

# Crossing Borders

Brexit & the  
Book of Ruth



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha  
Department of Foreign Affairs

corrymeela 



COMMUNITY  
RELATIONS  
COUNCIL  
Equity | Diversity | Interdependence

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# INTRODUCTION

In late 2017, more than a year on from the referendum on UK membership of the EU, Corrymeela took on the task of catalysing conversation among Christian communities around the complex issues thrown up by the result. We decided very quickly to centre these discussions around our shared sacred text and developed discussion material based on the biblical book of Ruth to discuss issues such as migration, belonging, community and stereotyping.

At this stage, the Dublin government were conducting All Ireland symposia of civic (including faith) leaders. While religious attendance has certainly declined in both Irish jurisdictions, it is nonetheless significantly larger than across other European countries. The question of British-Irish relationships has long been mediated through the lens of religious affiliation. Hence, attention towards the significant demographic of church-affiliated people was a priority, and Corrymeela felt we were well placed to do such an engagement.

Funding was secured through the Reconciliation Fund of the DFA of the Dublin Government. Subsequent funding was secured from the Community Relations Council in Belfast.

Workshops, seminars and discussions began in Spring 2018 and from the period of Spring 2018- Spring 2020, more than four thousand people have used the resources either in self-directed settings or under the leadership of Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan, the creators of the material. We are aware that the materials have been used throughout these islands, in Dublin and Belfast as well as Glasgow, Edinburgh and London. Workshops have taken place in Omagh, Newry, Castlewellan, Coleraine, Sandymount, Bangor, Carrickfergus, Ballycastle, Bushmills, and in Trinity College Dublin, Ulster University, Queen's University and Glasgow University. People have gathered in churches, universities, food banks, cathedrals, tents, fields and in the wilderness, on islands off the coast of Scotland and in festivals like Solas in Perthshire, Greenbelt near Kettering and Gŵyl Coda in Wales.

The Borders and Belonging resource has also been used by parishes in London, among English speaking Anglican churches in Northern France and the Netherlands. Furthermore, stripped of the Brexit element, the Ruth studies have been used extensively to discuss

issues of borders and belonging in the Pacific Northwest of the United States as well as in Colorado, California, Canada and South Korea.

This report is an attempt to extract some learning from the conversations we have participated in over the last two years as the Brexit project has convulsed the political and social life of these islands. It is particularly — though not exclusively — directed at faith communities and makes some recommendations for those in political and church life as we seek to plot our way into a new set of relationships in the aftermath of this initial phase of Brexit.

The report has been prepared by Pádraig Ó Tuama, and Glenn Jordan (who died unexpectedly in June 2020). It was submitted to the leadership of Corrymeela for consideration and editing, and following a submission to the DFA and the Community Relations Council, will be formatted for publication.



# 1

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1** It is essential that people across Ireland and Britain are provided with increased opportunities to become familiar with key moments in British-Irish history (including the various policy, treaty and leadership attempts to address tensions, and with the commitments of the British and Irish governments in the Good Friday Agreement).
- 1.2** A process of repair, renewal and reconfiguration is required both in the United Kingdom and in the EU to restore relationships, humanise our institutions and turn politics back to the citizens. Doing this will require new ways of hearing the concerns and the stories of the people who make up our constituent states.
- 1.3** The effective use of citizens' assemblies and constitutional conventions in the Republic of Ireland shows the benefit of such arrangements, which could be organised on a national and supranational basis across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They could also create space to introduce personal narratives into the formation of policy and law, particularly at a time when the perception exists that the professionalisation of politics has removed political representatives from the day-to-day experience of the electorate.
- 1.4** It is critical that all parties to the negotiations, the media and societies in general should deliberately include personal narratives in public communications about the emerging status of EU/UK relationships. When prioritised in discussions, personal narratives help ensure that those on both sides of the island of Ireland know that their experiences of the Brexit negotiation period will be reflected. Theory about what the border could be must be tempered by the truth of what the Brexit project has actually been like. Personal narratives expose the power structures at work by revealing winners and losers in politics. This is critical if politics is to be seen to work for people and not for the pre-existing power structures.
- 1.5** Regardless of the outcome of Brexit there is a generational project for the healing of the wounds of this political, social and cultural upheaval. It will not be served well by a restatement of "British values" nor by hasty calls for Irish unity. Nevertheless, a programme for national and community



dialogue and reconciliation is required that extends beyond a simple resolution of the argument about Europe or the border on the island of Ireland. It must restore faith in politics, address issues of social and economic inequality, and heal the divisions that have bedevilled this island.

- 1.6** We must also turn ourselves more diligently and honestly to the issue of the migrant among us. Few Irish families have not migrated somewhere in Great Britain. Few British families have not had crossovers from internal British borders, if not further afield. The colonial project has meant that for centuries, British families went throughout the world. Poverty and opportunity meant that millions of Irish individuals travelled far. That the Brexit project has been largely led by white politicians demonstrates that an underlying need in public conversation is a recognition of multi-racial dynamics in the questions of identity and belonging in Irishness, Englishness, Scottishness, Welshness and Britishness.
- 1.7** We urge actors in this drama of division to improve and focus their language towards one another in recognition of the fact that language drawn from the extremes forces us to the extremes. We recognise that the habits of contemporary politics and the historical estrangements between communities on the island of Ireland mean that intemperate language is sometimes used instinctively and without thinking.
- 1.8** We suggest that the circumstances occasioned by Brexit — and the heightened tensions that accompany it — call for language and actions of generosity and kindness. Such things may be considered to have limited currency in political and cultural debate, we are convinced however that they retain considerable potency in the context of public debate.
- 1.9** We recommend public awareness about the most basic geographic, political and historical factors of British-Irish relations, paying particular attention to how misinformation or stereotypes, sometimes historically rooted, continue to shape present behaviours.
- 1.10** We urge a renewed attention towards many of the findings and recommendations of the Report of the Constitutional Group on the Past. This work has been done, painstakingly,

and while some of the recommendations and findings are considered unacceptable, many elements of this document are of vital relevance to British-Irish relations.

- 1.11** Amplification of voices — at political, local, artistic and religious levels — who are demonstrating leadership, courage and capacity to change, and inclusion. Notably, these voices may have voted in different ways regarding Brexit, but they are proposing something demanding and creative regarding British, Irish and EU relations on these islands. We do not recommend seeking limpid “balance” but rather the amplification of voices — from people born on these islands and people who’ve moved to these islands — that transcend questions of how one voted, and instead locate us in moments of challenge and courage.
- 1.12** One of the fantasies of the future is that in 100 years, people will be learning all about Brexit. However, it may be that Brexit is a mere footnote in future history books, as people will be coping with catastrophic levels of climate change. We recommend that the governments of Ireland and Britain pivot some policy directions about Brexit into the light of climate change, with the hope of preventing more damage, and galvanising action for the good of all life on these islands and beyond.





# 2

## OVERVIEW OF PROJECT: BORDERS AND BELONGING

The Brexit referendum campaign in June 2016 and the subsequent triggering of Article 50 in March 2017 didn't just set the agenda for the UK government for the foreseeable future. These momentous events have also exposed ruptures and fault lines in UK society and reignited tensions in relation to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Corrymeela has always found itself active at those places where the tectonic plates of conflicted communities threaten to crack and split apart. So the situation post-Brexit on the island of Ireland and in UK society as a whole is a natural space for Corrymeela, which has dedicated itself for more than 50 years now to the healing of fractures and the building of new and healthy relationships in the aftermath of trauma.

We have sought to enter into the conversation, or the silence, in faith communities in relation to Brexit, not to re-run the referendum or the debate but to ask ourselves what kind of a society we aspire to in the future. We want to do so by providing conversation material based around the sacred text of our Christian communities because this seems the sensible thing to do when we acknowledge that among our communities there will be contrasting views. Putting our shared text at the centre enables us to navigate the complexity and the pain of the conversations we need to have.

### **2.1** Summary of the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth can be divided into four acts. Indeed, it has four chapters, and was written, clearly, by a person/persons with a flare for the dramatic arts.

#### Act 1

A wealthy family flees Bethlehem during a famine. They go, surprisingly, to enemy territory — Moab — where they settle. Soon after they arrive there, the father of the family dies, leaving his wife (Naomi) and their two sons. The two sons marry local Moabite women (Ruth and Orpah). Ten years later, there is a famine and both of these sons die, leaving Naomi a widow with two childless widowed daughters-in-law. Naomi cannot fulfil her obligations to provide these daughters-in-law with children, so she releases them from their marriage

obligations and prepares to return to Bethlehem. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, returns home. But Ruth refuses, and instead chooses to cross a border as a widowed woman from enemy territory. Naomi's reception upon her return to her hometown is ambivalent — after all, she had taken her money and run when the town was in hardship, now she's in hardship and has returned.

### Act 2

Set in Bethlehem's fields. Ruth is seeking social welfare provision for herself and Naomi. Were Ruth a local woman, or even a different kind of foreigner, she would be allowed to glean from the corners of the field. However, because she's a Moabite (and she's sometimes referred to as a Moabite from Moab) her marriage is questioned. So public recognition of her marriage (or not) influences whether she is allowed to join the other widows in harvesting the corners of the field. She finds one field where she is safe, a field owned by a relative of her dead husband, Boaz. He orders his men not to rape her. She returns home to her mother-in-law with provisions and a story about the owner of the field.

### Act 3

Naomi helps Ruth devise a plan to secure a marriage between Ruth and the owner of the field, whose name is Boaz. While Naomi's family are obliged to provide a husband for Ruth, Boaz isn't the immediate choice for such a husband, as there's a closer kinsman. However, Boaz seems the better choice by far. Ruth visits Boaz in the middle of the night, and ensures a commitment that Boaz will seek to marry her, thereby securing the rights she's deserving. Ruth entreats Boaz to do this by asking him to "spread his cloak" — while this may be a seduction, it is also a rich reference to an idea that God had spread his cloak over the people of Israel. In essence, Ruth is saying to Boaz "Be more like the God you say you love - treat me with the dignity that you, too, have been treated with. Fold me into the rights that you enjoy for yourself". She is entreating him to be a better citizen through the way he treats her.

### Act 4

Boaz knows that there is, technically, another man in the town who is a closer relative to Naomi's family, and who, by

rights, should be the one to marry Ruth. After all, marrying Ruth means that the person would inherit the family's land (as women couldn't own property). But the closer kinsman doesn't like foreigners. He wants the land, but not if it comes with an obligation to marry a foreigner. He cuts off his nose to spite his face, preferring to not expand his land if it entails being associated with a foreigner. Boaz, however, sees that the inclusion of Ruth is something that will deepen his citizenship in his own country, rather than threaten it.

## 2.2 Why the Book of Ruth?

It seemed important to us from the beginning to enter into conversation around such a complex issue by means of narrative, particularly a story which involved a range of characters with a variety of life experiences. Despite its ancient origin, the Book of Ruth from the Hebrew bible proved a valuable catalyst and helped pierce the complexity of law and international treaties with a deceptively simple human drama.

The Book of Ruth wouldn't ordinarily be one that presents itself for commentary on a contemporary issue like Brexit. The stereotype exists that this is a romantic book of the young, beautiful woman fallen on hard times who meets a good man, they fall in love, get married and have children, or at least a child. Of course there is some questionable activity in the supposed seduction of the soon-to-be husband, but by and large this can be glossed over, and at least it is tasteful, though only barely.

Perhaps the most well-known part of the story is the transcendent declaration of loyalty on the part of Ruth, who commits herself to her mother-in-law to go where she goes, live where she lives, to worship Naomi's God in such a way that only death would part them.

As we engage deeper with the characters and their lives though, there are other profound things which reveal themselves. Like the mystery of relationships between women. Like the trauma of surviving one's offspring, of childlessness and marriage and patriarchy.

And of course, in thinking about Brexit the story features a number of border crossings. Elimelech and Naomi and their boys leave Bethlehem (due to famine) and move to Moab (the place of the traditional enemy) and fall on hard times. Sometime later, in the midst of her desolation, Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem. Ruth because of her loyalty now becomes a foreigner in a country that doesn't like her sort, she is a woman in a man's world, childless in a society that required sons, a widow in a family-based culture, and poor in a community that lacked a comprehensive safety net. Navigating the fact of their displacement becomes the core challenge of the narrative, not just for Ruth and Naomi, but ultimately for the whole community.

The Book of Ruth can be read as a form of counter-narrative to other narratives in the bible, like Ezra and Nehemiah for instance, by telling a story where ethnic and religious purity is perhaps not as critical as might have been claimed initially. In Jewish tradition it is read at Pentecost alongside the reading of the ground-shaking events of Sinai. This story thus preserves the importance of the ordinary lives of individuals alongside great world-making events and dares us to find ways of making personal what could otherwise be overwhelming.

The book challenges its readers on the issue of welcoming the stranger; on redrawing our stereotypes through encounter with those who are "other"; on finding the gaps where compassion can thrive in the midst of technical debates about law and tradition; on carrying losses that cannot really be grieved. It presents us with questions of how to protect the rights of vulnerable minorities, particularly those who are politically and socially marginal to the mainstream, and also the responsibility towards the poor of those who are financially and socially secure.

The story features those who are forced to migrate to another country because of poverty or famine and encourages communities to face the question of what constitutes national identity and belonging to the tribe.

## 2.3 Outreach and Resources

In 2017, Corrymeela — mostly through the work of Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan — developed eight resources that discussed questions to do with borders, border-guarding, border crossing, stereotypes between near neighbours, denial/provision of social welfare to border crossers, and citizenship based on the narrative of the Book of Ruth. These resources can be found at [www.corrymeela.org/ruth](http://www.corrymeela.org/ruth).

Over the course of the project, Corrymeela met with seventy groups. Most of these were on the island of Ireland, with attention given to both rural and urban settings. Groups in border counties were convened, as well as in Dublin, Cork and Belfast. A number of events were held in England, Scotland and Wales, with some of the resources being translated into Welsh for use there. Groups met either once, or numerous times. Attendance ranged from ten people to up to 500 people at a session offered at the Greenbelt Festival.

In addition to these groups across Britain and Ireland, in-depth sessions exploring the methodology, approach, narrative and findings were offered in the United States (to groups of about 500 people) and at international conferences (notably chaplaincy conferences in Dublin involving university chaplains from across the 27 member states of the European Union).

In early 2021, an eight-chapter book, complete with group discussion questions and group prayers, was published by Canterbury Press, under the title “Borders and Belonging. The Book of Ruth — A Story for Our Times”. This book, written by Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan, is a summary of the approach and insight and learnings from the project. All proceeds from this book go to Corrymeela.

## 2.4 Why Corrymeela?

There are many questions ahead for us in light of the political choices made in 2016 which may take a generation to wash through. And when we are done, these islands will be profoundly changed. In Corrymeela we’re committed to ensuring that the imaginative, creative and caring voices of people of faith are heard clearly in the debates to come. We

want to ensure that our voices are informed and shaped by our text as well as by the disorienting fog of expert political opinion.

Corrymeela was established in 1965 by thirty individuals, including the Rev. Ray Davey, a Presbyterian Minister, former POW in Dresden, and then Presbyterian chaplain at Queen's University Belfast. Since its beginning, Corrymeela has been interested in how diverse opinion about British-Irish jurisdiction, politics, religion and identity can be together in fruitful (rather than adversarial) tension and dialogue. Recognising the impact of religion and politics in Irish-British relationships, Corrymeela has concerned itself with public projects that enhance how relationships can be beneficial for community, public and political leadership. Corrymeela is pleased to have been a Strategic Partner of the DFA of the Dublin government and to be in receipt of core funding from the Community Relations Council in Belfast. Corrymeela's reach across faith and community groups around Ireland and Britain, offering resources that engage groups in public conversations about matters of identity, faith, nationality, history and community situates Corrymeela as an ideal organisation for engaging in the civic identity matters arising from the Brexit project.

It is Corrymeela's assertion that the Book of Ruth will not deliver answers, but rather will help form better questions for communities to ask. It will also empower faith communities to take an effective place in the public square where decisions are being made which affect the whole community.

In the course of encounter with many thousands of people during this project, we did not take a position in the Brexit debate either for or against. We assumed from the beginning that the UK will be leaving the EU and we were interested in stimulating dialogue around the kind of community and nations we want to be. But we acknowledge that as we engage diligently with the text of Ruth we were led into complex discussions and debates about the issues at the core of the national debate: about the exact nature of national identity and who belongs; about the rights of EU citizens in the UK and of UK citizens remaining in EU countries; about our commitments to human rights; about combating racism and xenophobia; about legislation to protect the environment and



the future of our rural areas; about migration and immigration; about inequality in wealth distribution.

More than four thousand people took part in conversations using this material. These encounters took place in cathedrals and churches, in halls and tents, in residential homes, food banks, and mountain retreats. Each group was self-selecting but no-one was ever asked to state their position on Brexit or the Irish border. The following are our reflections on what was said, and may not represent the views of any one group or individual who participated.

## **2.5 What is Public Theology?**

Public Theology is a new term for an old practice: the overlap of faith narratives and public issues. Public Theology is a practice whereby religious texts are held alongside contemporary issues and multiple voices are invited into a discussion.

Public Theology does not imagine that the population at large will, or even needs to, be interested in deeper religious adherence. Public Theology, rather, is a practice of faith communities engaging in secular (that is: engaged with the world in contemporary time and issues) concerns. Public Theology recognises that faith voices have been powerful in our histories — for good and for ill — and offers, in humility, confession and clarity, ways within which theological concerns can be for the benefit of all, not just those who are members of a particular faith community.

Public Theology does not wish to issue forensic analyses of the singular preferred outcome of the topic at hand. Rather, Public Theology establishes a tone whereby differing voices can find a practice of engaging, listening, changing, considering and collaborating together on the basis of a set of ethical criteria, namely the criteria of: the voice of the stranger; the consideration of impact on the most marginalised; the analysis of power, particularly as it relates to economic, racial, gendered or social greed; the consideration of politics in the light of truth; and the amplification of voices that disrupt hitherto accepted singular public narratives.

## 2.6 Conclusion

We offer this report, as we offered the initial discussion material, in all humility, and desperately keen to place this text right in the middle of the most difficult and profound issues in the public square. We remain committed to reading the bible in this way, and it is a source of genuine wonder to us that this ancient text can play such an active and stimulating role in informing and preparing us for this future.

The questions remains for us as to the shape of the society we aspire to post-Brexit. And above all, we continue to ask how we should now respond, as people and communities of faith, to the challenges before us.



# 3

## RELATIONSHIPS

### 3.1 British-Irish Relations post-Brexit

“Crossing Borders: Brexit and the Book of Ruth” has been primarily focused on amplifying faith voices on both sides of the border in Ireland on cross-border relations particularly in the light of Brexit, and on the possibility of chesed (lovingkindness) impacting questions to do with border-interested-laws, and face-to-face encounters, and deepening knowledge about how to navigate this current phase of British-Irish relations. This project has primarily focused on people living on the island of Ireland — both jurisdictions — but has notably gone beyond, with engagements in Scotland, England and Wales (including a Welsh translation of some of the resources), as well as the USA and Canada.

It is true to say that British-Irish relations concern all of the peoples living on the islands of Britain and Ireland, although it is also true to say that not everybody knows it. The partition of Ireland and the creation of the state of Northern Ireland in the early 1920s can sometimes lead civic imaginations to conclude that community relations in Northern Ireland are Northern Ireland related only, rather than a contemporary and ongoing manifestation of the last 400 years of British-Irish relations.

Post-Brexit, Channel 4 conducted and broadcast some vox-pop interviews that — while as selective and unrepresentative as most vox-pops can be — were nonetheless disturbing. People in a city in England were stopped and invited to indicate where they thought the border on the island of Ireland was. Most got it wrong, some notably so, drawing lines from Dublin to Galway. The lack of understanding in contemporary Britain regarding the British border in Ireland — its development and its instigation — is notable. The so-called Backstop consumed much time in initial negotiations, followed by the commitment to the EU in late 2019 that no fortification of the British border in Ireland would ensue. However in mid-2020 this was once again thrown into confusion as it emerged that the British government were planning on inserting a clause in their policy that would break international law in “specific and limited” ways. One of the many things this process reveals is that many people on the island of Britain are not overly familiar with British involvement in governance, jurisdiction

and sovereignty on the island of Ireland.

When conducting Brexit and the Book of Ruth conversations in Britain we began sessions by asking whether participants would benefit from a brief overview of British-Irish relations. Without fail, groups all responded enthusiastically to this invitation.

And this leads us to a problem: where to start?

### **3.2** British-Irish history

It is a problem that confounds peoples from all political sides of Irish-British history all the time. Does one start with partition? Does one start with the famine? Or the Act of Union? Or with William of Orange? With St. Patrick? Or Grainneuil travelling to meet Queen Elizabeth I to plead for the release of her sons? There is no such thing as an unbiased plain retelling of the past when it comes to British-Irish relations, as different histories will paint different actors in different lights. This, then, was a vital place to begin our Borders and Belonging sessions in England, Scotland and Wales: a generous, committed and courageous attempt was made to give an overview of Irish-British relations in a way that was not designed to deepen shame, but designed to inform people that what is facing us now is simply the latest version of figuring out how Irishness and Britishness can co-exist and collaborate, across the multiple jurisdictions of these islands.

Without fail gatherings of people (some as large as 500 at the Greenbelt Festival in England in August 2018) were grateful for a brief overview, and were surprised and informed to recognise that Brexit negotiations were occurring near the centenary of the partition of Ireland, a centenary that was — even without Brexit — going to require careful navigation in terms of community relations.

### **3.3** Voices of Reconciliation 2010-2020

In sharing some brief history of British-Irish relations with groups — particularly groups in Britain — we found it very helpful to accompany the brief overview of history with statements from trusted and reconciliatory focused Irish and

British voices. Of note were the statements exchanged at the occasion of the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Ireland. Noting the tone of reciprocity, acknowledgement, pain, relationship and hope in many such statements from civic leaders helped set the tone for what Brexit negotiations could sound like, albeit against the experience of whatever was emerging from Downing Street — or tabloids — that particular week.

“A Uachtaráin agus a chairde... it is... true that no one who looked to the future over the past centuries could have imagined the strength of the bonds that are now in place between the governments and the people of our two nations, the spirit of partnership that we now enjoy, and the lasting rapport between us...No one here this evening could doubt that heartfelt desire of our two nations.”  
*Civic address by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II at a State Dinner in Dublin Castle, May 18th, 2011*

“the momentous Good Friday Agreement of 1998. That achievement was founded on the cornerstones of equality, justice and democratic partnership, and was a key milestone on the road to today’s warm, deep and enduring Irish-British friendship.”  
*Address by President Michael D. Higgins to the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, London, 8th April 2014*

### **3.4 Significant changes introduced by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**

The Belfast Agreement — also known as the Good Friday Agreement — is a peace treaty signed by the Irish and British governments, establishing their commitment to peace in Northern Ireland and between Britain and Ireland, and signalling support for the perpetuation of the peace dividends. The Agreement established British-Irish bodies to support the peace and recognises that peace in the North depends also on peaceful and cordial relations between the British and Irish governments and jurisdictions as a whole.

Importantly, the Agreement enshrined into law significant emendations to both the Irish Constitution and British Acts of Parliament, notably that the future jurisdictional belonging of Northern Ireland will be for the people of Ireland to decide.

This point — particularly viewed through the lens of questions of sovereignty and language about the threat of the ‘break-up of the United Kingdom’ — was informative for audiences in England, Scotland and Wales to consider. Noting that both the Dublin and Westminster governments had conceded legal sovereignty already on the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland introduces a significant legal fact that few people — and, it must be said, few journalists or media outlets — seem to acknowledge.

Notable is the opening declaration of support — on behalf of the British and Irish Governments — to the Good Friday Agreement:

1. We, the participants in the multi-party negotiations, believe that the agreement we have negotiated offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning.
2. The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.
3. We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.
4. We reaffirm our total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues, and our opposition to any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose, whether in regard to this agreement or otherwise.
5. We acknowledge the substantial differences between our continuing, and equally legitimate, political aspirations. However, we will endeavour to strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement within the framework of democratic and agreed arrangements. We pledge that we will, in good faith, work to ensure the success of each and every one of the arrangements to be



established under this agreement. It is accepted that all of the institutional and constitutional arrangements - an Assembly in Northern Ireland, a North/South Ministerial Council, implementation bodies, a British-Irish Council and a British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and any amendments to British Acts of Parliament and the Constitution of Ireland - are interlocking and interdependent and that in particular the functioning of the Assembly and the North/South Council are so closely inter-related that the success of each depends on that of the other.

6. Accordingly, in a spirit of concord, we strongly commend this agreement to the people, North and South, for their approval.

The spirit of these statements — from Heads of State and from internationally binding Treaties — gives a point of view into the tone that is creative and constructive for relating British-Irish histories, negotiations, pains and promises. The Book of Ruth proposes that Law should be narrated through the lens of *chesed* (lovingkindness) and that if the Law cannot be read through this lens, then it is the imperative of the law to change. This is echoed in the Spirit of Concord of the Belfast Agreement.

### **3.5 Irish/Northern Irish/Ireland/Island of Ireland in media**

The last three years of Brexit negotiations have seen a sharp spike in the amount of times that “Irish” or “Northern Ireland” or “Ireland” is referred to in the British media. Given the extraordinary ground gained by Treaty and by gesture by Heads of State, it is notable that the media attention since the Brexit Referendum has done little to deliberately honour what were ground-breaking achievements in alleviating centuries of British-Irish tensions. This *Borders and Belonging* project has sought — in a spirit of both concord and *chesed* — to address this with robust engagements, honest disagreements and a public commitment to serious conversation about British-Irish relations, their past and present and future possibilities.

Such a firm insistence that a clear, persistent and public voice of concord (or, in the Ruth lexicon, *chesed*) is amplified in ongoing British-Irish relations in light of the Brexit vote is not a saccharine suggestion to mollify the supposedly delicate



middle classes. It is a robust, strong, muscular insistence that escalating tensions will escalate until they explode, and that — at all times — a declaration of the peace that was hard sought, hard fought-for, and hard won must be voiced, especially by people in positions of power.

### 3.6 One recommendation

It is essential that people across Ireland and Britain are provided with increased opportunities to become familiar with key moments in British-Irish history (including the various policy, treaty and leadership attempts to address tensions, and with the commitments of the British and Irish governments in the Good Friday Agreement).



# 4

## GRASSROOTS NARRATIVES

### 4.1 Grassroots narratives on the island of Ireland post-Brexit 2016

It is of vital civic importance that grassroots narratives about British-Irish relations, Brexit and the border in Ireland, and cross-border life are amplified in the public discussions about what Brexit is, or should be. While not wishing to downplay the complexity of negotiating treaties and shaping new laws which will apply across a whole continent of people, Corrymeela is committed to ensuring that political negotiations are tempered with how arrangements affect the lives of people.

### 4.2 Ruth: a grassroots narrative of political importance

The story of Ruth lures us into a narrative in which marginal people like Ruth and Naomi provide examples for us of how difficult it is to make people live up to their legal responsibilities. The narrative also illustrates that the resolution of problems and divisions through the law is a laborious process and that frequently people with minimal access to power sometimes have to go beyond the confines of normal, even legal, activity in order to get justice, and that this process often requires considerable risk.

The story opens with a family which is forced to flee across national borders because of famine and which experiences great loss, despite finding a welcome in a new place. As the narrative unfolds the reader is exposed to the challenge of surviving in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar customs and traditions. The social protections afforded by the host country need to be navigated and deciphered and whilst they provide temporary release from poverty, legal and structural change is required to permanently answer the pressing needs of those who are marginalised. This is achieved by the end of the story, but not without danger, risk and then public support for change. Ultimately a community which opens itself to the outsider is a community which can renew itself, honour its history and secure a future for its citizens.

### 4.3 The importance of narrative for law

Lawmakers may wish it were otherwise, but narrative unveils for us the disorderly and unpredictable dimensions of life which are the common experience of countless millions of the

citizens of Europe and of those who have come among us from other places. Laws and treaties will always struggle to contain and reflect the emotional and moral dimensions of the lived experience of people, and cannot organise the complexity of life into secure and predictable patterns and remedies.

Narrative permits a more nuanced and complex pattern of justice to emerge which bridges the gap between what is required or preferred by treaty and statute and what is, ultimately, just. Sometimes there are better remedies for the things that divide us than the application of law, necessary though it may be.

It is futile to attempt to fit the scope of a person's life into legal categories because the drama of a life story will always spill over the containers into which we try to fit it. Thus, whilst treaties and law can and should provide a framework within which relationships can flourish, they cannot guarantee the compassionate and generous shared lives which are essential for human society to thrive.

Nor can this be achieved simply by the achievement of some form of national self-determination or sovereignty. Our world is too complex and too interdependent for that.

#### **4.4 The pathway to inclusion of grassroots narratives**

In Corrymeela's conversations — involving at least 5000 people in a variety of settings and from a variety of national identities — we detected a distinct yearning for a society that was just and fair, whose laws reflect the lived experience of people but recognised also the mutuality at the heart of healthy community.

It seems key to us therefore that there is a need for reform within the EU, to reduce the distance between the peoples of Europe and the perceived bureaucracy of the institutions. Such change would serve to renew a sense of participation in the operation of the EU and perhaps also help in countering the rise of a destructive form of populism.

The numbers participating in this project demonstrate a real appetite to engage constructively and deliberately in the

complex task of shaping the nature of the relationships across Europe. It is also clear that the Brexit vote demonstrated a clear disaffection with politics and with how the EU conducts its business—the No vote was not solely due to alleged racism among a class of people who were misled.

#### 4.5 Three recommendations

1. A process of repair, renewal and reconfiguration is required both in the United Kingdom and in the EU to restore relationships, humanise our institutions and turn politics back to the citizens. Doing this will require new ways of hearing the concerns and the stories of the people who make up our constituent states.
2. The effective use of citizens' assemblies and constitutional conventions in the Republic of Ireland shows the benefit of such arrangements, which could be organised on a national and supranational basis across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They could also create space to introduce personal narratives into the formation of policy and law particularly at a time when the perception exists that the professionalisation of politics has removed political representatives from the day-to-day experience of the electorate.
3. It is critical that all parties to the negotiations, the media and societies in general should deliberately include personal narratives in public communications about the emerging status of EU/UK relationships. When prioritised in discussions, personal narratives help ensure that those on both sides of the island of Ireland know that their experiences of the Brexit negotiation period will be reflected. Theory about what the border could be must be tempered by the truth of what the Brexit project has actually been like. Personal narratives expose the power structures at work by revealing winners and losers in politics. This is critical if politics is to be seen to work for people and not for the pre-existing power structures.



# 5

## COMPASSION AS THE INTENT OF THE LAW

### 5.1 The political importance of kindness

There are big questions in the Book of Ruth about the basis upon which one can belong to a people group, but also about the social responsibility that attaches itself to national belonging. A British or Irish passport affords one certain rights which are complex but clearly outlined and honoured, for the most part, across national borders. What is less clear, and not often talked about, are the responsibilities that come with national belonging.

### 5.2 Personal experience contributing to cultural and political norms

These responsibilities are shaped as much by history and culture as by statute and regulation. The Irish tradition of hospitality, for instance, is influenced by such things as the national experience of hunger and poverty and by the geography and topography of the land. These forms of responsibility are imbibed from our upbringing and passed on as an inheritance across generations. Understanding and practicing these dimensions of belonging have historically been critical to national identity, but what is not so transparent is how and whether these rights and responsibilities are communicable across ethnic lines to those who were not born here.

### 5.3 Kindness and law in the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth uncovers for us the startling possibility that belonging can come not simply by blood but also through character; indeed, it suggests that belonging by behaviour may even, in certain circumstances, trump belonging by blood. It opens for us the consideration that belonging can be a chosen thing and not just conferred on us by location or blood heritage.

Ruth becomes legally part of the community of Bethlehem on the basis of her demonstrable compassion, kindness and good character towards a vulnerable citizen of that town who had fallen on hard times. What is also true in the story is that the wealth, privilege and belonging of Boaz, the key male character in the story, automatically means he has

responsibility for both his distant family member Naomi and the foreigner Ruth.

The dramatic tension of the story rests in the question of which vision of society will prevail, for there is a kindness that is conferred naturally upon kin, and a more complicated and difficult kindness that is extended to the stranger and the foreigner. The latter is a more costly kindness.

#### **5.4 Kindness and law in a Brexit era**

Our conversations throughout these islands confirmed for us what we had anticipated: that austerity and economic uncertainty have reduced our store of compassion and hollowed out traditional kindnesses, particularly to those who are not born here. It may very well be that the dimension of the pro-Brexit vote that was characterised as anti-immigration is fused with a great degree of economic and social marginalisation.

In Northern Ireland it is apparent that the social contract between communities which was given form in the Good Friday Agreement has been broken in the Brexit vote, and that this will take some time to heal. In the meantime, it is not clear how and with whom new alliances can be built, such has been the fracturing caused by the referendum. This has served to unsettle Unionists as to the health of the Union and to cause Nationalists to lobby both governments on the issue of a border poll. Kindness and compassion for the uncertainties in the “other” community are in short supply as is patience with the British government in sorting the Brexit issue. It should also be noted that some are suspicious of the motives of the Irish government.

This process can begin with the moderation of language used about the “other”, whether that is those on the other side of our national question or on the question of Brexit. It takes courage to believe that compassion and kindness in our relationships towards one another can have a powerful, positive political impact.



## 5.5 Law is for mutual benefit

In our various jurisdictions, law is formed for the benefit of those who claim citizenship, but the significant increase in migration in recent years has placed strain upon all wealthy countries both economically and culturally, but also on the structures and institutions of the state. The lesson from Ruth is that the intent of the law matters more than its application and where the application of a law of the land results in an unintended unkindness this is a bad law which must be changed.

This is not necessarily a call for fully open borders, but it is, at least, a plea to ensure that the way we treat those and speak of those who come across our borders is honest, transparent, compassionate and kind. There is particular responsibility on the shoulders of those who have access to public platforms not to demonise or dehumanise others. In this way, we can at least raise the tone of the national debate and possibly even find a better way of being ourselves at a local, national and international level.

The public conversation about law since the 2016 Brexit referendum has demonstrated a worrying narrative about what law is. Often, law has been seen as the permission granter for justifying hate. This is a misreading of law. The law when it comes to Brexit, Britishness, Irishness and EU membership should be about ensuring mutual safety and co-operation rather than privilege at the expense of others: citizens and newcomers alike.

## 5.6 British-Irish global migration from 1700

It is easy, but mistaken, to only tell the story of British-Irish relations through the story of white Europeans crossing back and forth across the Irish sea. In order to wisely posit the story of British-Irish relations for this era, a reckoning with the past must ensue. We particularly recommend greater knowledge about:

- The British Empire and its impact on global governance, language and borders
- An Gorta Mór — the Great Famine of 1845-1847 — and its impact on rural life in Ireland
- Irish migration in the 1800s
- Irish participation in the global British Empire
- The fall of Empire - a study of the 20th century
- Migration to Britain from former colonies
- Migration to Ireland

Marking such realities necessitates that while Ireland and Britain have often been perceived at loggerheads in mutual political relations, they nonetheless found an agreeable collaboration in overseas imperial projects for the past centuries, with people of both Irish and British identity propping up systems of enslavement, indigenous dispossession and racism.

## 5.7 Two recommendations

1. Regardless of the outcome of Brexit there is a generational project for the healing of the wounds of this political, social and cultural upheaval. It will not be served well by a restatement of “British values” nor by hasty calls for Irish unity. Nevertheless, a programme for national and community dialogue and reconciliation is required that extends beyond a simple resolution of the argument about Europe or the border on the island of Ireland. It must restore faith in politics, address issues of social and economic inequality, and heal the divisions that have bedevilled this island.

2. We must also turn ourselves more diligently and honestly to the issue of the migrant among us. Few Irish families have not migrated somewhere in Great Britain. Few British families have not had crossovers from internal British borders, if not further afield. The colonial project has meant that for centuries, British families went throughout the world. Poverty and opportunity meant that millions of Irish individuals travelled far. That the Brexit project has been largely led by white politicians demonstrates that an underlying need in public conversation is a recognition of multi-racial dynamics in the questions of identity and belonging in Irishness, Englishness, Scottishness, Welshness and Britishness.

# 6

## CHANGING POLICY AND ATTITUDE

### 6.1 The possibility of change

Through the years of long and complicated histories between these islands we have inflicted immeasurable harm on one another. And wherever we choose to begin the telling of our troubled relationship there is no escaping the bad choices, the cruel violence and the lasting damage we have done. Our near-neighbour status serves as a constant reminder of that complicated story which is only exacerbated by political upheaval such as that caused by Brexit.

It is tempting to believe that long-established and deeply rooted hostility can never be excised from communal memory or from international and interpersonal relations. But stories have ways of reaching places that forensic history or detailed journalistic analysis consistently fail to penetrate.

### 6.2 Change in the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth roots us early on in the story of neighbouring countries with a lengthy and troubled history. This story begins with famine and a family forced to leave ancestral land in search of the kind of security that might ease their plight. In doing so they flee across a border to the land of their traditional enemy.

That this flight happens because of famine is surely significant given the long history between these neighbours. In the ancestral memory their new host country had, generations earlier, denied hospitality to their forebears during a particularly hungry time.

Here in Ireland we have our own troubled history with hunger and a neighbour who looked on while people starved or emigrated. The memory of famine lingers and still impacts relationships with our powerful neighbour to the east. Careful listeners can even hear that memory in the language.

An additional detail in the opening paragraphs of the narrative points to another negative stereotype between these neighbours. In telling us that the sons of this migrant family marry women from the host country the narrator is subtly hinting at another dark part of their history. The tradition holds

that women from Moab led their young men astray which in turn brought the judgment of God upon the people.

Thus the opening paragraphs of the story of Ruth set up the original hearer or reader to expect their neighbours to fulfil the negative stereotypes which had been forged in the heat of close proximity. There is no help in hungry times to be found among these people. And their women are not to be trusted.

The antipathy and spite towards their neighbouring country was so deep that forgiveness was deemed impossible.

In the Book of Ruth however, contrary to expectations, this particular family finds a welcome in this new time among their neighbours. Not only that but the women their sons marry prove to be loyal and faithful even after the tragedy of the early deaths of the sons.

The unfolding of the story of Ruth dares us to imagine that stereotypes can be confounded and new histories written. Relationships can be healed and peoples can break out of the bonds in which they have been restrained by history.

Laws, treaties and political negotiations help set the context for this kind of change, but they cannot make it happen. Change of this sort cannot be compelled for it is ultimately a form of conversion and happens through real encounter. Ruth, who throughout the story is referred to as “the Moabite” (her ethnic identity), ultimately transcends that identity and is accepted as kin when people are challenged and enabled to look beyond and behind a historical and inherited identity to the reality of the human being who presents as an embodied presence.

### **6.3** Change in policy and attitude among our participants

Throughout the conversations that took place in church halls and tents, cathedrals and food banks, residential homes and universities, participants were urged to examine the language we use to describe those we consider “the other”. We looked together at the origins of this language and its persistence through time. We also wondered together whether it was possible to move beyond the negative stereotypes we ascribe

to one another. In these fraught times of ever-narrowing circles of belonging it is easy to respond to difference with words and actions motivated by fear and anger. These serve both to strengthen the bonds which hold “us” together but they also push “them” further away.

This story calls us to a new generosity of engagement with those previously considered the other. It also challenges us on the language we use about one another and alerts us to the fact that language that demonises makes reconciliation harder.

The story also dismantles the myth which asserts that national self-understanding requires an enemy. Ruth and her son are not just enfolded into the community of Bethlehem but the new relationship between Ruth and Boaz, and the son which resulted from their union, becomes part of the history and bloodline of the nation. The narrative records that their son becomes an ancestor of their greatest king.

The centrifugal forces of conflict over borders and belonging pushes participants to the edges of human relationships. Language becomes taut and strained and often hurtful. This project has served to remind us all that the hurtful language which we have used to describe one another is language we will one day have to walk back from if the work of reconciliation is to be characteristic of us as peoples.

#### **6.4** The choice to narrate history through the lens of co-operation

Actions marked by radical hospitality, and words flavoured by kindness reduce the distance between us. They also create the circumstances in which new forms of relationship and belonging on the far side of hostility can be imagined.

By encouraging us towards risk taking for the sake of relationship, to moderating our language during times of tension and disagreement, this story and these discussions have modelled good practice for us. In one setting in the Republic of Ireland participants in the discussions took on the responsibility to learn more about Unionism in Northern Ireland and about the political position of the Democratic Unionist Party, but also to pray for those with whom they

disagree profoundly on the issue of the border on the island and on relationships with the EU.

A profound — and often ignored — contribution towards the choice to narrate past pains through the lens of contemporary co-operation is Report of The Constitutional Group on the Past. While this report was ultimately shelved based on its recommendations of payment, it nonetheless contains the template for how to engage actively with:

- The Legacy of the Past and Reconciliation
- Victims and Survivors
- Legacy
- Societal Issues
- Processes of Justice and Information Recovery
- Remembering

While the recommendations of the report probably have some elements of them that are time-bound (it was published in 2010), the process, and lens of leadership provided through it are timeless when it comes to exploring politics, division, pain and mutual benefit through a cooperative, fruitful and restorative lens.

## 6.5 Four recommendations

1. We urge actors in this drama of division to improve and focus their language towards one another in recognition of the fact that language drawn from the extremes forces us to the extremes. We recognise that the habits of contemporary politics and the historical estrangements between communities on the island of Ireland mean that intemperate language is sometimes used instinctively and without thinking.

2. We suggest that the circumstances occasioned by Brexit — and the heightened tensions that accompany it — call for language and actions of generosity and kindness. Such things may be considered to have limited currency in political and cultural debate, we are convinced however that they retain considerable potency in the context of public debate.

3. We recommend public awareness about the most basic geographic, political and historical factors of British-Irish

relations, paying particular attention to how misinformation or stereotypes, sometimes historically rooted, continue to shape present behaviours.

4. We urge a renewed attention towards many of the findings and recommendations of the Report of the Constitutional Group on the Past. This work has been done, painstakingly, and while some of the recommendations and findings are considered unacceptable, many elements of this document are of vital relevance to British-Irish relations.





# 7

## LEADERSHIP AND THE FUTURE

### 7.1 The future in the present of Brexit

It is easy to indulge in the fantasy of the future. One of the fantasies that is often broadcast is the fantasy of how future history books will record the present. Inconclusive as this indulgence is — for how would we ever know what the future will say about today? — it is nonetheless an interesting exercise, not about future decades, but about the current one.

### 7.2 The imagination of the future of leadership

One imagination of the future is how the future will record the names of prominent voices of political leadership in the Brexit discussions. Future students will have to memorise the names, political tendencies and lengths of tenure of various political leaders serving in office in Westminster, Stormont, Dublin and Brussels.

To serve in political leadership is a demanding role, and one that inevitably will result in the practice of the art of compromise, the achievement of some policies and complication regarding others.

### 7.3 Ruth: an unexpected leader

The Book of Ruth offers insight into the question of leadership, but not political leadership, rather leadership that comes from embodiment, courageous action and commitment to change. Ruth's commitment to not be limited by nationally prescribed protocol is demonstrated in the first verses of the book: she marries a foreigner. And when that foreigner dies, during a time of famine, she accompanies his mother back across the border, becoming a displaced widow in foreign territory, wondering whether social welfare provisions — the gleanings at the corners of fields — will be available to her. The Book of Ruth highlights that she — in her embodiment — is a challenge to tensions between Israelites and Moabites. Both at home and in a foreign country, she was challenging stereotypes that were reductive of the imaginative possibility of relations between neighbouring territories.

#### 7.4 Ruth: a leader emerging in troubled times

There is a significant question about the timing and authorship of the Book of Ruth. One suggestion is that it was written during the time of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a senior civil servant in the city of Jerusalem during a time when that city was re-establishing itself after the ravages of the Babylonian occupation and exile. Nehemiah's words — included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible — are chilling. In re-establishing a city, he instructs those citizens of the city who've made it back from exile:

Neh. 13 <sup>23</sup> In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; <sup>24</sup> and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. <sup>25</sup> And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. <sup>26</sup> Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. <sup>27</sup> Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"

Nehemiah's instruction was that people who had married foreigners should divorce such foreigners as the ravaged city was re-established. His leadership was demonstrated in the establishment of boundaries, of clear delineations as to who was (and wasn't) acceptable as a citizen, to the point of breaking up families.

Into this political and impoverished climate comes the Book of Ruth. One theory is that an author chose to write this text as a fictional challenge to the political actions of the day. If this is the case, then we see the value of the arts in challenging political, civic, religious and interpersonal impoverishment. Of course others see that the book is an accurate account of an individual — or composite — historical character. The text doesn't tell us whether the text is a description of a

person in living memory or a fable. Either way, its inclusion in the Hebrew canon is extraordinary. The Law concerning inheritance, concerning provision for foreigners, concerning provision for Moabite foreigners, and concerning legacy and inclusion in the community — is changed by the action of a brave woman who advocated for her own self and for her mother-in-law.

## **7.5** The Book of Ruth: a model for collaborative leadership

Other characters in the book, too, could be analysed for their valour — or lack thereof. Naomi emerges as a strategist, Boaz emerges as a person willing to challenge the norms of his own community and exploit the implications of an impoverished imagination. The unnamed character who was a closer relative of Ruth's deceased husband (translated variously as "next of kin" or "So-and-So") had anxiety about the future: "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it." In imagining his future inheritance — and in particular, imagining that marrying a foreigner would damage his inheritance — he is denying the enacted and embodied virtue in the person who is right in front of him.

The Book of Ruth issues a clear call to pierce fantasied imaginations of a fearful future with concise, embodied and clear examples in the present moment of neighbourliness, virtue, courage and conviction that come from unexpected corners. In the face of solidifying imaginative borders because of fear about the other, the Book of Ruth calls for leadership — political, local, artistic and religious that looks at the here-and-now, and honours the building of community, the crossing of borders and the kind of law that deepens a community's capacity to embrace, rather than exclude.

## **7.6** Two recommendations:

1. Amplification of voices — at political, local, artistic and religious levels — who are demonstrating leadership, courage and capacity to change, and inclusion. Notably, these voices may have voted in different ways regarding Brexit, but they are proposing something demanding and creative regarding British, Irish and EU relations on these islands. We do

not recommend seeking limpid “balance” but rather the amplification of voices — from people born on these islands and people who’ve moved to these islands — that transcend questions of how one voted, and instead locate us in moments of challenge and courage.

2. One of the fantasies of the future is that in 100 years, people will be learning all about Brexit. However, it may be that Brexit is a mere footnote in future history books, as people will be coping with catastrophic levels of climate change. We recommend that the governments of Ireland and Britain pivot some policy directions about Brexit into the light of climate change, with the hope of preventing more damage, and galvanising action for the good of all life on these islands and beyond.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

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*A report from The Corrymeela Community*