

TENTH BIRTHDAY – SOCIAL JUSTICE IRELAND

Sr Brigid Reynolds writes:

Recently we had the 10th Annual General Meeting of Social Justice Ireland. When the formal proceedings were completed the Executive Board and Staff recalled with gratitude and humility what had been achieved over the years. While we did not have a formal celebration, we did take time to remember the many people who helped the organisation in so many different ways since 2009. The Marist Sisters are in this count of generous supporters.

The rise of Trumpism and the chaos of Brexit have illustrated what can happen to national Governments when democracy is taken for granted. One of Social Justice Ireland's projects is to develop and support local participation. Encouraging people to get involved in local decision-making should help towards vigilance at all levels. The financial assistance of the Marist Sisters has been directed towards this project. In 2013 we were asked by the then Minister for the Environment and Local Government to Chair a government appointed committee to develop a structure which would involve community groups in local government activity. The principle conclusion of this committee was the proposal to establish Public Participation Networks (PPNs).

This proposal was accepted by the Government and established in law. The PPN is an umbrella structure for all the voluntary, community, and environmental groups in the area. PPNs provide a mechanism by which citizens can have a greater say in local government decisions which affect their communities. Each of 31 Local Authority areas now has a PPN in place that allows the public to take an active role in relevant committees of the local authority. The PPNs are now the "go to" organisation for all bodies in the county/city who wish to benefit from community and voluntary expertise.

In recent weeks it was very heartening to see the very positive role the PPNs were playing in facilitating the local communities in welcoming migrants and asylum seekers. When all the groups work together it creates a good community spirit where the work is shared and enjoyed. At the end of 2018 there were 14,846 member organisations attached to the PPNs. They got government support to the tune of €3.3 million. Social Justice Ireland was involved in organising 386 training sessions for the PPN members and local government officials during the year. During the coming year we plan to provide training for budget analysis at local level. This training should raise awareness and work towards transparency at local level.

Many thanks for all the support!