

Roger Cromey's Story

My initial visit to Corrymeela was in April 1965 when I was approaching the end of first year studying medicine at Queen's University. Ray Davey and his associate Desney Kempston had organised a residential weekend for around 25 students in the old Guysmere house in Castlerock. On the Saturday afternoon Ray suggested we drive to Ballycastle to see the building that a group of people had decided to buy as a centre of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Corrymeela was empty and in need of tender loving care. However the house was dry and spacious with around a dozen small wooden chalets close to the main building. Even on an overcast day the view was superb.

I had nothing planned for the first part of that summer, so when it transpired that a work party was needed in June to start to make Corrymeela habitable, I was keen to be there. Seven of us arrived in Ballycastle to see what needed to be done. Billy McAllister, a former railway employee from Dundalk, led us in the many manual tasks that were required including restoring a water supply and planning a production line for making beds. Joyce Nice helped to keep our hunger pangs at bay, and Desney ensured that everything ran fairly smoothly. As the summer progressed, more and more people, mostly students, came to Corrymeela to do what they could to assist in this project. From memory we each made a token financial payment towards our meals. I remember one delivery man enquiring what Corrymeela was all about. When he was told that part of the purpose was to bring groups together from different denominations he was horrified, especially when he was told that most of those present at the time were Presbyterians and Methodists.

Work camps, frequently lasting a week, were a great way of involving young people in the transformation of Corrymeela from a tired green shell of a building to an attractive white residential unit on a hill overlooking Rathlin Island. A pattern developed where we worked hard during the day at whatever Billy planned, and then had time in the evening for relaxing and discussion. Worship, meals, coffee breaks and music punctuated by constant chat and laughter added to our enjoyment, and the occasional romance was a bonus. The introduction to informal worship shared between Protestants and Catholics meant a lot.

Corrymeela is in a constant state of change. Each time I go to Corrymeela the experience is different, and although I have been going for over 50 years, I approach Ballycastle with a degree of apprehension. Walking into the reception area to join a crowd chatting over coffee is not for the faint hearted.

Every day I am grateful for so much that I have learned, and rejoice over those I have met through Corrymeela. The study weeks with Roel Kaptein brought a new insight into the Gospels which was helpful to me personally and in my work as a GP. When I go to Corrymeela now, I go with my lovely wife Desney who was there when we first visited Corrymeela in 1965.

Reconciliation! It seems to me that reconciliation is now needed more than ever, what with Black Lives Matter, Brexit, the contrast between the effects of Covid 19 in different communities, climate change and of course the divisions in our own province. The task for Corrymeela continues.

Roger Cromey February 2021