

Rosemary Dunlop's Story

In her third year at Queen's University Rosemary heard Tullio Vinay speak in the Whitla Hall and was impressed by the ethos of the Agape Community. Meeting Ray a short time later she expressed her enthusiasm for the possibilities offered through working together as a community. Ray introduced her to an already existing Community group which met regularly in the Presbyterian centre. The group shared a simple meal together, then, using a liturgy developed by the Iona Community, prayed together. About ten people were in the group; Desmond Rea, Bill and Angela Breakey, Pam Compton and Des Dornan are remembered.

It became apparent that some other groupings were also enthused by the idea of establishing a community somewhat similar to Agape. Various locations were explored for their suitability and after some time, the Ballycastle site became available and the decision was made to settle the community at Corrymeela.

What moved you to get involved? Rosemary grew up in Comber, youngest of a family involved in youth organisations and regular Sunday school and church service attendance in one of the two Presbyterian churches in the town. She was aware on Sundays, that there were people making their way to the small Roman Catholic Church but never had occasion to know or interact with them. Within the family there was little reference to a Catholic/Protestant issue; her father was a businessman who interacted with colleagues without concern for their religious affiliation. She respected and loved her maternal grandparents who had worked a small farm in County Tyrone, who spoke of Catholics helping Protestants, and vice versa, at harvest time, but yet, not really trusting one another. Her grandfather had signed the Ulster Covenant. Her memory of these grandparents living in her home for more than fifteen years was of fun and love and caring and of the contentment and faith of their devotional life.

From time to time there would be Orange parades, and 'Orange services' in church. On one occasion a large meeting was held in the Andrews Memorial Hall and some primary school children had been invited to hand out programmes of proceedings to people attending. Rosemary's perception of that evening was that the important people on the platform were dictating the future role of the organisation and the members on the floor were given no opportunity to express their views, either to agree or disagree. She had a sense of unease, of this not being good.

In 1961 Rosemary went to Queen's and in the general mix of contacts and friendships that developed it did not occur to her to check out the religious affiliation of others. The opportunity to interact with different people was welcome and good. The experience of listening to Tullio Vinay was like a new exciting vista opening up - that community could be a better way to understand, listen and work together, rather than the divisions of the past. Theological differences did not have to be a separation matter but could be explored and appreciated without a rightness or wrongness being assigned.

Rosemary was married in 1965 and she and John lived in a flat in the Lisburn Road. They were founder members of the Corrymeela Community and as often as they could they got involved in the various activities in the early days of the community. She recalls that after their daughter was born in 1967 she came with them to Corrymeela. In 1968 Rosemary and John moved to Jamaica where they maintained an interest in the work of the Community but obviously could not be involved as active members.

Following return to Belfast in 1978 and involvement within the church, the Corrymeela Fairs were a great opportunity to meet up and share news of the ongoing work in the community, and regular information came through the magazine; this helped keep Rosemary in touch when it was impossible to be more fully involved. The annual service of commitment was attended each year and was another point of contact within a service of worship and joy and thanksgiving. The work of the Community has remained a strong interest and focus of support.

In more recent years Rosemary and John took part in two weekend conferences organised by Desney which attracted some others who had been committed Corrymeela members in the past. To experience again the ethos, the conversations, the challenges and questioning within the faith context was reminiscent of earlier years at Corrymeela and was stimulating and refreshing. To be able to talk and discuss issues when the outcome was not required to be a conclusion to anything; not to have answers, but to think outside the box gives a buzz and often starts a process of different ways of thinking. There is a journey of hope and excitement.

Rosemary's involvement in couple counselling endeavoured to provide such space and opportunity for people in turmoil and distress, to allow them to progress and move forward into their own resourcefulness. This way of thinking expresses her sense of how her Christian faith is to be lived; it is a journey. There were possibilities and opportunities within Corrymeela to talk and be open, to tease out such thinking, whereas it was less likely to happen within most church settings. To be informed and to experience such respectful listening to a range of opinion by people of faith Rosemary found liberating.

Rosemary got involved in planning and running women's weekends alongside Mathilde Stevens, Shirley Morrow, Vivienne McCappin, Maighread Kennedy and others for six years from 1985. The women participating came from different areas and churches. The weekends grew out of the frustration of women feeling they had a contribution to make which was not acknowledged within their church setting.

Being involved in Corrymeela fitted with Rosemary's interest in peoples's stories and concerns; an interest which had led her into couple counselling. Building relationships and gaining understanding helps to shape a key part of reconciliation.

John and Rosemary experienced church life in Jamaica as open and accepting and Corrymeela's ethos was similar. Accepting difference and building relationships she sees as an ongoing journey within faith communities, in the political arena and in our neighbourhood and communities. Respecting and valuing others, looking to their interests as well as our own is crucial for the good of our society.