

Isobel McDonagh's Story

7th October 2010

How did you hear about Corrymeela, was it a particular person – what took you there?

Isobel: What started me was I got married to Donald and came to Coleraine. The University was just starting in Coleraine, and we had a letter from Ray Davey saying there were quite a few people coming to the University who he thought we should get in touch with and befriend. He sent us a list with names and expected us to go and welcome them. It was professor this and professor that... Anyway, it was an interesting exercise. Many had Iona contacts and we got them in touch with Corrymeela. At that time Pam Compton had come to the University and she initiated the Corrymeela cell group that met in the University. That was in 1959/60. The University hadn't actually started functioning then. The building was being built and not all the people on Ray's list had come. There was Anne Moore whose husband was on the committee that brought the University to Coleraine and she knew quite a few people. So, between the two of us we had evenings when we invited these folks for a meal and welcomed them and got to know them, that sort of general friendship. When the cell group started there were quite a few university people on it at the beginning and we met in the university. Donald knew all about Corrymeela, but I didn't and we went over and visited. It was in the early stages. Billy McAllister was on guard and Anna was there. So, it was very early on.

Then the troubles started in 1965/66 we felt we weren't, I suppose, as involved in the troubles in Coleraine as the folk in Belfast. All the groups were from Belfast. But gradually the Corrymeela cell group were getting involved in families that were intimidated out of Derry or Belfast and coming to live in Coleraine. So, we brought them on a family weekend. We did not come for a whole week then. But we brought the families and some of them are still members of the cell group. Pauline Stevenson was one of the families.

It was in 1970 when Ray kept saying to Donald and I to become members. So, it took us until then to get our act together. And from then on we got involved every summer in two family weeks most summers. The first family week we did was in conjunction with John and Shirley and it was a group from Belfast. I remember asking John: what are we do? What happens next? And his answer was: just do it. Shirley had more practical advice. We were not able to follow the families up and that was the trouble. The second year we were told to get the families from Coleraine, mostly they were prisoners' families, referred by the social workers whom I knew through my work. So, we had a Corrymeela summer family week that summer, and we were able to keep in touch with them afterwards. And from then on, we did a Derry family week as again it was easier for us to follow them up afterwards in Derry.

So, you were involved in Corrymeela's work by doing family weeks and you were also involved in the cell group. Did the cell group focus on Corrymeela?

The cell group moved out of the University. There was a Quaker couple. He was a lecturer in the University and was very keen on Corrymeela. We used to meet in his bar on the Murderhole Road in Coleraine and then it gradually moved into our house. It was in our house for 21 years until I went on strike. It was shortly after Donald died. I found with me working that I couldn't cope with getting all the furniture organised.

Did you have a programme?

Some years we had and some years we hadn't. It depended on what people wanted. Sometimes it was a book that was recommended. There was the one on Christian family lifestyles which John

Morrow directed us to. We did a bible study. So, it was a mixture of things.

Then you became a member and you have been a member since. Was it hard to become a member? Did you easily find a place?

Donald was very much at home in Corrymeela. I found at first - and I haven't felt it for a long time - I think I had a chip on my shoulder because I wasn't an university person. Everybody seemed to know each other. All these Queen's people who were around about the same time. They all seemed to know each other, and I felt that being a community we ought all to know each other and I struggled with that for quite a few years. Then I decided: you just get to know one or two people at a community weekend and then you find this works.

You came to Corrymeela as a family? Did they enjoy the weekends at Corrymeela?

They enjoyed them as children. When they grew up, they grew away a bit and Stephen unfortunately was at the time when there was an anti-middle-class thing that then was at Corrymeela for a while and he suffered a bit from that. He took the side of a young chap who had been bullied and he was sent home. That finished him as far as Corrymeela was concerned. We never heard about that until much, much later. He has never gone back really. Janet was much more involved all through the summer programmes. She played the guitar and both Stephen and Janet led youth camps in the cottages. So, they were quite involved. Janet went away to university. She belonged to the Corrymeela group in Newcastle and they were supportive of her at a difficult time. She had gone just after Donald died.

The cell group was and is very important. I remember one person saying: I'm going to Corrymeela tonight and I said, well what's on. But what she meant was that she was coming to the cell group. It surprised me a bit that it was the group not the centre that was Corrymeela for her.

Are there one or two key experiences that have stayed with you?

I remember one family week when he had worship in the lounge. You remember that we had the heavy Army tents. It was dark and miserable. So we had worship in the house and I can't remember where the families came from, but I remember that there was one person who did not mix in very well because her husband was an ordinary prisoner and she wouldn't mix with the others, the political prisoners. It was at the beginning of the week... and it was something about the Lord's Prayer and one woman crossed the room and said to this woman: I want to say the Our Father with you. It was a Protestant and Catholic encounter and I remember that really hit me very hard that this was what Corrymeela was about. And one of the other incidence was Bernhard Brett and we had seen him sitting in the corner in the dining room, kids all around, wee tough guys from the Markets area, saying: hi Mister can I do this for you... It was just absolutely wonderful I thought.

And I suppose one of the other key times was the last time Donald was there. It was the April weekend when he was refused Communion. And I think it galvanised a lot of Community members. It was the priest who was in Columbanus, Father Hurley. It was a time when we didn't have a protestant communion service. Normally there was a Mass one night and the Protestant communion service the other night. But Donald knowing I suppose that it would be his last. I remember him sitting on the big cushion in the Croi and he went forward and put out his hand and Michael Hurley knowing he was a Protestant gave him a blessing instead. Donald never said a word about it but remember really feeling hurt by it. He never said a word about it.

One of the other things that touched me greatly and it shows the Corrymeela family, is that Ray came over to the hospital to Donald the night before his operation and brought the Corrymeela

chalice and it was interesting that Ray was there and somebody else from Corrymeela, but it was in the side ward in the Corrymeela hospital and the surgeon asked if he could come too. I remember standing beside him and seeing his hand out and thinking these are the hands that will be operation tomorrow morning. It meant so much. It was amazing. Again, it is about community. And again, another episode which was very personal too. When I was in hospital 1977. It was the old kitchen table and Anna Glass found out when I was going to theatre so that they would have worship around the kitchen table when I was going into theatre and remember me. Martine came over the night before to tell me. It meant so much to me. Just the thought of that.

Did these experiences lead you to do more in your community?

The cell group tried in Coleraine to do things. We had John Harvey over to do a conference and invited all the Churches. But we seemed to come to a dead end all the time. Ray always used to say, you have to be Corrymeela in your own community and we tried very hard, but it didn't seem to work. All of a sudden - well I suppose it wasn't suddenly, the Churches Forum materialised and it was something we had been praying for as a group and nothing seemed to happen. And then it happened and four of us got involved in it. It is very much what we longed for all these years.

You are pretty unique in this as I don't think many members are as involved in local Ecumenical work as you are?

I suppose it was because as a cell group we were out on an edge from Ballycastle. And we weren't as involved as the Belfast ones would be with Belfast groups of people going to the Centre. And Ray always kept saying to us, to Donald and I as members and in sending us the list of people at the University was hoping that we would get something going here. But rather than the University the actual town became the focus. You have to take the opportunities when they arise, and it took a long time for them to arise. There was one occasion in our own Church when Donald and I were told to stop bringing Corrymeela into things. We were both leaders in the Church at that time.

Did you feel you were doing Corrymeela work? Did you feel supported? Or did you feel that the work was happening at the Centre?

There were times when this seemed the case. Especially latterly I occasionally felt it, but never earlier on. The Centre was always a resource for us to use, than to go to. I remember an argument I had with Billy Kane about his resource group. I assumed that being a resource group we could ask them to volunteer at a family week. But that was the wrong thing altogether. They were not to be a resource to us. I got the wrong end of the stick. Summerfest were high marks in my experience. I helped with the planning and I remember when they left me in charge of a workshop led by the then two Bishops of Liverpool. I kept promoting one to Archbishop and demoting the other to Bishop. As a Methodist lay woman, I was not equipped for these titles. They thought it was amusing.

Do you feel that during your time at Corrymeela your attitude changed? Your way of looking at things?

Very much. I would say. I was brought up in Portadown and was surrounded by quite a narrow attitude really. My mother was a very fierce Presbyterian. Even marrying a Methodist was seen as a mixed marriage. There was no coming or going between Catholics and Protestants at all. We lived next door to a huge convent. There was a wall between them and us. I was fascinated by the convent, so much so that I would throw my teddy bear over the wall so that I could go and see these nuns to get the bear back. No there was no connection. It was very much a Presbyterian upbringing in a segregated community. Then I was sent to Boarding School where we went to the Presbyterian Church in the morning and the Church of Ireland in the evening. In the school I met Beth Davey

who taught Divinity and her involvement in my growing up had a big influence on me. One of the ministers we had made a big impression. He was Gordon Young. I did my first communion with him and he was very ecumenical. So that was growing gradually. It was a great problem for my mother. But I kept telling her that this was the way my life was going. Jim Boyd also had an influence. He was the SCM secretary in schools and he widened my views. But really until I came into contact with Corrymeela I hadn't experienced it. I knew about it before, the theory of it. But it was in Corrymeela that it gradually dawned on me: this works. It was the family weeks and it was also the business about not being too religious. These things could happen without using all the pious words and Donald was so set against all these words. He taught me a lot about things as well.

How were you treated as a woman within Corrymeela? Was it different from the Church?

I never felt less valued as a woman in Corrymeela. The one thing I felt was that when you went to Corrymeela it didn't matter really who you were, what you were, what you were wearing, what you looked like. It was one of the things that I found so refreshing. You didn't have to dress up. Mind you the kids always got a new t-shirt before they went, so that they looked half decent. I think the whole feeling of being accepted. The woman thing never really was an issue for me neither at Corrymeela or in the church. I suppose I always spoke up anyway. I remember it was when I became friendly with Liz Hewitt and all her struggles of being the first Methodist women at Edgehill College that I became far more tuned in to the business of the language. Before that it hadn't really got through to me.

Was there anything that was frustrating for you in Corrymeela?

For me the frustrating thing was just not to get to know everybody. It was also the frustration when you got back to your local Church that you could not get them to move as quickly. You felt there were two worlds.