

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECONCILIATION CENTRES

The Corrymeela Community Centre's Experience

The Importance of the Reconciliation Theme

Reconciliation centres are:

- Local expressions of an international reconciliation practice. They are reminders that reconciliation has roots in a humanitarian, ecumenical, social justice, liberation or other tradition. The national conflict is understood in a wider context. (For example: Corrymeela began before the conflict emerged here; it had its roots in the post World War II ecumenical tradition; the Ecumenical Laity Centres Movement in Europe and especially the work of the World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Youth Service Work Camps)
- A statement of reconciliation being desirable and attainable-politically, culturally, economically, socially, religiously.
- An invitation and challenge to public, civil, cultural and political institutions to promote a reconciling culture within their organisational life and daily work.

The Importance of Dispersed Communities of People Associated with Reconciliation Centres.

They are:

- A symbol that people from opposed traditions can work together, in spite of the conflict.
- A question mark to those who support demeaning and / or violent treatment of those people who are different to them.
- A sign of change being possible, even in the midst of terror and violence.

Some Tasks of Reconciliation Centres

They are:

- To proactively signal that 'those who are different' are important also.
- To promote inclusive solutions based on equality of opportunity, human rights and agreed law and order systems.
- To be a 'home' for people seeking to model a new form of reconciled community
- To model that 'shared governance models' are possible in societies dominated by partisan structures.
- To be a centre of critical reflection for people:
 - Within the existing traditions.
 - Engaging in meetings and relationship building between the existing traditions.
 - Seeking to move beyond historical polarising identities.
- To assist new ways of working together emerge; new rituals that include all.
- To find ways of not forgetting the past that still enable all to move forward, often painfully.
- To think in more open ways; to think 'out of the box'. For example:
 - Through Corrymeela's links with people in other conflict situations we developed understandings that sustained our practice and expanded our understanding of reconciliation;
 - We drew on learning from the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theology about people becoming subjects capable of being change agents not merely being the objects of other people's dominance;
 - We drew on political understandings of ethnic frontier societies
(See Frank Wright, Northern Ireland, *Northern Ireland – A Comparative Analysis*, Gill & Macmillan, 1989)

Relationships of mutual antagonism can make the task of meeting together and securing new relationships across diverse identity lines difficult. Reconciliation work includes the generation of possibilities to learn in new relationships.

Some of our founder members had experiences outside Northern Ireland that opened us all up to a wider world. Some had:

- been doctors who, as females, had pioneered mould breaking medical services for women and families in African societies from the 1930-1950's;
- lived through the Second World War and been in prisoner of war camps. This was the experience of the Founder, Ray Davey;
- had been members of the trade union movement in times of high unemployment;
- involvement in the ecumenical movement;
- been from what would now be called the social responsibility movement in the business tradition;
- visited other reconciliation centres in Holland, Germany, Sweden, France, Italy and Scotland such as de Dreiberg and Kerk und Wereld; the Berlin work of Maechler and the Confessing Church who had been with Bonhoeffer; Rattvik; Taize, Agape and Iona.

The Importance of Involving People Locally from diverse Life Experiences in Conflict

Some members have distinct experiences here that challenge us about the reconciliation task.

- More recently some of our members have been the families of victims of the conflict;
- Some have been part of the violent actions and have turned from that;
- Some have experienced deep inequality in living here;
- Some have become engaged in standing with the new migrant citizen base here in giving support, health and legal advice.
- Some now work in other conflict areas such as Zimbabwe; Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Sudan; with the United Nations.

To Be A Space In Which New Programmes And Actions Can Be Modelled And Developed.

Within A Conflict

Promoting an educational rationale for reconciliation.

- Experiences of meeting around sensitive and disputed issues have to be promoted, safeguarded and sustained.
- This work is both relational and structural; personal and political.
- The Reconciliation task is one that should involve all of life-politics, institutional, communal and personal life.

Developing and supporting Community Relations from the Periphery

- The Potential of the Voluntary and Community sectors in adult education for reconciliation is important and essential even though that work is often viewed as being peripheral.

Facilitating Difficult Meetings

- Corrymeela assisted people and groups meet for hard and difficult encounters about many sensitive issues such as housing, religious beliefs, violence between traditions, the control of education, schooling and models of political co-operation.
- Corrymeela challenged the ready stereotyping of trust building work by developing a rationale for reconciliation work in contested societies;
- Corrymeela situated the task of trust building in a wider European context, drawing on foundation work on ethnic frontiers by Frank Wright;
- Corrymeela developed and supported the development of new ways of meeting; new forms of educational work that addressed sensitive issues and new forms of work with young people;
- Corrymeela developed resources and models of practice.

Ways Out of Conflict, Wilson, Morrow and Wright, Corrymeela Press with the Open University, 1994.

Post Conflict

- To be a meeting space open to all.
- To be a place and a form of community that creates diverse, and often unexpected, meetings across lines of difference.
- To sustain Quality Trust Building Practices that Challenge Central Institutions
- To challenge core institutions in this society to commit themselves to promote trust building within their core structures and core business.

The initial building blocks in this work included:

- Highlighting the needs of prisoners.
 - Supporting victims groups.
 - Initiating innovative youth work programmes that had residential elements and home based experiences.
 - Developing residential practices with primary, secondary, further and higher education institutions.
 - Taking the theme of inclusion as a challenge how we support innovative work that includes young people who have traditionally been marginalised.
 - Challenging partisan religious positions.
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- Building Models of Practice:
 - Developing institutional programmes of work that initiate organisational learning practice within voluntary and public bodies.
 - Developing Civic Programmes that bring people and organisations into a wider societal perspective.

Current Challenges

There still is a need for the above models to be internalised in the working of major institutions.

The recurring theme of reconciliation in today's intercultural society need addressed as well as the old issues of sectarianism and racism challenged.

Growing inequalities need addressed also-such work needs to be at the centre of the lived community of reconciliation, at the centre and in the daily lives of members outside it.

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

Growing the Practice Core to Trust Building

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 – has ensnared community relations work within a centre-periphery paradigm.

Such limited approaches mistakenly presume a broadly healthy core of society with marginal manifestations of sectarian violence.

Such operational blindness sees mistrust and violence as not proper areas of active concern in many areas of Northern Irish society. Indeed, the very 'bracketing off' of large areas of such activity is held up as success and has become habitual. Outside the points of greatest stress, tensions are largely contained by silence and legislative exclusion from the public domain.

There are a number of assumptions taking root in different sectors that have a debilitating effect on how trust might be promoted in this society, coming out of conflict.

For us the 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.

Successful regional economies now depend on two human realities:

1. that there are low levels of social inequality
2. that there are high levels of ease and trust between citizens from diverse identities and backgrounds.

We need to create 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.

This Reconciliation Centre needs to be an international space as well as a local space for issues to be engaged with.

Emerging from Conflict this Community of Reconciliation Faces Challenges:

- To be open to re visiting our core purposes in the light of peace agreements.
- To be part of strengthening civil and public society in engaging with the new political order,
- To promote the civic courage of public institutions and civil society organisations.

The Task of Peace and Reconciliation Work - To Design and Create Something That Is Unknown And Untested

There are limited experiences of trust between citizens from different identity backgrounds here.

Such individual experiences of people from different traditions coming together are still exceptional.

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

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 common sense of the different traditions, the ways of separation and distrust.

To work with the reality *'that change is possible...'*

To work knowing that people can be subjects creating history not merely objects of history is the goal.

DERICK WILSON