



## **10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of UN International Year of the Family.**

### **Parental Equality Proposal for Father's Gathering 2004**

**30<sup>th</sup> April 2004**

#### **Background and context**

During 1994 the UN International Year of the Family, as chairperson of Parental Equality, I met St. Maura Duggan the Chair of the IYF committee at a (well-funded) launch by Proinsias de Rossa at the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham. I discussed with her our desire to run a workshop for unmarried fathers, as this group of men were totally disenfranchised as parents in Ireland. Sr. Maura was one of the first people who could help who got the big picture. A true egalitarian and an educator of educators, she gave me a unique insight into the plight of young schoolchildren in schools who don't know or live with their fathers and who, when asked to sketch their family tree, are embarrassed or just don't know how to fit in Father. Single-handedly, and even though the monies had already been almost totally committed, she encouraged me to apply and she saw that we received some 600 punts towards organising the day. More importantly, she offered us the use of the facilities in Sion Hill and provided us with beautiful food on the day, all with a supportive "No Charge". Furthermore, she sought out for us the first male graduate of home economics in Ireland and secured his services to present a nutrition session for fathers on the day.

Parental Equality ran the first workshop for unmarried fathers in 1994. The workshop was opened by Joseph Keegan, the brave father, whose relationship with his daughter was cut off on her adoption, but whose resilience in successfully challenging this wrongdoing in the European Courts marked a beginning, by addressing legally the rights of Fathers and their children. Many professionals gave their time freely and willingly to this pioneering day. We even arranged for other fathers to provide an ad hoc crèche on the day, so that fathers could bring their kids along (Saturday's was when most unmarried father's had access time with their children). The workshop was a great success. In a very male environment, men shared openly their pain of being restricted in their relationship with their children; they supported each other with innovative suggestions for managing their time with their children and for dealing with the

institutions of the state and with their children's mother. The nutrition and health section went down brilliantly, with really practical discussion relating spot-on to these father's lives.

As an epilogue, following a radio interview, subsequent to the event, Sr. Maura was contacted by Ivy and Ken Crowe from the Methodist community. Ivy then made contact with Parental Equality and together we embarked on the Father's Family Time project, where fathers and their children gathered on Sunday afternoons in Leeson Park in the Methodist hall there. Over the years many of our children formed lasting friendships in "the Club" as they called it. The project was so successful that a number of family court judges specifically made court orders for fathers to have access to their children during this time and we facilitated the often delicate handover scenarios between mothers and fathers. This project continued for seven or eight years until many of the original participants moved and as usual no enlightened statutory body came forward with funding to enable mainstreaming.

Over the last decade since that workshop Parental Equality have worked at the coal face, promoting Shared Parenting and Joint Custody as a Win-Win-Win-Win scenario for children, both fathers and mothers, extended families and society in general. While the message we distributed was and continues to be simple (to the point of being blindingly obvious), as an under funded voluntarily group, mostly accessed in the early years by fathers or female relations and friends of fathers, Parental Equality has always been sidelined when seeking funding to raise awareness at a level of critical mass and to develop better models to iron out difficulties experienced in shared parenting. The Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, for example, in their payment policies continue to deny recognition the reality of Joint custody, continuing to force parents into a dominant custodial parent and a secondary, subservient parent "on Access". Sadly, various ministers and department officials have chosen, for more than a decade now, to treat Parental Equality's proposals as the work of troublemakers and bitter, angry men. In our meetings with Family units etc we have repeatedly sought funding to run a conference on Fatherhood. We have been fobbed off with promise which never came to fruition and then insulted with examples of taxpayers monies, reputedly spent on researching fatherhood, when in fact these research efforts have largely been focussed around "safe hands", those who would inevitably underpin the belief system that 'If only men would change and satisfy the feminised model which has been ordained for the NEW MAN, then all our problems would magically vanish'.

**Appendix 1** contains a sample proposal which was presented and modified over the last ten years trying to seek funding for such an event. The present proposal has this original material as a starting point but is fundamentally driven from a grass-roots organic ethos, coming from fathers at the coal face and relying on the hard learned experiences and insights of those actually working with, rather than theorising about fathers.

Parental Equality have been at the coal face, working with fathers for since 1992. In 1995 the EU ran a conference in Helsinki, entitled "The status and role of Fathers- Family policy aspects". In a limp submission to the conference the Irish government, represented by then Minister of State at the Department of Social Welfare, Mr. Bernard Durkan. It basically reported the common answers of "No information", "Not aware", "no evidence" etc to a questionnaire filled out by around thirty participating countries. In it's response the Irish Government singled out Parental Equality as being the only named voluntary group advocating for father's rights.

Since the IYF in 1994, Parental Equality have assisted thousands of fathers as well as supporting many mothers who often faced the criticism of their peers by sharing parenting with

their children's father. We have developed and delivered shared parenting and family programs and successfully developed supportive and informative websites. We have published a book "Things for Dads to do with Kids" by Sam Carroll and continued to make submissions to a very deaf administration. A measure of our positive impact was the introduction of the Children's Act 1997, which changed somewhat the legal complexities of guardianship, the recognition of the role of grandparents and the underpinned Joint Custody as a possibility in Family Law.

Over the last decade a number of groups of fathers have emerged. Some have come and gone. Almost all of those who have chosen to protest father's rights to equal treatment have had little statutory support. There is a wealth of real experience of father's condition within these voluntary, under-funded and loosely structured groups.

This Special Awards scheme for the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the IYF is a unique opportunity for the state to facilitate the NGO sector in focussing on fathers and their families. Parental Equality proposes running a two day gathering on the theme:-

### **Focus on Fatherhood.**

The general thrust here is to gather together fathers and their representative groups over two days. We suggest Dundalk as a location. It is a gateway North-South, in recognition of the many cross border relationship and fatherhood issues we have come across and to glean current and best practice from two different legal and administrative cultures. PE also has our main office there. The gathering is designed to take place over a Friday/Saturday period, probably in late September/October.

### **Methodology:**

The general process for the gathering is based on the Gap model of managing change. Essentially this consists of three stages:-

- 1) Where are we (as Fathers)?
- 2) Where do we want to be?
- 3) How do we get there (in terms of strategy, milestones, methodologies, rules etc.)

This process is particularly suitable to the natural behaviour of men. It stimulates interest, engagement and participation. The richness of this gathering is that it will be organic, bottom up and from the grass roots. It does not seek to rely on the "Academic Theoreticians", who, in our experience, have contributed to propagating the "Paradigm paralysis" around fathers, where their traditional "stuckness" in their thinking, produces more of the same man-bashing recommendations. A measure of their intervention is increasing isolation of men, increasing disconnection between separated fathers and their children, greater levels of domestic and societal violence. (Einstein once said that you cannot solve the problems of today with the thinking that created them). Our experience of working with fathers is that fathers are honourable, reflective and level headed, when treated with parity of esteem and autonomy and that they will self regulate with more street-cred than any external hierarchical power can impose ( the Celtic tradition of Táin Bó Cualigne springs to mind). This Gathering will provide fathers

with their own space, where they can map out their own course, unfettered by the social prescription traditionally imposed on them by the dominant feminised discourse.

The vision is to have working sessions where men from various father's groups will present their experiences and insights. All aspects of fathering will be included. Divergence of outlook and viewpoints, religious, moral, economic, social etc will be welcomed and actively sought. Funding will be utilised to support these presenters to prepare and research their contributions (This work will feed into the post production of event papers and other material for future distribution).

The sessions will be facilitated by men who can manage the necessary energies, conflicts, confusions and struggles which are a vital element to this process being useful and real. (I have participated in a number of conferences over the last twelve years which purported to engage with men's issues. Almost without exception the organisers ran scared of male energy and expressions of anger and spent their time trying to restrict men from saying their "stuff" that the events lost vital opportunities to embrace the reality for many fathers.)

A web site will be established prior to the event to build up a databank of resources as interest and preparation for the gathering develops.

Funding will be required to build media awareness and to network with the various father's groups throughout Ireland and abroad, through advertising and travelling to meet with groups to establish credibility with them.

The visioning part of the process, setting out a future situation for fatherhood will be facilitated by practitioners engaged to use swot, mapping and other appropriate methods of capturing the focussed energies of the gathering. (All too often the rapporteurs at conferences, which I have attended around family issues, fail to reflect what participants either said or meant). This process will utilise multimedia and recording technologies to ensure that the richness of the experience will be adequately captured.

There will be range of activities organised over the two days. These will include some sports, such as football, pitch and putt, a swim, cards, a session etc. These elements are an essential element to facilitating the energy flows and the strengthening of relationships. There will also be childminding facilities and kids'n'dads activities.

In order to develop the logistics of this innovative process, funding will be necessary for design and organisation sessions to ensure delivery of component elements of the gathering.

### **Who will attend and numbers expected?**

Whereas for financial and political purposes, earlier proposals, such as contained in Appendix 1, focussed on politicians, professionals from the various areas which affect fathers lives and women's groups' representatives, the thrust of this proposal is to target the actual grass-roots father's groups from throughout Ireland and some from abroad. Typically, they will be unfunded, so subvention for travel, accommodation and the fee for the gathering will be necessary. Too


often at events in the past, understandable bitterness has emerged from fathers having had their valid experiences being lost to the process because of their limited resources, while funded paid employees of various health boards and departments ( who often won't attend on a Friday/Saturday as it eats into their personal time) have enjoyed the benefits of full rate mileage allowances etc.

It is positively hoped that the various professionals group will participate in the gathering. However they will be welcome as co-learners in a common struggle to create more sustainable and fruitful future family relationships, rather than as the hostages of the perceived wisdoms which can block creative possibilities.

In terms of numbers expected at the gathering we plan for around 150-200 participants.

### **Aside:-**

In my role as lecturer in the Electronics Dept. at DKIT, I have envisioned, developed and piloted a learning process for the last three years in the Engineering school at DKIT, a course consisting

mostly of young men. This process utilises the concept of the Meitheal,  the traditional Irish model where groups of men formed resilient autopoietic communities to address the day to day issues and tasks facing them. This community based model, which has had very positive external evaluation and student feedback, produces a phenomenal level of engagement, team-work and self esteem, from both staff and students and works from the inherent genius within the participants. I have learned many of the elements implemented in this process from working with fathers. The most vital element is trust. The gathering Parental Equality proposes will have trust and mutual respect as core values.

### **Projected Costs:**

We have based costs on conferences run by Amen in Dublin and Navan over the last few years, and more recent conferences run in DKIT with Peace and Cross border funding. This process will also require a gathering manager for some two to three months to implement a professional process. Specifically, if the benefits of this process are to be effectively marshalled and put to future use, a comprehensive multimedia capturing of the experience is necessary. Our projection is in the region of €35,000.

### **Summary.**

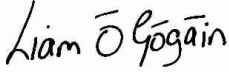
Parental Equality have been delivering services to fathers and families for twelve years. We have been in the isolated wilderness of being politically incorrect in a society which has focussed on Equality for Women to the exclusion of men and their children. We have struggled with minimal funding. Piecemeal offerings render it impractical to deliver an event which can be meaningful in terms of embracing the reality of Ireland's fathers and mainstreaming them into social policy. This proposal delivers on all five themes identified in the Information leaflet.

As an NGO with the under-funded realities that those working with fathers at the coal-face bring with it, Parental equality has no other source of funding available to deliver this product. Unlike the well financed women's groups whose budgets will dwarf anything we might seek (the stats make depressing reading), we require full funding to deliver an effective outcome. What we have

is tangible connectivity with the “great unwashed”, fathers out there, who are struggling to love their kids in a very unsupportive environment. After more than a decade of parenting in difficult circumstances, many of the fathers who have been with and through our community have survived and have much distilled wisdom to pass on.

It is a challenge to whoever is delegated the responsibility to decide on funding various projects, to think as imaginatively and with foresight as Sr. Maura Duggan ten years ago.

If further discussion is sought please contact me by phone at 087-2543997 or by email to [chairman@parentalequality.ie](mailto:chairman@parentalequality.ie)

Liam ? Gógáin   
Chairman Parental Equality  
[www.parentalequality.ie](http://www.parentalequality.ie)

## **Appendix 1**

See attached PDF file titled “Fatherhood in the New Millenium”

