

# WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

## THE CORRYMEELA STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT AS A RESOURCE FOR FAITH AND LIFE

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THINK PEACE 1

This invitational text has three purposes:

To ground the readers in the challenges and implications of the theme;

To support members, staff, and the wider public in thinking about and developing some relevant reconciliation practice;

To bring us more into the present time and face into future challenges.

The text is offered as an aide to reflection and emerges out of the work of a Programme Development Group of members considering the bases of the reconciliation practice of Corrymeela in 2013.

## **The Statement of Commitment as a Resource for Faith and Life**

Who are we, and where do we stand on reconciliation in the 21st century?

We do not start with a blank sheet of paper to answer these questions. The Corrymeela Statement of Commitment provides some powerful road signs, to tell the way, to motivate action, to lead on to deeper understandings, and to generate new meanings for us.

For members before we begin, an invitation: please read this reflection with your Member's Booklet <sup>1</sup> in hand and please send me your thoughts on the questions below or any other association with the Statement of Commitment.

From this dialogue, I would like us to build more worship resource for use in the Croi with all sorts of groups that can help share Corrymeela with new people and deepen the commitment of those who are already involved.<sup>2</sup>

What is the Statement of Commitment (hereafter the Commitment)?

**See the back cover of this leaflet for the text.**

According to the Member's Booklet, it says something<sup>3</sup>;

- about the things we regards as important;
- our identity, our 'centre.'

That is to say, it is about our values, our vision, and our identity.

I invite your reflection on three questions that the Commitment can help answer.

*First, who do we think we are?*

*Second, who do we think God is?*

*Third, what do we think the work of reconciliation is?*

For Corrymeela, the answer to each question depends on the answers to the others.

## First - Who do we think we are?

One way of 'doing theology' is to try to discover truths about texts by breaking down how they are structured. When I examined the Commitment in this way, I discovered something I had not noticed before. It divides into 3 sections:

- 1) self,
- 2) society,
- 3) community.

First it reminds me I am committed to the **renewal of self** as I affirm, celebrate, confess, believe and surrender myself to the spirit of Jesus to overcome divisions and make myself an instrument of his peace. I have often said that I am a member of Corrymeela because it reminds me that I am part of the brokenness of society. As David Stevens wrote, I am not 'outside the conflicts of our society and (I am not) better than other people.'<sup>4</sup> Corrymeela members often say this in a different way, as Alistair Kilgore sometimes puts it: 'Reconciliation starts with me.'

Second, it reminds me that I am committed to the **renewal of society** as I commit myself to work for a society marked by justice, mutual respect and other values. At first these words are non-controversial; almost banal. Who could disagree with 'concern for the vulnerable and the stranger, stewardship of resources and care for creation?' But as I write, I hear the sounds of helicopters policing public disorder in the streets, in a society marked still by hatred and violence, and where de facto spending priorities haemorrhage money into (for example) policing public disorder and paying compensation to injured police officers, sometimes for months and years, rather than address problems through civil and democratic channels. I have just watched a Facebook video showing Pacific island birds killed by ocean rubbish, 2000 miles from the nearest continent. The news tells me of children driven to suicide by cyber-bullying.

The society in which we are living seems to be marked by values very much the opposite of the society for which we say we work. Our work for a new society is not only about reducing and eventually eliminating violence, it is also about building something new instead.

The third section of the Commitment reminds me that I am committed to the **renewal of this community** as I commit myself to acts that strengthen the Corrymeela Community, and express my wish to walk 'the way of the Gospel together.'

*Question:*

*I have suggested what this three part structure says to me about who we are.*

*What does the three part structure say to you?*

*What does it say about you?*

## **Second - Who do we think God is?**

I propose that, in addition to saying something about who we think we are, the Commitment says something about who we think God is.

I think this is because who we think we are in terms of our work of reconciliation will always be in relation to who we think God is. This is true, if you think about it, whether you believe in God or not. In the main we work within an inherited tradition from leaders like Ray Davey that Christian witness, without reconciliation, does not even exist.<sup>5</sup>

The three sections of the Commitment echo the three actions of God we try to explain in the language of the Trinity. 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost' used to be helpful wording, but over the last fifty years the patriarchal distractions (for some) of these words have been addressed by using gender-neutral language like Redeemer, Creator and Sustainer. In any case we see clues as to who we believe God is, in the Commitment.

For example:

We see signs of the one we might call 'redeemer' in the first section as we affirm that we ourselves are broken, and we are part of the brokenness of society, but Jesus calls us to a life of radical new possibilities.

In the second section of the statement we see glimpses of God as 'creator,' at the beginning, middle and end of history. Because, in fact, we cannot criticise society as it is, without working on some assumptions of what we believe society was meant to be. The society to which we are committed is a society characterised by justice, concern for the vulnerable and stranger, and so forth; all values we find in what the Biblical witness calls the Kingdom of God (or reign of God, if you prefer).

In the third section of the Commitment, we ask for God's help as our 'sustainer,' and acknowledge that we can only walk together in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is stronger than saying that we cannot get where we are going without God's help. It asserts that we cannot move at all, unless the Spirit empowers us, for the walk we share.

***Question: Do you agree that what you believe about reconciliation is intertwined closely with the kind of God you believe in?***

You might not find Trinitarian language helpful. You may say that you do not believe in that kind of God. There are so many different ways to express faith. Okay, so do not tell me the God you do not believe in; tell me, perhaps, whether and/or how the Commitment points to the faith that you do believe in.

***Question: Who or what do you believe is implicit in the Commitment that you can affirm about who God is?***

As we commit ourselves to seek a 'deeper understanding of our faith,' here is the most important question of all. These statements all answer questions about who we think we are in this work of reconciliation, and who we think God is, and make a connection between them. I would like to propose they really point to answers, which themselves point, in fact, to an even deeper question. You may disagree with any or all of the above, but I would propose that every member of Corrymeela needs to have an answer to the question about where we find hope.

***Question: In a broken world, what is the source of your hope?***

### **Third - What do we think the work of reconciliation is?**

#### *Speech and Action*

The Statement of Commitment is not just words. David Stevens, in his commentary in the Member's Booklet calls it a 'speech-act.'<sup>6</sup> It is both a statement and a commitment. Some other examples of 'speech-acts' come to mind:<sup>7</sup>

*I promise (is the act of making the promise as you say it).*

*You are welcome (is part of the act of making people welcome as you say it).*

Or sometimes you have corporate 'speech-acts':

*'We are one body...'* (an affirmation of unity that also helps create it).

In all of these examples, what you say does not cover the entirety of the meaning; it is united with an act. There is more to this apparently simple idea than appears at first glance. To say the Commitment is a 'speech-act' conveys important truths about who we think we are, who we think God is, and what that means about the work of reconciliation. I invite you to notice three things about this feature of our commitment.

**First:** notice that the words of the Commitment without action are meaningless; the words and actions reinforce each other. There is no hierarchy between action and speech; they are closely linked.

Notice an important implication here. What we say we are, or what we say reconciliation is, or what we say God is, is only half of the story. The other half is what we do.

This commitment to action might explain why the Statement of Commitment is less important to some members than others. It also explains a crucial part of the dynamic of reconciliation; it is about engagement and doing things, not just believing and saying things.

**Second:** to say that this is a speech-act captures the dynamic relationship between the two. The 'doing' informs the believing, and the believing informs the doing. This active engagement also expresses who we think we are (eg. we are people who make cups of tea for people, and listen to their stories), what we think reconciliation is (e.g. from inter-actions of hospitality, encounter and difficult conversations), and who we think God is (e.g. walking all the way with us).

**Third:** while they reinforce each other, there is also dynamic tension built in between the speech and the act, a tension that can be productive and positive but may not be comfortable.

We live with this dynamic tension in a number of ways, as some members suggested in a recent reflection together.<sup>8</sup> For example: there is a tension between the movement and stillness to which we aspire (eg. 'Creator be with me as I enter the stillness where you wait for me'<sup>9</sup>); between striving and resting; between hard and soft boundaries of identity; and being both clear about who we are and being welcoming of difference.

We could continue. What is important to note here is that a dynamic tension is at the heart of who we think we are, who we think God is and what that means for the work of reconciliation.

It means that we do not have to agree finally on a perfect form of words, because we do not believe that words finally express everything about who we are. We can agree on a form of words that is good enough to encompass some of the positive affirmations we wish to make, whilst hinting, as this does, at the dynamic tensions that keep renewing our life together.

*Questions:*

*What does this mean for you that our commitment is a 'speech-act'?*

*What are the other tensions we hold in HOW we do things?*

*What are the implications for us as individuals? As community? For worship? For our programmes?*

**Conclusion: Refreshing our traditions for the 21st century**

In recent years, I have heard many conversations that dance around questions of who we are (as Corrymeela) and who God is (or is not) to us as Corrymeela members, and how we respond to the challenge of reconciliation.

I believe we have frequently set options in these conversations that are too limited. Too often, discussions focus on what seem to be two stark alternatives, which I will caricature as follows, for the purposes of discussion.

**Do we:**

**Option 1:** chuck out the old explicitly Christian language because it is either outdated or exclusive, or both?

or

**Option 2:** require people to sign on a dotted line at the bottom of the Statement of Commitment in some modern variant of what used to be called 'right doctrine' belief?

This sees belief as the key. That is, we all have to believe the same interpretation of the same words. The belief is fairly static. Action and practice does not feature in 'right belief' formula.

I believe that there is (at least) a third option.

**Option 3:** We can take the traditions we inherit, subject them to new scrutiny and refresh them. We can do this in the best of an ecumenical tradition, where we are positive about our own identities (within a broad-church Christian identity as Corrymeela) and curious and welcoming about the identities of others.

I do not believe that the Statement of Commitment needs to be drained of Christian images or identity to achieve a meaningful curiosity or welcome of difference. In fact, I believe a strong and positive identity can make our welcome stronger and more positive.

We can invite people to the community not because we all have the same interpretation of the Statement of Commitment, but because we believe that the words are 'speech-action' for reconciliation. That means that they have a generative power for both action and reflection about who we are, who God is, and what reconciliation is.

Our beliefs are worked out in our practice and our practice informs our understanding of who we are, who God is and what reconciliation means. Unlike option 1) above, this option

maintains the language we inherit in the Commitment and seeks new understandings of its power to inspire and motivate action and reflection in reconciliation. Unlike option 2) above, this option is dynamic and changes with times and demands and the fresh insights we bring to it.

I became involved with this sort of project of ‘doing theology’-- or reflecting on faith and life issues as we might call it in Corrymeela—when I worked in education and campaigning on economic justice issues at Christian Aid. There we consciously worked on identifying Christian traditions we inherited, and trying to consider how they could generate new meanings and be refreshed. Sometimes this included bringing insights from say, Ethiopian or Brazilian churches (or indeed economists or youth and community workers in those countries). This happens in Corrymeela too in the process of engagement and refreshment of the traditions we inherit.

Reflection on faith and life that includes refreshing the traditions is both an urgent and important task, for two reasons.

Firstly, as members, we make the commitment to ‘seek a deeper understanding of our faith.’

Secondly, we are hosting many thousands of people every year in a wonderful place, with whom we might share, and share more deliberately, some key elements of who we think we are, who we think God is, and what reconciliation is...in word and in action.

Some of those thousands of people passing through--or their children--may be volunteers, friends, associates, members, financial supporters, partners, and allies in this work two months, two years, twenty years, and fifty years from now.

I welcome your own reflections on the Statement of Commitment and how it guides or challenges your understanding of who you are, who God is, and what the work of reconciliation is for us walking the way together.

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#### End Notes:

<sup>1</sup>*The Corrymeela Community: Community and Prayer Guide 2013 has the Statement of Commitment on p.1.*

<sup>2</sup>*This reflection builds on some material prepared and shared at a programme meeting, August 10th, 2013.*

<sup>3</sup>*See p. 2 of the Corrymeela Community: Community and Prayer Guide 2013*

<sup>4</sup>*See p.3 The Corrymeela Community: Community and Prayer Guide 2013.*

<sup>5</sup>*As in, for example: ‘If we Christians don’t speak about reconciliation we have nothing to say.’*

<sup>6</sup>*See p. 2 of The Corrymeela Community: Community and Prayer Guide 2013.*

<sup>7</sup>*Thanks to David Tombs for helping to clarify these examples.*

<sup>8</sup>*A programme discussion meeting, 10 August 2013 at 8 Upper Crescent.*

<sup>9</sup>*See p. 43 The Corrymeela Community: Community and Prayer Guide 2013.*

## CORRYMEELA STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

The Community was founded in 1965 by the Rev Ray Davey and makes the following commitment together:

*As a community of Christians drawn from many traditions, we:*

**AFFIRM** our faith in the reconciling power of God in Jesus Christ;

**CELEBRATE** the promise of life;

**CONFESS** our own responsibility for the destructive conflicts in our society;

**BELIEVE** that we have been called to seek a deeper understanding of our faith;

**SURRENDER** ourselves to the spirit of Jesus to overcome our own divisions and make ourselves instruments of His peace;

**COMMIT** ourselves to work for a society whose priorities are justice, mutual respect, the participation of all, concern for the vulnerable and the stranger, stewardship of resources, and care for creation;

**AGREE** to pray regularly for each other, to join in the worship of the community, to give time to the life and work of the community, to care for and support each other, to live out our commitment in our daily lives, to give, according to our ability, to the funds of the community;\*

And **WISH**, through the power of the Spirit, to walk the way of the Gospel together.

## Corrymeela Community

### VISION:

Embracing difference, healing division and enabling reconciliation.

### MISSION:

To provide open, safe and inclusive spaces for dialogue, which moves society towards social justice, positive relationships and respect for diversity.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone.

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