

Leader's Report to 2009 AGM

A Time of Transition

In August we commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Troubles and all sorts of figures from the dim and distant past reappeared. It was also the time of the Tall Ships and feel good and normality. Where are we now?

Many people are clear that they do not want to return to violence but they have been unable to articulate what they want beyond violence. We have a political agreement with shared institutions but we have been unable to produce a clear and compelling vision of a peace we want to create together – was the peace process even about a shared future? We have political institutions that are fragile and precarious and teeter towards paralysis on important matters. Violence has largely ended but the conflict hasn't, and reconciliation remains elusive, although we have achieved an awful lot in moving from a violently expressed conflict to a better managed one. We have political institutions (and a class of politician) with a huge disconnect with people (and reality) on the ground – working the institutions and making politics work, while important, is not enough. We are in a world of transition – the old is ending, the new has not yet come, and in the meantime there are painful symptoms.

We have dismantled many of the paramilitary structures and created a policing vacuum on the ground, and people are moving into that vacuum. We have significant number of disaffected and marginalised young people who yearn for the excitement and sense of community that violence creates and say 'It's our turn now'. Republican dissidents and elements in the loyalist paramilitary sub-culture have a ready audience for same. The middle class has largely opted out and has absolved itself of any responsibility for the conflict. Many think that issues of peace, reconciliation and community relations are irrelevant in a post-agreement world. They simply want to get on with their lives. For many middle class young people the Troubles are history. The world of virtual reality is much more real than the world of the Troubles. Some of the former activists in the Troubles find it easier to meet than do the bystanders. Many of these activists are more honest than some of our politicians or people in our churches, who scapegoat others or wash their hands. And there are many weary people.

Many of the approaches to healing and reconciliation are incredibly superficial, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact we have had more money spent in peace per head of population than anywhere on the planet. We constantly underestimate the depth and difficulties we are trying to deal with. Peace-making is more difficult than war-making. In regard to civil rights in the States we tend to think that Rosa Parks sat on a bus, Martin Luther King gave some speeches and boom, change happened. Short-term approaches to a 30 to 40 year task are inadequate and sometimes make things worse (e.g. produce disillusionment). We are in a world of often mundane and inglorious work.

Last year at this time we were deep in a world-wide financial crisis. Resolute action managed to save the banks and the wider economy. The end of the financial world

is no longer nigh but we have not heard the end of this crisis. It is clear that we are in for a decade of austerity. There are going to be increased taxes for all of us and there are going to be substantial public expenditure cutbacks in Northern Ireland after the Westminster election. Combine these with the end of Peace and IFI monies and there are going to be less financial resources for people like ourselves in the next decade. We are going to have to look for other sources of income and there is going to be a need for a significant re-shaping. And it means that we need to be clear about what we are doing. In a world of less financial resources for peace work we need to:

- Help people feel pride in themselves again
- Focus on what produces well-being, rather than always focusing on problems
- Involve people in meeting their needs
- Think about what people might be positively attracted to
- Bring people into real relationship – It's relationships, stupid.

Last year has been a time of transitions.

- Transition from one Centre Director to another and it is right that we express our thanks to Ronnie Millar for all he did for us – it was not always easy.
- Transition from one set of buildings to another. We opened the new Coventry building and the refurbished Croi. We are about to demolish the Cottages and the Village and build new residential accommodation. It is right that we express thanks to Helen Baird for her scrupulous attention to detail and her good humour in taking criticism.
- A time of new posts and an end to existing posts. Action Around the Kitchen Table (the faith and life programme in Belfast), the Inclusive Neighbourhoods Project, the Faith to Faith, Face to Face Youth Leadership programme, the Forgiveness in Schools project in partnership with Peacelines, the partnership with Co-operation Ireland, an Teach Ban and Glenree in the Irish Peace Centres Consortium – all of this represents a lot of vibrant programme. And there has been the end of the full-time Family Work post and it is right that we thank Rachel Craig for all she brought to this work.

In times of transition it is easy to focus on the negative. We need to celebrate the things we do well and volunteering is one of them, as Brid Cullen's report and the discussion at the last Community Weekend showed. Wear and tear on people, crises and challenges, failure to meet some people's expectations, and sometimes, errors of judgement come with the volunteering territory, as does growth, transformation and success. Can we do better? Can we build on success? Yes, we can. Let's do it.

In the last year we said farewell to two of the founding generation of Corrymeela – John Morrow and Kathleen Davey – last year's AGM was the last Corrymeela event that Kathleen was at before she went into hospital. Their Services of Thanksgiving were inspiring occasions and profoundly Corrymeela events. All that diversity of people that John and Kathleen had come into contact with – and there was a faith centre that held it all together and spoke through their lives and relationships. We are at a time of transition in Corrymeela. How do we pass the vision and the Story to a new generation? How do we attract and make room for new people? The story of

Corrymeela cannot be about what we did in the Troubles – although we can be proud of that. It is what we stand for now, it is our identity now, that counts. It is about what it means to follow Christ in this confusing post-Troubles, but not post-conflict, world that matters. What does ekstasis – stepping out of the normal way of seeing things – mean for us today?

We are going to continue to say goodbye to buildings, ways of doing things, to people, to programmes – there is going to be sadness and pain along the way. And we are going to say hello to new buildings, new ways of doing things – which will bring challenges and opportunities, to new people, to new programmes. In doing all this we need to hold on to a vision and be part of a Story that is beyond us. So it is not just telling 'our' story, it is moving in a story, a Resurrection story.

Iris Robinson and Sin

(This is a reflection following the Study Weekend Jan 2010)

There is a certain realism required about the human condition – the persistence of sin in all of us. And that often the worst corruption is the corruption of the good. This is Pharisee sin – the sin of the 'religious'. The Pharisee puts himself above others – particularly the people who commit sexual sins, and the sins of impurity. It is interesting that the only people who Jesus really condemns are the Pharisees.

We are all fascinated by the 'big' sins associated with sex, power, money and violence. And the Robinson story has all of these except violence (to date). And all of us are fascinated. But part of the story we are loving is that here was a woman who put herself on the moral pedestal (the Pharisee position) and now has been plunged into hell. And we think: great, you have got your come-uppance. So from being the 'good' person (in her eyes) she has become the 'bad' person (in every person's eyes). And maybe her tragedy is that she has become the 'bad' person in her own eyes (thus her mental health crisis).

There are 'facts' – what she did or didn't do and she must be accountable for these. But making her the 'bad' person, over and against the rest of us (who are of course 'good' people) makes her a scapegoat. Issues around sex, power and money are constant temptations for most of us. The Pharisee position is again most of us. Iris thought she was better than most of us – now most of us think that we are better than her. And because she has thrown stones at others we would gladly throw stones at her. We are playing the same game. Ironically Iris may now be discovering the loneliness of the scapegoat – the position of many gays she scapegoated.

There is 'knowledge' in the Christian tradition which may help about scapegoating (and Jesus was the ultimate scapegoat), about the possibility of new start, about being held in line, about accountability, about truth telling. In particular there is 'knowledge' about sin, about the persistence of sin, and about the relational dimension of sin: that it is often out of poisonous relationships that sinful acts come. And finally sinfulness is something shared by all human beings. A recognition of

solidarity in sin is a realistic recognition of a true human solidarity – we are all caught up together in our sinfulness. It is part of being human. Being human is not denied and cancelled out by the fact that people (including ourselves) have ways of being human which deny the being human of others. This is the tragedy of being human. ‘Judge not that you be not judged’.

David Stevens