

Carrie Barkley's Story

Carrie Barkley grew up in Dublin but membership of the GA Executive and of the Committee of the Irish Council of Churches often brought her to Belfast. She was well known through her work as President of the GA (Girls Auxiliary), a big organisation with about 2000 people. She then was appointed as Sunday School Advisor of the Presbyterian Church. She got invited to the Sunday Night Meetings at No 7. This was Ray's home and work place where he not only lived with his family but also with students. These Sunday night meetings were the beginning of Corrymeela. When the house at Ballycastle came on the market, Ray invited a group to go and see the place and Carrie went along. She remembered an old AGA in the kitchen and also meeting Billy McAlister for the first time.

She knew Ray's sister Beth who had been a staff member at St Colm's College some years before Carrie was a student there.

The group then decided to buy the place and the practical work started. Carrie was not sure about the purpose of the place, but she felt it was important as the political situation began to deteriorate in the country. Ray talked a lot about his experiences as a prisoner of war and his time in Dresden. She learnt that the bombing was dreadful and felt ashamed that Great Britain was involved in such an act.

Coming from Dublin where the majority of people were Catholic Carrie was shocked to find things so different in the North. She was surprised by the attitudes she met here. Ray spoke about reconciliation having to mean more than words and wanted the Corrymeela Centre to do more than the churches were doing. It had to be more than a talking shop. It had to involve action. The Churches were too close to Unionism. Carrie's father had been in favour of home rule. Members also brought influences from Iona and its commitment to social action.

At first, however, a lot of work at the Centre was of a practical nature and Carrie joined in the painting of walls and building beds. They talked of creating a community to bring people together, but Carrie was not too sure at first what this would involve and who these people were. Eventually the building was habitable and they were able to stay for a weekend.

Carrie then became aware that Corrymeela was doing things the Churches were not doing. Family Weeks brought Protestant families together with Catholics. They were encouraged to talk and share in a way it was not happening elsewhere. For Carrie this was the part of Corrymeela she felt comfortable with. However, she knew that not everybody approved of this, not even in her own family.

It was also a new experience for Carrie to meet with people, particularly Protestant people who did not go to Church and visit areas that were new to her. Having grown up in a Presbyterian family she had assumed that people simply went to Church.

Family Weeks were an important part of Corrymeela's work and Carrie was involved in this work. At that stage families could apply to come to the Centre and Carrie brought family members from Dublin. These encounters made a deep impact on her brother. They experienced a Christianity that was open and where worship was different from what they experienced in Church. For most people coming to family weeks was the first time they experienced worship and prayer with Catholics. This again was very important to Carrie.

Then came the Grand Opening with Tullio Vinay and by then it became clear that events would

soon determine the work of the community. Things were not looking good.

Most of the work happening at the Centre was done by volunteers. Anna and Billy were the constant presence. Then the Troubles started which brought different people to the Centre - people that were driven out of their area, that were affected by the violence.

Some of the key experiences for Carrie were the Summerfests under the leadership of Doug Baker. She was involved in the planning group. She enjoyed the wide variety of people who came and she met for the first time Catholic people involved in a Charismatic prayer group where they worshipped with Protestants. The sharing groups where people with so many different life experiences and on different faith journeys met and shared stories and deep emotions were extremely important to her. This was so different to Bible studies in Church groups. For her these were great opportunities to meet many new people at a deep level.

Carrie had experience of inter-church work as President of the Irish Council of Churches. In Corrymeela she met young people who seemed to be anti-church, especially anti the institutional Church and this was a challenge for her. She got a new understanding of other people and of different styles of worship, such as the use of puppets, informal worship and worship coming out of people's experience of the world. She was able to use some of this learning in her work with Sunday School teachers. Also, the ability to share openly at a deeper level which the Church did not usually provide, became important to her. The practical application of faith seen so clearly in the care for people with disability impressed and moved her.

One of the challenges for Carrie was being at the Centre when a group of Christian gay and lesbian people were there. When sharing her struggles with John Morrow he reminded her that we are all on a journey. She says this continually helps her cope with new challenges and going to places where it is difficult to accept what is happening.

She also finds it difficult to accept volunteers who have no experience of Church. She can cope with young people from Jewish and Muslim communities. For her the Christian Community is the basis and she could not be a member if this would change. This does not mean Corrymeela should be a holy place. Corrymeela has still an important job to do. Carrie still enjoys being at the Centre as a presence.

Carrie is also strongly involved in her local Church. She is a member of the Peace Committee and they meet with politicians and get involved in local issues. She is also always willing to share her Corrymeela experience and learning in discussion groups.

It would seem that Carrie came to Corrymeela with a strong Presbyterian ethos, but one which was influenced by being brought up in a predominately Catholic state. This meant that she was totally comfortable working with Church groups, Protestant or Catholic, which was not the case for many people in Northern Ireland. She struggled more with those outside her experience – non church goers, gay groups, but she never gave up trying to understand them and accept them. Even in her mature life, she remains active and remains open. Corrymeela provided a natural 'home' for Carrie when she moved to Belfast. It provided her with a constant challenge and stimulation which is still ongoing for her. She attempted to filter out into the wider world the ideas and attitudes she encountered at Corrymeela particularly in relation to new ways of worshipping – a task which was not easy at her particular time of employment.