

The Corrymeela Community

AGM November 2007

Leader's Address

Wake Up and Smell the Coffee

What I said at the community meeting on September 15 tried to spell out some of the realities we are facing and sought to give some elements of a vision to meet them. I don't want to repeat what I said then. What I want to explore is the struggle between yearnings – the wish to be this, to do that and realities which often mean: you can't do this, the wish to be this is unaffordable and so on.

Senior staff and Council members struggle with difficult dilemmas and the tensions that these produce:

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| Ronnie: | increase the occupancy but don't increase the staff;
have more self-programming groups but preserve the
Corrymeela ethos at the Centre. |
| Jo | bring more unrestricted money but do it in Corrymeela ways. |

are some examples.

And we struggle with the reactions: How can we make people redundant? Suggest we close Knocklyd? Make groups pay more? Suggest volunteers contribute? And on it goes.

These reports show how we have sought to deal with some of these dilemmas and tensions. Can we do better? The answer is: yes. But we cannot easily remove the dilemmas and tensions. This is the heat in the kitchen which you – and I repeat you – ask Council members and senior staff to work in. You are perfectly entitled to disagree with the decisions but please understand that some of this is not easy and no group of people would find it easy. It is remarkable, given the nature of Corrymeela, that we have achieved so much. David Mark expressed some of the dilemmas and tensions rather well in an e-mail he sent me after the September community meeting and I want to read part of it to you.

In a community sense we think of ourselves as a self-sustaining community – a community that controls its own destiny, is self-funded, able to take all our own decisions on our own terms.

This is not the reality:

- We gave up some elements of independence when we took on core funding – granted our applications were on the basis of our unique vision etc.

- We became to some extent a service provider when we accepted project funding.
- Now we have created a centre and organisation to deliver services for our funders – while maintaining our vision as central to our way of working.

So we have a half-way house providing a service while having the ability to maintain and promote our vision.

The community enjoys the scale of this position but still likes to think of itself as independent and outside the realities of being a service provider.

Perhaps we have two options:

1. Scale the community back to a self-sustaining model – sell the centre and base ourselves at Knocklayd with a part time leader, volunteer couple, community volunteering and financial donations from those private individuals who support what we are doing.
2. Wake up and smell the coffee-
 - a. What % of our income comes from members' contributions?
 - b. Accept that we have taken the "king's shilling" and that, provided we do not compromise ourselves and we maintain at all times our vision, this model allows us to fight way above our weight.
 - c. We have to think strategically and maintain our sustainability to deliver the service that funds this model, e.g. rebuild the centre.
 - d. Consider the community energy and capacity including age profile and patterns of new membership – i.e. who will run Corrymeela in 2020?
 - e. Accept that to receive grants we have to have the highest level of financial controls, solvency and reporting – statements like "don't worry about money it will be alright" works for 1 above but not 2.

You don't have to agree with David's options but in setting them out he shows some of the underlying issues that are facing us, and were implicit when we took grant aid way back in the 1970s. It is only in this decade that the things once hidden have become clear and that those who live by grant aid risk dying of it.

I think we need Community conversations about the realities facing us and the constraints being placed on us. But perhaps more importantly we need new conversations about the journeys we now need to make as a Community of faith in the new Northern Ireland that is opening up.

The Community was formed in the 1960s – a time which seems an eternity away now. It was a place of Unionist domination and Nationalist resistance. It was a place of silences but also of hope of change which Corrymeela expressed. There was the new hope of Vatican II and there was Paisley ranting and bawling. There was a wish among some for new expressions of faith and for new forms of faith

community. The smoke of the battlefield of the Troubles surrounded us, entered our souls, obscured much. Now the smoke of the battlefield is disappearing. What do we see? What are the possibilities? Where is the hope?

Alf McCreary's new book charts the cycle and the impact on Corrymeela: from a sort of peace in the 1960s to a sort of war in the 1970s, 80s and 90s to a sort of peace now. All through this period there has been the presence of Ray Davey and the presence of Ian Paisley. In a sense Ray's vision has won but the people who have inherited the earth are the Paisleys and the McGuinness'. The Chuckle Brothers rule OK. The challenge is to move from a sort of peace to a real peace which has changed the historic pattern of community-relating here, and an honest peace which has dealt with the past, that remembers so that the past does not repeat. I cannot say that the recently published Programme for Government is encouraging in any of this. We are back to silences and evasions.

So where do we put our Community energies? What are the things we are being called to do? What does being a community of faith mean today? How do we attract new members in new times? These are some of the things we need to be having conversations about. There are winds of change howling all about us. There is no retreat for us. We cannot stay where we are. We have to get out of our comfort zones and be prepared to go on new journeys. In 1965 we were called, like Abraham, to set out for a place that we were to receive, not knowing where we were going (cf Heb 11: 8). We have received much – and we grow from our past and we only flourish when we are in touch with that past. And by faith we continue to travel looking for a better country. We have to in the words of the Quaker Advices and Queries 'live adventurously'.

David Stevens