

**THE CORRYMEELA COMMUNITY
AGM NOVEMBER 2006**

LEADER'S ADDRESS

NEW TIMES

Three quotations. The first from J.K. Galbraith 'Meetings are a great trap. However, they are indispensable when you don't want to do anything'; from Groucho Marx 'those are my principles – and if you don't like them I have got others'. And from a headline in the Guardian about Ryanair 'Keep it simple – and don't talk about the add-ons'.

I want to announce a Corrymeela victory. In early October Ian Paisley met Archbishop Sean Brady – representative of the anti-Christ. The world continues and yet something has changed. Ray Davey is the winner in the consistency of principle stakes. Ray recognised in the 1960s that something was crumbling in the Ulster that he knew and that there had to be new imaginings, new conversations, new meetings and new journeyings. And we are one incarnation of that recognition. Paisley resisted new imaginings, new conversations, new meetings and new journeyings - and its over. Even the immovable moves, even dinosaurs evolve. The rest is mopping up. The Italian Marxist Gramsci said 'The old is passing away, the new is not yet come and in the meantime various morbid symptoms appear. We are in the time of morbid symptoms, but the old is passing away.

The St Andrew's Agreement is an agreement in delicate choreography, and the self-righteous and the unrighteousness are to be joined together in unholy matrimony on March 26 with an engagement, perhaps without actually meeting, on November 24, such is the strange politics of undesire. We need to understand what the restoration of devolution means and will do – if it happens. First of all it is another step in a long journey. It is not the end of the journey. At best it may be a sort of half resolution and there are huge uncertainties hanging over it. How it will work – if it works at all – will be through trade-offs and clientalism, and it will not be a pretty sight. We will be the sort of people traded off against and we will not be the favoured people of either Sinn Fein or the DUP. The power of public money could be used to intimidate and silence those who are not clients of the DUP and Sinn Fein. There may well be paralysis at the heart of government on major policy initiatives for what can these people agree on. Sectarian turkeys will not vote for inclusive Christmas's. What we may hope for is for some desperately needed stability for 10-15 years, and then perhaps new more inclusive political forces may emerge. This unbrave new world if it emerges is going to be strange. But maybe it is as good as it gets for a while.

The Corrymeelas of this world – independent voices, people who know it is better together, people who actually believe in a shared future – are going to be more than ever needed in this strange new world that may be opening up. We need to look beyond tiredness, self-absorption and money pressures to what we are being called to be and do in new times. This is long term business and we need to think how we

inspire a new generation – the people who are really going to carry us into a promised land.

And two lines from the poet Michael Longley for new times

'When all the reeds are swaying in the wind,
How can you tell which reeds the others bend'

And a line from the English novelist Iain Sinclair

'Who you walk with alters what you see'

We are in a place of change and change is happening to us. Lots of resources – both government and voluntary – were put into Northern Ireland from the early 1970s, and we have had our fair share. Some of that is ending and there is nothing we can do to stop it. We are reverting to normality; there are going to be less resources around. This is not about failure and blame, but about facts and living in reality. This is also about the 'morbid symptoms' I was talking about earlier. Re-adjusting is often hard and painful. No-one can say how many staff we will have in 5, 10, 20 years time. What you can reasonably ask of a Leader, a Management Team, a Council is that they face reality, make the changes that have to be made, look for new possibilities and, if possible, find new ways.

Jean Paul Lederach, the Mennonite conflict expert, spoke 2 or 3 years ago at a CRC Live Issues event. He was asked to look at the likely implications of peace for peace and reconciliation organisations based on his knowledge of a number of post-violence situations throughout the world. He made a number of points and raised a number of questions.

- There was going to be a diminishing outside investment in the peace infrastructure in Northern Ireland.
- Not all or most organisations who have received money are going to survive.
- Voluntarism will increase as a category.
- A question: how much of the work can be a function of voluntarism and good will?
- Some things will be absorbed into state functions and public bodies, e.g. into education. Question: how do you encourage these bodies to respond creatively and flexibly?
- The private sector will take over some functions and charge fees.
- People who pay the full cost of things demand high quality.
- The financial dependency tests; if your funding is cut in half can you survive?
- The disappearance test: will the work go on?
- The future test: can you identify three things that will make a difference in 10 years time?

Jean Paul Lederach says that in an environment like ours we need to sustain a purpose with a capacity to adapt. Part of adapting is asking the questions: what is missing? Where are the gaps? What is our niche? And he talks about the virtues of simplicity and responsiveness. I believe we need to strategically concentrate our efforts and resources.

At the same time we need new journeyings, following the Spirit of truth which is Jesus Christ. We need to recognise that we are in new times. There is a danger that we have become comfortable with ourselves and we lack external focus. We need to get out more and we need the stimulus of new members.

James Alison, the Catholic theologian who will be with us in early January says, in his latest book, that there can be an apparent heaviness in reconciliation work. Look at all the work we have to do. But he goes on to say that from a Christian perspective this is profoundly wrong, that we should start from 'the extraordinary sensation of being in luck, of having fallen, despite ourselves on our feet in the midst of ridiculously good fortune'. Is that not our actual situation in Corrymeela? Have we not, despite ourselves, despite all the nonsense we find ourselves in at times, fallen on our feet in the midst of ridiculously good fortune? Sheila Hancock, the actress who is a Quaker says 'I believe in living adventurously' and then she goes on to say 'my Quaker phrase book says "we may risk pain as well as feeling joy"'. It is to the pain I now want to turn.

The redundancy, Knocklyon and Reading decisions have caused hurt, anger, pain and anguish to different people. I want to make a number of points.

- Reality is a tough taskmaster and avoidance of reality and delay simply make it worse. We want things to carry on as before but reality – often through economics – is telling us they cannot.
- There is no easy way to do these things. Hurt, pain, anger and grief come with this territory because we are talking about real endings. It is a sort of death and things – particularly relationships – are not going to be the same again.
- And in Corrymeela – which is both an organisation and a community – it is actually even more difficult. An organisation has procedures; it operates in a world where there are laws and people have contracts and rights. Community is about relationships, where mutuality operates and there are informal understandings. People want to be part of this 'Corrymeela'. But Corrymeela is also an organisation. I straddle both as Chief Executive of an organisation and Leader of a Community. In fact we are all part of both. Most of us are happier to be in a community and not in an organisation, but we cannot simply be in a community, particularly when we are employing staff. I understand the anguish in the question: how can a Christian community treat people like this? And in a world of employment law you have to follow procedures, you have to be an organisation. And, further, disaster lies in store for people who do not follow procedures. The following of procedures and the potential for litigation restricts what can be said, so openness and transparency are limited, necessarily so.
- There is always damage for the organisation that carries out such actions – the laws of unintended and unexpected consequences kick in. There is survivor guilt and grief and surrogate anger. There is collateral damage – all of this I acknowledge. More than an organisation we are a living organism

and all organisms require careful nurturing and we are an organisation embedded in a network of fragile human relationships and what we have gone through has caused damage.

- Revisionism kicked in during the summer when the meaning of 'Corrymeela' in Irish became no longer 'the hill of harmony or sweetness' but 'the lumpy crossing place'. That more truly expresses the reality. We have to deal with the reality of imperfection and recognise that things are often simply lumpy. And still it is a crossing place and there are few of them in Northern Ireland.
- Being both community and organisation does not make for easy decision making. Over the last 3 years Council members have found themselves making friends redundant or people they have known for decades and there are people who are both Council members and involved in the Knocklayd Committee. These are difficult burdens to have to carry. Trustees of a charity are required to act collectively and to act for the good of the whole charity. They have to put aside their personal loyalties.

None of this is easy and I would like to thank Council members for carrying their burdens bravely on behalf of the whole Community. A culture of meeting, discussion and participation does not adapt easily to the need for decisive action and often the requirement of confidentiality. We are reviewing our governance but please understand none of these things are easy.

- And I would like to thank Ronnie who has had to bear the day to day burden of the redundancy decision. We are lucky to have him.

In the midst of all of this good work continues to be done, and it is important that we do not lose sight of that. I have asked four staff members to talk about one particular part of this work to give you a flavour.

David Stevens