nothing about the North, never thought about it, and their vote for Sinn Fein had nothing to do with this. Unionists asked what would Republicans get in a United Ireland that they did not already have.

Because participants were all from working-class areas there was a huge commonality between them on social issues. Northerners were continually amazed at the price of houses in the South and the general cost of living. Both North and South mentioned terrible experiences of the health services, especially mental health and the difficulty of accessing GPs. Drugs were everywhere.

At the same time, Northerners were very surprised to learn about the funding for community posts in Dublin, which seemed to be multi-annual, rather than on the basis of yearly applications as in the North.

Transport was really difficult for people in rural areas. But this also applied to Dublin people in working class estates which were not near where a bus route started.

Many said it would be great to have politics that were free of identity issues. Despite this most would vote on the basis of identity.

Stormont was down for most of the process, and Sinn Fein were high in the polls, North and South.

Site visits, introduced last year at the request of participants, were hugely popular. We were hosted in Magherafelt by Sperrin Cultural Awareness Association (now Inspire Northern Ireland) and got an in-depth input on the Loyal Orders. Many Republicans were surprised to learn of the positive social impact of the Orders. One leading participant said that his journey towards taking part in cross-community work began 27 years ago at a Community Dialogue residential.

In Dublin we were hosted by Cherry Orchard Family Resource Centre ('The Bungalow') and learnt about their educational work. Again we toured St Ultan's primary school with its wrap-around care for young people with special needs whom they integrate into the main school. We also saw the Equine Centre. Northerners were struck by the impact of these projects, and how local community workers had got them off the ground.

We also visited Spring in Armagh and Barron Hall in Newtownabbey. These visits were mainly focused on women's issues and, not surprisingly, there was great commonality among people from different backgrounds.

Dialogue among community groups is vital: these are the groups working on the ground in very large segregated housing estates and in rural areas. There is very little communication,

especially on political issues, between people from different backgrounds in these areas. Bringing together leaders from different areas helps to overcome this.

We are very grateful to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs for funding the project.

### **5. ACRE (Active Communities Restoring the Earth)**

ACRE's aim is to support and encourage working class communities in positive climate initiatives. Given the appalling level of our overall climate response to date, especially from the Government in N. Ireland, this work is vital. In the words of Pope Francis, 'Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day'.

We have been working on a new six-week pilot course called 'My Planet, My Home'. The course was created to bridge the gap between a group's initial aspiration to create an environmental project and the time it takes to build this momentum internally. The course has been delivered successfully to several groups, including the Atlas Women's Centre in Lisburn. With further plans underway for the second session with the centre's working moms, the outcomes so far have been very beneficial for both the centre and ACRE. The local community commented on how "fantastic, informative, and vital" the informational sessions were.

These initial pilot outcomes were given as feedback to management staff at the centre. Suggestions were put forward to utilise resources onsite that have been forgotten about. The centre has its own raised beds and a polytunnel that are sitting idle. Members attending assumed that these were being used by others, as there were never any projects advertised for them. However, centre staff are now looking into the possibility of using these resources.

Because of the pilot ACRE was approached by Belfast City Council, We have since put forward a proposal to the Council to deliver 'My Planet, My Home' at their Girdwood Community Hub, situated at an interface area in North Belfast. The Centre there has put forward several green spaces they may be able to rewild.

Recently, we generated new partnerships with Lagan Park (Lisburn), Woven Housing (Belfast), Formation Works (NI-wide), and Friends of Callan River (Armagh). The Lagan Park project aims to reduce further flooding impacts along a stretch of the Lagan River. Friends of Callan River supplied 80 trees from their tree nursery. These were planted by both ourselves and Woven staff in an afternoon. Positive publicity for both Formation Works and Woven Housing led to a follow-up meeting with Formation Works, who are keen to replicate the project at their other business sites across Northern Ireland, with a view to engaging the local community in future planting events.

We also supported a new partnership between Armagh City Council and the Friends of Callan River. This was centred around tree planting at Amhain Mhaca (Navan Fort) in Armagh. The Friends of Callan River supplied native trees that they have grown themselves from seeds to increase the site's woodland areas. We used our community connections to host groups at the site alongside staff from the council. We welcomed each group with a short information session about the project, stressing the importance of climate action before they planted the trees. Don't Box Me In (DBMI), who are a local mixed-ability community group, and children from St Mary's School took part. We will continue to support Friends of Callan River who plan to plant thousands of trees over the next five years.

We have applied for funding to offer a course on pollinator patches that will work alongside a citizen science project. These patches entail an area set aside to be planted with Yellow-rattle, a local wildflower that removes nutrition from the soil. This reduced soil nutrition allows other native species to gain a foothold, providing a space for varied native species to thrive, which in turn feeds our pollinators. Groups can do a baseline survey with Ciaran McLarnon. He will then help them to install a small pollinator friendly patch that the group will revisit for a post-work pollinator survey. All data will be automatically uploaded to the UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme (PoMS) website that feeds into the wider All-Ireland Pollinator plan. St. Marys and Good Shepard Primary schools in Belfast, the Atlas Centre in Lisburn and Spring in Armagh have all expressed an interest in this course.

Ciarán McLarnon has nearly completed his Masters in Queen's. One of his projects was to measure biodiversity in Northern Ireland Railway stations. He will be bringing this knowledge back to ACRE and hopes to link in community works near the stations.

## **6. Organisational**

We are very grateful to all our volunteers and staff:

*Trustees:* Tom Layden, s.j. (Chair and Company Secretary), Gerry Clarke, s.j. (Treasurer), Yvonne Jennings, Terry Howard, s.j., and Roma Carlisle.

*Management Committee:* Rosemary Murray (Chair), Roma Carlisle, Martina Killeavy, and Jarlath Fields.

*Community Support Management Committee:* Mary Vallely (Chair), Mary McGinn, Bernadette McArdle and Osmond Mulligan. *Volunteers:* Brian Lennon, Osmond Mulligan, Kieran Murphy, Brendan Keane and Martina Killeavy.

*Dialogue Project Management Committee:* Kathy Wolff (Chair), Marie Delaney, and Brian Lennon.

*ACRE Management Committee:* Brian Lennon, Rosemary Murray, Ciara Murphy, Kate Martin, Roma Carlisle, *Staff:* Ciarán McLarnon.

**End**