

Diana Carson's Story

One of Diana's early memories is her challenge to Corrymeela. She felt that Corrymeela was exclusively Protestant in membership, even though it wanted to be inclusive. She felt strongly that interested Catholics should be invited to join the Community. However, she was told very clearly that as a foreigner she had no right to criticise Corrymeela. Her response was to say that she was a Christian and was now living here in Northern Ireland permanently.

At a later stage, she met through her work a woman who was interested in finding out more about Corrymeela. Diana brought her along to a community meeting and Kathleen was made to feel welcome and accepted as a new member. However, two weeks later she was told that Council had decided that she could not be a member because she was a Catholic. Diana accepted the decision but remembers how both of them cried afterwards. Diana's husband Robert pointed out that, at that stage, Corrymeela was still trying to find out who they were and what they were about, and the Catholic/Protestant division did not appear strongly on the radar yet. It was only after 1969 that it was decided that Catholics could become members. For Diana it was very clear that Catholics, as Christians, had to be involved in Corrymeela.

Diana arrived in Northern Ireland in 1965 after she married Robert who was already involved in the new group that met regularly at Ray Davey's home, the Presbyterian Student Centre. The group was thinking about ways in which the Church might relate to society, to politics and the trade unions. Robert also became involved as an architect in the development of the site, an involvement that he has kept up to the present. Once the Ballycastle Centre had been bought, Joyce Nice quickly asked Diana, who had catering experience, to help in the kitchen. So Diana became Joyce's assistant and spent many weekends cooking for visitors, work campers and others. She also remembers Sydney Smyth coming offering to help. At first she wondered what he would be able to do sitting in a wheel chair. But he said he could be there to welcome people and direct them to where the work was, and he was sure not to stray from his post! He proved to be a wonderful gift.

Diana was attracted to Corrymeela because she had been involved in ecumenical work in the States. She had taken part in some of the first work camps organised by the World Council of Churches and had visited Agape before Ray decided to take a group there. The anger she felt when she was rebuffed for being a foreigner made her even more determined to be part of the Community and to be involved in discussions about the work and policies. She was also keen to work on a practical level and helped with furnishings for the house, insisting on carpets for the bedrooms to make them more comfortable and homely. She remembers the visit by Terrence O'Neill. The police came to check out the place and check out people. There had been rumours that Paisley would come to protest. Paisley was invited to come and talk to the Community. He said that he would come if he could bring along a bus load of supporters. So it didn't happen. There were meetings with the Orange Order which sometimes led to somewhat heated discussions.

Diana worked in the kitchen with Joyce Nice and later with Anna Glass until other volunteers came to do some of these tasks. Diana was also involved with work camps. She was a kind of liaison person and reported to Council about the work. These work camps focussed on very practical tasks around the building and the site. Later she became involved in family weeks with her children, for whom Corrymeela became a very familiar place. Diana also ran a holiday week for teenagers with learning difficulties. She has a memory of the final night when they invited the parents to come for a meal. Diana had worked with the young people preparing the food and making bread. One of the fathers refused to eat the bread his son had made. Diana felt very hurt and told him that the food was fine as they had worked under supervision. Because Diana was often in Ballycastle she also was a welcoming presence at the Centre when visitors called. All this was very much part of what Diana believes in. She had worked in race relations and ecumenical work in the States, so in a way

Corrymeela did not change her, but it became a place for her to use her gifts and helped her feel more a part of Northern Ireland. However, she was American and a strong woman, and this caused some difficulties at times. She was freer in social contact than most Northern Irish women. However, she is glad she was here at that particular time. She had strong feelings for Ray and Kathleen and she felt the work was important. She shared the commitment of Corrymeela, which transcended different ideas. She also remembers a weekend when the sisters from the local convent came to share their experience of the Second Vatican Council and the changes it brought for all of them and for the Corrymeela Community.

She remembers how special the place was for families, especially the women who came from the troubled inner-city area. For them it was a holiday where others played with their children and cooked for them. It gave the women time to rest and to talk with each other. They felt accepted.

There came a time when Diana felt that more was required of them. There was talk of the need for a commitment and of giving more in terms of time and energy. This was not possible at the time and both Robert and Diana became Friends. However, they still both believe Corrymeela is important and they have maintained their relationship with the Community. Diana is still enthusiastic about new possibilities for weekends. She herself then became involved in volunteer work in Kenya where she taught child development in a training programme for pre-unit (kindergarten) teachers, with some paper crafts in the evenings, for three-week residential; other early-years responsibilities included proofreading the first history of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa ever written by a Kenyan. These first trips were for some three-plus months each, for a decade. Later, when the funding ended, she has gone at her own expense, for five annual ten-week periods. She has also been involved in proofreading a book on healing plants as well as a Glossary of the Bible. How does this relate to Corrymeela? Corrymeela has broadened Diana's vision, strongly encouraged voluntary involvement, and remains an important emotionally supportive and important factor in her life. She never forgets Corrymeela! So, Diana has spread the pollen of peace and reconciliation far and wide.