

## Corrymeela Connections by Peter Moss

In the summer of 1966, having left school, I played a lot of golf. Not well but you can't be good at everything. I played with Paul, whom I knew from school. He was decent golfer as well as a committed evangelical and fluent talker. One day he mentioned that he had heard about an event for freshers at Queen's being run by the university's Protestant chaplains (then called Deans of Residence). He was thinking of going and was sounding me out to come along.

The venue was a new place on the north coast near Ballycastle called Corrymeela, founded the previous year by a group led by Rev Ray Davey, who had played rugby for Ulster and been a prisoner of war during WWII. Ray had then been assistant minister in our church, McCracken Memorial, and my mother (after conversations with others) had recommended that I go to the chaplaincy when I got to Queen's. So, as well as giving Paul company, I was able to please her for good measure.

Ray had been one of three fathers who regularly watched my school rugby team from the under 13s upwards. His son, Robert, was a second row forward in the team. Ray once impressed my father by asking whether they had ever considered that the ways in which their children most annoyed them were also the ways in which the children most resembled them.

The other chaplains were Rev Cecil Kerr (Church of Ireland) and Rev David Turtle (Methodist). Cecil, who later founded and led the Christian Renewal Centre in Rostrevor, was often known as "Smooth Cecil" because of his hairstyle and soft manner of talking). David was pretty quiet, coming across as a bit lugubrious, and could therefore be underrated. He was a good listener and thinker and clearly cared about people.

The key person at the event was Desney Kempston, later Cromey, who had been Ray's Associate Chaplain for a couple of years and had played a key role in the establishment of Corrymeela. She was the inspirational figure in what was for me a life-changing event.

It was in truth a fairly straightforward few days, with daily talks and discussions to help us prepare for our new life at university, walks to what was believed to have been Marconi's cottage and singsongs in the evening. Among the favourite songs were "The Wild Rover", "Roddy McCorley", "The Wild Colonial Boy" and "Kumbaya". Meeting students who were already at Queen's also provided a very helpful orientation. What made the deepest impression on me, however, was the informal worship, where for the first time I felt I was with people who really meant what they were saying.

After this experience I could not wait to get to the Presbyterian Centre, where I met more Corrymeela people, some of whom became lifelong friends, and where I made my base for the next four years. I don't think Paul ever returned to Corrymeela but I've been around in one guise or another ever since.

Corrymeela was still in its infancy and had just two full-time staff on site: Norah Fair as housekeeper, Billy McAllister looking after the house and maintenance. A Ballycastle woman, Anna Glass, acted as cook and remained for many years, becoming a very popular fixture. There was already a summer work camp programme and at Christmas a new event was arranged, a mixture of conference and house party called Corrymeet, which initiated a series of gatherings, including Eastermeet, which also became a fixture in the calendar.

Corrymeet was a great success with speakers, lively group discussions, singsongs, night walks and personal encounters making up what Desney called "the Corrymeela experience". The house held about 70 people and 120 crammed in, including three Catholics, a bonus for the organisers because the natural clientele was Protestant. Even getting there proved an adventure, travelling by bus and being diverted around the countryside because of flooding.

I remember walking in a large group into and then beyond Ballycastle one afternoon. We were too busy being young, together and part of an exciting venture that we paid no attention to the fact that increasing time was now required for the return journey. Finally someone cottoned on and phone calls were made to recruit those with cars to come and collect us. We arrived back with sore feet but more or less in time for the evening meal.

Next up was the summer work camp programme, which ran from early June to August. I heard much talk about previous work camps, including one where the participants had come through the World Council of Churches and Gunther from Iceland had been noted for his lack of enthusiasm about the work element of the camp. Someone had written high on the walls of the Men's bathroom the memorable words "Gunther worked here [with the particular date]". I was sorry when someone later removed it, leaving a gap in our communal memory.

I was looking forward to having the work camp experience but was alarmed when Desney asked me to lead one, since I had never led anything. However, when I expressed my reservations, Desney was ready. She reached up, put her hand on my shoulder and said, with emphasis, "Peter, I believe you can do it". You did not say "No" to Desney so I had no choice but to accept. I then made sure to enlist for an earlier camp to find out how they ran.

The earlier camp in June (post-exams) consisted largely of students from the Presbyterian Centre, so I was in familiar company, which helped me to pitch in. There was also a group of young Germans with their leader, Herr Schultz, who organised them in a suitably Teutonic and highly organised manner. They had their own programme but we would see them at meals and tea/coffee breaks. Indeed, one of the most interesting features was the encounters and mutual interest between our young men and their young women. Encounters and attempted encounters made for an entertaining week, which, incidentally, was the last camp group to sleep in the house. After that the camps stayed in the cottages out in the grounds. Incidentally, Herr Schultz returned with another group some years later and revealed a more relaxed personality.

The work was physical and in my case was largely concerned with assisting in the attempt to build a dam on the stream below the main entrance so that there would be water available in case of a fire in the main house, which was wooden and a fire risk. It was an ambitious project not destined for lasting or even temporary success but at least we thought that we were contributing to the greater good of the Corrymeela project. Brian McKenna led this work group and devised a contraption involving planks and ropes to move the boulders we found in the stream to be the base for the proposed dam. After much trial and error the “McKenna patent stone-shifter” did work but required considerable assistance from the workers (not least to get the stones into the rope loop for shifting them). Finally Brian realised that it was more efficient if he just lifted the big stones under his arm and moved them himself.

It was possibly during this week that I heard about a previous camp in which the campers had spent the week digging a trench out to the two person cottages where their successors would sleep and eat. The trench was planned to take water pipes or electric cables but it was then decided that it was in the wrong place so the next week’s campers spent the week filling it back in. The third week’s participants then dug it in the right place. In future years, when giving talks about Corrymeela, I often cited this as an example of efficient organisation in that each group of campers had a clear task offering a genuine sense of purpose and each could be satisfied that they had done a valuable job.

There were of course periods for relaxation during the day. I was a runner in those days and the season was not yet over so I went for a few training runs to keep myself in shape. There being no suitable flat areas for regular sprint training, I went on “acceleration runs”, in which you started out slowly and accelerated gradually through the whole run over a couple of miles. I started from the car park and went up the road, turning right at the top and going on to meet the road from Ballycastle, then turning and heading back. While there were steep hills on this course, it gave the opportunity at the end to go flat out downhill back to the centre. There was a flat roof above the kitchen where people liked to sunbathe with a good view up the road and I remember Peter Montgomery telling me that my finishing sprint had been very impressive (no mean compliment from him!).

It may also have been this week that I heard about a previous year’s young and inexperienced camper who had been asked to make tea for the group’s morning break. All he knew about making tea was that you put in one teaspoonful (of real tea – no teabags in those days!) per person and one for the pot, which he had learned from his mother. There were 25 in the group and his well-intentioned effort was not entirely appreciated by the other campers when they discovered how strong the brew was. Everyone else laughed but I was shaken. I wasn’t a tea drinker and did not know the system of one spoonful per person and one for the pot. The thought of having that poor boy’s experience made me shiver although later I realised that in my ignorance I would have asked someone and therefore avoided the disaster. Still, I felt chastened and alarmed by my own sheltered upbringing. What else did I not know?

When my next camp came round in the first week of July, I was terribly nervous. My co-leader was to be Anne Watts, elder sister of Donald, whom I did not know very well and for some reason she was not going to be available for the start of the camp. Luckily for me, Desney stepped into the breach so I was sure that we would not make any basic mistakes. In the event, Desney had to leave early and someone else took over for a couple of days until Anne arrived so I actually went through three co-leaders during the week.

In those days the leaders' roles were strictly based on gender. The female leader was responsible for the meals and the male for the work. In the leaders' manual the female leader was reminded that the men were unlikely to be satisfied with a salad following strenuous work activity. As a dedicated non-salad eater, I heartily agreed. Knowing nothing about cooking (or the work) I was relieved that Billy McAllister was around to provide guidance, instruction and support. I did have the opportunity to practise the simple roofing skills I had picked up at the previous camp, knocking tacks into replacement felt roof tiles on the cottages and feeling surprisingly competent.

While the dates of the camp were fixed, participants from previous camps sometimes stayed on for a few extra days so we had quite a gathering initially. In our case, we were told that a lovesick American girl was mooning about at the bottom of the road hoping for a glimpse of her new love. A couple of campers were under the minimum age of 18 and we were asked to keep an eye on them to be sure that they were all right.

Robert was only 14 (his father did the religious broadcasting for the local BBC, which doubtless helped to secure his place) but proved to be a lively and enthusiastic worker and settled quickly. My abiding memory is of him rushing around with a wheelbarrow. Liz Maxwell (now Parkin) was a shy 16 year old and there seems to have been a doubt about whether it was wise for her to go. However, when her father heard that the co-leader was going to be Peter Moss, permission was granted. He had been at school with my father and reckoned that Liz would be all right with a son of Ian Moss!

Also at Corrymeela for the first time was Norman Richardson from England, brought by a Northern Irish friend. Norman and I became firm friends and he ended up moving here, subsequently founding and leading the Corrymeela Singers and joining the Community.

At one point we had a problem with some local boys who were walking to the site and causing a disturbance. There was concern that they might actually come onto the site and create problems. Such an issue was not covered in the leaders' manual so I had to accept responsibility. Taking the burly Norman with me, I went to the edge of the drop overlooking the road where the boys had gathered. In an early, spontaneous and inspired act of leadership, I sent Norman down to confront them while I bravely watched from above, ready to spring into action and run for help if things went wrong. But Norman, fierce and formidable with half a week's stubble on his chin, saw them off and they retreated.

Another feature of those early days was Bible study. For this week Rev Bill Jackson had agreed to lead the sessions. He had been a missionary in Malawi and cycled over to Corrymeela from Londonderry/Derry with his teenage son to lead the sessions. He was a most gracious man, warm and friendly, and he made a big impression on me. I was sorry to see him go, though we were to meet again.

Anyway, the week seemed a great success and raised my confidence in myself, as surely anticipated by Desney, and I looked forward to many future work camps.

However, it would be three years before I enlisted for another one. Although I would not have missed Corrymeet or Eastermeet, helping to plan and organise them, I spent the next two summers in America as counsellor in a YMCA summer camp, which gave me a whole new set of experiences. I was at a loose end when summer 1970 came round and spent about six weeks in various projects, meeting Doug Baker and the group of US volunteers he came with. My only week at Corrymeela was in the house with families.

This week was memorable for my first meeting with the Morrow family and I remember marking John down as a future Community leader (although I recall being torn inwardly as to whether Shirley or he would be the better leader in practice). The weather was appalling and I played Peaknuckle for hours on end with the younger ones there, including wee Duncan and even smaller Philip. This card game was a frequent Corrymeela late night activity for years, especially in the kitchen, and caused much merriment.

By chance, three of us (David Stevens, Liz Maxwell and I) had learnt the rules on the same evening from David Corkey, who had played it fanatically with his friends at university. When, on a later occasion, we played again with him and he tried to change those rules, we refused to listen and afterwards deemed ourselves the “keepers of the rules”. In fact the rules were quite complicated and in themselves caused much amusement. One of them was that a player incurred a two card penalty for swearing during the game. During this week, and after several days of virtually non-stop playing, I remember one of the kids blurting out at me “You never swear!” which I accepted as a big compliment.

During the next winter I was recruited by Rev Gordon Gray, the Presbyterian Youth Secretary and a founder member of Corrymeela, to lead a World Council of Churches (WCC) work camp in 1971. These camps were virtually legendary in Corrymeela circles and many people had attended and in some cases led camps. Desney and Derick Wilson were regarded as exceptional leaders by the WCC and others included John Hunter, Libby Bailey and Allen Mercer.

When I attended the leaders’ orientation meeting in Switzerland, I impressed the old hands by knowing about 10 previous leaders from Northern Ireland. They thought I must be very well connected but, of course, all those leaders had come through Corrymeela.

This camp followed the pattern of a successful one in 1970, working with teenage boys from the Shankill, Falls, Sandy Row and Ballymurphy areas – Doug and the other Americans had participated in the previous team. Both camps were sponsored by the Protestant denominations' youth officers. Research had been carried out during the 1970 camp, showing to some surprise that, although numbers had been equal, it was the Protestants who had displayed the characteristics of a minority. The issue of the double minority was of interest around then given that Protestants were the minority in Ireland as a whole while Catholics were a very substantial minority in Northern Ireland. While this did not lead directly to any great new insights or solutions, it provided important background understanding, which I always used in briefing international participants.

The five week camp consisted of an orientation (in Carlisle Memorial Methodist Church), followed by a challenging week under canvas at Guysmere, Castlerock. One of the tent leaders was Wilfred Orr, whose wife, Jenny, is now a Community member. Finally, we spent three weeks visiting the boys in their own communities, developing contacts there and providing recreational activities. This was an intense and exhausting experience but, after a short period of rest and recovery, I was ready for a more straightforward and presumably anticlimactic time at a Corrymeela work camp in August. This was to be a much more traditional affair – scraping a bit of paint off here and there and applying new paint as needed was the essence of the plan.

It began on the evening of Sunday 8 August 1971 and we went through the usual routines of getting to know each other and discussing the week's work plan and activities, none of which actually came to pass. In fact the rest of the week is now mostly a blur in my memory because early in the morning of 9 August the Northern Ireland government introduced internment (imprisonment without trial) in an attempt to counter the increasingly violent campaign by the IRA, involving bombs and shootings.

Unionist politicians had long advocated the introduction of internment, which had been used in previous IRA campaigns, apparently with some success. The police always said privately that they knew the leaders and they could be picked up quickly. However, the policy caused a huge national and international outcry and it soon became obvious that many of those taken away had not in fact been involved with the IRA or any violence. The resentment created in the Catholic population proved a huge factor in the conflict, which escalated dramatically.

Of this we knew nothing when we awoke the next morning to be told that internment had been put in place and there was shooting and rioting in the streets of West Belfast. The tension had been exacerbated by Protestant kids using the hit song "Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep" to taunt the Catholics by singing repeatedly "Where's your daddy gone?" Before long contact had been made, initially through Liz Maxwell, who was working in Ballymurphy. She recalls that, when she rang Corrymeela, the person who answered the phone was Peter Moss! The details of that conversation are now part of my general blur but I passed it on and a whole new train of events was soon underway.

Corrymeela had a Coordinator on site over the summer to liaise between different groups and generally supervise what was going on. That week Gilbert Bell was in the role, which was very reassuring since he was measured, calm and apparently unflappable. He told us a little later that, given the panic in the area and fears for the safety of the children there, an evacuation was going to be attempted and we were to receive some of the evacuees.

Since none of us had any experience of such a situation, everything had to be arranged on the hoof without knowing how many would arrive, what state they would be in and what was to be done with them. The question of duration would have to wait and the work camp as planned was abandoned.

The logistical problems were daunting. If more than a few turned up, it would be impossible to accommodate them on our site. Someone started to contact the local schools to see whether they could help and I was sent into Ballycastle to meet the Mother Superior (?) of the Cross and Passion Convent. This is my main clear memory from those days. I was, of course, a nice middle class Protestant who had had very little contact with Catholics outside Queen's University classes and informal activities. There was still only limited Catholic involvement in Corrymeela although, after major consideration, membership of the Community had now been opened to Catholics. (I became a member in about 1968 and was one of those pushing for the change.) I knew little or nothing of the formal Catholic institutions or structures. And, never knowingly fashionable, I was wearing a favourite garment, which seemed wildly inappropriate for the occasion.

As a camp counsellor in Massachusetts, I had been introduced to the Peanuts comic strip and had returned home with a selection of books, t-shirts and sweatshirts purchased in case I never saw them again, an internet being far beyond our imagination.

On this morning I was wearing a bright red Snoopy sweatshirt, particularly striking because it showed an angry Snoopy with a caption on the back saying "I wish I could bite someone. I need a release from my inner tensions". I did offer an apology but Mother Superior was unfazed and agreed that the convent would take a certain number of children. This was, of course, a good billet in that the school took boarders and had proper beds and dormitories. (The sweatshirt later caused a minor sensation when I wore it to a performance at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and attracted the interest of several glamorous ladies in ball gowns during the interval – I saw them discreetly walking round the balcony to get a better look.)

Someone else was busy rustling up camp beds and bedding for use in the other schools and settling the practical arrangements, still without having any idea who or how many were going to arrive. It was a long, uncertain day filled with a mixture of tension and excitement underpinned with adrenalin. Plans were concocted, activities were discussed and, crucially, the Corrymeela network was informed what was happening with an appeal for help. As a result, many people

dropped what they were doing (including jobs, temporary work and holidays) and flocked to Ballycastle.

Later we heard first-hand from Ray about his hair-raising journey to Belfast that day to collect children in the minibus and how he managed to fend off the men who wished to hijack it. This story has been recorded elsewhere. Given that we were hearing reports about widespread shooting and gunfights, we had a real sense of encountering history as it was happening.

By all accounts, the situation around the Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge and New Barnsley estates quickly became chaotic as arrangements were made to send the area's children to locations all over Ireland. Siblings were separated and the parents often had no idea where they had gone. Huge telephone bills were run up in all directions as frantic family members tried place after place to try and find them. The Corrymeela bill was also enormous - I heard £100 in less than a week. I used to have an early 1971 English broadsheet newspaper (decimal currency was introduced on 15 February 1971) and the cost was 4d - 4 old pence, equivalent to less than 2 pence today; that paper now costs £2.50! And it was £100 in both directions for the Belfast office was also fully involved.

When the children arrived at the convent, the sisters had recruited a substantial number of local women who apparently lined the stairs, grabbing unsuspecting children who were then thrown in the bath and scrubbed. Trust in Belfast hygiene clearly did not run deep on the north coast . . .

Arrangements at other sleeping locations were more informal but we soon settled into a regime of coping through activity. I have little specific recollection of what I was doing, though I was involved in outdoor games along with general supervision. We welcomed a number of visitors, some of whom proved to be important for Corrymeela's future programming and relationships with public bodies. Various public sector staff, including social workers, were dispatched to Ballycastle to find out what was going on with the children and, presumably to assess whether there were any issues in what we would now call safeguarding.

They were generally dumbfounded to encounter a fully functioning activity scheme run by volunteers recruited and acting spontaneously but with a high degree of organisation and responsibility. Dumbfounded and impressed. They found it hard to believe their eyes. And yes, this high-functioning programme was put together and run by the early Corrymeela!

One of the people I welcomed was Willie Gray, who had started school on the same day and in the same class as Robert Davey and me. In fact, when we moved to Inst, Willie and I were in the same class with David Stevens. Willie followed his brother by moving to Campbell College the next year and, having shown no previous sign of sporting talent, astonished me by turning up and finishing second in the inter-school sports in the 100 Yards. We were rivals for a couple of years and he won most of our races then, though he faded later while I continued to develop.



Anyway, he had been sent by social services and, as I recall, was most impressed by what he witnessed. Evidently glowing reports were made and over the next period, public bodies became willing to encourage and support Corrymeela in its programme, especially with young people from areas suffering violence. I have always seen these partnerships as pivotal in our development, though someone else will have to tell that part of the story.

Obviously there was considerable angst and worry among the children about the situation back in Belfast and their own families. At least one had to be taken home when a family member was killed. He may have been a little boy with bright red hair, though it's hard to be sure now. I was told during the week that there were a total of one and a half Protestant families in Ballymurphy and, if so, he *may* have been part of the half.

Over the course of a few days things settled down and eventually it was possible to re-unite families and wind down our operation. The work campers dispersed without scraping off the paint or replacing it with fresh coats but doubtless someone else was able to do this in subsequent weeks.

I left the site tired but content, allowed the adrenalin to subside, and retreated into the future.

The following period was significant for me. I was called to the bar (became a barrister) in September and appeared in court for the first time on 28 September. As a new barrister I had to have a "master" and John McKee of McCracken agreed to have me as his "pupil". He also asked me to take over the church youth group and responsibility for the Christian Aid collection, which in the circumstances I could hardly refuse. I later took the youth group to Corrymeela, which was the first visit for a young and very enthusiastic Roger Courtney . . . Roger was a talented singer and songwriter and his song "The Pollen of Peace" became virtually a Corrymeela anthem.

I also received a telephone call from Bill Jackson, who was by now minister of the Townsend Memorial Presbyterian Church in the lower Shankill Road area of Belfast, asking whether I knew anyone who might be prepared to help with a new club for teenage boys in the Percy Street area. Inspired by the ecumenical camp, I volunteered and found that the club included a few of those boys.

This was an educational experience for me and the leaders were delighted to have a barrister helping out! So I got undeserved brownie points there for being a barrister and equally from Corrymeela friends for being involved in the lower Shankill, which was regarded as a very tough area.

During the next couple of years helping with the club I encountered the emerging UDA, found one of the boys guarding a UDA no-go area and was called on by Doug Baker, now back in Belfast, to visit the parents of one who had been sent home from a trip for setting up a no-go area on the boat to Scotland. I met his father, who told me he had "nearly broken his hand on that wee boy's head". The son was later jailed for armed robbery on behalf of the UDA.

The other one I particularly remember was David who had been on both the ecumenical camps. He was a decent lad but had taken terrible stick in the Shankill when a photo appeared in the local press showing him playing cricket with a Catholic boy - he was quickly dubbed a "Fenian lover".

Later on he and a friend found a revolver on waste ground and tried it but it would not fire. So they decided to play Russian roulette, which was fine until the gun suddenly went off and killed the friend. David was sentenced to life imprisonment for manslaughter. Another member of the group was found shot dead on a rubbish tip.

I also took the Percy Street group to Corrymeela and, while they enjoyed it, I could not persuade them to go on a night walk to Marconi's cottage because they were so terrified of the dark in the absence of streetlights.

Incidentally, Bill Jackson later took charge of the McCracken Memorial congregation for a period and was very well liked. He told my parents that he had once slipped into the back of a public meeting in the period before independence in Malawi. The meeting was being addressed by Hastings Banda, later the President, who was in full flow attacking white people and proclaiming that they must all be driven out of the country. Then he saw Bill standing at the rear of the crowd and stopped. "Except that man!" he cried. "We need that man!"

Incidentally, there are more McCracken connections in the Corrymeela story. Ian Irwin was a founder member and Alex Wimberley later served as the congregation's minister for a number of years.

During my time with Percy Street I also joined a committee based in Agnes Street Methodist Church (also in the Shankill area) where I first met Rev Harold Good, an ecumenical enthusiast and later the first Centre Director at Corrymeela. He was succeeded by Bob Livingstone who, with his wife, Shelagh, had spent years in India. Shelagh later became a member of the Community and is now an Associate member.

At both Percy Street and Agnes Street I was able to use some of my legal skills by helping to draft their constitutions, which were required by government as a condition for any financial support.

While I remained a member of the Community, I had little more involvement in the programme, though I was elected to Council in 1975. By that time I had become deeply involved in the wider ecumenical movement, organising Ecumenical Youth Service (EYS) work camps in Ireland and chairing the board, which now ran them in Europe, succeeding the WCC.

The board organised the annual leaders' orientation event in the week before Easter and, not without difficulty, I persuaded them to hold it at Corrymeela in 1976. It had always been held in continental Europe so this was a major decision. A key question for the board was "What will the weather be like?" They were

obviously concerned about encountering the wild and rainy Irish weather, of which they had often heard.

So I promised them that we on the Irish Committee would organise the weather and assured them that it would be good, on which basis they agreed to come. In fact the weather in the week before the event was horrible – just what the Europeans had feared.

The meeting was to start on Monday and the skies cleared that morning. Days of glorious sunshine followed and many of the group sessions were held on the grass between the house and the cliff top. I was relieved as much as delighted. The bus to take the participants back to Belfast left on Friday and, as they boarded it, the first drops of rain fell . . . I decided instantly that I would never make promises about the weather again – and I never have.

So, while I had wider ecumenical contacts and activities, I had less direct involvement with Corrymeela. However, the members were always clear that this outside activity counted as part of my member's commitment

Later in 1976, following a fateful telephone conversation with David Stevens, a new direction opened up which led me to a job with the World Council of Churches in Geneva. But that is another story altogether.

Peter Moss  
3 March 2021

What does reconciliation mean to me?

Reconciliation means healing, acceptance and sense of belonging between people of every creed, colour, country and characteristic.

How has Corrymeela involvement affected my life?

Corrymeela sent me out into the adventure of the wider ecumenical movement and held me while I recovered. It then introduced me to Mary and held us both as family in community.