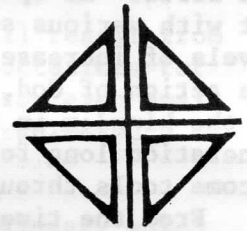

The

CORRYMEELA PAPERS



Learning Together in Northern Ireland

The Seed Groups of the Corrymeela Community

Douglas Baker

When Jesus began his active ministry the focus of his preaching and teaching was the kingdom of God, which he announced as being "at hand". Repeatedly he used the way seeds grow as a parable to help his followers understand how God's kingdom grows in the world. He spoke about a sower whose efforts at scattering seed along the ground met with various setbacks - and about how some of the seed nonetheless produced various levels of increase. He spoke also about how seeds that are sown grow unnoticed, through the action of God, even while we sleep. And in all of these parables about the growth of the kingdom in the world, Jesus spoke a powerful message of hope for all who in each generation long for the spread of God's kingdom and through their own lives seek to become tools through whom it is nurtured.

From the time of our own beginnings in the mid-1960's Corrymeela has always been concerned about finding authentic models for Christian education with young adults. About three years ago we began to see the connection between these parables about seeds and the process we had been developing in our own work. The flaws in some of the models we had developed were beginning to appear. For several years we had operated what we referred to as "Resource Groups". These were initially to be a kind of training experience for youth who would become a resource to us in working with other groups. They came into the programme with some expectation of "doing" something with or for Corrymeela. For some of them that expectation was almost a pressure. As time went on we realised that we could neither guarantee that we would make use of all those who wanted to become involved in leadership ways immediately, nor could we claim that those we would like to involve should be using their time and energy within our own programme rather than other settings, nor could we assume that all (or even most) of those taking part would ultimately choose to have leadership responsibilities.

WHERE PEOPLE REALLY LEARN

Gradually we modified our expectations and our approach. We saw that the most important learning taking place came not through structured sessions but from the sheer contact of the participants with one another. The groups were mixed: Catholic and Protestant, working-class and middle-class, students, workers and unemployed, those with strong church connections and those with none at all. That had been planned; but we perhaps never understood its full importance until we began to witness just how much it meant to those now becoming a "resource" to each other. The second realisation we came to was that just as the experiences of their peers in this group were great "resources" for learning, so were each member's own life experiences. So much of what each of us had experienced had never been examined, understood, reflected upon and used by us at any depth as a source of learning. So personal development, rather than leadership training, was becoming the focus for our group work with young adults - and the seed a parable for our experience together. Obviously, a change in names as well as approach was called for and Corrymeela has now offered several Seed Group experiences for young adults.

Each programme consists of six monthly residential weekends at our Ballycastle centre, and sporadic contact between participants outside of those times. The group is made up of approximately twenty eighteen to twenty-one year olds, along with three or four older adults who help with different discussions. There is a deliberate attempt to have a balance of male and female, Catholic and Protestant, working-class and middle-class, church related and those with no obvious interest in Christian faith, and also a variety of life experiences such as further education, work, and unemployment. We also have built in a mixture of Northern and Southern participants in each group.

By calling these Seed Groups we have several things in mind:

- we recognise that the greatest potential for growth in the group is already within the group: in the faith, questions, struggles for understanding, and unarticulated affirmations stirring within us.
- the food for growth will come largely from the life experiences of each person,

- fully opened up and understood, utilized for growth with each other's help; whatever growth there is will be gradual, perhaps frustratingly slow and at times painful - requiring a commitment to each other and to a process over an extended time; and
- a risk factor: there is no guarantee in advance about what will result from planting and tending seed that is own. We can have no set expectations for ourselves or each other in this group. But our hope is that from even small beginnings there may develop something very significant for ourselves and others.

The aims we have identified for this programme are:

REFLECTING in a supportive group on all of the experiences and influences which have shaped who we are - and on the issues and choices which confront us and challenge us in terms of who we shall become.

UNDERSTANDING ourselves

our relationships with our families
 our relationships with our peers and other adults
 our relationships with members of the opposite sex
 and the social, political and religious dimensions of the society to which we belong.

RELATING Christian faith and language to our own experience and a Christian understanding of reconciliation to the many divisions of our society and world.

BUILDING bridges of trust, understanding and personal friendship within a group spanning different social, educational, denominational, and political backgrounds.

ENCOURAGING the development of initiatives for reconciliation within and between different localities and groups, including groups in our own home areas.

HOW EACH PROGRAMME WORKS

A thumbnail sketch of the process used goes something like this:

Throughout the year we identify potential participants from other groups coming to our centre with schools, youth clubs, parishes, and family groupings. These are youth indicating a desire to become more deeply involved in Corrymeela experiences.

On the first weekend our priority is group building. Each weekend begins with some fairly lighthearted games and communication exercises to give us a common experience as a jumping off point. More time needs to be used at the beginning to develop trust and group spirit. People come not really knowing what they have let themselves in for; so some time is given to clarifying what this is all about. Then, through the use of life maps we begin to share the journeys each of us have made up to this point in life - the highs and lows, the people and events which have shaped us most. Two things often happen: people are reassured when they discover there are others in the groups who share something of their own experience (e.g. it becomes much easier for someone in the group to state that they failed an exam when three others have already shared the same information; or two or three who have had parents die find some strength in chatting with each other), and they are astounded by the ways in which others in the group have had such different experiences to their own and they become excited about what they can learn from each other. Then we move on to making some group decisions about how we will operate as a group for the rest of the weekends.

The second weekend deals with family relationships. Here drawing the relationships in our family at different times in the past and using role-plays to grapple with present tensions frequently leads to a lot of healing. Most problems seem to be found in other families also. That is reassuring! Sometimes the ways that others have approached them give us a clue for how to make a new start ourselves. That is hopeful! Sometimes we decide families are not so bad after all and find the freedom actually to tell parents in particular that we love them. Quite a few participants have reported

on the following weekend that they went home and talked with their family in ways they hadn't for years.

Our third weekend looks at sexuality and relationships. Here it can be important that this is done in a group you have learned to trust and a mixed-sex group, but not a group you see every day of the week or who knows your boyfriend/girlfriend.

THEN WE FACE THE POLITICAL TENSIONS

Next comes a look at "the Troubles" and how they have influenced our lives. There is no question but that this can begin to divide the group again (which is one reason why it is left until later in the series). But by now relationships are fairly well established, and the topics explored have shown us how many experiences we have in common - regardless of denomination or political loyalty. Most of this age group are too young to remember the beginnings of the present period of violence in Ireland. The questions we use to open up discussion generally lead to the recognition of just how little information they possess. Only at that point are they interested in having some new information provided. Most feel quite depressed by the hopelessness of the situation. The recognition that we need to look for a different way out of the present impasse also leads to an openness to exploring Biblical models of peacemaking. By far the most important though, is the relationship built up within the group and valued by the participants - many of whom would not have anticipated such contact or bonds a few months earlier.

WE DO FIND SIGNS OF GROWTH

The next weekend is on the meaning of life. Faith and doubts are both explored; cartoons are drawn on the images of God which no longer make sense to us, which we can then laugh at and discard, while asking - "Behind all of that what is there that does speak to us or still makes us look for a spiritual dimension to life?" Again, expressing doubts is often easier outside of your own parish group. Because we begin with such questions, denominational debates fade into the background. There are common questions here for all of us, and the group are not interested in scoring points against one another. Instead, as the process goes on, the participants are open to understanding each other's positions, and even valuing things from other perspectives.

Our last weekend is more a time of evaluation and celebration. Having begun the year looking at the journey we had each been on up until that point in our life, we now look both at the journeys (individual and corporate) we have made during the past six months and the journey ahead. By now some of the participants will have dropped out and the growth among the others will be uneven. But, almost in spite of our planning and tending of the group, there is growth. The promise in the parables Jesus told about seeds is true. The most obvious signs of growth are greater self-confidence and greater tolerance. Already some of the participants are producing a harvest in terms of the use they have made of the bridges with others in the group and with their respective circles of friends or churches at home. Others are still just beginning to break through the surface of the ground or don't show any outward signs of germinating at all. Nonetheless, the experience is still within them and in other soil or with time will form part of the food for growth wherever the seed scatters.

Working with such a model has been a liberating experience. There is a design, but not really any curriculum. There are topics for exploration, but no body of information to be absorbed. There are hopes but no expectations in terms of results. There is freedom for individual learning to follow different paths and also for the Spirit to work in ways we can't programme or control. Perhaps the most exciting part, though, comes from the growth of a learning community, with trust, caring and mutual sharing of gifts, so different from most of the models used in both secular and Christian education.

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