

Speech for the Opening of the new Coventry House

On behalf of Corrymeela, I would like to welcome you here today and thank you for coming.

We are in a beautiful place. The poet John Hewitt speaks of this part of the world as follows:

And yet no other corner in this land
Offers in shape and colour all I need
For sight to touch the mind with living light.
(from *The Glens*)

And John Hewitt has a connection with Coventry. Passed over for the Directorship of the Ulster Museum he became Director of Herbert Art Gallery and Museum.

We are in a place called Corrymeela. Corrymeela is often translated from the original Irish as 'the hill of harmony' or 'hill of sweetness'. But there is another and more probable translation. The name comes from a neighbouring townland, Corrymellagh, in the parish of Culfeightrin. Culfeightrin means in Irish 'the corner of the stranger'. Corrymellagh means the 'lumpy crossing place'.

Perhaps this etymology is more apt for us: a place where differing groups, strangers to each other, are offered the opportunity to cross over into another space. And the crossing is 'lumpy', not easy, full of pitfalls.

So today we affirm the Irishness of this place. We are also in a place where we can look over to Scotland where many of us came from – and to the island of Iona with its rebuilt abbey and the Iona Community who have profoundly influenced us.

We are celebrating today the opening of a building called Coventry House – there's a little bit of English history here too.

We are in a place where migrant workers have come to work – we have two Polish workers on our staff.

We are in a place where every year there is a week for refugees and asylum seekers and their families.

This is a place where people come from all over the world to stay – our volunteer team this year includes an Indian, a Sri Lankan, an El Salvadorean, a German, Americans, as well as people from Northern Ireland.

This is a place where all sorts of people come – Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama to name but two, opened by an Italian Protestant pastor who saved Jews in Florence during the War.

This is a place where Prince Charles opened the Main House and where today the President of Ireland opens the new Coventry House – a building built with American, European and Northern Irish money.

This is the North of Ireland today – a place of broken history – a contested present, and a hope that all these comminglings will lead to a better history. This is a place which dares to speak of moving beyond brokenness to healing.

Ray Davey, the Founder of Corrymeela, stretched our imaginations to take on the suffering of a wider world. In a sense Corrymeela has its origins in the rubble of Dresden, which he was in a few hours before it was bombed in February 1945 – not the bombings of Belfast. And that leads me to another bombed city, Coventry.

Following the destruction of Coventry's medieval Cathedral in 1940 a charred cross was erected behind the altar amid the ruins and later the inscription "Father Forgive" was made on the stonework. Three of the roof nails were put together into the form of a cross (the Cross of Nails) and this later became the symbol for an international movement of healing and reconciliation, at first between Dresden and Coventry but later extending to a world-wide network of Cross of Nails Centres.

Corrymeela became a Cross of Nails in September 1971 and the first Coventry House was largely funded by the Coventry Cathedral Cross of Nails Network under the inspiration of Provost Williams and Canon Horace Dammers. It was opened in 1976.

The first Coventry House over the years became the home of over 300 one-year volunteers and some permanent staff and a meeting point across many international cultures and traditions. A residential house where the sharing of life has thrown many of our young people into contact with their contemporaries from other cultures through living and learning together in community.

We want the new Coventry House also to be a place of encounter. As John Morrow – the second Leader of Corrymeela – said of the first Corrymeela Coventry House.

It is an important physical symbol and reminder of our international solidarity with movements for healing the wounds of history in many parts of the earth. It reminds us that our wounds are not so unique as we think and that in sharing with others we can deepen our own understanding as well as share our experiences and healing with others.

We want the new Coventry House to be an international place of sharing with others.

The ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral are another important physical symbol and in those ruins every Friday at noon the Coventry Litany of Reconciliation is prayed, reminding us of our brokenness and our continued need of reconciliation. This being Corrymeela time we are going to say it a little late.

Reconciliation work is a stubborn engagement with the realities of division – the crossing is lumpy and recent events remind us of this. Thus this new Coventry House symbolises an audacity to hope, as did the act of Provost Howard who in the

ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral, had inscribed on the wall behind the altar the words 'Father, Forgive'. Note not 'Father forgive them'. This recognises that all involved in war and conflict have some level of responsibility. Provost Williams' act in 1940 was a daring, controversial and prophetic one. This litany is an invitation to humility, acknowledgement and repentance and reminds us of the people we find difficult to include or don't want to be here.

The Litany of Reconciliation

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,
Father Forgive.

The covetous desires of people and nations to possess what is not their own,
Father Forgive.

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth,
Father Forgive.

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
Father Forgive.

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,
Father Forgive.

The lust which dishonours the bodies of men, women and children,
Father Forgive.

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God,
Father Forgive.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as
God in Christ forgave you.

Ray Davey at the opening of another building on this site challenged his audience

To dedicate ourselves to work more courageously and more intelligently for
that society that is built on real consensus. Always in the knowledge that
Christ is Lord and has the whole world in his hands.

Despite the passing of the years and the progress that has been made, the
challenge remains valid.

Thank you.

David Stevens