

THE ORIGINS OF CORRYMEELA AND THE CORRYMEELA COMMUNITY – recollections

Bill and Angela Breakey

March, 2021

The idea of “community” was growing for some years before Corrymeela was identified as the location. It began in Queens University. The Rev. Ray Davey was the Presbyterian Dean of Residences (chaplain), who operated out of a house near the campus, at 7, College Park East, known to everyone as “Number 7.” Ray and his family lived in the upper floors, while the ground floor served as a community center for students for a variety of religious and cultural and social events. For many of us students, Number 7 became a spiritual home away from home, both for students from out of town as well as for some of us who lived in Belfast. Somewhere around 1959 the old house was demolished, and a beautiful new Presbyterian Community Center was constructed, but we all still referred to it as Number 7.

Within the Presbyterian Community, Ray encouraged the formation of “action groups” focused on certain interests. The word *action* was intended to convey that these groups should not simply be prayer groups or study groups but that their activity should lead to action.

The name *Community* was not used casually at Number 7. Ray’s understanding of the Christian life leant heavily on the centrality of the community of faith and he was much impressed with contemporary Christian communities such as The Iona Community and The Community of Agape in Italy. Ray led groups to visit each of these places and George McLeod of Iona and Tullio Vinay of Agape were names we all became familiar with.

So some of us students who were inspired by these ideas and to some extent dissatisfied with the traditional, conventional, churches of which we were members, formed an action group to get better informed about Christian communities and to think about if and how we should form a community in Northern Ireland. We met on a regular basis. We had mini retreats at a cottage in Dundrod that had been given to Ray for this purpose; some of us spent time at Agape and visited the Community of Taizé in France. We had a weekend in Portballintrae with the leader of the St. David’s Community in Wales. As time went on we more and more felt the call to establish a community in Northern Ireland that would enable us to experience the sort of Christian community that we were not finding in our home congregations. And we wanted to have a center, as did Iona and Taizé and Agape, where others could come to experience community, explore their faith and engage with the important issues. We even travelled to Fermanagh to view a big house that was for sale (but far beyond our capacity to purchase). The membership of the Community Action Group varied from time to time, but individuals I particularly remember were Craig Cameron, Pam Compton, Norman Smith, Rosemary Willis (Dunlop), Pat Gallagher, Barbara Moll, Des Dornan, Desmond Rea.

At some point around 1964 Ray decided that we needed to get serious. He called together a larger group consisting mostly of progressive Presbyterian ministers (Alec Watson and John Morrow, who were both members of the Iona Community, as well as Carlisle Patterson, Desney Kempston, Philip Breakey, Gordon Gray, Bertie Jackson, Carrie Barnett, Tom Patterson and others) along with our Community Action Group. This larger group met several times to explore the call to form a community and grew as more people from more backgrounds, with needed skill sets joined in. The consensus gradually firmed up that this was what we were called to do – but how?

Ray became aware that a building near Ballycastle on the north Antrim coast might be purchased for a very reasonable price: Corrymeela.



Angela and I were familiar with Corrymeela. We had both been pupils at Belfast Royal Academy and each year a weekend outing took place to Corrymeela for senior pupils. These weekends focused on outdoor activities and marine biology, apart from high jinks and (mostly mild) flirtation. Corrymeela at that time belonged to and was operated by The Holiday Fellowship to enable people to have healthy, outdoor reasonably-priced holidays. However, the demand for this

type of holiday experience was evidently decreasing, so the Holiday Fellowship wanted to sell the property, including the building and several acres of land.

So we agreed that this was worth exploring. Ray got the key and a dozen or so of us set off on a Saturday to check out Corrymeela. We found this wonderful, hulking, green wooden building perched on a cliff overlooking Rathlin Island, with lots of bedrooms, a kitchen, dining and meeting



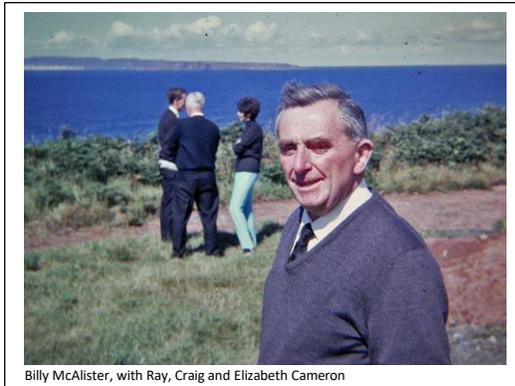
rooms, along with a circle of chalets, each of which could accommodate two to four beds. This seemed to be exactly what we needed. The scouting party returned to Belfast and reported on our findings. Other groups went to see for themselves in the following weeks. But before any action could be taken, two things were required. There needed to be an entity which could purchase and own the building and there needed to be funds to pay for it. Although the price was reasonable, for us it seemed like a lot. We had nothing.

So the first test of the seriousness of our intentions was to raise this money in a space of just a couple of weeks. We each agreed to seek interest-free loans from ourselves, our friends, relatives, like-minded people. We all went out begging and we succeeded. When we reconvened, somewhat to our surprise, we found that we had secured the necessary promises: a sign that this was meant to happen.

The other necessary requirement was to form an entity that could legally own property. This was the time to formally establish our community that would not only be a faith community, but also a “Company Limited by Guarantee” that would have legal standing to own property and do business. We were extremely fortunate to have as members of our group two lawyers, Basil Glass and Kenneth Irvine. Basil had wide experience as a solicitor in Belfast and was able to guide us through the legal processes.

The Corrymeela Community was established with about twenty members and a guiding body, The Council. Ray was the Leader; I was the first Secretary. Craig Cameron was the first Treasurer. We established by-laws for the Company, and rules for the community. Each member of the community played a role in moving our project forward and participated in the life of the community by attending meetings, praying for each other, contributing to the funds and committing to spending some time each year at Corrymeela.

The first enormous task was to tackle the major work involved in getting the building ship-shape, safe, clean and furnished to fulfil its role as a meeting place. This was all done with volunteer labour but we were fortunate to have members of the community with special gifts to guide us.



Billy McAllister, with Ray, Craig and Elizabeth Cameron

Robert Carson was an architect who had spent some time in North America and was familiar with the peculiarities of large wooden buildings; Billy McAllister was a retiree from a career in railway engineering who knew everything we needed to know about construction. Billy in fact took up residence in Corrymeela to guide and direct the process for many years. The only full-time employee in the first year or two was Anna Glass, a wonderful cook and a gentle presence presiding in the kitchen for many years. I cannot imagine Corrymeela having

developed as successfully as it did without Billy and Anna.

We very quickly developed a plan for work camps to get this massive operation completed. The entire exterior had to be repaired and repainted. Robert advised us that the proper colour for a building like this was white. Most of us were aghast at this idea; Irish buildings like this were usually painted in a dark colour, like the existing dark green, which was believed to be more durable. However Robert gently pointed out that all across North America, where weather conditions were often quite extreme, white painted buildings lasted, on occasion, for centuries! So that first year, we applied gallons and gallons of white paint, often on high ladders, to apply two coats to the entire structure. (A personal note here: In 1965 Angela was expecting our first child. Her obstetrician was very upset to learn that she was on top of a tall ladder painting Corrymeela! From then on she kept a lower profile.). There was also a lot of painting and repair needed on the interior of the building.



Work camps had had a central role in the development of Iona and Agape. Engaging in physical work together had proved to be a valuable part of community-building, as well as a way to get tasks completed at lower cost than otherwise. Angela and I had both participated in a work camp at Agape.

Desney Kempston (Cromey) was Ray's associate in The Presbyterian Community. She took on the task of coordinating the work camps which were vital to the success of the enterprise and over the years became a vital part of Corrymeela's life. The work campers were in many cases students from Queens that first year, although later work camps became much more international. Among those first generations of work campers several became key members of the community, including Derrick Wilson, Alastair Kilgore, Peter Montgomery, Jim Cavalleros.

A lot of creativity went into furnishing the large building with scant resources. Joyce Nice, as I recollect, was one of the leaders of this effort. Robert Carson came up with a design for built-in beds and somebody purchased large quantities of foam which served as mattresses. Hollow doors were fashioned into very adequate dining tables.

We set ourselves a deadline to get the building useable for large groups, in October, 1965, if I remember correctly. Tullio Vinay from Agape was invited to speak to us, friends and church dignitaries were invited to attend. The main conference room was full of people and the work campers stood around the walls holding their tools. Ray presided.

In those first years, in addition to a succession of work camps there were several types of weeks or weekend events.

Community weeks and weekends, when community members would gather to deepen their fellowship, develop their mission and work on the ongoing renovation and upgrading of the buildings.

Special events, such as a weekend gathering to talk together about the developing civil rights concerns in Northern Ireland. Our first major conference was notable in that the main speaker was Terence O'Neill, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, and provided a foretaste of the important role Corrymeela would have in the future as an important center for exploring and addressing issues of community relations and peace building.

Family weeks, in the summer, when families came for a week of seaside recreation combined with enriching group experiences.

Other groups, mostly church groups, would at various times during the year rent Corrymeela for their own conferences or retreats.

In 1969 Angela and I left Northern Ireland, intending to spend a year in the USA for my further professional growth before going to India as missionaries of the Irish Presbyterian Church, to the Ludhiana Christian Medical College in Punjab. We spent two years in New York State before going to India for three years. When our tour of duty in Ludhiana came to an end, for reasons of professional opportunity we returned to the USA. We resigned from membership of the Corrymeela Community because we could not fulfil the obligations of membership, but have continued as Friends and supporters ever since, with great pride in the amazing growth and success of Corrymeela's endeavors. We were thus "missing in action" during the height of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland when Corrymeela played such a heroic role in peace-building and in caring for those most affected by those terrible times.

Corrymeela has become justly renowned and described as "a center for reconciliation in Ireland." It is worth remembering that reconciliation was not thought of as the primary goal at the outset. We thought of it as a center where people could experience Christian community and hopefully bring back into their everyday lives, as well as their churches, a deeper spirituality and an enriched sense of community. Peacemaking and reconciliation were a part of this, and it is worth recalling that Iona was founded to bridge gaps between working men and the Church in Scotland; Agape was founded to promote peace in Italy, where bitter rivalries persisted after the War, as was the case with Taizé in France. Some of our founding members had connections with The Fellowship of Reconciliation, so this theme was definitely a part of our thinking (this was, after all, Northern Ireland in the 1960s), but at that stage we did not see it as being the major focus that it became in just a few years as the political and sectarian conflicts escalated.

We always had the aim of being an ecumenical community, although the founding group was heavily Presbyterian with a handful of Methodists. Ecumenism in that era in Ireland meant Protestant ecumenism. The Roman Catholic Church was not interested in doing much with Protestants, and Protestants were wary of Catholics. Thus it was assumed early on that this would be a Protestant community (as was the case with Iona, Taizé and Agape early on). This assumption was challenged very soon by Noel and Sadie Magee. They were Catholics from Lisburn, who wanted to be a part of what we were doing. There could not have been better people to bridge this gap of assumptions and biases and the Community did not hesitate for long in accepting them. And that was the end of Corrymeela as a Protestant community.