

Comments by Cllr Jim Corr when chairing the public lecture

2009 is the Centenary year of the arrival of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Ireland. In 1909 Fr Michael Tierney – a native of north Cork - returned home from Australia to establish the first MSC house in Ireland on the Western Road, Cork.

The Irish writer, Walter Mackle, said in another context: “It is a little trickle in a high place that makes a great river flowing to the sea” and in this centenary year, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart can point to the fact that from their small beginnings on the Western Road, a great number of young Irish boys and men were educated at second level, went on to study for priesthood, went to University and then set out for distance lands to spread the gospel message.

They went to various countries on the great continent of Africa, to Papua New Guinea, to Indonesia, to Venezuela, and in more recent years to Russia.

My wife and I had the wonderful experience of working as lay missionaries back in the 1960s teaching in Northern Nigeria. During those six years we came to appreciate the hospitality and friendship of the African people and their struggle to make ends meet in terms of daily living and their determination to make their communities better places in which to live, to find work, and to enjoy their leisure hours.

We also saw at first hand the commitment of the Irish missionaries – priests and nuns - who built schools, hospitals and health centres while simultaneously preaching the message of the gospel. My African experience demonstrated clearly to me that Christianity was an overwhelming force for good in that great continent.

Today, the number of missionaries leaving Ireland for distant lands has sharply diminished, but let us not forget that in the early 20th century a spirit arose in Ireland which sent many young men and women to foreign lands to spread the word and work of Christ. Indeed in the 1920's, 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's Ireland became one of the leading countries in the modern missionary movement.

I believe that we should not allow their contribution to humanity to sink into oblivion because not to speak of them would be to deny history their relevance. They were men and women driven by a noble ideal who left home and fatherland. Many died from a range of tropical diseases and were buried in the red laterite soils of Africa, some returned home after years of service in the bush of Africa to live out the winter of their lives in retirement homes.

If Irish youth today are searching for examples of idealism and commitment to the welfare of less well off people they will find one example in the lives of the men and women who were part and parcel of the Irish Missionary movement.

This evening's public lecture is entitled “The Christian response to HIV/AIDS in Africa”. It is one of the events of the centenary celebrations of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

Our speaker is Sr Dr Miriam Duggan, Superior General of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters to Africa and also President of the Irish Missionary Union. Sr Miriam graduated from UCC's Medical School in 1964, received her masters in obstetrics and gynaecology in Birmingham in 1969, and was admitted to Fellowship of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1982.

She served as consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at Nsambya Hospital in Kampala, Uganda. In 1987 she founded the Nsambya Hospital Home Care Service for AIDS patients. In 1991 she founded "Youth Alive" as an AIDS prevention programme. Following on its success in Uganda this programme has now spread to 21 African countries.

The parliament of Uganda presented her with a "Recognition Award" last year in acknowledgement of her work in the fight against HIV/AIDS over a 25 years period. Sr Miriam has first hand experience of the devastation that AIDS can wreck on a community.

In the Kampala Hospital in Uganda she found herself in the frontline of a losing battle against a killer disease when in 1987 the first cases were diagnosed and a "culture of death" began overwhelming the people of that African nation.

Sr Miriam is a most qualified and experienced person on the AIDS virus, and we welcome her back to her Alma Mater –UCC - this evening.