

Honouring the legacy of Irish missionaries while empowering local leaders



Frida Hennig

Reflecting on the past year ahead of Mission Sunday on October 18, Misesan Cara CEO John Moffett and Chairperson Philip O'Brien spoke to *The Irish Catholic* about their observations in the field, the transition underway to local indigenous leadership, and their pride in being associated with Ireland's missionary work.

Much of Misesan Cara's work in the last few years has focused on transitioning mission projects being led by Irish missionaries to being managed and run by local leadership. The process is one of necessity, as numbers of Irish missionaries fade, but also one of empowerment, allowing those closest to the problem to be most involved in finding the solution.

On the ground observations

Reflecting on a visit to Kenya in April, where he attended a conference with a focus on children with disabilities, the Misesan Cara CEO observed the work of indigenous leaders first-hand. The conference drew together various project teams working with children with disabilities across nine Sub-Saharan countries.

"What was very telling was the majority of participants at that meeting," explained Mr Moffett. "We might have had some of the programme team from the headquarters of our members here in Ireland, but all of the project leaders and managers were indigenous sisters from Sub-Saharan Africa who are running some fantastic programmes across those nine countries."

Mr Moffett visited one of the projects that's run by the Daughters of Charity and led primarily by Kenyan Sisters, a school and health facility in Thigio, north of Nairobi, "where they cater for children with a wide range of disabilities." Many of the students who pass through the facility also take classes in vocational and life skills, enabling them to later work alongside their parents, which gives them an opportunity to "provide a bit of inde-



Daughters of Charity, Kisima Special Needs School – Thigio, Kenya. Photo: Misesan Cara.



Sr Pauline Nakayale, Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa with Misesan Cara CEO, John Moffett – Nairobi, Kenya.

pendence and income for themselves," said the CEO, who described the Daughters of Charity sisters who he met there as the "most patient and delightful group of sisters you'll ever meet."

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"The number of Irish missionaries that we work with continues to decline on a yearly basis. But we are so encouraged by the succession planning that's in place, and the ability of the Indigenous sisters just to continue on, run with, and carry on with the projects.

"Of course, with Misesan

Cara, what we want to do is set them up for success. So we're investing a lot of our own resources into strengthening capacity, and working with our members and their project teams to identify where there might be gaps in organisational management, and provide them with the training to scale up in the areas that they need to."

From his visits such as the one to Kenya, Mr Moffett is encouraged by the desire to learn and improve he sees in the indigenous congregations. "We find them really receptive to all of those initiatives," he continued.

Commitment

Misesan Cara chairperson Philip O'Brien, who has served in multiple roles with UNICEF around the globe, and is a founding member of UNICEF Hungary, has spent a lot of time in Tanzania and Kenya, and in his role as Chairperson, has plans to visit mission projects early next year.

Mr O'Brien described a few things that struck him during his visits to Africa with UNICEF. He said it was incredibly inspiring to see



Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception – Lagos, Nigeria.

the "extraordinary commitment of individual Irish missionaries to work with very disadvantaged communities over a long period of time" and to see them "make that their life's labour."

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Touching on the transition to local leadership that Mr Moffett described, Mr O'Brien noted that even during his time with UNICEF there was a "growing awareness that this isn't going to last". In other words, Irish missionaries were aware that someday there would need to be a handing over of



St Teresa's Kindergarten (Irish Jesuits International) – Rumbek, South Sudan.

the torch from their leadership to a local one.

"There wasn't the same number of young Irish people coming through into the vocational fields...and they were very conscious of trying to build up local capacity in the projects we were looking at. I saw that in hospitals in Tanzania, but also in trade schools," he said.

Continuing, Mr O'Brien said that in consultations with leadership in the congregation, there is a distinct awareness of the need to manage the transition between Irish missionary leadership to the local indigenous leadership, "and in some cases to building a missionary goal." For example, indigenous sisters in Kenya can be working on mission projects in Zimbabwe, so that the missionary element of their work remains.

'Indigenisation' in the development sector

The process of "indigenisation", as Mr O'Brien referred to it, is a slow one amongst the development sector as a whole.

"When you've got a lot of policies, procedures, and

ways of working in place, trying to adopt those to new ways of working takes a bit of time, but I think certainly what we've seen over the last year is a real shift within the overarching structures of development from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) countries that lead on development assistance", which includes moving away from just the rhetoric of localisation to actual action, explained Mr Moffett.

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Because of the way missionary groups are structured, specifically in



Solidarity Teacher Training College – Yambio, South Sudan
Photo credit: Nyokabi Kahura



Edmund Rice Centre Nairobi – Kenya.



Misean Cara members' meeting – Uganda.

regards to their long term presences in countries, they set themselves up for success. Spending lots of time in these spaces cultivates a closer relationship with the indigenous leadership, making the transition smoother when Irish missionaries leave.

An example of this strategy is Sr Orla Treacy's involvement at the Loreto School in Rumbek, South Sudan. Speaking with pride about Sr Treacy's presence in the Rumbek community, Mr Moffett emphasised that her ability to negotiate within the culture of that community in South Sudan, one that is steeped in patriarchy, is essential to the school's success. Her ability to "encourage the leaders and families to commit to allowing their girls to finish their education

and seek out these opportunities has been fantastic," shared the CEO.

"Those negotiating skills in very patriarchal societies are not to be underestimated. I mean, I think it's a huge skill to have and an ability to have to bring people along with you, and in small ways, chip away at some of the more harmful cultural practices and create opportunities."

With missionary work like Sr Treacy's the intention was always to "develop new formations, bring in novitiates, and develop indigenous congregations in the countries where they're operating," not, "to be there for all time, but to put the structures in place, get the congregations up and running, and then have the local sisters brought through the

whole process of formation to take on the leadership and continue the work that they've started and leave that presence in place," explained Mr Moffett.

“I think that’s a really important point for missionaries who are working with communities, to actually think of their handing over as being to local communities”

"That's one of the strengths of the missionary approach, is that long term



Philip O'Brien, Misean Cara Chairperson (left) and John Moffett, CEO (right). Photo credit: Jenny Barker.

presence but not the long term dependence on external support."

Discussing the shift in the international development sector's approach to missionary work, Mr O'Brien differentiated between government policy, which tends to focus on government to government communication, and the work of the local mission projects, which tend to work through a congregation to community, congregation to project stream of communication.

Continuing, he said the latter has potential to be "more resilient and less subject to the vagaries of political processes that you find in various countries.

Mission Sunday

With Mission Sunday approaching, Mr Moffett emphasised the opportunity the day presents; to celebrate and make known the "wealth of activity" that the 77 member organisations of Misean Cara are involved in across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

For the CEO, the goal of

the day is to "bring that information to the Irish public at large, to show them the amazing amount of impact and work that our congregations continue to undertake in exceptionally increasingly difficult circumstances.

"The last year or two have been incredibly difficult years globally, just with the increasing number of crises across the globe and the reductions in Official Development Assistance (ODA)," explained Mr Moffett. "We've seen a 20% reduction in 2025 alone, and yet the needs continue to increase. There are areas of work that our members and, in particular, the Catholic Church has supported for years, like education. And we've seen remarkable advancements in education over the last couple of decades, and those are really at risk of being eroded.

"It's now more than ever that we need to continue to support the really trusted actors like our members who are engaged in education in the Global South to ensure that we're continu-

ing to provide opportunities for the growing population of young people in the Global South who need to have those opportunities to get a foot on the ladder, find themselves good livelihoods, and move forward with productive, genuine, and and well-lived lives."

The format for this year's World Mission Sunday, to be celebrated on October 18, will be different for Misean Cara. In past years, RTÉ has hosted Misean Cara at their studios for their Mission Sunday programming, with a small number of invited guests, said Mr Moffett. This year RTÉ will be broadcasting their Mission Sunday programming from the Cathedral of Assumption in Thurles, where Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly will celebrate Mass. AMRI and Missio will also be present at the Mission Sunday Mass, which will give the organisations a chance to collectively showcase "the expansion and scope of the mission support from Ireland," said Mr Moffett.

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When asked about the values that Misean Cara shares with organisations such as AMRI and Missio, Mr Moffett said that while they all have different methods of operation, they are "all on the same page".

"I think that there's a growing awareness and recognition that this is a task for all of us together, and that there is need for deeper collaboration on issues like this," added Mr O'Brien.

Sharing his pride at being a part of the work that not only Misean Cara, but also organisations such as Missio and AMRI do, Mr Moffett described what makes Irish missionary work unique: "What I admire most about Irish missionaries and our Irish missionary organisations is their ability to find ways to work with the people who are the most disadvantaged, the poorest, those that are being left out of social safety nets and really provide them with support. And their willingness to go to the hard to reach places that others would find very very difficult to operate in."

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