

LEARNING IN CORRYMEELA

Introduction

This article has its origins in the work that Future Ways was commissioned to do for the Community Relations Council on self-evaluation in relation to its core-funded groups (of which Corrymeela is one). The Future Ways work has had a focus on groups' learning about reconciliation and community relations work.

In addition, in the Government's Shared Future document on community relations, Corrymeela is referred to in regard to best practice in reconciliation work (section 2.8.17).

The Importance of Vision

Corrymeela began with a vision of Ray Davey, of Christian community and reconciliation which took the form of a centre and a community in 1965. One of Ray's key themes was the idea of the 'Open Village' which he expressed at the opening on 30 October 1965.

We hope that Corrymeela will come to be known as 'the Open Village', open to all people of good will who are willing to meet each other, to learn from each other and work together for the good of all.

Open also for all sorts of new ventures and experiments in fellowship, study and worship.

Open to all sorts of people; from industry, the professions, agriculture and commerce.

This vision expressed a commitment to encounter, interaction and positive relationships between all sorts and conditions of people. The vision was global as well as local. It was not just about community relations. It was about a totality of relationships. The vision put an emphasis on openness and hospitality. Hospitality and reconciliation are linked. In the words of Henri Nouwen "Hospitality is about offering people space where change can take place".

At the outset the following core aims were identified:

- a) To help to train Christian laymen/women to play a responsible part in society and the Church.
- b) To provide opportunities for retreat, so that people under stress, or wishing to discover new meaning in their lives, may find quietness for readjustment.
- c) To provide opportunities for industrial and professional groups to meet for conference and study.
- d) Through work camps, to bring together crafts people and voluntary workers in a realistic Christian fellowship.

- e) Through youth camps, to provide a meeting place for young people of this and other countries.
- f) To provide a meeting point for reconciliation work in the wider community and in Church life.

These core aims bring together a number of themes:

- Training, particularly of lay people
- Retreat, respite, renewal
- Encounter
- Volunteering
- An international dimension
- Community building
- A ministry of reconciliation

which have been important in our history.

The Importance of Relationships

It is a central insight of Christian faith that relationships matter, that they breakdown constantly and have to be restored. Ray Davey offered a language around relationships and reconciliation which others applied to politics (Frank Wright, Duncan Morrow), conflict transformation (Derick Wilson, Colin Craig) and faith (the Faith & Politics Group, John Morrow). This language around relationships and reconciliation has been taken up in political discourse. In the Shared Future document it is said “relationships matter and are central” and “moving from relationships based on mistrust and defence to relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust, is the essence of reconciliation” (both 1.4.1).

Reconciliation is a Practice not a Theory

Ray Davey was a person who enabled young people to take significant responsibility and provided a context for incredible learning (learning by doing). Ray and other important individuals in Corrymeela’s history provided key models and conversation partners for learning about reconciliation. They taught the practice of reconciliation. It is not enough to ‘know’ (ideologically, theologically, intellectually) about reconciliation. We need places where people can experience trust and reconciliation. We need people who can ‘model’ reconciliation. Thus encounter and relationships are central. It is only in encounter and relationships that words like trust, reconciliation and forgiveness become real.

The early experience in the work camps, which helped to reconstruct the site at Ballycastle, (and later in the family weeks) created a strong context of community building and learning. And the Corrymeela Community, through being a group of diverse people committed to and involved in reconciliation, created a context for learning – both structured and unstructured – about reconciliation. This has continued all through our history. It has had

implications directly for the work of Corrymeela but Corrymeela members, staff and long-term volunteers have carried their learning throughout Northern Irish society and beyond. Many Corrymeela members (nearly 400 in 40 years), former long-term volunteers (upwards of 300 since the early 70s) and staff are active in a whole variety of reconciliation and community relations activities, and some have created their own training agencies in community relations and conflict transformation issues.

A Crucible of Violence

The Troubles, starting in 1968, created a wholly new context for the work. The focus that had always been one of bringing people together intensified, but providing respite for people, often from the most troubled areas, became of vital concern in the work.

This led, through the seventies, to a rapid expansion in the number of programmes at the Centre. This required us to seek additional funds. These funds also enabled us to develop the physical infrastructure and residential facilities. By the mid-seventies we had established sectors of work within the schools system, youth work, family and community groups and churches.

A Range of Different Programme Models

Initially we had hoped that by bringing people together in an environment where they could live, talk, work and play together, that the experience could help break down the barriers of ignorance that separated them. It was not that this was unsuccessful but we soon realised that more was required. At the beginning we had also used the time-honoured conference model. This revolved round the speaker or speakers who had come to impart specialist knowledge and skills. It was basically a teaching model. We began to realise that while this was useful and had its place other models were required.

We moved to models that began with the participants, where they were and their life experiences. Greater emphasis was put on people sharing their experiences and developing relationships between participants.

We widely used a seed group model where a diverse group of people (particularly young adults) worked together over a number of weekends. Each weekend had a particular theme, e.g. family relationships, the meaning of faith, sexuality and relationships, the Troubles, sectarianism. This model has a strong emphasis on personal development.

Safe Space

We developed the understanding that it was not just the bringing people together that was important but also that the context within which the contact happened was crucial. The way we set up our initial group processes and

allowed the programme to evolve was key to achieving the outcomes that the groups hoped for. We referred to this as the 'creating of safe space'. It was providing such a space where difficult stories and experiences could be raised and shared that took our programmes into a new level of encounter.

The phrase 'safe space' is an easy phrase to use and is both simple and quite complex at the same time. It includes something as simple as a smile for and the recognition of, the stranger arriving at the Centre. It involves giving a direct welcome and ensuring that the unit in which they are staying is warm, welcoming and friendly. It involves setting a contract with the group based on our hopes, fears, expectations and limitations. Above all, it allows, through evolution of the sense of safe space, for people's stories and questions about one another to emerge. In a safe space people can be vulnerable and vulnerability also creates safe space.

The language of 'safe space' has also found its way into the Shared Future document (see 1.3.14) and others have grasped the importance of spaces, "in which different groups can share a similar experience of discovery. Sometimes such spaces allow people to detach aspects of their identity (cultural, vocational, sexual) from what they have hitherto seen as its essential and dominating character. Often, it is within rather than between groups that the real processes of discovery occur. In any event, it is in such spaces – youth groups, drama workshops, sports teams – that some of the most imaginative and successful forms of community healing have taken place." (David Edgar, the Guardian, 14/09/05)

The Telling of Stories

We have learnt the importance of people telling their stories. We are 'storied' people, we understand ourselves and what has happened to us and our communities in and through stories. We can decide how we want to tell our story – it is always possible to tell it another way. You cannot tell a story without someone listening to you and you have to tailor the story to reach the other person. What happens when you tell your story in the presence of someone from the 'opposing' community? What happens to you when you listen to their story? Does your story alter? Do you alter? It is always possible to tell it another way and that the 'other' finds a different place in it. It is always possible to hear the other person's story in a different way. And stories can be added to.

Creative and Adventure Learning

To support the process of sharing stories whilst also trying to create a sense of community, we had always used different activities. We had a well-established set of recreation resources, arts and crafts and we, occasionally, used drama, beach walks and forest walks to provide variety. However, for the most part, these activities were used to fill the 'spaces' when we weren't

'working'. The 'real' work, in the late seventies and early eighties, was in the meeting, the discussion and in the talk.

By the early nineties, we began to understand the limitations of talk or discussion. Often, when we evaluated the group's experience we would regularly find that the group would name the creative learning and recreational activities as having been the most important part of it. Many of the young people and some of the adult groups had little or no experience in and/or comfort with engaging with each other through words. What was done in group settings and how it was done, was much more important than what was said or how clever the use of words might have been.

In light of this experience, we began to think more creatively about these activities. Large elements of what had previously been termed 'recreation', were transformed in both content and use to become what we now know as 'adventure learning'. Initially, through the work of Colin Craig and then with key support from Mike Bartle (who was a Senior Lecturer in Outdoor Education of fourteen years experience), we developed an exciting and diverse range of activities that could be used on or off site. These activities are used to help build groups in terms of the communication, risk taking, problem solving, gender differences and physical support of one another. These activities have become increasingly adapted and designed to create experiences which allow group members to enter new relationships with one another at many different levels.

Our Creative Learning work (art, drama, puppetry, etc) developed in essentially the same way. Our recreational use of arts and crafts had always been well appreciated but the new thinking allowed us to translate and transform many of these activities into discrete activities, which could equally be used to help build and enhance both group processes and the individual experience.

Involvement in the arts engages the whole person, 'speaking from the heart' and using his or her creativity and emotions. This can lead to learning and insights that can pave the way for personal change.

The Importance of the Residential Experience

A residential experience can create a new openness to deal with issues that people find difficult in their 'home' territory – often issues of reconciliation and community relations. A lived residential experience together allows old patterns and ways of viewing one another to change. It allows different ways of meeting to invade the world of fixed expectations or old ways of being with one another in a group, a school, a church, etc. Such activity can bring challenge and even discomfort to some groups, but new ways can be opened up.

We have been influenced by the tradition of Dutch adult education which came through the Dutch members of the Dutch Northern Irish Advisory Committee who had been involved in Dutch adult education centres.

The starting point of this kind of work is the conviction that every adult is responsible for his or her learning process. The facilitator initiates this process, guards it and tries to shape it. The goal of this learning process is to enable a person to make a contribution to social change and to the improvement of the situation in which he or she finds him/herself. The person is him/herself part of this process.

The learning process takes place in a group. This group represents to a certain extent the social and personal situation in which the participants are living. It is not an arbitrary group such as a school class. It is composed of people who share a similar situation and have the same interests. Though some input from outside the group may be desirable or even necessary, the group itself is often quite knowledgeable. The greater part of any conference is used to communicate to one another the knowledge that is contained in the group itself. The facilitator uses different methods to bring this knowledge to the surface and to promote the exchange of facts, emotions and experience. Every participant shares responsibility for what happens in the group.

The learning process starts by analysing and defining the common questions and problems of the participants. In this they are already taking their responsibility both for the learning process and for their social and personal situation. The process demands a certain distance from the situation in which the participants live. They leave their home and work for some days and come together in a conference centre. They must have an issue, a subject or theme that to some extent unites them, and some awareness of what they want to learn; in the process itself the more concrete aims of the learning process may change. The participants should feel free and secure; a general rule is "everything said in this room remains in this room". The conference centre must provide a hospitable environment. At such conferences the informal part is at least as important as the official programme.

The facilitator ought to provide sufficient information for the participants to analyse the situation and to find ways to deal with it. Input from outside the group may be indispensable. The facilitator must have some insight into the situation from which the participants are coming. An intake interview and some general exploration of the situation may be required. However, he or she is learning too; the facilitator is not supposed to have a complete analysis of the situation or to be able to offer solutions. This may even hinder his/her listening to what the participants have to say. At the end of the conference the participants evaluate what they learned and try to find ways of applying their knowledge to the situation where they come from.

Beyond the Residential

Residential based work needs to be linked to community based work, particularly to developmental programmes rather than a series of one-off events. Community based work is the world of day-to-day actions, engagements and understandings in which people live their lives. Therefore, the residential experience needs to support change in this day-to-day world – new ways of meeting or speaking about sensitive issues so that new events, new patterns of activity and new structures are created, and institutions are influenced in positive directions. One of our past important projects in this regard has been the Teacher Training Project which produced the *Joined Up* resource.

Not Doing Things to People

Reconciliation work is about not doing things to other people – making them more tolerant, open, etc. This is a mutual exploration or at least an exploration that I too have gone on. We cannot expect other people to cross boundaries and go on journeys of exploration that involve the 'other' if we have not done so in some way too. One of the big problems that occurs time after time in reconciliation work is that we discover that it is the workers (the custodians of young people or school children) who are often a major barrier to useful work. They cannot cope themselves with issues of diversity or whatever, so how can we expect the groups they work with to do so?

The Work of Roel Kaptein

In the 1980s and early 1990s the work of Roel Kaptein was a profound influence on a number of staff and community members. Roel was a Dutch member of the Dutch Northern Irish Advisory Committee. Roel started with a person's questions; these questions could be personal, religious, social or political. He illuminated these questions by the use of pictorial models and by the use of theory derived from the French thinker Rene Girard. Thus many people learnt about the importance of imitation, rivalry and scapegoating. They were able to see reconciliation in new ways: as undermining exclusionary behaviour and expulsive mechanisms; of (re-)incorporating the vulnerable and scapegoats; and challenging the things which alienate and separate us. Many people were able to see the gospel in a new way.

They also learnt about the importance of sticking with their/our questions. 'Head' and 'heart' knowledge was also brought together. Reconciliation was about us, not other people out there. It was not a 'theory' or abstract knowledge. The way that Roel worked has profoundly influenced many community members and continues in the Mill Group and in the Members' Study Weekend in January.

The Work of Frank Wright

Frank Wright, who was a Corrymeela member and a political scientist, brilliantly analysed societies where two groups with different national allegiances shared the same territory. He called these societies ethnic frontier societies and Northern Ireland is obviously one such. Ethnic frontier societies are characterised by histories of antagonism and lack of trust. In such societies

- There is a lack of ease in the presence of those who are different from 'us'. In a context where suspicions about the intentions of the 'others' abound, a lack of real knowledge about the others breeds speculation, and speculation breeds fear. These fears merely demonise the other, reinforcing separate identities and stereotypes.
- There is a deep insecurity about the outcomes of talking about division in a society where relationships between people from different traditions and structures in which people feel safe together are so fragile;
- There is a 'cultural common sense' that supports separation, avoidance and politeness rather than taking risks together about working through issues that touch on core divisions.

Reconciliation work involves the creation of 'space' for open meetings across divisions. It concerns the growth of trust and relationships in order that the difficult and sensitive issues associated with an ethnic frontier society around politics, human rights, equality, education, cultural identity, the economy, social development and law & order can be worked through rather than around. It involves meeting each other across divisions in different ways so as to undermine previous separate certainties. Such possibilities of meeting can often be fragile and hostage to the wider atmosphere of inter-communal fear and violence that may be threatening or occurring. The people who are involved are usually 'exceptions'.

We were always clear that a stable political settlement was vital for cross-community trust building; without a stable political settlement the work was always at risk. We were also aware that without a certain amount of trust you couldn't have a stable political settlement. Therefore, from our earliest days we ran political conferences and members were involved in political parties. We also had conversations with paramilitaries, encouraging them to become constructively involved in politics and community building.

In Conclusion

Thus in our history learning has had some of these themes

- The importance of meeting and encounter
- The importance of community building (and residential build community)
- Creating a 'safe space'
- The importance of stories

- Making connections between faith and life
- Starting with people's questions
- Using models to help our understanding
- Using creative and adventure learning to get us 'beyond' words and thinking to open up other dimensions of our personalities

Some of the learning in written form or video form by members and staff

Creating Community: a resource for church and community groups in Northern Ireland (2000)

Different Tracks: a practical resource guide for community relations work [Colin Craig, Mike Bartle, Joanne Robinson, Jonny McEwen, Rachel Craig and Yvonne Naylor]

Relationship to Reconciliation (Mary Montague)

On The Way Of Freedom (1993) [Roel Kaptein with Duncan Morrow]. The product of a group of members with Roel "working together exploring the gospel, the bible and our lives, trying to find ways forward for our thinking, for our actions and for our lives".

Joined Up: Developing Good Relations in the School Community (2005). Mary Potter and Nichola Lynagh.

Ways Out of Conflict: resource for community relations work [Derick Wilson and Duncan Morrow].

Who We Are: Dealing with Difference: a resource for children and young people 9-14 (2003) [Yvonne Naylor].

Stepping Out: a resource for diversity and inclusion for teachers, leaders and children 5-9 years old.

Creative Ideas for Exploring and Celebrating Differences (Key Stage 2) [Norman Richardson]

Inside Out (2006) [Susan McEwen]

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¹ This article has used material from 'Different Tracks: Experiential Learning' which was produced by the Community and from the work of Future Ways.