

OPEN

60 Years of Corrymeela

60 years ago, at our dedication service, Billy McAllister stood up and ‘on behalf of the Corrymeela Centre’ asked Tulio Vinay ‘to declare Corrymeela open.’ And so Tulio Vinay, leader of the Agapé Community, responded: ‘It gives me great pleasure to declare Corrymeela open.’ (I thought about doing that in an Italian accent. Then I thought better of it.)

What they meant primarily, of course, was that this *place* would be open to all people of good will. Ray Davey responded to Tulio Vinay’s words by saying ‘We hope Corrymeela will be known as the Open Village.’ Again: Corrymeela as a *place* open to all sorts of people. But even then, the name of the place and the name of the people were becoming interchanged. Tulio Vinay prayed that this centre would become a place for peaching the New World, a place of encounter, a question mark to the churches. But then he added that he wished ‘more than all, that *you* - being together - have open eyes and ears to understand when the Lord is passing nearby, to be ready to follow the way He shall indicate to you.’ It wasn’t the centre being opened that day. It was the community, being opened to where God would lead us.

In some ways, those gathered that day were already fairly open. The founders of Corrymeela were people who found themselves in the mid-1960s with enough courage to follow Jesus down a strange path that led them not only to this strange place but to the strange work of reconciliation. They were already open to a new way of being Christian in Northern Ireland. Now, I don’t want to give those from that founding generation too much credit. Real courage requires genuine fear and then the determination to proceed when you know how bad it’s going to get. I don’t think anyone in 1965 really understood how bad the next 30 years would be, or how involved Corrymeela would get in the raw reality of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Instead, back in 1965 there was a sense that the world was riding a wave of real change – that the ‘arc of the universe’ was quickly bending towards justice – and that (by gum) being part of Corrymeela would mean being sent forth into something happy and glorious.

That turned out not always to be the case. But there was still courage at work, worth celebrating. It takes courage to let go of what you know and to be open to something new. The people who became Corrymeela had the courage to follow Jesus down a path that would take them away from their fathers’ secure church and their mothers’ cozy concept of Christianity. They gave up much of what they knew, what they were told to hold on to, to follow Jesus on a journey that couldn’t help but change them.

As we mark 60 years since the dedication of this centre, as we hear familiar words and sing familiar songs, we have a chance to reflect on just how far we’ve come since our founding – and perhaps how far we’ve gone astray from our original intent. After all, the founders in 1965 weren’t sure about having Catholic members in their Christian community – let alone Jewish and Muslim and agnostic members as we do now. The founders probably didn’t expect us to have openly gay members, or for our organisation to have become so professionalised in our peace-making work, to have over 30 paid staff along with 15 or so residential volunteers from all over the world. Would we have guessed that we would have served as a refugee camp for 250 children during the summer of internment or that we would have hosted Mother Theresa during the summer of the hunger strikes, or that we would have held a conference on who gets to call themselves victim in the early post-Agreement period – or that we would extend our work of reconciling differences beyond the orange/green sectarian binary to address racial and theological and political and ecological and cultural polarisation? Of course not. We had courage and faith. We did not crystal balls. And if we had known what was coming, if we could have counted the cost before setting off, I’m not sure we would have gone.

Yet looking back at the speech Tulio Vinay gave at that dedication service, I can see a clear throughline to where we are now from where we started. Where we are as Corrymeela in 2025 makes a lot of sense given where we decided to head sixty years ago.

Tulio Vinay said his wish was that the centre would be ‘First: a place of preaching the New World as we see it in the person of Jesus Christ.’ He said: the world needs to *see* this message at work in the real world. We weren’t going to just *talk* about the Gospel; we were going to live it out with others, to

make a real difference in the real world. And then he prayed that Corrymeela would become ‘a place of encounter and dialogue with all men; believers and unbelievers.’ Because, he argued, ‘believers need the presence of the unbelievers. They represent a criticism of our way of life.’ We need to be challenged by unbelievers if we are to present something that actually *is* good news.

And so, it has never only been about changing the world at Corrymeela; it has also been about being changed by God through encounters with the world. That’s what I hear in the words and music of the poetry and songs we are sharing today: not a message we declare to the world, but the log from a journey going deeper into a strange world. These pieces express the experience of people whose surprising encounters have opened them up to new insights, to hidden truths, to better understanding, to a more genuine desire for community. Each one written at a time when someone was opened up a little further, at a moment when God was ‘clearing us out’ as Rumi would say, ‘for some new delight.’

Personally, I don’t know how we follow Jesus if we’re not willing to leave our comfy and secure positions and be open (exposed) to something new. To be in real relationships with people who are very different to us means that we will be changed by those relationships. Corrymeela changed in its understanding of Christianity by welcoming Catholics into its membership. Corrymeela changed in its understanding of victims and perpetrators by learning why perpetrators saw themselves as victims. Corrymeela learned about its own hypocrisy by being called out by those who could see what we could not: how complicit we are in what is broken. Corrymeela changed by welcoming those we called ‘other’ and learning that we are not all that different.

Christian evangelism—which is of course motivated by love and concern for others – too often comes across as judgement. I have something *you* need to hear – *you* need to be more like me! The message of God’s love to the world often seems to sound like: you can be safe, God will love you, if you do this, if you become what I think you should be. But Jesus has freed us from that trap and opens us up to something new. With faith, we start with the assumption that everyone we meet is already a child of God, already loved as we are, not really in need of what we can offer. And then our attitude can be: I can learn more about the world and God and myself by being open to your experience, your fears, your hopes, your loves. You have something *I* need to hear. *We* need to be more like Christ. That requires courage. And demands change.

It strikes me that all the buildings that were present on this site in 1965 or even 1995 are long gone. The main house, the villages, whatever shanties you used as loos...they’ve all disappeared. The centre we dedicated 60 years ago is no more. In its place are very different structures – yet dedicated to the same purpose: a place to preach the New World not in words but in a shared life; a place of encounter for believer and nonbeliever, a question mark to the churches, asking: where is the living God really leading us today? Surely not further into ourselves, waiting for others to come to their senses and join us – but out into the world, to places we don’t already know and cannot control and to people who may let us join them.

We should be disappointed if the Corrymeela of 2025 closely resembles the Corrymeela of 1965. That would mean we didn’t show enough faith. That would mean we didn’t learn anything from our encounters or hadn’t been reformed by our relationships. It would mean we didn’t maintain the courage to follow Jesus to the unexpected places and people he was taking us to meet.

Indeed: if you have come here today struck by how different this place is: thank God.

And if you have come here today concerned about the state of the world in 2025, and the state of the Church, and our ability to meet the challenges of this age without shutting down and drawing back into comfy positions, known certainties and safe spaces, I want to repeat the words Tulio Vinay was invited to say 60 years ago: ‘It gives me great pleasure to declare Corrymeela open.’

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Leader of the Corrymeela Community
30 Oct 2025