

## Denise Smyth's Story

I am Denise Smyth. I was born on Lady's Day, 25th March 1932. I live in Jordanstown, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim. I came to live here with my husband Sydney and our 3 children, Alastair, Andrew, and Katharine in 1984.

I read in the Presbyterian Herald about Ray Davey's idea to open a centre in Northern Ireland where people from different religious denominations could meet. I wrote to Ray saying that Sydney and myself would be interested to find out more about this venture and so we were invited to a meeting at the old Presbyterian Centre at Queen's University. Sydney and I were living in North Belfast at that time and there was little mixing of the Protestant and Catholic communities around us. Sydney worked as a Personnel Manager in Andrews' Mill on the Fall's Road. He knew men from both sides of the divide.

Eventually we were invited to come to a Family Week at Corrymeela. We didn't know any of the families there. Everything was very informal. We walked into Ballycastle and enjoyed meals cooked by Anna in the kitchen. We helped with the dishes after each meal. The highlight of the week was a trip to Rathlin. This was a great adventure! The boat was small like a fishing boat. We brought a picnic supplied by Anna and we returned tired and ready for a hot, tasty dinner. We put the children to bed at 7.30pm. The adults could then chat together in the lounge, content that they would hear their children if they needed attention. I enjoyed the freedom to talk about things which I would not have felt comfortable doing back in Belfast. Back home, we had learned to keep safe by never opening the door at night and in all conversations - *never mention religion or politics!* Before I came to Corrymeela, I would have been very shy about speaking out in a group, but I soon found my voice!

I remember strolling down to the small beach just below Corrymeela. There I came upon Teresa McCambridge, one of the Catholic mothers. I was amazed that there were about 8 children in the McCambridge family. Protestant families were generally much smaller than that! Also, at that first family week we met Craig and Elizabeth Cameron and John and Libby Lamont. They have remained great friends ever since. As the years passed, Sydney and I visited Scotland every year to visit our daughter Katharine, and we stayed with these friends for a night or two on the way.

After Sydney's accident, we were accommodated at Corrymeela in a specially adapted room at the side of the kitchen (in the old, old house!) I was glad of help for pushing Sydney's wheelchair and strong arms to help him in and out of bed! Sydney was a magnet for children, and he did not mind their lively attention. Some of the teenage children managed to push Sydney back up the hill when we had been into Ballycastle or down to the beach.

**Being a member of the Corrymeela Community has made an enormous difference in my life. Living in North Belfast and then Newtownabbey, we didn't have big numbers of Corrymeela members living in our neighbourhood.**

Doug Baker brought the idea of Cell Groups from America. Members and Friends could meet on a local area basis once a month and do what Ray suggested: "Corrymeela begins when you leave." We would take turns hosting the Cell Group in our homes. We had a short worship, shared any news from our local churches or neighbourhood and finished off with a simple supper. Currently I belong to two Cell Groups - one in Newtownabbey and the other further afield in East Antrim. I'm looking forward to these monthly meetings resuming following the end of the Corona virus pandemic. Latterly since I am confined to my home, I appreciate the Members' Prayer Guide and directory because I can keep in touch with my Corrymeela friends by phone or letter. I also look forward to receiving the monthly Members News.

THE CORRYMEELA FAIR was an important annual event for many years. On the Friday evening before the Fair, I would go to help set up the Linen Stall at the Fair. We received generous donations of good quality 'seconds' from a linen business in Ballymena. We pinned them up on clothes lines like curtains around the tables. I remember the vegetable stall run by Addie Morrow and his family. There was a book stall, a toy stall and another with knitted and crocheted items. There were also some paintings for sale.

On the Saturday morning Sydney, Ray and Pat Barry would sit at the entrance to the Whitla Hall, giving out information leaflets and taking names and addresses of people who might be interested in finding out more about Corrymeela. I enjoyed meeting up with friends from Corrymeela at this busy

Fair before Christmas, taking a break to enjoy some tea, scones and traybakes.

I always looked forward to the experience of Worship at the Croi. We were so grateful to take part in services led by folk from many different Christian denominations. Sidney and I were also given opportunities to travel with other members to Iona and to go on an amazing trip on the Corrymeela bus across Europe visiting Paris, Taizé, finally arriving in Berlin. Our fellow travellers were so kind to me and Sydney and it meant so much to us. Sadly, Sydney died in 2001 and since then the local Cell Groups and my weekends at Corrymeela have been a great support.

**RECONCILIATION** isn't easy. It needs to be a true experience where people feel free to share deeply on issues affecting their lives. They need to know that they are being listened to...not just being paid a kind of lip-service.

Reconciliation happens naturally when people get opportunities to spend time with each other and to build trusting relationships. I did exactly that at Corrymeela. Thank you for reading my story.