

## **Paper Proposal: European Conference on Mission Studies 2014 (Mission and Money)**

My name is Kevin Hargaden. I am a first year doctoral candidate at Aberdeen University, studying under Brian Brock and considering the theology of wealth with reference to recent Irish economic history.

I would like to propose a paper for the upcoming conference in Finland. My proposed title is: **Mission, Charity and the Post-Christian Irish Imagination**. It will consider how Irish popular culture has shifted from thinking in terms of mission to thinking in terms of charity. It will offer a theological critique of this shift along with a reflection on how it should impact ecclesial self-understanding in Ireland around the issues of mission, wealth and wider society.

Ideally, I think my paper would best fit in the fifth panel on “Missions, Economies and Biblical Hermeneutics”.

## **Mission, Charity and the Post-Christian Irish Imagination**

Ireland has traditionally been one of the last examples of a Christendom society. Christian churches were centrally involved in every aspect of Irish life from education, politics and healthcare down to social celebration and local sporting initiatives. This was most especially true in the case of the Roman Catholic Church but Protestant traditions sought to mimic the institutional power of the larger church on a smaller scale.

The centrality of Irish Christianity to the life of the society meant that mission was a prominent theme popular culture. Primarily through the efforts of missionary priests and nuns, the idea of the Christian kerygma being spread around the world took on a particularly clear resonance in Irish society. Collecting money to support the missions was an almost universal occupation; it operated at the level of the family, the school and the parish. It was often embedded in everyday market transactions. The role of mission in this era was such that Irish self-understanding was indented by the idea of being missionaries.

In recent decades, the power of the churches has waned. In a context of diminished social capital and cultural influence, mission is no longer as potent an idea. While many of the fundraising and dissemination networks are still in place, they are reduced in size and the number of missionaries sent out by the Irish churches has dramatically reduced. However, the missionary impulse can perhaps still be discerned in large-scale charitable efforts. There is a rich tradition of local-level volunteering in Ireland that was historically encouraged by the churches and that persists even after Christian practice has waned. There are high-profile efforts by secular Irish NGOs that win widespread support and coverage.

But this post-Christendom missionary impulse is no longer connected with the Gospel and need no longer include a vision outside of the State. Competitions that set Irish charities up for funding and publicity commonly receive widespread support and a modified version of this phenomenon has been explicitly connected with the national recovery from the economic collapse of 2008. In the last year, figures connected with the ruling government party, Fine Gael, have initiated a program called “The One Percent Difference” that rhetorically seeks to direct a sort of missionary impulse towards national recovery. The same political party is considering amending the tax code to encourage philanthropy.

This emerging charitable culture, while in many respects positive, is open to a stern theological critique. The politics of state-sanctioned charity in the fifth year of Irish austerity stands in stark contrast to the catholic impulse to care for the distant brother and sister. The scale of vision involved in mission is considerably broader than the very limited goals intended in the newer forms of charity. By charting the transition from mission to charity, and the differences therein, a broader opportunity opens to consider where the churches sit in Irish society and what missional stances the churches can fruitfully take in the context of a changing culture.