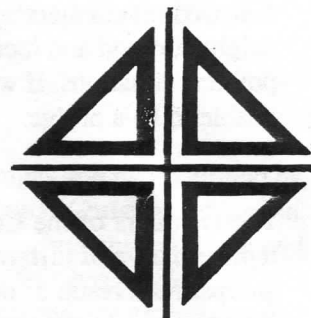

A CORRYMEELA PAPER



“The Corrymeela Community” - a brief summary -

The *Corrymeela Community* is a *dispersed* community of Christians from all the main Christian denominations in Ireland who have bound themselves together as instruments of God's peace in church and society, through prayer, mutual support and commitment (see appendix).

The *identity* of the Community has been focussed on the development of a *residential centre/open village* on the North East coast of Northern Ireland near the town of Ballycastle. The name Corrymeela is a local name which was used for the Holiday Fellowship Centre which had been established in the 30's and had become redundant in the early 60's. In the early years only one or two people were resident full time at the Centre and the members and their friends came for short periods to rehabilitate and develop the site. The programme developed as they brought groups from their local communities, churches, youth clubs etc. Gradually the Community established a small *residential core group* for ten 1-year volunteers and five/six permanent staff at the Centre in addition to day staff. They also established a *non-residential resource centre* in the city of *Belfast* as a base for the work of field staff, as a place of preparation and follow up of programmes and as a communication centre for members, friends and sympathetic organisations or groups.

A TWO WAY PROCESS

The two centres act as a *resource* to the *dispersed community* of 160+ members and two thousand two hundred friends (more loosely linked) and to the society at large. The members and friends in turn support the development of the centres. This *two-way process* is essential to the open nature of Corrymeela and challenges us to remain flexible to the real needs of our members and to changes in the society. Members are urged to keep their links with their local churches, neighbourhood and local communities and to live out their commitment in the family, at work or in local social and political situations. If we loose this tension, we could become an isolated group with no real roots in our society and unable to be a bridge.

The members of the Community are *largely lay* people with a *sprinkling* of clergy. They are increasingly more representative of different strata of society and include people of both conservative and radical outlooks and all age groups. As a result of our contacts and programmes over the years, some of those who are at present members have been bereaved or are former prisoners, single parents, unemployed etc. Some members work full time in education, in youth and community, probation service, youth training and unemployment schemes, health, industry, agriculture, civil service, family or full time church work etc. Some are also active in politics. The members meet residentially at Corrymeela and, for shorter meetings, in other centres, as well as in small cell groups for mutual support, prayer and discussion.

It is essential to the character of the Community that we always *recognise* that the *conflicts which exist* in our society and our world are present, at least to a degree, *amongst us all*. As a community we are only beginning to understand one another. Only as we develop a deeper awareness of ourselves and each other, learn to understand, accept, and forgive each other, nourish a wider vision, can we witness to Christ's work of reconciliation in the world and to the community of unity in diversity which he creates.

MANY DIMENSIONS OF RECONCILIATION

The work of reconciliation can only be understood within the *concrete context* in which we live and work. This is not the place for a treatise on Irish history but it is essential to understand the kind of divided society which we have inherited, if the witness of Corrymeela is to make sense. There are an overlapping series of dimensions to the conflict which include cultural aspects like British or Irish identity, religious tradition, (Protestant or Catholic), social or economic opportunity etc. It is not possible to *limit* our work even to these dimensions and any approach to the *Christian understanding* of reconciliation must take on board relationships between people of all ages, disabled and able-bodied, from both sexes, from different social classes, of conservative or liberal temperaments and the wider issues of race, other religions or no religion. *Peace is indivisible* and although we all have to work in particular concrete contexts, we do not exclude wider international issues and contacts and any issues which bear on our common humanity. Indeed, it is often only when some of the intractable local divisions are put in this wider setting of the search for a fuller humanity that significant change begins to happen.

Due to the highly stratified nature of our society and our educational system (Catholic and State), it is important to provide opportunities for people to *meet each other* in a "*lived*" situation if they are to rediscover each other as human beings. The value of a centre *jointly owned by people from both traditions yet independent* of the control of the official establishments either political or ecclesiastical, can only be understood in terms of the norms of Northern Ireland society. The ethos of the Centre is one where guests are invited to share in the domestic chores and to be part of a lived community with volunteers and staff, whatever else they may do by way of a programme. The volunteers are chosen on the basis of a wide diversity of experience and background both Irish and international and their year together is in itself a major reconciliation project. It is therefore as staff and volunteers struggle to live this *unity in diversity* that they can legitimatise the same freedom and space for those who come.

The *development and design of the buildings* has been closely related to the development of this "community" setting and to the kind of programmes which have emerged. There are three residential units for guests, one of which is specially

designed for youth and young adults. The design is aimed to foster a kind of informal pattern of living and learning together with an emphasis on open kitchens, fireplaces and floor cushions which can aid the creation of an atmosphere of relaxed sharing. The focus is on learning through the sharing of experience and in dialogue and encounter. Formal lectures are often replaced by appropriate contributions from *resource persons* who make their input at the appropriate time.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMMES

The programme of the Community is flexible and has constantly been adapted to the challenges and needs around us. Staff have been appointed with special responsibility for work with youth and young adults, Christian education, community and family work, schools' work and special conferences. In order to reflect this *holistic approach*, we seek to work together as a team and to interweave all aspects of the work as much as possible. This has proved valuable in all sorts of ways since it often means that the Centre has groups from a variety of backgrounds and age groups meeting at any one time. The possibility of their interaction at the informal times or in the common activities of eating, recreation or worship has often added something special to the total experience. Many young people value the chance to relate to a wide variety of adults and not to be wholly encapsulated in a "youth" culture (and vice versa). Community is about that kind of interdependence.

Over the years we have developed a wide partnership with many groups and individuals in all sections of our society (in addition to our own friends and members). This is of course always changing since we seek to avoid a dependency situation and move on to support those who wish to take new initiatives or who are simply taking a first step. *Work for Reconciliation must allow people to begin from where they are.* For example, our awareness of the way in which *young adults* in urban society from areas of social disadvantage have been easy fodder for paramilitary groups has led us to work in this sphere. We have sought to enable young people from a variety of backgrounds to find the strength to make their own decisions about their lives to reflect on past experience and to widen and deepen their experiences through encounter with people from other traditions and the wider world beyond their home situation, (including at an appropriate stage international exchange programmes).

Our centre is an ideal place for families to share and grow in friendship and understanding. Some of these families may be under stress such as recent bereavement, or have a member of their family imprisoned or simply be under a variety of pressures, sometimes associated with the Troubles and sometimes not. Some of those who have come through the most *painful experience*, have at a later point proved to be the most authentic witnesses for peace in our society.

In recent years, our work with *schools* has developed with support from the Department of Education and our Centre has become a resource for a wide variety of intra and inter-schools encounter programmes, and these are often followed up by ongoing community relations projects in their local situations.

Many of the *conferences and consultations* have led to continuing initiatives to bring about changes in our divided society. In line with our policy, we encourage such groups to become autonomous and not to remain dependent. Examples of continuing groups are: The Northern Ireland Mixed Association, Housing Associations, a Human Rights Group, a Working Party on Faith and Politics, mutual help groups of various kinds, a youth training project for unemployed, new experiments in the expression of Christian community etc. In and through all of this, we are wrestling with *our understanding of Christian Reconciliation* and the way in which it needs to be *articulated* afresh for ourselves and our world. Much of this is implicit in what has been said above but it needs to be made more explicit if we are to give a reason for the hope that is in us.

THE CORRYMEELA VISION

Our work is rooted in the conviction of the *Lordship of Christ* over all. Our vision is of a renewed and transformed universe. Modern insights confirm the Hebrew understanding of the universe as wholly *relational*. The Kingdom of

Christ is the Kingdom of right relationships. To understand Christ's life and death and resurrection and to participate in this work is to begin a journey to renew *all* our relationships; with God, with ourselves, with all human kind and with the earth and the universe. All things find their unity in Christ. But paradoxically, He is *the Lord who is the servant* so we can only understand this Lordship as we are turned around and rediscover one another in mutual service as brothers and sisters in God's family. Service without solidarity is paternalism. Today we are called to rediscover the meaning of faith *in community*. We are invited to be a sign of the new community and a catalyst for its creation locally and internationally. As we do this, we will inevitably be seen by some as a threat to existing structures or to those with vested interest in the status quo. So the way of peace is often the way of the cross. Some have already experienced that; others of us have not been really tested yet. We need to rediscover that the way of the cross is the way to share in Christ's risen life.

I suppose the part of the Gospel which speaks so eloquently to us here is the letter to the Ephesians and the whole New Testament witness to the breaking down of the enmity between Jew and Gentile. That enmity is deeply rooted in us all as a result of the historic conflicts in this island. As we struggle to find a basis for a pluralist society in which both Irish and British traditions are recognised and given free expression, and where all sections of our society can feel a sense of belonging and have a real chance to participate, we know that our deeper fears and wounds can always block the way. Tragically our churches have sometimes given a higher loyalty to political causes more than to the Servant Lordship of Christ. Only a rediscovery of the Servant Lordship of Christ and the depth of His healing love can unite us and *free* us to create the new structures which are necessary for a new society. The love which can both expose the selfish pride and fear in our hearts but which also reaches out to win enemies over to friendship. If we realise that Christ loved us whilst we were His enemies we can work without self-righteousness with those who oppose our way and not become cynical or embittered, as we seek to create a more inclusive community.

The Northern Ireland conflict exists in the context of British/Irish relationships as a whole and indeed the wider American and European dimensions are also part of the jigsaw. In this sense, we share with many others in the search for a better way - a politics of forgiveness instead of confrontation? We also seek to learn from others who have gained new insights in all branches of the world church.

JOHN MORROW
CORRYMEELA

APPENDIX

The Corrymeela Community is a fellowship of Christians drawn from many traditions, who,

AFFIRMING our faith in the reconciling power of God in Jesus Christ,

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

mutual respect

the participation of all

sharing and stewardship of resources;

AGREE to pray for each other,

to join in the worship of the community,

to care 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.