

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECONCILIATION CENTRES?

The Experience of the
Corrymeela Community, 1965-2013

THINK PEACE 4

The Corrymeela Centre is linked to a dispersed ecumenical community of people from the catholic and protestant traditions living and working, in their voluntary and paid time, for reconciliation in Northern Ireland and beyond. Corrymeela, historically, belongs to a wider network of reconciliation centres that were part of the Church and Society Movement and that evolved in Europe, especially in the post World War II years with roots in the humanitarian, ecumenical, social justice and inclusive theological traditions. Corrymeela began before the conflict emerged in Northern Ireland and was linked to the Ecumenical Laity Centres in Europe and the Ecumenical Youth Service Work Camps. It is now part of a worldwide network through the umbrella of Oikosnet Europe (see www.oikosnet-europe.eu) and we will host this network in our 50th Anniversary year in 2015.

The Corrymeela Community seeks to be:

- An experience together, that builds hope in people from opposed traditions working together, in spite of conflict.
- A question mark to those who support demeaning and violent treatment of those different to them.
- A sign of change being possible, even in the midst of fear and violence.
- A statement that reconciliation is central to Christian belief and that reconciliation needs to be addressed relationally and structurally in agreements between people, and in political and civic life.
- An invitation and challenge to public, civil, cultural and political institutions to promote a reconciling culture within their organisational life.
- A local expression of a reconciliation practice that is international.

Some of our early members had experiences outside Northern Ireland that informed their commitment.

Some had:

- been doctors who had pioneered medical services for families in different developing countries;
- lived through the Second World War and been in prisoner-of-war camps. This was the experience of the Founder, Ray Davey who died recently at the age of 96;
- involvement in the ecumenical movement;
- been from, what would now be called, the 'social responsibility movement' in the business sector;
- visited other reconciliation centres in Holland, Germany, Sweden, Italy, France and Scotland such as de Dreiberg and Kerk und Wereld; the Berlin work of Maechler and the Confessing Church who had lived with Bonhoeffer; Rattvik; Taize, Agape and Iona;
- been members of British and Irish Overseas Aid programmes.

One was a stretcher-bearer in the Chino-Japanese War with Quaker Peace and Service and, later, worked to re-connect displaced children from Jewish families.

Some members have distinct experiences of life in Ireland that challenge us about the reconciliation task. Some of our members:

- have been the families of victims of the conflict;
- have been involved in promoting mutual understanding practice and curriculum development within the formal schools and informal youthwork sectors;
- have worked in medical casualty services, dealing with victims of bombs and shooting;
- have experienced deep inequality in living here;
- have become engaged in standing with the new migrant citizen base here in giving support, health and legal advice.
- have worked, and continue to work, in other conflict areas.
- have been members of the trade union movement.
- have linked churches together in community reconciliation projects.

Some Tasks of Reconciliation Centres are:

To pro-actively signal that 'those who are different' are important and equal citizens.

To promote inclusive solutions based on equality of opportunity, human rights and agreed systems of law and order.

To be a 'home' and 'safe space' for people seeking to model new forms of creating a reconciled community.

To model that 'shared governance models' are possible in contested societies.

To be a centre of critical reflection and challenge for people:

- Within the existing traditions.
- Engaging in meetings and relationship building between the existing traditions.
- Seeking to move beyond historical polarising identities, whilst valuing the best elements of the different traditions that support fair treatment.
- Inviting people to be open to the emerging new diversity in society.

To assist new ways of working together emerge and to establish new rituals that include all:

- To find ways of not forgetting the past that enable all to move forward, often painfully.
- To exercise the power of convening meetings where people learn from community and residential experiences in reconciliation.
- To think in more open ways; to think 'out of the box'.
- To generate reconciliation through creating new possibilities to learn in new relationships.

Some understandings underpinning our practice:

Through Corrymeela's links with people in other conflict situations we have developed understandings that have sustained our practice and expanded our understanding of reconciliation.

We have drawn on learning from the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theology about people becoming subjects capable of making change, not merely being the objects of other people's dominance¹.

We have drawn on political understandings of ethnic frontier societies developed by one of our members, the late Professor Frank Wright².

For Frank:

- The history of ethnic frontier societies is essentially pessimistic, unless people are prepared to build and support the actions of small groups of individuals across lines of enmity.
- Contested societies inevitably have to deal with the legacy of unequal treatment. Within that often is the need to: address discrimination; develop agreed policing and law and order structures; and establish a human rights culture. Such societies also experience struggles for the control of education, culture and (sometimes) language rights.
- Patterns of communal deterrence relationships in ethnic frontier societies, such as Northern Ireland, mean that many relationships across fear and identity lines are, at best fragile and, at worst, untenable.
- Relationships of mutual antagonism can make the task of meeting together, and securing new relationships across diverse identity lines, difficult.

Reconciliation Practice: A space where new activities can be modelled and developed.

Within a conflict it is important to promote an educational rationale for reconciliation. Experiences of meeting around sensitive and disputed issues have to be promoted, safeguarded and sustained. This work, at its best, engages people meeting one another with all of their life experiences, "*with the head, the heart and the gut*".

The reconciliation task is: both relational and structural, personal and political; one that should involve politics, institutional, communal and personal life.

The potential of the voluntary and community education sectors for reconciliation is important, and essential, even though that work has often been viewed as being peripheral. Developing and supporting community relations practice needs to be made more central in public policy and institutional culture, rather than being made peripheral.

Reconciliation Practice: Facilitating Difficult Meetings

Corrymeela has:

- assisted people and groups meet for difficult encounters about many sensitive issues such as policing, housing, religious beliefs, violence between traditions, the reconstructive contribution of education and youth work, and models of political co-operation;
- stood with people and groups who, historically, have been scapegoated, such as those previously referred to as 'unmarried mothers', those in mixed relationships and the LGBT community, as well as those more recently scapegoated through racial abuse, violence and intimidation;

- in the conflict, facilitated meetings between state and paramilitary actors;
- developed a rationale for trust building and reconciliation work in contested societies;
- situated the task of trust building in a wider European/ international context, drawing on foundation work on ethnic frontiers;
- developed and supported the development of new ways of meeting; new forms of educational work that address sensitive issues and new forms of work with young people.
- developed resources and models of practice such as *Political Co-Operation in Divided Societies: A Series of Papers relevant to the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, (ed) Desmond Rea, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982, that informed wider political reflection at that time.

To Be A Meeting Space Open For All

Post Conflict Corrymeela Seeks:

To be both a place, and a form of shared governance community, that creates diverse, and often unexpected, meetings across lines of difference.

To explore restorative possibilities to address the needs of the harmed and those who have caused harm.

To initiate innovative inter-community youth work programmes that link challenging residential learning with experiences in local communities.

To develop residential practices and school based experiences with curriculum materials relevant to primary, secondary, further and higher education institutions.

To take inclusion as a challenge, developing innovative work that includes young people who have traditionally been marginalised.

To challenge partisan religious positions and promote inter-church and inter-faith meetings and actions that support the development of a more open and inclusive society.

Current Challenges

With the language of trust building and reconciliation now being part of political discourse it could be argued that the process of institutionalising these core themes has progressed. (See Together: Building a United Community Policy, OFMDFM, 2013)

The Northern Ireland Act (Section 75 (i) & (ii), 1998), formally recognises the interconnection between equality and trust-building. The introduction of the good relations dimension into legislation, with regards to three categories of religious belief, political opinion and racial groups, has extended the legal focus of trust-building beyond traditional community relations work to the core of Northern Ireland society, as it is evolving today.

There still is a need for trust building and reconciliation to be internalised in the working of major institutions. Corrymeela has an opportunity, in its own way, to promote these themes as part of the lived community of reconciliation, at the residential centre and in the daily lives of members, staff, friends and supporters outside it.

Growing the Practice Core to Trust Building

There are strands of Corrymeela practice, at the Centre and in the practice of members and supporters, which promote advances in these areas.

Up to 2002 the persistent operational preference for addressing community relations at its most visible points of failure – urban ghettos, victims work, work with paramilitaries – or among constituencies accepted as important for the future – children and young people – had ensnared community relations work in being special and marginal to mainstream society. Such a limited approach mistakenly presumed a broadly healthy core of society with marginal manifestations of sectarian violence.

Such operational blindness saw mistrust and violence as not being proper areas of active concern in many areas of Northern Irish society. Indeed, the very ‘bracketing off’ of large areas of such activity was held up as success. Outside the points of greatest stress, tensions were largely contained by silence and legislative exclusion from the public domain. Such a culture allowed many people, including many in the professions and public service (with notable exceptions), to deny that they too had a responsibility to promote trust.

For Corrymeela, some assumptions that need challenged are that:

- *“Reconciliation is primarily the responsibility of those at the margins of society.”*
- *“There is increasing comfort with the logic of separation.”*
- *“Trust building is irrelevant to economic sustainability.”*

Without doubt, there have been significant social and economic costs and we have lost time and energy that could have been given to enriching our collective imagination and creativity. We now need to support political, public and civic endeavor that builds trust. Trust building, prosperity and our future sustainability need to be interlinked concepts and policy priorities.

We need to stand firm: in promoting agreed institutions of government; agreed law and order; a citizen-based society not a partisan based one; a society that works at reducing inequality and promotes social justice.

We need to promote a culture of interdependence, where local people and local issues are linked to wider, similar, global issues.

Emerging From Conflict

All parties to the Belfast Agreement in 1998 signed off on Paragraph 4, which states that:

“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.” (www.ofmdfmini.gov.uk)

In support of all working for such a non-violent climate Corrymeela continues to:

Promote intergenerational learning that acknowledges the past, infuses the present and embraces the challenges of creating an interdependent future (see Eyben, Morrow and Wilson, 1997, 2001, 2002)

Be open to re-visiting our core purposes in the light of peace agreements.

Be part of strengthening civil and public society in engaging with the new political order.

Promote the civic courage of public institutions, civil society organisations and politicians.

Link together the twin aims of promoting ‘ease with different others’ and ‘reducing inequality’ within the reconciliation agenda.

The Task of Peace and Reconciliation Work is to Design and Create Something That Is Unknown and Untested

There are limits to individuals having experiences of trust building across lines of enmity if such actions are not modelled and promoted institutionally in public, civic and political society. The tragedy of a contested society is that such individual actions can be one of the few experiences of people from different traditions coming together. Unless institutionally supported, these individual and small group actions can remain exceptional experiences.

A difficulty in a contested society is that trusting relationships between people across the religious/political division can be few and, where they do exist, are often hostages to the latest threat or violent action.

Where trust between people is scarce, there is little glue or history that sustains people through difficult periods. It is easier, and understandable, to return to the 'cultural pessimistic common sense' (Wright) of the different traditions, the ways of separation and distrust.

So, returning to Corrymeela Community "*Think Peaces*" on the *Statement of Belief* and on *Knowing What we Know Now, How can we Promote Reconciliation?* a central reconciliation task is to create and generate new meetings between people who have lived apart or who have had little experience with one another, apart from enmity or threat.

This task is to promote work across all sections of society and creatively hold the tension between:

- **Personal work**-with a focus on personal growth and understanding;
- **Relational work**- in supporting new or renewed relationships between people from different histories of division and conflict;
- **Structural work**- in developing policies, procedures and cultures of institutions that promote and embed healing ways and a spirit of reconciliation.

It is also to promote interweaving actions across all the areas below:

- i. **Creating (and restoring)** innovative engagements and meeting.
- ii. **Nurturing relationships** and growing practices between people and groups.
- iii. **Sustaining new forms of meeting** and working across divisions that embed shared practices in organisations and institutions.

The Corrymeela Community and the work of the Corrymeela Centre seeks, in its own human and fragile way: to work, with others locally and internationally; to be a centre of international understanding; to develop practical faith and inter-faith reflection about reconciliation; to be an inter-cultural meeting place that offers support for local and international actions associated with reconciliation.

¹ Kaptein (*with Morrow, 1997, On the Way of Freedom, Dublin: Columba Press.*

² Wright, (1987) *Northern Ireland-A Comparative Analysis, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; Wright, F, (1996) Two Lands on One Soil, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.*

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Some Papers published whilst Members* of the Corrymeela Community relevant to Reconciliation Practice are:

Political Co-Operation in Divided Societies: A Series of Papers relevant to the Conflict in Northern Ireland, (ed) Desmond Rea*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1982.

Tracing the meaning of Community Relations in Northern Ireland since 1969. Duncan Morrow*, download at <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/fs/doc/tracing-the-meaning4.pdf>.

Integrated Education and New Beginnings in Northern Ireland, Frank Wright*, 1990 Corrymeela Press.

Ways Out of Conflict-Resources for Community Relations Work

Duncan Morrow* & Derick Wilson* 1996, Belfast: Corrymeela Press

ISBN: 1873739 10 9

On the Way of Freedom, Kaptein (with Morrow), 1997, Dublin: Columba Press.

Learning Together for a Change: The evolution of a Model for Cross-Community Meetings between Adults in a Divided Society, Derick Wilson* 1994 D. Phil Thesis. University of Ulster.

Different Tracks: Experiential Learning Colin Craig*, Mike Bartle, Rachel Craig*, Yvonne Naylor*, Johnny Mc Ewen* 1999, Corrymeela Press

Joined Up: Developing Good Relations in the School Community

Mary Potter* & Nichola Lynagh (2005) Belfast: Corrymeela Press

ISBN:1 873739 3

Richardson* & Gallagher*, (eds) 2011 **Education for Diversity and Mutual Understanding: The experience of Northern Ireland**. Bern: Peter Lang.

Other Materials:

The Eyewitness Programme
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/learning/eyewitness/learning/index.shtml>

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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ISBN: 1-873739-37-0

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

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