

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECONCILIATION
CENTRES
The Corrymeela Centre's Experience
1965-2008**

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Reconciliation Centres are:

- **Local expressions of a reconciliation practice that is international. They are reminders of a wider reconciliation movement with its roots in a humanitarian, ecumenical, social justice, liberation or other traditions. The national conflict is understood in a wider context.**

(for example: Corrymeela began before the conflict emerged here; it had its roots in the post World War 2 ecumenical tradition, the Ecumenical Laity Centres Movement in Europe and especially the work of the World Council of Churches and Ecumenical Youth Service Workcamps and their history with offering sanctuary to Jewish people and other Minorities)

- **A statement of reconciliation being desirable and attainable-politically, culturally, economically, socially, religiously.**
- **An invitation and challenge to public, civil, cultural and political institutions to promote a reconciling culture within their organisational life and through their daily work.**
- **A symbol that people from opposed traditions can work together, in spite of the conflict.**
- **A question mark to those who support demeaning and violent treatment of those different to them.**
- **A sign of change being possible even in the midst of terror and violence.**

THE TASK OF RECONCILIATION CENTRES

To proactively signal that ‘those who are different’ are important also.

To promote inclusive solutions based on equality of opportunity, human rights and agreed law and order systems.

To be a ‘home’ for people seeking to model a new form of reconciled community

To model that ‘shared governance models’ are possible.

To be a centre of critical reflection for people:

- **Within the existing traditions.**
- **Engaging in meetings and relationship building between the existing traditions.**
- **Seeking to move beyond historical polarising identities.**

To assist new ways of working together emerge; new rituals that include all.

To find ways of not forgetting the past that still enable all to move forward, often painfully.

To think in more open ways; to think 'out of the box'.

For example:

Through Corrymeela's links with people in other conflict situations we developed understandings that sustained our practice and expanded our understanding of reconciliation;

we drew on learning from the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theology about people becoming subjects capable of making change not merely being the objects of other people's dominance:

we drew on political understandings of ethnic frontier societies,

- The history of ethnic frontier societies is essentially pessimistic unless one is prepared to build and support the actions of small groups of individuals across lines of enmity.
- Contested Societies inevitably have to deal with the historically unequal treatment of some by others. Within that often is the need to address unequal treatment, discrimination, agreed policing structures, law and order and human rights. Such societies often have a struggle for the control of education, culture and (sometimes) language rights.
- Patterns of communal deterrence relationships in ethnic frontier societies such as Northern Ireland means that many relationships across fear and identity lines are, at best fragile and, at worst, untenable.
- Relationships of Mutual Antagonism can make the task of meeting together and securing new relationships across diverse identity lines difficult. Here reconciliation work includes the generation of possibilities to learn in new relationships.

Some of our members had experiences outside here that opened us all up to a wider world.

Some had:

been doctors who, as females, had pioneered mould breaking medical services for women and families in African societies from the 1930-1950's;

lived through the Second World War and been in prisoner of war camps. This was the experience of the Founder, Ray Davey;

had been members of the trade union movement in times of high unemployment;

involvement in the ecumenical movement;

been from what would now be called the social responsibility movement in the business tradition;

visited other reconciliation centres in Holland, Germany, Sweden, France, Italy and Scotland such as de Dreiberg and Kerk und Wereld; the Berlin work of Maechler and the Confessing Church who had been with Bonhoeffer; Rattvik; Taize, Agape and Iona.

Some members have distinct experiences here that challenge us about the reconciliation task.

More recently some of our members have been the families of victims of the conflict;

Some have been part of the violent actions and have turned from that;

Some have experienced deep inequality in living here;

Some have become engaged in standing with the new migrant citizen base here in giving support, health and legal advice.

Some now work in other conflict areas such as Zimbabwe; Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Sudan.

Some take their learning into promoting practice around diversity and conflict in Europe and North America.

To be a space in which new programmes and actions can be modelled and developed

WITHIN A CONFLICT

Promoting an educational rationale for reconciliation.

- Experiences of meeting around sensitive and disputed issues have to be promoted, safeguarded and sustained.
- This work is both relational and structural; personal and political.
- The Reconciliation task is one that should involve all of life-politics, institutional, communal history and personal life.

Developing and supporting Community Relations from the Periphery

- The Potential of the Voluntary and Community sectors in adult education for reconciliation is important and essential even though that work is often viewed as being peripheral.

Facilitating Difficult Meetings

Corrymeela

- assisted people and groups meet for hard and difficult encounters about many sensitive issues such as housing, religious beliefs, violence between traditions, the control of education, schooling models of political co-operation, diverse historical understandings.
- challenged the ready stereotyping of trust building work by developing a rationale for reconciliation work in contested societies;
- situated the task of trust building in a wider European context, drawing on foundation work on ethnic frontiers by Frank Wright (Northern Ireland-A Comparative Analysis, Gill and Macmillan, 1987);
- developed and supported new ways of meeting; new forms of educational work that addressed sensitive issues and new forms of work with young people.
- developed resources and models of practice around understanding history, exploring politics, robust meetings.

Ways Out of Conflict, Wilson, Morrow and Wright, Corrymeela Press with the Open University, 1994.

POST CONFLICT

To be a meeting space open to all

To be a place and a form of community that creates diverse, and often unexpected, meetings across lines of difference

To sustain Quality Trust Building Practices that Challenge Central Institutions

To challenge core institutions in this society to commit themselves to promote trust building within their core structures and core business.

The initial building blocks in this work included:

- Highlighting the needs of prisoners
- Supporting victims groups

- Initiating innovative youth work programmes that had residential elements and home based experiences
- Developing residential practices with primary, secondary, further and higher education institutions.
- Taking the theme of inclusion as a challenge how we support innovative work that includes young people who have traditionally been marginalised
- Challenging partisan religious positions

Building Models of Practice:

- Developing institutional programmes of work that initiate organisational learning practice within voluntary and public bodies and yield case studies of organisational change in a contested society.
- Developing Civic Leadership Programmes that bring people and organisations into a wider societal perspective.

Current Challenges

With the language of trust building being a little more to the fore and the incorporation of terms such as '*the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all*' in the Programme for Government, Northern Ireland Executive, 2001 it could be argued that the process of institutionalising these core themes had progressed.

The Northern Ireland Act, which translated into United Kingdom law the core elements of the Belfast Agreement, has formally begun to recognise the interconnection between equality and trust-building.

The introduction of the 'good relations' dimension into legislation, with regards to three categories of religious belief, political opinion and racial groups, has extended the legal focus of trust-building beyond traditional community relations work to the core of Northern Ireland society as it is evolving today.

There still is a need for these experiences to be internalised in the working of major institutions.

Now the old recurring themes and the newly emergent ones have to be a part of the lived community of reconciliation, at the centre and in the daily lives of members outside it.

There now are strands of Corrymeela practice, at the Centre and in the practice of members and supporters, that that promote advances in these areas.

Growing the Practice Core to Trust Building

Up to 2002 the persistent operational preference for addressing community relations at its most visible points of failure – urban ghettos, victims work, work with paramilitaries – or among constituencies accepted as important for the future – children and young people – has ensnared community relations work within a centre-periphery paradigm. Such limited approaches mistakenly presume a broadly healthy core of society with marginal manifestations of sectarian violence.

Such operational blindness sees mistrust and violence as not proper areas of active concern in many areas of Northern Irish society. Indeed, the very 'bracketing off' of large areas of such activity is held up as success, and has become habitual. Outside the points of greatest stress, tensions are largely contained by silence and legislative exclusion from the public domain.

There were a number of assumptions taking root in different sectors that have a debilitating effect on how trust might be promoted in this society, coming out of conflict.

For us the assumptions that need challenged were that:

- Reconciliation is primarily the responsibility of those at the margins of society.
- There is increasing comfort with the **logic of separation**.
- The measurement of community relations is overly focused on the 'harmony index'.

Without doubt, there have been significant social and economic costs in terms of resources, innovation and enriching imagination. There is an absence of a strong operational core to trust building in Northern Ireland-trust building and prosperity still need to be interlinked concepts and policy priorities.

To stand firm in promoting eventual agreed institutions of government; agreed law and order; a citizen based society not a partisan based one; a society that works at reducing inequality and promotes social justice

To be an international space for local issues to be engaged with

To be prepared to be silent with successes and openly take the blame for failures

EMERGING FROM CONFLICT

To be open to re visiting our core purposes in the light of peace agreements

To be part of strengthening civil and public society in engaging with the new political order

To promote the civic courage of public institutions and civil society organisations

THE TASK OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION WORK-

TO DESIGN AND CREATE SOMETHING THAT IS UNKNOWN AND UNTESTED.

The limits to experiences of trust

The tragedy of a contested society is that such individual actions can be one of the few experiences of people from different traditions coming together-they are exceptional experiences.

A difficulty in a contested society is that trusting relationships between people across the religious/political division are few and, where they do exist, are always hostage to the latest attack, violent action or threat.

Where trust between people is scarce there is little glue or history that sustains people through difficult periods. It is easier, and understandable, to return to the common sense of the different traditions, the ways of separation and distrust.

To be prepared to reconsider the task of embedding practices and ways of working in the daily practice of organisations and institutions

To be a centre of international understanding and support for local and international actions associated with reconciliation.