



Chairman's Welcome

Dear Fellow Pioneers,

I am a new face to many of you, so I take this opportunity to say a few words in this issue of *Pioneer Matters* which covers Pioneer Total Abstinence Association (PTAA) members' findings and feedback from the Association's 2009/10 provincial conferences.

Blessed John Henry Newman once wrote: "In a higher world it may be otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often".

If this is true for us in our personal lives, it is also true for us as an Association. Change, while hard, can bring new life. When I was leaving my community in Dublin four years ago, I emptied my bedroom and office and handed over the keys of the house to the man replacing me. I felt all I'd had was gone. Yet it was the condition of a new beginning, of preparing myself for new work and new relationships.

Ireland's financial difficulties are bringing painful change to the lives of families all over Ireland. We hope and pray that something new will be born out of this pain and lessons learned.

The Pioneer Association is also facing change: Child Protection Policies and the new Charities Act are beginning to impact on how and what we can do in centres throughout the country. In addition the Association has to address its own financial deficit.

I recognise the current suspension of underage activities coming at the start of the school year, and leading to cancellation of competitions, was difficult in the extreme. At the recent Munster conference near Mallow some people, as well as expressing disappointment, felt that suspension could be a time to reflect and re-assess. We all need to reflect and pray for the openness to be guided by the Lord. Feedback from the conferences, we hope, will guide us in this regard.

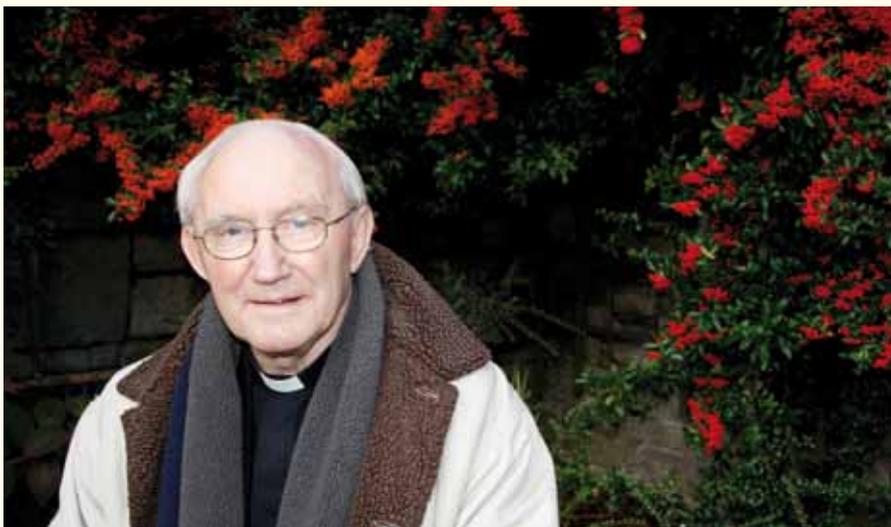


A subcommittee of the board is presently seeking to formulate a New Vision in keeping with Fr. Cullen's vision and in the light of the external legal changes to which we must conform.

As a spiritual association within the Catholic Church, we also face the challenge of a serious weakening of our Catholic Christian culture. The passing on of the faith within families and schools is now much more difficult.

Could this be an invitation to renew our own spirituality, our own relationship with the Lord so that with Him, in Him and through Him, we might imaginatively and courageously seek to hasten the coming of his Kingdom even now through our centres and our diocesan, regional and provincial committees?

Fr Charlie Davy, SJ
Chairman of the PTAA



Fr Joe Dargan, SJ, stepped down as chairman of the PTAA during the summer. As CEO I would like to express my sincere thanks to Fr Joe for the exceptional skill, talent and insight he brought to the Pioneers during his chairmanship of the Association.

Feedback from the PTAA's 2009/2010

Almost 400 members attended the PTAA's 2009/10 provincial conferences in Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connaught. Each conference adhered to the same overall conference agenda. In addition, each province included additional agenda items which were usually specific to their own province needs and concerns. Every conference displayed an openness to reflection, discussion and debate which was useful and informative. As expected, feedback was very wide-ranging and at times contradictory. However, as the conference tour unfolded it became very clear that there was a notable degree of consensus that the Pioneers was first and foremost to be a spiritual and prayer-filled organisation, committed to supporting those struggling with alcohol abuse and drugs.

Spirituality and Prayer

Each conference felt it was important that the Pioneers reiterate its devotion to the Sacred Heart, spirituality and prayer at a time when faith is considerably weakened in Ireland. Many members wondered if today's Pioneers were sufficiently spiritual in both outlook and activity. There was a clear call by all members for the Pioneers to introduce more spiritual activities and meetings. Members stated that having more prayerful meetings would help motivate centres and members. Members collectively felt that prayer must play a more central role in the Pioneers and their work. While the Heroic Offering is accepted and used by all members, some members also suggested the possibility of supplementing the Offering with a range of reflections and short prayers which could be developed for use at specific times in the Church calendar, like Christmas and Easter, and to target particular groups in society – a prayer for children, reflections for parents.

Pioneers and the Church

All conferences stated that the ongoing and active support of the local church was critical to the Pioneers' work in the community. Members' experience of Church support for the Pioneers ranged from very poor or non-existent to outstanding. There was agreement that the Association should make a concerted effort to garner Church support for the Pioneers and their work. The possibility of embracing other religions was touched on by most conferences. Conferences were open to exploring the possibility of the Association becoming more pluralist and ecumenical in its approach while also respecting its founding principle of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Some suggested the Pioneers should draw up a clear policy on the Association's religious make-up.

Abstinence, Moderation, Alcohol, Drugs

Some discussion took place at conferences about whether or not the Pioneers should establish a Friends of the Pioneer Association for moderate drinkers. No conference reached agreement on this issue. Concerns were expressed that the Pioneers were seen as communicating a negative message – i.e. we are anti-alcohol – instead of being perceived as pro-moderation. Many members voiced concerns that the Association was not promoting both its alcohol and drug messages. Many members spoke about the Association's failure to try and address the issue of drug abuse. They expressed concern that the PTAA's over-concentration on alcohol made the Pioneers appear out of touch with the reality of drug abuse, particularly by young people. Therefore, the majority of attending members agreed that the Pioneer mission is to pray for those struggling with alcohol and/or drugs, and not just those affected by alcohol issues. Significant numbers of members asked if centres could work more closely with local rehabilitation centres. Some suggestions were made about the possibility of the Association forming a link with organisations like the AA where Pioneers could 'adopt' and pray for someone open to receiving the support of another's prayer in their personal work/recovery.

Advocating for the Pioneers

The issue of advocating for the Association provoked very mixed reaction. There was disagreement on whether the PTAA was a pressure group that should

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Provincial Conferences



lobby government and target the drinks industry. Some felt the PTAA should become more political, have its voice heard and as a result build a better PR profile for the organisation. Others stated that this detracted from the Pioneers' fundamental spiritual message and could also encroach on organisations working in the alcohol and drug abuse sector. Feedback indicates that the issue of the Pioneers' role and remit in 21st century Ireland needs clarification.

Youth, Parents

There was a collective concern at all conferences about the role Pioneers can play in helping young people in their relationship with alcohol and peer pressure to drink alcohol. There was a widespread feeling that given the ageing profile of the Pioneer membership the organisation's continuity is dependent upon the addition of younger and young people to its membership. It was acknowledged by



all conferences that youth was a key target group for the Association. It was suggested that suitable communications materials – cinema advertising, DVDs, a modern website, should be funded by the Association. It was also suggested that Pioneer materials should tie in with the school curriculum. There was also worry that the Pioneer message/s did not hold sufficient appeal for young people. In today's youth culture it was felt that the Pioneers were generally seen as 'old fashioned' and 'not cool enough' for large numbers of young people

to understand. It was stated that the wearing of the Pioneer pin causes embarrassment to children who it was felt should be offered 'cooler' age-appropriate options like friendship bracelets. It was also asked if the *Pioneer* magazine could become more youth friendly.

There were examples given of considerable success with individual youth groups and schools visits programmes from around the country. Yet, conference attendees suggested that such successes, while very welcome and badly needed, were rare and not the norm. It appears that what the Pioneers currently offer to Under 18s is not working. All felt that the weakening appeal of the Pioneers amongst youth was borne out by the fact the Pioneers have not signed up any significant numbers of young people over the past decade or more. A suggestion made at all conferences was for the Pioneers to work with well-known sports personalities from the worlds of GAA and rugby in helping the Association relate its message to young people.

Parents

Each conference expressed frustration at the lack of parental involvement in the Pioneers. Parents aged 50 and under were described by one conference attendee as the generation that was 'lost' to the Pioneers. Many members expressed concern about trying to work with children whose parents did not understand and/or perhaps had no desire to support the Pioneer message. It appears that current Pioneer work with young people and/or parents needs to be reviewed by the Association.

Child Protection

On a related issue there were numerous requests for the Association to provide training on its then forthcoming child protection policy. By the time the Munster conference took place in October last, the Pioneers had suspended its activities with Under 18s. As a result, the child protection issue initially dominated the Munster agenda. It was generally felt that the Pioneers 'had no future without youth'. There was also voice given to the necessity for the Association to adopt and implement its child protection policy in a way that was professional and which catered for the needs of

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both children and adult PTAA members. Members queried why the PTAA could not follow the lead of other voluntary organisations already implementing child protection policies. Pre-Munster, there were clear requests made at the Omagh meeting for clarity on garda and police vetting procedures that Pioneers north and south needed to follow.

Finance

The Pioneers' worrying financial position was covered at every conference as was the need for the Association to take cognisance of its challenging fiscal reality. When discussion focused on the pressing need for an Association-wide financial plan to be developed, there were three key suggestions made by members. The PTAA's annual draw needs to be significantly enhanced. The idea of Pioneers paying an annual subscription or membership fee as they do for many organisations was mooted at three out of four conferences. The Pioneers designating a Pioneer national annual church-gate collection day caused much debate, particularly in relation to securing countrywide garda permits. Many felt the goodwill in the community towards the Pioneers is not being capitalised on by the current PTAA approach to church-gate collections. There was a significant amount of discussion about the Charities Act and the resource and legal impact it will have on the Association. This left some conferences saying centres would not function if, as the Act states, all of their funding has to go to Head Office. The fact that the Act prevents PTAA-collected monies from being given to any third parties also caused concern for people who felt the Pioneers' 'good name for giving to worthy causes' would be damaged by the Act. It was stated that non-compliance with the Act was not an option as failure to adhere to the Act would lead to the closure of the Pioneers when the Act becomes law in 2011.

General

While it would be impossible for this publication to capture every contribution made at each provincial conference, it does set out to comprehensively

capture feedback and findings. It is important to stress that every piece of feedback offered to us has been both valued and considered by the Association. The conference organising committees from each province are to be congratulated for running each gathering so effectively. Also, as chief executive I would like to express my thanks to every member who attended the conferences. I appreciate the time and effort you all generously gave to the Association in helping us execute the conference roadshow.

Post-Conference Update

Last September the PTAA's board of management took the decision to suspend all activities with Under 18s until December 2010. The Board meets again on 4 December next. Within days of the suspension being activated, PTAA members received a letter from me explaining our current dilemma on potentially implementing our adopted Safeguarding Children Policy. Since you received that letter, a sub-committee of the board has been formed, met and is working on formulating a new vision in keeping with Fr Cullen's founding vision of the Pioneers. The sub-committee's position paper will be presented for discussion at the forthcoming board meeting. A board sub-committee on finance was also established last month and is drafting a financial rescue plan for the Association. Their recommendations will also be presented to the board at its next meeting.

Since the last board meeting the Pioneers' insurance brokers have clarified our position in relation to cover for child abuse claims. Under its current insurance policy, the Pioneers have no cover for child abuse claims. Our brokers will shortly present the costed options the Pioneers must reflect on when considering the potential implementation of its child protection policy. Again, this issue will be on the board meeting agenda. Members can expect to receive a further update after the 4 December meeting.

Padraig Brady
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Many members expressed concern about trying to work with children whose parents did not understand and/or perhaps had no desire to support the Pioneer message.

◆ ◆ ◆ Feedback ◆ ◆ ◆

We welcome your feedback on any of the articles covered in this edition of *Pioneer Matters*.

Please send your comments, suggestions or recommendations to Padraig Brady at

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or ring him on Tel: 01 8749464