

Cross-cultural Placement Report

Irish Baptist College | Preparation for Ministry

Blog article

Word Count2702

Date25/09/2023

Contents

Introduction	2
1. Background	2
2. Ireland — North & South	4
3. Church-life	8
4. Lessons and Prayer Points	14

Introduction



The first two weeks of June and the third week of July brought me to the south coast of Ireland. Cultures differ on our island, not just north and south, but between counties, cities, towns and even villages. And our island is becoming increasingly multicultural, in the true sense of the word.

In this article, I want to take you on a brief journey. Provide you with some background about what I did; look at key differences between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; explore church-life a little; and then finish with some lessons and prayer points.

1. Background

The backdrop —Trevor Johnston’s bleak words. From a 2018 Irish Times¹ article they bring home the dire need — **in a place just thirty-five miles away from where we study** — a place where, as Trevor puts it, God is now seen as redundant and unnecessary.

‘The Republic of Ireland is the least Christian part of the English-speaking world and a place where God is now seen as redundant and unnecessary’

Trevor Johnston, Rector at All Saints Belfast

¹ Patsy McGarry, ‘Ireland “Least Christian” Part of English-Speaking World’, The Irish Times, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/ireland-least-christian-part-of-english-speaking-world-1.3567045>.

My key objectives with the churches in which I served were ...

- further exploring life in Ireland.
- specifically, gaining a better understanding of
 - *church-life,*
 - *the church's witness and reach into the surrounding localities.*

So, where did I go? Who did I serve with? And what did I do? Youghal, Waterford City, and Passage West were key destinations, along with the surrounding towns and villages.

In Youghal I worked with Paul and Kate McFarland, Baptist Mission Workers; Paul leading the work in Youghal Baptist Church. Most of my time in Waterford was spent working with William Kidd, recently inducted as Pastor in Waterford Baptist Church, William, and his wife Yvonne part of the Baptist



Mission's Team. David McConville, Pastor of Nenagh Baptist Church in Co Tipperary, joined us in some door-to-door work. I met with friends, Colin, and Alison Holmes, who have served in a church plant in Ferrybank, Waterford since 2010 with European Christian Mission. Passage West provided many opportunities for

insightful conversation, along with serving in the routine of church life. Peter and Payton Carrigan, Brendan O'Brien, and Shane Deane among many of the folk I spent time with.

Activities were wide and varied across all three locations. Ranging from preaching to outreach to focussed discussions — sharing experiences, helping, and encouraging one another.

2. Ireland — North & South

I wonder, just how well do we understand life on our island? How much of what we think we know is fact or just urban myth?

Here are some high-level facts comparing Northern Ireland² with the Republic of Ireland^{3,4}.



² NISRA, '2021 Census', Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2023, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census>.

³ Central Statistics Office, 'Census 2022 - Key Findings' (CSO, 30 May 2023), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/keyfindings/>.

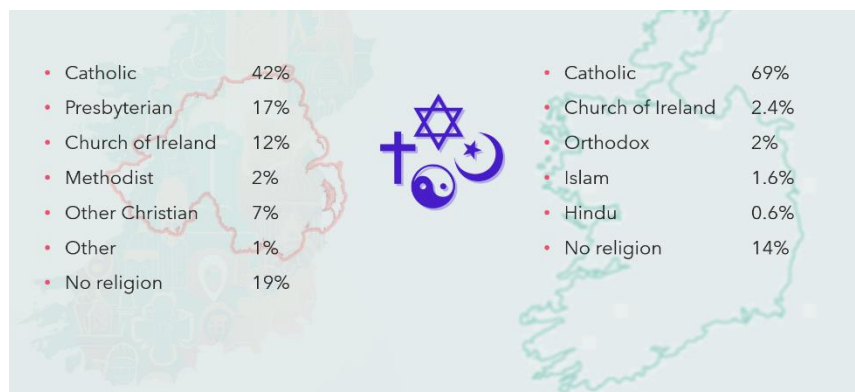
⁴ The World Bank, 'World Bank Open Data - GVA', World Bank Open Data, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

- Population in the Republic of Ireland is 2.7 times that in Northern Ireland — and it is growing at a higher rate.
- Northern Ireland has more households per head of population. No shock given the Republic's low housing supply, driving property and rental prices.
- Interestingly, the Republic of Ireland has a slightly younger population, with a marginally lower average age.
- It also has benefited from the inward movement of people (based on numbers where English is not the first language) — significantly higher in the Republic of Ireland, it proving to offer more work opportunities than here.
- With a greater land mass, the Republic of Ireland is generally less densely populated; but larger populations are now centring around the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Galway.
- And economically, the Republic of Ireland is thriving. Gross Value Added/head of population, which measures economic productivity, shows Northern Ireland lagging significantly behind.

In summary, the Republic of Ireland is a growing, thriving, and attractive location for people to work and live in — becoming more urban, with many rural towns and villages now functioning as homes for commuters.

But what about religious life on our island? Examining published

census data reveals some surprises.



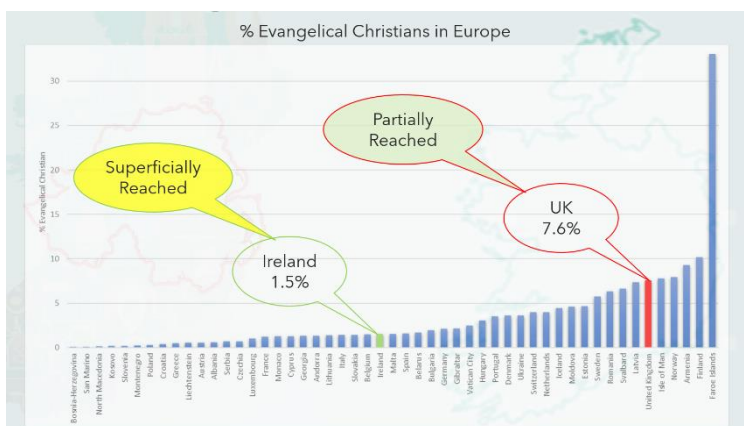
The big news headline from Census 2021 here was that those designating as Catholic, now outnumber those designated as Protestant for the first time since partition. Applying the same split in the Republic of Ireland, perhaps on the face of it, reveals little we didn't already know. But dig a little deeper and we find that in Census 2022, while the numbers designating as Catholic stand at 69%, this has fallen from 84% in 2011 — its peak in 1961 being 94.9%.

Church of Ireland figures have remained static in the south, probably held up by inward migration. Numbers of people affiliated with Islam and Hinduism are rising — again impacted by immigration.

The most interesting thing, however, is our perception of the Republic of Ireland as a secular society, with God being, in Trevor Johnston's words, '*seen as redundant.*' In reality, there is a

The advantage, and blessing, we have here is a greater number of people affiliated with evangelical churches. But cultural Christianity — mere superficiality — is a growing problem even in evangelical churches.

The Joshua Project⁵ appears to have the most recent published data on evangelical life in Europe.



Except for the Faroe Islands, the percentage of evangelical Christians in every European country is less than 10%. The figures

⁵ Joshua Project, 'Ireland People Groups, Languages and Religions | Joshua Project', 2023, <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/EI>.

for Ireland and the UK are highlighted — there are none available for Northern Ireland. The 1.5% figure for Ireland is generous — broad assumptions made that all members of certain denominations are evangelical.

Trevor Johnston asserted that — *‘the Republic of Ireland is the least Christian part of the English-speaking world.’* I can’t find data that underpins this. But we can say with some certainty there is a significant difference between Ireland, north and south, and a real and pressing need. The Joshua Project classifies the Republic of Ireland as only superficially reached — *‘few evangelicals, but many who identify as Christians. In great need of spiritual renewal and commitment to biblical faith.’* Again, allowing for the broad definitions of evangelical and Christian, the situation is likely much worse.

3. Church-life

But what of Baptist life in Ireland? Using the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland (ABCI) 2022 data⁶, we can see some broad and obvious differences between our churches north and south.

The figures speak for themselves — significantly fewer churches, members, average membership, and attendances in the south.

⁶ Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland, ‘Annual Report and Accounts 2022’ (Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland, 2023).



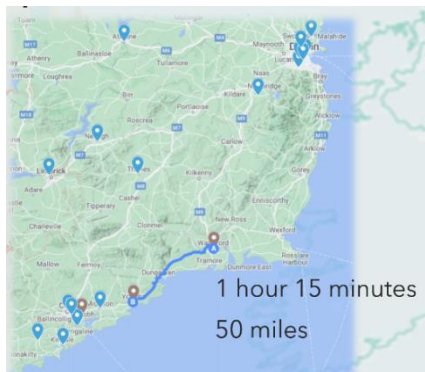
Dig a little deeper — our churches in the Republic of Ireland have significantly lower numbers of young people. There are fewer pastoral vacancies but a much higher vacancy rate. If we consider the geographic spread of churches and bear in mind that an area of one hundred km² is an area roughly the size of Belfast, there are nearly sixteen times more Baptist churches per 100 km² in the north compared to the south. You will travel a long way from one Baptist Church to another. And per head of population, there are eight times more Baptist churches in the north compared to the south.

Mapping the location of our churches makes this easier to visualise. Huge swaths of the island are devoid of Baptist churches. There are other evangelical churches, but the data is not easily available to map, and even if added the need remains great. Put another way, we have 14.5 Baptist churches per county here. Compare



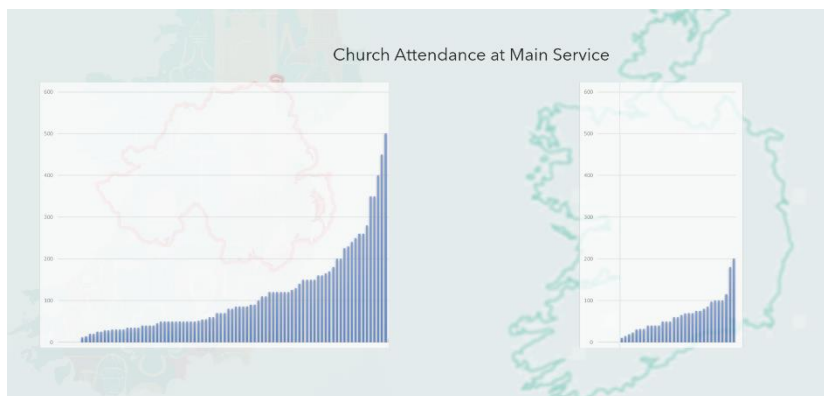
that to 1.2 Baptist churches per county in the south.

For some further perspective, focus on the south-east coast and think about the church in Waterford. If William Kidd wants some fellowship with a like-minded pastor, he must make a 1-hour 15-minute



drive – 50 miles. To put that in some perspective, that's like our ABCI President, Ian Grant, having to drive from Armagh to Newtownards before he finds another pastor of like mind. The reality — he will drive past multiple Baptist Churches on route; slightly less if he drove the same distance west or northwest, but still many more than if the same journey took place in the south. Isolation can be a big issue for Gospel workers and for our fellow believers in the Republic of Ireland.

Moving from averages, let's look at actual attendance per church.



Thirty-five of our churches here (that's 40%) have attendances of more than one hundred people — the south, in comparison has only six churches (that's 19%) with attendances over one hundred.

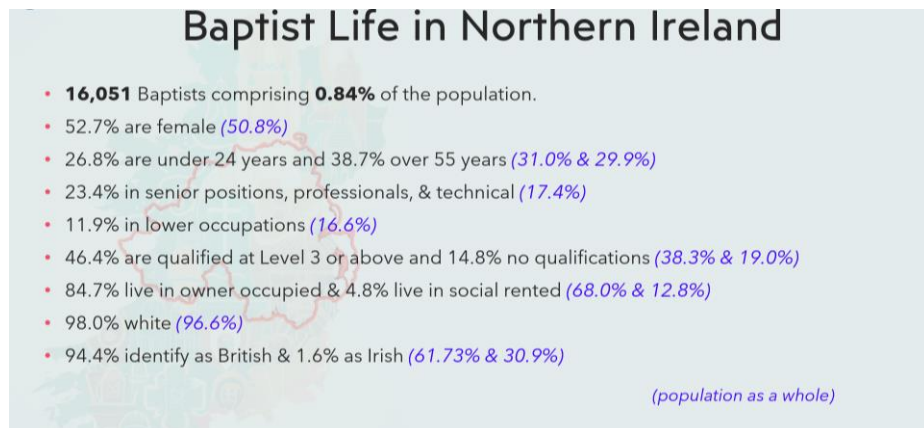
This skews the average attendance figures. And when you look at the graphs many churches north and south are similar in size being quite small. That pattern is repeated with membership and children's and youth work.

What about leadership? The figures reveal a greater ratio of elders to members in churches in the south compared to here. This, perhaps, suggests a stronger emphasis on leadership — compensating for long-term pastoral vacancies.

Turn to church growth. While the rate of baptisms is the same, the percentage of new members in our churches in the Republic of Ireland is higher than here.



Believe it or not, Census 2021 tells us about Baptist life in Northern Ireland. And sometimes to understand differences, we first need to understand ourselves — rid ourselves of those misperceptions.



Just over 16,000 people or 0.84% of the population say they are Baptists. This tallies reasonably well with ABCI data when allowing for children, non-members who attend and some non-association Baptist churches.

As we delve further, a caution. Bear in mind this is an overall picture — there is considerable variation between individual churches and geographic areas.

- In terms of broad demographics, we have more females than males — a slight difference from the overall population breakdown (*the blue figures on the slide*). Again, compared to the Northern Ireland population we have significantly fewer young people aged under twenty-four and significantly more

people over the age of 55 years. While we know the Holy Spirit does the work of saving souls and the Lord builds his church, a statistician looking at this will see these figures pointing to a future downward trend in overall numbers.

- Economically, and compared to the overall population, significantly more Baptists are in higher-level jobs, significantly less in lower occupations — and Baptists tend to be better qualified. We are more likely to live in homes we own and less likely to live in social rented accommodation.
- Ethnically, we are mainly white. And no revelations here — NI Baptists are more British and less Irish than the rest of the population.
- And, comparing Baptists to other religious groupings here against these indicators — Baptists are generally doing better.

This information is challenging; maybe uncomfortable, but worth carefully reflecting upon, particularly in terms of our reach into the communities where we are called to be salt and light. The accusation sometimes cast, that the church is becoming a middle-class club, may be closer to the truth than we might want to admit.

Unfortunately, there is no comparative data for the Republic of Ireland. But anecdotally, from observation and discussion, those attending churches are largely more representative of the broader society — there is a more tangible diversity against a range of indicators.

4. Lessons and Prayer Points

Our churches here have much to offer our sister churches in the Republic of Ireland — practically and financially. But in understanding ourselves better, there are lessons we can learn.



Life in the Republic of Ireland is generally more relational. People like to talk, and build a rapport — take time to develop that relationship. This presents challenges for evangelism — it requires patient effort over the long term, often one-to-one. Each church member needing to reach out in their daily lives, not contract out all the responsibility to a pastor or worker.

Sadly, here, we often see a transactional attitude to church life — a *‘what’s in it for me?’* approach. People sometimes follow men or programmes — dipping in when it suits them.

That relational perspective to life in the south is reflected in church life, helping to foster unity amidst a very rich diversity. The business executive sitting alongside the single mum from a council estate, her sons struggling with addiction. The Nigerian family, studying God’s Word alongside an Irish couple. A Ukrainian lady and her son, using a Microsoft app, which translates the sermon for them. First-generation Christians

faithfully and actively serve alongside those, where successive generations of families have known God's grace in their lives. Hard, consistent work, with many ups and downs, but a people united in Christ.

Commitment levels are high. With smaller numbers there is less opportunity to hide — everyone playing a part and working together.

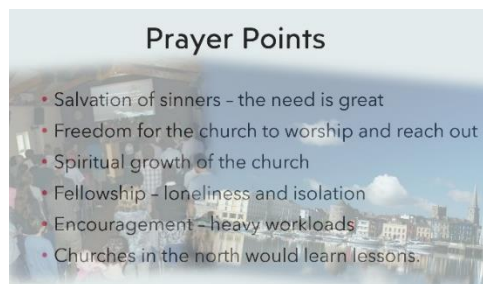
That relationality spills over into genuine interest and concern for one another. If you're not present with the church someone is quickly following up. People make a concerted effort to get on. You can't fall out and go to the church down the road or in the next town — the chances are there isn't one, and if there is it won't be Baptist.

This happens with godly, strong leadership. The data pointed us to this emphasis on leadership in churches in the South. Leaders work hard, particularly pastors. There is variation with some pastors bearing a heavy load with no elders — in other churches elders play a pivotal role visibly and behind the scenes.

But that people focus is the biggest takeaway. There is no fixation with programmes — planning a busy schedule, which can become a distraction from spiritual growth, at times no more than activity; hampering opportunity to engage the lost in daily life.

There is less attachment to buildings — premises are often rented,

representing better value-for-money, located where the people are, less obstacles to outreach — keeping the focus of the church on what the church is — a people called out by God's grace.



We need to pray for salvation blessing. The need across our island is great.

Pray for ...

- Ongoing freedom amidst a changing society — that churches can worship and represent Christ to the people of our island — grow spiritually.
- Perseverance — loneliness and isolation are major factors for Gospel workers; for Christians, young and old, be it in schools, the workplace, and sometimes families. Taking a stand for the Lord costs.
- The Lord's encouragement to those serving him in the Republic of Ireland. The work is tough and the load is often heavy.
- Ourselves — there are important lessons for our churches. Society is changing here at a pace far greater than many realise. We cannot be indifferent to these changes or spend our time bemoaning the direction of society. We must be salt

and light for Christ, consistent in our message offering hope in Christ; and appropriately adapting methods as we participate in God's mission.

This washed-out picture stands over Waterford City. It stood bright over the city when painted in 2016. It's



title — *we live protected under each other's shadow*⁷ — it aimed to communicate the need for community amid the social injustice of society. The hope it might have engendered has long since faded. But where are people looking for hope?

Walk into Waterford's bookshop and the spirituality section has shelves lined with multiple options from the occult to new age. In terms of an evangelical offering, you'll find two CS Lewis books and two Bibles — the Bibles sitting alongside the witch's bible. A shop in Youghal invites you to *believe — feed your spirit*. It's devoted in its entirety to occultic practice. Drug abuse and social issues are rife across not just cities, but small towns like Passage West. People are without hope — offered many false hopes. What they need is the Gospel.

⁷ Joe Caslin, "Ar Scath a Cheile a Muireann a Daoine", Joe Caslin, 2023, <https://joecaslin.com/pages/waterford-walls>.

Ireland – The Need ...

'I came to the peoples of Ireland to **preach the gospel**. I bore insults from unbelievers, so that I would hear the hatred directed at me for travelling here. I bore many persecutions, even chains, so that I could give up my freeborn state for the sake of others. If I be worthy, I am ready even to give up my life most willingly here and now for his name. It is there that I wish to spend my life until I die, if the Lord should grant it to me.'

Patrick, c. AD 460 Confessio 37

Patrick⁸ had a tough mission in the fifth century. Twenty-first-century Ireland may seem infinitely more civilised and advanced, but it is still tough.

The mission remains the same sixteen centuries later — ***preach the Gospel***.

Let's pray for our workers and churches in the Republic of Ireland. May they, in the words of Acts 2:42, be ...

devoted ... to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And like the church in Jerusalem that their witness would be used by the Holy Spirit

And the Lord adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

⁸ Royal Irish Academy, 'Confession | St. Patrick's Confessio', 2011, https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english#.