

Leader's Address to AGM November 2008

Sign in Coventry Cathedral 'Closed. We regret we are unable to open the treasury today.'

The financial crisis that the world is going through has exposed a whole series of illusions that have governed economic life for 30 years. Tesco ergo sum. We consume therefore we are. Things hidden have suddenly been made clear. As Andrew Simms, policy director of the New Economic Foundation has put it
'This is to finance-driven capitalism what 1989 was to Soviet Communism'

The world has changed and it will have consequences for us – there will be less voluntary donations. Foundations and trusts will have less income to distribute. Fewer people may have the money to come to the Centre.

And there are consequences for Northern Irish society. In the Government's Programme for Government the common project between Sinn Fein and the DUP was prosperity. To say the least this policy has question marks to it.

There has been stasis at the heart of government. The Executive has not met since June, not even when the world's banking system was falling apart.

What this stasis shows is how difficult this peace process is, how long it will take. And why we, and others like us, are needed. And why we need to stick around. Which means we need to act in ways that give us the possibility of sticking around.

This means understanding the world we are now in

- we cannot use a story about the troubles to seek funding any longer
- we have lost that specialness given by violence

The American writer John Updike recently wrote a poem called *Portrush, Northern Ireland*. In it there are the lines

... These people had a war,
And peace partakes of the sea's tedium

Or as Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, speaking about another context says

The long march back to boredom and stability

We are moving into a world of restraints, limits, choices and where there are no guarantees. Welcome to the normal world.

In this situation it is important to be clear about what one is about. Our primary purpose is not to be a community relations delivery mechanism or a training agency

in diversity and conflict management, or whatever. We are not in the business of bringing solutions or doing things to people.

Jesus didn't bring solutions to his world. He brought intuitions around strangers, hospitality, vulnerability, being a follower, about being de-centred and not in control. The Gospel world is a world of astonishing inclusions and frightening exclusions – astonishing in who is found there and frightening that we may not find ourselves there. Jesus brings questions, he brings disturbance, he brings a different way of seeing and being attentive. We learn to see and listen.

Ray learnt something about Christian community out of his wartime experience; he learnt about the need for reconciliation out of the destruction and desolation of Dresden. He had an intuition in the 1960s that Northern Ireland had to change. And Corrymeela is the working out of that. Ray had a quality of tenacious hopefulness.

I want to focus on this tenacity. The story about tenacity that most moved me recently was the 106 year old black woman from Atlanta who went out to vote for Barack Obama. She had suffered exclusion and discrimination; had been denied the right to vote and she had lived to see the first black President. People misunderstand Ray if they think he was a softie. He could be very tough instead. Tenacity is about standing for something – it is about having a centre. In faith terms for us that is Jesus Christ. Having a centre means that you can be provisional about all sorts of things; there is no need to have answers to everything. But we need answers about some things – particularly about the hope that is in us.

Hopefulness is the refusal to give into anxious questions, to act without guarantees. We do not know what works. We are in a world of seeds – and some fall on stony ground and mustard seeds which can grow very big. Remember this quality of tenacious hopefulness – we are going to need it.

And we live in a world of deep paradox, as all religious bodies do. They have been given a glimpse of a gospel world and they are organisations like any other. Gospel communities are not in the business of outcomes, output, strategic plans, etc. Organisations in this modern world are. Kathy Galloway, Leader of the Iona Community, describes the relationship between community and organisation as follows: the Community is 'not just a membership movement' but also 'a voluntary sector organisation with around 50 full-time and part-time staff and an extensive volunteer programme'. She goes on to say that 'it is through this organisation we do our corporate work as a movement and it is the organisational face of the Community that is for many their first encounter with it.' That seems to describe Corrymeela as well. Which brings me to the strategic plan. Such a plan should be taken with appropriate seriousness but it is not the most important thing in the world or for us so we have to hold the paradox of Gospel community and organisation together, to negotiate it.

A strategic plan gives us directions to go in and what the document is trying to do is give us some key directions to go in, in the next period. In a restrictive funding environment the programme priorities are both about seeking to continue existing things – but perhaps in different ways, for example, the Summer Programme – and doing new things e.g. work with refugees and asylum seekers, faith and life work in

Belfast. This plan should also be seen as a transition to an ever more restrictive funding environment where Peace money and International Fund for Ireland money will be gone. Thus the importance of completing the site developments, planning for how we staff and use the Centre post 2010, the future of No 8 and Knocklayd, how we use volunteers, how we develop fundraising in a context where we cannot use the story of the troubles, how we contain costs and do things in lower cost ways, and creating a context where members and what they do in their lives and work becomes more important.

I want to return to tenacious hopefulness. This decade for Corrymeela has been challenging, is challenging and will get more challenging. We live in that reality and that reality can sometimes make it appear that we are drowning in a sea of moans. Another part of that reality is actually we are privileged people in the things we have experienced and the people we have met. We should not forget it. Kathy Galloway says of Iona, 'We do extraordinary work with a worldwide reach and impact. It is life-changing for many, and life-saving for some. It succeeds as much as it does through the dedication of staff and the support of our members.' Isn't that something we can say of ourselves too? And we should not forget that the journey we signed up for – and we do it every year – is a long-distance journey, and is beyond our life spans and requires tenacious hopefulness.

I want to close with Larry from the l'Arche Community on the Ormeau Road. Larry celebrated his 40th birthday in October. He hired himself a dress suit and bought a black shirt and a red tie. His speech at the party was the following four words 'Happy man – Thank you.' When it is his turn to pray at table or during community prayer time he looks around and begins:

Thank you for plates, knives, forks, floors, walls, ceiling, cooker, dinner, dvds, tv, tv licence, beers, friends, table, chairs, that's all. Amen'

We could learn something from Larry.

David Stevens