

The ecumenical journey of an Anglican bishop in Ireland

Debunking myths about the other

Bishop emeritus of the Church of England in the diocese of Limerick in Southern Ireland, the author shares his ecumenical journey, starting with his decision as a young priest to move to Belfast during the hard years of the civil war. He later became leader of the Corrymeela Community¹, founded in 1965 to help people and communities affected by the violence and polarization of the Northern Ireland conflict.²

Rt Rev. Trevor Williams

I was born in Dublin, a Roman Catholic city. There was only one other Protestant family in the area. My best friend was Catholic and we loved to talk about the differences between our denominations and what our faith meant to us personally. This friendship gave me a love for the Catholic Church.

Us and them

One of my first jobs as an Anglican priest was as a university chaplain in Belfast. Moving to Belfast was not an easy decision. It was 1977, and Belfast was consumed by frequent bombings and murders. My wife and I had a baby to look after. But both Joyce and I felt this was God's call, so we moved to Northern Island and have lived there most of our lives.

In Northern Ireland, the vast majority of young people attend denominational schools. Many Catholic youth have never met a Protestant and vice versa. The first opportunity to get to know *the other* is usually at universities. So, Catholic and Protestant chaplains decided to bring their students to Corrymeela for a cross-community programme. Shortly after, I became a member of Corrymeela, which is committed to reconciliation, and have been a member ever since. The *inter-Chaplaincy* group continues its activities still today.

I left the Chaplaincy after the stipulated three years and was asked to be the host of a new experimental radio program called *Sunday Sequence*, which would focus on the religious, ethical and social issues of the day. At the time, this was ground-breaking. People were divided, but they had to find a way to work together. The success of the program showed that many people were eager to get to learn about one another, to discuss the differences, and dispel the myths that inevitably grow in a divided community. It was the time of the hunger strikes and tensions between communities were running high. Not everyone was

pleased with the Programme's dialogue between Catholics and Protestants. During that time, however, there were opportunities to chair public Ecumenical events and conferences.

After eight years in the spotlight as a broadcaster, I returned to parish life in Newcastle County Down (Northern Ireland), encouraging and supporting relationships between the Churches. This was essential if peace was to be built from the ground up.

A safe place to meet

In 1993 I was elected leader of the Corrymeela Community. Through welcome and hospitality, the community seeks to create a safe space for new opportunities to emerge. During an intercommunal program in the dark days of the *Troubles*³, Catholic and Protestant youth met in our worship center. When a leader asked if anyone had anything to share with the group, one girl said, "I would like you to pray for a man who is in prison tonight. He is worried and his wife and children are worried, too, because tomorrow he returns to court to receive his sentence." The group of Catholics and Protestants prayed in silence for that man. Afterward, a Corrymeela staff member asked the girl, "If you don't mind telling me, who is it that you asked us to pray for?" She replied, "He is the man who killed my father." I have learned that a part of working for unity is simply to provide opportunities for people to meet across the divide.

Another time, in a small group, a Protestant girl shared that her father had been killed by the IRA because he was a member of the police. She talked about the empty chair that she and her mother look at every time they eat together. Then a Catholic girl in the group spoke of how her brother had been killed by a Loyalist terrorist group 'out to kill a Catholic'. Out of eight young people in that group, six told stories of grief suffered through 'the Troubles'. In the end, the group fell into each other's arms, Catholics comforting Protestants, and vice versa. A lasting bond was forged between those young people that evening. It struck me that Protestants have the gift of healing that Catholics need, and vice versa.

The steel wall

After ten years as leader of Corrymeela, I was appointed to a Interface parish in North Belfast, an area that experienced some of the worst violence of the Troubles. Evidence of persistent tensions between the communities was seen in the seventeen-foot steel wall, a few hundred meters from the church, marking the divide between Protestant and Catholic homes. It was erected to prevent neighbors from bombing one another with gasoline. As a church we partnered with the community association in organizing events to bring the community together, work out how needs could be met, and discuss and plan how to improve the community. It is hard to change the *us and them* mentality that was so ingrained for generations. I felt like I was from another planet when I tried to show my Protestant parishioners that we would only find peace when our Catholic neighbors found peace.

Local Catholic and Protestant clergy met regularly in our home, and we found that friendship and support are essential for reconciliation. In addition to working in the community, we also set up inter-faith programs and groups for our parishioners.

Better Together

In 2008 I was asked to allow my name to be proposed for election as Bishop of Limerick, in Southern Ireland. I was torn, because I was engaged in the long task of peace-building in the parish and was not sure if I was the right person for this job. After praying, we decided that I should let my name be proposed. I was elected and consecrated bishop.

There I found new opportunities and new partners in the Good News, in the persons of my brother Catholic bishops; what a joy to be able to share in fellowship with them and discover, thanks to this deep friendship, how very often it is better together. Apart from being seen frequently in public together, there was one ecumenical project undertaken in Rathkeale, a struggling rural town where the Traveler community had purchased more than 50 percent of the property. The churches were the only place where both Irish Travelers and Settled communities felt at home. Thus, by working together as Churches, we could sustain opportunities and events in which the two communities could get to know and understand each other.

Now in my retirement, in addition to my work with Corrymeela, it is a great joy to participate in the conferences of bishops of various Christian Churches organized by the Focolare Movement. At the end of the Bishops meeting we make concrete our commitment to one another. We pray for one another in these words:

*Grant us, Father, the grace of your Spirit,
so that we may become one with the other.
Grant that we may consider the cross of the other as our own,
that the joy of the other may become our joy,
the desire of the other our desire,
so that all may be one and the world may believe.*

That commitment is the essence of any ecumenical journey.

¹ <http://www.corrymeela.org>. The Corrymeela community was founded in 1965 as an organisation seeking to aid individuals and communities who had suffered as a result of the violence and polarization of the Northern Ireland conflict. To give the community a physical meeting place, Corrymeela moved to the Holiday Fellowship Centre near Ballycastle, County Antrim. The new centre was formally opened the same year as a place of Christian reconciliation in Northern Ireland. In 1997, Corrymeela was awarded the Niwano Peace Prize, in honor of "her significant contribution to interreligious cooperation, thus furthering the cause of peace in the world."

² Article collected by Joan Back and published in New City magazine (www.newcity.co.uk).

³ The term *Troubles* refers to the Northern Ireland conflict that took place in between the late 1960s and late 1990s.