

## **Irish missionaries' heroism and selflessness abroad is often overlooked today**

The contributions of this unique group of the Irish diaspora have been overlooked to the detriment of contemporary Irish society and the Catholic Church

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As the numbers of Irish missionaries serving overseas have declined to well under 1,000 and few younger people in Ireland today have any knowledge of the missionary movement, it is worth reflecting on the contribution of missionaries and what lessons we can learn from them as a society and in terms of faith.

The 'golden era' of the missionary movement in the mid-20th century saw thousands of young Irish men and women join Catholic missionary and religious orders and work overseas, mainly in countries of the Global South. For example, between 1920 and 1970 more than 30,000 men and women joined missionary orders.

As well as providing education, health/social care and pastoral support through parish development and 'church planting', missionaries took on difficult social issues. They often became the voice for people who had little agency – people who had HIV/Aids in the early days of the disease, women in prostitution, prisoners, landless labourers, refugees, etc.

The fortitude, heroism and selflessness of these people who went to remote and sometimes dangerous parts of the world are often overlooked today. With few material comforts and inaccessible travel, they also endured the loss of family, friendship and cultural ties.

They did this to spread the gospel: "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full" (John, 10:10). In empowering poor people to have better lives for themselves they worked closely with and learned from local people and civil society groups.

Speaking to a group of retired missionary men and women about their lives and work, you are struck by both their ordinariness and the extraordinary things they did. They had typical conventional backgrounds in an Ireland that was monocultural and traditionally Catholic.

Yet, they made their faith relevant across cultures and were pioneering in responding to a myriad of human dilemmas. Their faith developed in tandem with their mission work, and they availed of opportunities for learning, reflection and renewal. In particular, they drew inspiration from the theology of Vatican II (1962-1965).

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Despite many challenges and setbacks, the missionaries generally experienced great joy in their work. Missionaries' spirituality was nurtured through their relationships with communities of poor people.

Mission was meaningful for them because it entailed a process of learning about yourself and others that was rooted in gospel values but had to change and adapt with new challenges, experiences and insights.

So, what can we learn from this unique group of the Irish diaspora who are now in their older years and who seem to have been forgotten in the general climate of antipathy towards religion and the decline of the institutional Catholic Church in Ireland in recent decades?

Firstly, they provide a blueprint for creating a bridge between faith and society in the holistic approach they took to living and proclaiming their Christianity.

Secondly, their positive intercultural encounters demonstrate the possibilities for achieving greater intercultural understandings and solidarity.

Thirdly, their courage and resilience in the face of many challenges, dilemmas and paradoxes provide a paradigm for our society where we often expect quick-fix solutions to personal and social problems.

Fourthly, their work demonstrates a myriad of flexible ways of ministering and serving as a Christian.

Fifthly, they recognised that the gospel had to be spread through collaboration and in a spirit of companionship and empowerment of local people.

The question arises as to why missionaries do not appear to have had a greater influence on Irish people's religiosity or why the diocesan church in Ireland was not more impacted by the missionary experience? While the teachings and spirit of Vatican II permeated missionary work, it was not embraced to the same extent by the diocesan church in Ireland.

How many Catholics understood or were encouraged to learn about this way of being a member of the church and being a Christian? Irish people were generous in supporting 'the missions' financially but seem to have had little knowledge about the real work and approach of our missionaries.

I suggest that the contributions of this unique group of the Irish diaspora have been overlooked to the detriment of contemporary Irish society and the Catholic Church. Their strong social justice focus, holistic approach and theological openness have increasing relevance for us in Ireland today.

The missionary experience could inform our thinking about global inequalities, threats to democracy, care of the planet, racism and injustice and help contribute to a flourishing society.

We are running out of time to hear their stories and the possibility of learning valuable lessons from their experiences and wise perspectives.

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This article is based on narrative interviews with 37 Irish missionary women and men and recently published by Routledge as Gallagher, C (2024) Retired Missionaries and Faith in a Changing Society.