

**CUMANN GAELACH NA hEAGLAISE**  
**(The Irish Cumann of the Church)**

“In the year 1914 a group of members of the Church of Ireland came together to consider the new Ireland that was about to blossom around them. They were scholarly persons whose principal interest was the revival of ancient aspects of Irish culture...language, music, art, history. Not only did they seek political objectives but they wished that the Church of Ireland be a full participant in the new Ireland where the Irish language together with Irish art and music would be part”. So wrote an active member of the Cumann some years ago.

Who were these persons who were responsible for founding Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise on 29 April 1914 with the following objectives:

- To promote all that tends to preserve within the Church of Ireland the spirit of the ancient Celtic Church and to provide a bond of union for all members of the Church of Ireland inspired with Irish ideals
- To promote the use of the Irish language in the Church
- To collect from Irish sources suitable hymns and other devotional literature
- To encourage the use of Irish art and music in the Church.

Amongst those who sent apologies to the inaugural meeting were F J Biggar and Roger Casement. The Bishop of Tuam was in the chair. George Ruth sent out the invitations to the meeting. His widow was the first woman elected to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in 1953 when women were admitted for the first time.

In addition to arranging services the Cumann's members organised lectures and outings from time to time.

There were two streams, both connected with Conradh na Gaeilge, the Gaelic League, one of whose founders in 1893 was Douglas Hyde. Four in the first stream – Ernest Blythe, a Northern Presbyterian who never lost the accent, Seán O'Casey, playwright, Séamus Deacon and George Irvine, men who were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. There is evidence that they were responsible for organising Irish language services in St Kevin's church on the South Circular Road, Dublin 8, from 1907 onwards. The other stream was Craobh na gCúig Cúigí of the Gaelic League. This translates as the Branch of the Five Provinces but as so many Protestants were members it was nicknamed "The Branch of the Five Protestants".

Before going to St Kevin's church the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, the national cathedral of the Church of Ireland, had refused to allow them to organise an Irish language service there. In one of O'Casey's satirical pieces he wrote "What? Have a service in Erse in St Patrick's? We don't want our church to be filled with Conn the Shaughran, like a Wicklow Wedding (regarded as low class); besides Heaven is used by now to the English language and it would be a nuisance for them to have to become bilingual." But seriously, one bishop asserted that services in Irish were blasphemous!

In 1916 the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, a different dean this time, gave the Cumann permission to hold services in the Cathedral once a month. In the same year Duanaire

Diadha (Divine Anthology) was published containing 26 hymns to be sung at services. A connection lasting until the present day was established as An Chomaoineach Naofa (Holy Communion in Irish) is celebrated in St Patrick's Cathedral every St Patrick's Day.

Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise was not unaffected by national events. In 1918 Harry Nicholls, whom I had met before he died in 1975, came to a service in St Patrick's Cathedral in the uniform of the Irish Volunteers. Harry was active in the College of Surgeons with Mallin and Countess Markievicz in 1916. An effort was made within the Cumann not to refer to the 1916 rising. At a meeting on 1 June 1916 a letter was read from the Bishop of Tuam stating that it was not acceptable to hold a meeting of the Cumann without strongly condemning the rising, an attack on law and order. Efforts were made to issue a more moderate statement. Eventually there followed the fated split – an ancient Irish custom. On the one hand there were those loyal to King and Country (the bishops, senior clergy) and on the other hand there were the republicans. One expects that there were those in the middle who were members of the Cumann simply for the sake of the language itself.

In 1918 a resolution was passed supporting the 1916 rising. A good few members left the Cumann to found Comhluadar Gaodhalach na Fianaise/ Irish Cumann of the Witness. It was not long before they were reunited.

In 1919 a service was held at 5 pm on the first Sunday each month in St Andrew's church, Suffolk Street, Dublin. The Cumann pursued the interest shown in the ancient Celtic

Church, in the saints and visits to holy wells. The Cumann was a well run organisation with many social activities. There was an annual sale of work to raise funds.

In 1919 a journal, An tEaglaiseach Gaelach/The Irish Churchman was founded – subscription six shillings per annum. Neillí Ní Bhriain, a descendant of William Smith O’Brien, was the journal’s manager. After her death in 1925 the journal continued until 1929. During its existence it carried articles in Irish and in English expressing the views of the authors on aspects of Irish life and encouraging readers to use Irish, particularly in Church ceremonies.

In memory of Neillí Ní Bhriain funds were collected to publish an Irish version of the Book of Common Prayer in 1931.

It was Neillí Ní Bhriain, as vice-president of Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise, who welcomed Éamonn de Valera in 1921 to a meeting organised by the Cumann and convened in his honour which a large crowd attended. At that time members of the Church of Ireland were anxious about their position in the new situation in Ireland.

During the twenties and thirties Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise supported the establishment of Coláiste Moibhí and the teaching of Irish as a subject in schools. As a preparatory college Coláiste Moibhí survived for over thirty years longer than the other preparatory colleges in the country. Among the principal teachers at Coláiste Moibhí was Lil Nic Dhonnchadha (1933 to 1951). Lil was active in the Cumann from the beginning and in the Gaelic League.

She explained to me that when Coláiste Moibhí was founded in 1927 she declined the invitation to be principal because it would have necessitated taking an oath of allegiance to the 1921 Irish Constitution which signified loyalty to the King which she, like many other people opposed to the 1921 Treaty, was not prepared to do. Ernest Blythe was Minister for Finance at the time and if he had heard that Lil had accepted the position she would have had to conform. She continued teaching in Alexandra College as Lillian Duncan but was appointed principal of Coláiste Moibhí after De Valera assumed power and put an end to the requirement that those on the State payroll take the oath of allegiance. I remember thinking that listening to her talking about this experience was a very real way of learning an interesting aspect of Irish history.

From 1951 to 1984 Gladys Allen was principal of Coláiste Moibhí who brought students to the Cumann's services every month in Christ Church Cathedral. When Risteárd Giltrap succeeded Gladys Allen in 1984 the morning services formerly held in the cathedral on the second Sunday each month transferred to the chapel of the Church of Ireland College of Education in Rathmines which also housed Coláiste Moibhí.

In 1945 Archbishop Barton of Dublin, a relative of Robert Barton who was one of the five signatories of the 1921 Treaty, arranged that St Finian's church, Adelaide Road, Dublin 2 be available for the exclusive use of the Cumann. It is there that I started attending the services in 1956. But, being an old building, the upkeep was high and in 1960 when the Lutherans expressed interest the Cumann decided to move out. For two years thereafter the

services were held in St Thomas's church, Cathal Brugha Street, Dublin 2 when they were then transferred to Christ Church Cathedral.

The membership fell dramatically during the fifties. The attendance at services increased, however, when students from Coláiste Moibhí and the Church of Ireland College of Education came to the services.

Kilmacedar is in the West Kerry Gaeltacht. Services were regularly held there during the summer until the church was closed in 1980. We were very disappointed with this decision bearing in mind that the Cumann had just made a financial contribution to the Friends of Kilmacedar without knowing that the church was about to be closed. Happily, the donated contribution was returned.

During the nineties Amy Philips, a retired teacher in the prestigious girls' secondary school – Alexandra College, in conjunction with Cór Dhuibhlinne, organised a Carol Service in Irish in Christ Church Cathedral. In December 1992 many people were present at this service. Representatives from secondary schools in attendance were the cause of a report in the Church of Ireland Gazette "giving the service a welcome buzz of youthful liveliness". One often remembers this service and about two decades later an enquiry came to the cathedral seeking the date of the corresponding service in the current year – it was, however, a once off.

During the eighties also students came to services from secondary schools (different ones each month) with hymns, readings and, occasionally, dramas prepared beforehand. Amy Philips organised these highly successful services.

Peace and Reconciliation Forum – in 1995 the Cumann took part in these deliberations in Dublin Castle.

The Cumann participated in Louis Marcus's film "No Rootless Colonists – na Gaeil Phrotastúnaigh" made in 2002 and shown on TG4 several times. In 2004 "Coinne le Gary" was transmitted on TG4 – a programme based on the life and work of Ven Gary Hastings, Provost of Galway, in which members of the Cumann participated.

From time to time members of the Cumann sit in the House of Bishops. I remember Lil Nic Dhonnchadha remarking (jokingly, of course) some years ago when George Simms was Archbishop of Armagh, Harry McAdoo was Archbishop of Dublin and the next senior Bishop of Meath was Dónal Caird that she would advise any young ordinand wishing to progress within the Church of Ireland to learn Irish as the three most senior bishops were Gaeilgeoirí. Now there is just one member of the Cumann in the House – Michael Burrows, Bishop of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory – the patron of an Cumann.

I pay tribute to the late Leslie Bryan, Leaslaoi Ó Briain, who from the time he entered university until his untimely death a decade ago was the Cumann's Hon Secretary – a

period of almost forty years. Unfailingly, he always ensured that there was a celebrant for the bimonthly services – not an easy task through the years.

For some years now details of the Cumann’s activities have appeared on [gaeleaglais@gmail.com](mailto:gaeleaglais@gmail.com) and on other sites such as that of Christ Church Cathedral and the Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough in addition to Irish language organisations’ websites and elsewhere.

In 2011 the Cumann was transformed by the arrival of Caroline Nolan as Irish Language Officer. Foras na Gaeilge offered funding for participants in its Irish Language Community Scheme, renewed twice since - the latest this summer - which provides funding support for salary and activities. Caroline has immersed herself in promoting the use of Irish language in various parts of Ireland. As the rector of Dungarvan, Co Waterford, at a bilingual Harvest Festival service in his parish church enthusiastically said to me ”I never thought that Irish was something I would be involved in until Caroline came along”. We are very indebted to Caroline and to Foras na Gaeilge.

At Caroline’s behest the Final Blessing has been said in Irish at General Synod.

Today the Cumann, 102 years after its foundation, is not as large as formerly although it is more active. Regular services are held in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin and in St Finbar’s Cathedral in Cork together with occasional services in various parts of the country. In January during the Octave of Christian Unity the Cumann, in conjunction with Pobal an

Aifrinn, organises an interdenominational service again in Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. In alternate years a Protestant minister and a Catholic priest preaches. It might surprise some to learn that in the period of almost four decades since these services commenced the Cumann has never had to go back to a minister from the Protestant community to preach a second as there was always someone new to preach and so it will be again next time. The Lord Mayor of Dublin, or representative, reads a lesson. The collection yields €400 which is distributed to charities. Refreshments are served in the crypt beneath the Cathedral after the service – the oldest building in continuous use in Dublin, one thousand years without break, it is said. Clergy from various traditions – Presbyterians, Methodists, Society of Friends, Lutherans, Unitarians, Orthodox Roman Catholic have participated over the years. For some years past it has been Gaelscoil na Cille, Ashbourne, Co Meath and a consort of the cathedral choir lead the singing.

Holy Communion is celebrated, especially on St Patrick's Day, entirely in Irish or bilingually in many places including, but not exclusively, Armagh, Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Galway, Waterford, Kilkenny, Killorgan, Thurles and Templemore.

In 2012 the Cumann organised Comórtas Bedell, a competition amongst Protestant ethos secondary schools for their effort at the use of Irish during Seachtain na Gaeilge around St Patrick's Day. The Bedell cup is awarded to the winner at morning assembly later in the term and cash prizes are presented to the winner and two runners-up.

The Cumann has published in Irish from time to time-

-Crib sheet	
-An Chomaoineach Naofa/Holy Communion	€10
-Ardaigí bhur gCroíthe/Lift up your Hearts, and cassette	€10
-Book of Common Prayer 2004	€20
-Sacred Music for Choirs (24 Hynms) €6 and cassette €3	€9
-An Ghaeilge in Eaglais na hÉireann-Irish in the Church of Ireland	€12.50
-New Testament	€10
-Alternative Prayer Book 1984	€5
-Collects from Alternative Prayer Book 1984	€3
-Book of Common Prayer 1926	€4
-Hymn Book 1961	€4

It is a matter of great satisfaction and pride that the Irish language version of the Book of Common Prayer 2004 was available simultaneously when the English version was published in 2004, thanks to the efforts of the Archdeacon of Tuam, Ven Gary Hastings, the translator, then Rector of Westport and now Provost of Galway, and to his wife Caitríona who assisted him greatly. Incidentally, at the launch of the Irish version in Downpatrick in 2004 some of us were intrigued that many from the North believed that this Irish language publication was the Church of Ireland's response to the parity of esteem which was widely spoken of following the Good Friday Belfast Agreement. Unexpected credit came the Cumann's way accordingly. In earlier years the Irish version of the Book of Common Prayer 1926 (the decision to publish having been taken in 1945 to adhere to the Official Standard spelling, albeit then in the Gaelic script) came out in 1965. I acknowledge that an abridged version was published in 1931.

Sacred Music for Choirs was published after organising a national hymn writing competition in 1988/89 in memory of Lil Nic Dhonnchadha who had left the Cumann a legacy in her will.

The New Testament, translated by Canon Cosslett Quin, was published in 1970 followed by reprints in 1985 and again in 2005. I remember how well this was received in Irish language circles as weekly readings at Mass had to be especially translated prior to 1970. An Bíobla Naofa was not published by Maynooth until 1981.

Holy Communion 1972/An Chomaoinach Naofa 1972 was translated by Canon Cosslett Quin. Although a sentence therein indicates that it was issued in accordance with the Church of Ireland's Constitution, Chapter 1, Section 25 (3) the secretary of the Church's Liturgical Advisory Committee claimed that it was a private publication. Some members of the Cumann was less than happy with this. A letter appeared in the Church of Ireland Gazette from a prominent member of the Cumann accusing the Church's Liturgical Advisory Committee of negligence as regards Gaeilgeoirí – an omission filled by Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise in addressing this important task. The secretary of the Liturgical Committee maintained his silence!

Risteárd Giltrap was the author of “An Ghaeilge in Eaglais na hÉireann” – “Irish in the Church of Ireland” which was awarded a prize in the annual Oireachtas na Gaeilge competition in the year 1989. Although the Cumann was the publisher Risteárd's outspoken style was his own. For a while from the mid – seventies there had been difficulty in obtaining ministers to conduct services although we never failed to find one who was free at the time. Risteárd's prophesy when he wrote that there would not be sufficient ministers available to conduct services through Irish by the year 2000 has not come to pass.

That said, we are very grateful to the ministers who regularly conduct services even though some of them would admit that they do not have fluent Irish.

To fund publications the Cumann has received subscriptions from friends and generous grants from Foras na Gaeilge. We have learnt that if there is a venture or business challenge out there one should address it and can come through it.

Seathrún Mac Éin, a committee member, began writing a monthly article in Irish over twenty-five years ago for the Church Review, the diocesan magazine of Dublin and Glendalough, which publicises the activities of the Cumann. Recently, the Cumann's recently retired Hon Secretary, Aonghus Dwane, started contributing occasional articles in Irish to the Church of Ireland Gazette as does Caroline Nolan also. They get their photographs published there also!

Work is progressing on the parish placenames project involving listing the Irish language version of the names with explanations of the names of all the parishes in the Church of Ireland many of which words come from ancient Gaelic words and sources. The Representative Church Body, which is the corporate headquarters of the Church, has welcomed this and has undertaken to publish it alongside the listing of parishes in the Church of Ireland directory issued each October starting next year as it is a bigger undertaking than we had envisaged. The suggestion for this came from an unexpected source. The idea of the project has been well received. This project was launched in Carlow earlier this year at the Pan-Celtic Festival by the Cumann's patron as it had been decided to commence with his dioceses. The information on other dioceses is in course of preparation.

Recently new committee members were welcomed. New faces, new energy, new ideas, new developments, one of which is to have made contact with those bishops whose dioceses contain Gaeltacht areas suggesting that at a minimum churches in those areas might more obviously acknowledge that fact by conducting occasional services in Irish, particularly during summer months, where the Cumann could offer assistance, and by bilingual signage.

One looks forward to continuing progress. One suggestion to be considered is the publication of a pocket edition of the Bible in Irish.

In the 2015/16 Annual Report the Bishop of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, Patron, writes:

In recent years the visibility and contribution of Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise right across the church has developed in a quite remarkable way. Greatly increased numbers of people are becoming aware of the value of the use of Irish in the enrichment of worship, and they are genuinely enjoying making use of whatever ability...however modest...they may have with the language. An Cumann is a wonderful focus of fellowship and encouragement for many. As we look forward, we hope far more people will actually become members and will assist us in developing a fresh vision of how An Cumann can best serve and inspire the mission of the Church of Ireland. For me it is both a pleasure and an honour to be the episcopal patron of its dynamic work.

Dáithí Ó Maolchoille

22 September 2016