

Caux, Plenary on 'Steps towards National Reconciliation', 1 July 2013

Rev Inderjit Bhogal

To explain a little bit about the Corrymeela Community I would almost have to go back 400 years to give you the context, but I'm not going to go there. It's an amazingly complex situation in Northern Ireland and I would say that in terms of the resolution of the conflict, which is very deep there, we are probably looking for another 400 years to go in terms of the work that needs to be done and Corrymeela Community is making a modest contribution within that very deep environment. Two weeks ago today President Barack Obama came to Northern Ireland with the G8 Summit and visited Belfast. I listened to him speaking in the Waterfront Hall. One thing he said was that peace is much harder work than war. I agree. But I would say also that reconciliation is harder work than peace. In Northern Ireland 15 years ago, a peace agreement was signed, but the work of reconciliation is our real goal. Mahatma Gandhi used to say that peace is the pathway to our real goal, it's not the goal. The goal in Northern Ireland is reconciliation, and Corrymeela is engaged in that work. If you forget everything else I say, remember these six words which summarize the mission of Corrymeela: to embrace difference, heal division, enable reconciliation.

The work was started early as recently as 1965 by a man named Reverend Ray Davey, a Presbyterian minister who was chaplain at the university in Belfast. With his chaplaincy groups, 20 year olds, he started to work on what is the relevance of the Christian Gospel within the situation of conflict. One thing I would want to say to us is, give some people responsibility and you will be surprised by the initiatives they can take. So, this was started by 20 year olds and they bought a residential centre, a bit like this one but not on such a grand scale, and in a similar situation, with a wonderful location. It was a beautiful place looking out over the sea and there they bought this hotel called Corrymeela. Corrymeela basically means 'that lumpy ground where strangers cross over to meet with each other'. That is what Corrymeela has been trying to do for almost 50 years, to bring together people of Catholic and Protestant backgrounds to do this work of embracing difference, healing division, and

enabling reconciliation. It is a Christian community, so they do that within the context of a Christian community. The task within the residential centre is to create space, space for meeting, space for community to be developed, space where Catholic and Protestants can gather for what would often be difficult conversations. And, as trouble broke out in Northern Ireland and in 1968, Corrymeela became that space where people could be brought from the different sides to meet for respite and to meet with each other to see that the other side is also human, to build relationships of mutual respect and trust and through working together to look at how they can resolve their conflict.

And that continues. Some people say, 'Northern Ireland is at peace now...there is a peace agreement.' But as I said, peace is not goal, the goal is reconciliation and there is work to be done and the priority of Corrymeela at the moment, I would say, is the work of reconciliation. One of our programs, which is our flagship program, is our Young Volunteering Program. Young people in their twenties come from all around the world, and they stay in our residential centre for twelve months, and during that time, about twelve of them, they work together to serve all the communities that come to the residential centre. Something like 7,000 people a year visit the residential centre to engage with each other to reflect on challenges that face us. These young people serve them. They serve and learn and also teach us a great deal. At the end of their twelve months, they return to their different parts of the world to continue and work as ambassadors for peace. At the moment we have young people from Nepal, Spain, Germany, Ireland and USA. I would like to finish by saying, come and see us....come and see for yourself as you're very welcome.

Prof Marshall: Inderjit, you focused on this distinction between peace and reconciliation, could you elaborate a little on what you see as the differences and particularly in Northern Ireland. In some ways it's been our inspiration, that Ireland has come close to peace and yet there seems to be 400 years, at least ahead.

Rev Inderjit Bhogal: Within the Northern Ireland context, peace has meant secession of violence. Weapons have been put away and that's actually a remarkable situation to be in. But there are dissidents, there are people who feel this is a real compromise and they're not happy with it. And so, particularly around the 12th of July, there are all kinds of commemorations from that 400 year history and the 12th of July is usually a day in which there is a lot tension and violence in the air. So, the G8 summit, the visit of Barack Obama, it all passed away very peacefully, which is quite remarkable because we all know when G8 summit meets, there's usually some violence that accompanies it, but in Northern Ireland, of all places, it was one of the most peaceful G8 summits. So, it's left us with kind of a hopeful environment and so I'm hoping for a peaceful summer. Reconciliation is not an event like the signing of a peace agreement. Some people think that reconciliation is an event that happened in the past, within the Christian tradition they will look at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and locate reconciliation in that, an event that happened 2000 years ago. But for me, reconciliation is a process, it's an ongoing task and challenge for us all. So, what I would like to see in Northern Ireland, which I hope will be, perhaps, a significant contribution of organizations like the Corrymeela community working across the divides. What I'd like to see happening is that all the parties who remain in tension sit down with each other and actually agree to be in a relationship, agree to be in a covenant in which they say, 'We need to have difficult conversations about unresolved issues. Yes, we've got a peace agreement, but there are underlying currents and let's look at how we're going to continue that dialogue, because we haven't gotten there yet.' And so, we need to create spaces and I think this is one, Caux, and Corrymeela is the other one in Northern Ireland and there are other places around the world. We need to create spaces in which people can meet and hold difficult conversations. I don't see an end to that, we have keep doing that. Reconciliation is the real hard work that we have to sustain. It is a challenge that faces all of us.