

Ken Irvine's story

CORRYMEELA, the early days – a personal retrospect

In the years after World War II there was a growth of communities and community centres throughout the Church all over Europe. One of the first such communities was Iona which had in fact been established just before the War. The Iona Community was founded in Glasgow and Iona in 1938 by George MacLeod, a Church of Scotland Minister who after a distinguished record in the First World War became an outspoken pacifist. His work in the dockland parish in Govan, Glasgow, led him also to a profound belief in socialism.

Iona is a small Hebridean island off the west coast of Scotland, cradle of Christianity in Scotland, where in 563AD the Irish monk Columba (Columcille) established a monastic settlement that evangelised large parts of Scotland and the north of England and became an important centre of European Christianity. In the Middle Ages it became the site of a Benedictine abbey, and over the centuries it has attracted many thousands of people either as tourists or as pilgrims.

George MacLeod took groups of unemployed skilled craftsmen and young trainee clergy to Iona to rebuild the monastic quarters of the mediaeval abbey and also to build up a common life by working and living together.

A number of Irish Presbyterian clergy had become members of the Iona Community, among them John Morrow and Alec Watson. When I was at Queen's there was a small support group of Friends of Iona who met regularly in the Presbyterian Student Centre. From time to time some of us visited the island itself. I was there for a week in the early 1960s. I cannot recall what the topic of discussion was but I do remember meeting an Australian on my first day there. I mentioned to him that the only Australian who I knew was a Methodist Minister called Semple who had spent a year on an exchange in Dublin when we lived there. The response was, 'Lloyd Semple? He's my best friend!' It turned out that this other Australian was also a Methodist Minister.

I also visited the centre at Agape in the Alps of northern Italy where Pastor Tulio Vinay had established a centre. Vinay had been a Waldensian Pastor in Florence during the War and had hidden Jews to keep them safe from the Fascist persecution. He set up his centre in Prali in the mountains of Piedmont north of Turin. The conference which I attended was concerned with the United States. It could be regarded as a rather radical viewpoint on the USA. Certainly there would not have been many supporters of the Republican Party there.

A third centre of influence was at Taize in France. I never managed to visit it but I enjoyed listening to the unique music that the Brothers of Taize had developed.

Back home in Belfast, the Presbyterian Dean of Residences (i.e. Chaplain) at Queen's was Ray Davey. Ray had also been involved during the War in a Chaplaincy capacity and had been taken prisoner early on. He spent time in Italy and later in Dresden where he was captive when the Royal Air Force carried out its massive bombing campaign at the later stages of the conflict. Ray was a quiet man who had a profound influence upon generations of students, not just of the Presbyterian persuasion. In the

summer of 1964 Ray had a meeting with John Morrow and Alex Watson to draw upon their experience in Iona. They decided to call together those they believed would be keen to launch a Community relevant to the local situation. Some 50 turned up, from all backgrounds though at that stage perhaps still predominantly students or recent graduates. They were most enthusiastic about the idea of a new community which could counter apathy and complacency and open up new possibilities in Northern Ireland. Meetings and discussions continued over a period of months.

Suddenly early in 1965 the group was told that the Holiday Fellowship Centre near Ballycastle in County Antrim was up for sale. That news immediately concentrated our thinking and what had been somewhat theoretical gave way to a concrete issue. One Sunday various small groups travelled by car to Ballycastle and viewed the Centre. In many ways the place was ideal, there was plenty of space with a large dining hall, lounge and conference room and in the grounds were 20 chalets which could be used for additional groups. On top of this, the setting was stunning as it looked out across the Sea of Moyle to Rathlin Island. The drawback was that the building was in some disrepair and much rehabilitation work would be necessary, but most of it would be within the range of voluntary labour. It was unanimously agreed that we proceed with the purchase of the property. This was an act of faith as the group had no money. Within a week or so that was all resolved either by donations or loans and the premises were purchased. During the following two summers work camps brought the premises into habitable condition. The old wooden sinks which dominated the kitchen were replaced by modern (and more hygienic) fittings and the place generally was brought up to standard. The buildings had been painted a sombre green which rendered them invisible against the rural background. An early work camp was engaged in repainting everything brilliant white. Naturally the painting was done from the top to the bottom. This caused some puzzlement to people in Ballycastle a mile or so away who saw what appeared to be a building materialising from roof downwards!

In October 1965 all was ready for opening and Pastor Vinay came to County Antrim to deliver an inspiring address. In his response, Ray Davey said that he hoped that Corrymeela would become known as 'the Open Village'.

Those early days involved a mixture of work camps and conferences. The first conference which brought Corrymeela to the public attention was held at Easter 1966. It was realised that this was a significant date, the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising in Dublin. It was decided to hold a landmark conference with a view to looking forward rather than back. The Prime Minister of the day, Captain Terence O'Neill was invited and it was with some anticipation that he arrived to speak on the Friday evening. O'Neill had taken a major risk earlier that year in inviting the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic to visit Belfast. He had incurred the wrath of much of his own party by so doing and his visit to Corrymeela could have been a flashpoint. It was a major speech, the text of which can be found in his collected speeches, and it provoked much publicity and discussion but the event passed off without any disturbance.

In those early days I was involved with the running of two events, one was an annual Open Day when we invited all and sundry to come and see the place and stay for a ceili in the evening. At that time the BBC in Belfast used to broadcast ceilis and the caller was Jack Sloane who was in the day job an Inspector of Taxes. He also covered

Irish League soccer for the BBC and this was how I had got to know him. I asked him to come and 'call' at the Corrymeela ceili and he kindly agreed.

The main event for which I was responsible was a conference entitled *The Arts in the Community*. It seemed to me that as Corrymeela was concerned with the community generally and as I had even then an interest in the Arts I might help to look at the place of the Arts and the effect which they could have on the community at large. Today, that would involve a lengthy study with consultants brought in from England. And so, having obtained the agreement of the Community, I set out to gather together a programme of speakers.

I started with the Arts Council, making contact with the then Director, Michael Whewell, but without any success. I then approached the Chairman, Captain Peter Montgomery. He was unable to come but arranged for the attendance of the Council's Exhibitions Officer, Brian Ferran, who was described by the Captain as 'a very charming and well informed young man'. Brian did of course go on to become Chief Executive of the Arts Council in the 1990s and had a major influence on the growth of the Arts during his tenure. I contacted Tyrone Guthrie and Brian Friel but neither was able to take part. Guthrie was engaged in directing at the Opera in Dusseldorf. Friel by then had adopted the approach of keeping out of the spotlight and did not take part in discussions or give interviews. I had heard him in discussion some years previously and perhaps some of the less perceptive questions put to him may have influenced his decision to withdraw.

In the end I had a full programme which ran over the weekend 19th – 21st April 1969. On the opening night Dr Alan Price of the Department of Education at Queen's gave a talk on Literature Education and the Community. Dr Price had been recommended to me by Raymond King who had studied under him at Queen's and found him most inspirational as indeed did those who came to Corrymeela that evening. Saturday morning dealt with Music in the Community. I had engaged Professor Philip Cranmer to give the talk but he had to drop out with just days to go. I was left with little time to find a suitable replacement but found a willing one in his colleague Professor Raymond Warren. Warren was perhaps an even more appropriate choice as he was Professor of Composition at Queen's and had a short time previously written a piece which had been performed in St Anne's Cathedral and which called for clerical soloists from various denominations, truly a cross-community composition. In the afternoon David Hammond, folksinger and collector extraordinary, gave an illustrated talk on the place of folk music in the community. I still have a tape of his talk which I copied and gave to him many years later when he came to **aspects** to film a reading by Seamus Heaney. On Sunday for the final session we had a discussion on The Arts and Community Relations chaired by Martin Wallace and involving John M Knipe (one of the leading figures in amateur theatre and a good friend in Bangor Drama Club), Patric Stevenson (artist) and John Boyd (playwright), the first two being also members of the Board of the Arts Council.

Marketing was a vague art in those days. I sent a brief press release to the media and got a little coverage. We circulated schools and I managed to borrow a mailing list of people who were interested in the Arts. Those were the days before Data Protection legislation! In the end there was quite a decent gathering which was enjoyed by all and perhaps it sewed a few seeds.

Through Corrymeela I met many people who were a privilege to know. One of the earliest was Billy McAllister. Billy was a retired railway official who had spent most of his life in Dundalk. Early on he offered to take up residence in the rather weather-worn structure at Ballycastle and for years he was resident counsellor, listener, adviser, general handyman and clerk of works. Many a person coming to Corrymeela found that Billy was to be their guide and friend. William Rutherford was a Consultant Surgeon who had spent much of his life in India. He came back to Northern Ireland at a time when the Troubles were brewing and his surgical skills were much in need. There must be hundreds of people in Northern Ireland today who owe their wholeness of body to William's surgery. I once remarked to a medical colleague that William was unique to which the response was that not only was he unique he was also a nice man. The two things do not always go together. Billy and William are no longer with us. Nor is Ray Davey who lived on into his nineties. His influence upon hundreds, if not thousands, is incalculable. Others still with us are Craig Cameron, my predecessor as Treasurer and a fellow student in the Law Faculty, Noel Rea who was Secretary when I was Treasurer, his brother Desmond who went on to become Chairman of the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, John Hunter who served as a Permanent Secretary in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Donald Watts who became Clerk of Assembly in the Presbyterian Church and John Dunlop who was one of the most prophetic figures to hold the Moderatorship of the General Assembly.

At that opening ceremony Tulio Vinay had expressed the hope that Corrymeela would become 'a question-mark to the Church everywhere in Europe'. Sadly, the Church lacked and still lacks those who will be question-marks. Too often things are taken for granted and not questioned. I recall hearing W.L.Northridge, Principal of Edgehill College, talking to a group when I was at Queen's. He expressed the view that if one did not have doubts then one was not thinking. I have never forgotten those words. Faith without doubt is meaningless. Indeed, faith and doubt are and should be in constant struggle.

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