

“A Space In Your Heart You Never Knew You Had”

**Qualitative Case-Study: The Impact and Experience of
Young Adult Reconciliation Programs**

Focus: The Corrymeela Community

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Project Summary:

The following is a qualitative, interview-based case study that examines the experiences and change process in young adults involved in a reconciliation program at the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland. Thirteen young adults between the ages of 18-25 were interviewed. Criteria involved prior or current participation in a formal reconciliation program called the Seed Group and subsequent continued involvement with Corrymeela. Participants were asked to reflect on how they became involved with Corrymeela and the Seed Group, the nature of the experience with comments on the impact of both the context (atmosphere, ethos, location) as well as formal program elements, and why they had stayed involved with the Corrymeela Community.

Significant findings indicate that the change process is developmental at three levels: personal, social, and transcendent, with development at each of these levels interrelating and building on the other. It was found that ongoing involvement with Corrymeela was a method for continuing the developmental process at all levels. In addition, both the context, (atmosphere, ethos, location) and formal program were equally important in participants' experience and the developmental process. Finally, one of the most significant findings indicated that Corrymeela's integrated approach to reconciliation not only resulted in more positive relationships between Protestant and Catholics, but also challenged and broke down prejudices on a much wider basis including: homosexuality, gender relations, class, and traditional notions of masculinity.

I. Introduction:

My Involvement with Corrymeela

During a discussion with one of my mentors, Duncan Morrow, about my desire to research the impact of Corrymeela, he said, “You need to start with yourself. Before you can understand what Corrymeela has meant to anyone else, you need to understand what Corrymeela has meant for you... Why are you back here?” Good question!

My experiences in Northern Ireland and with the Corrymeela Community began when I spent six months studying conflict resolution as part of my undergraduate peace studies degree at Earlham College. After arriving in Belfast in early January 1992, we spent our ‘induction’ week at the Corrymeela Reconciliation Center in Ballycastle. Our field director, Mervyn Love, a member of the community, had talked extensively of many of its programs, the people who were involved, and its Christian based ethos prior to our arrival. He described its location on the cliffs overlooking the sea as beautiful and peaceful, and the people who worked there to be dedicated, warm and welcoming. From his descriptions it was obvious that he was talking about a place that meant a lot to him. In fact it did. Support from Corrymeela had been instrumental in his own journey of healing.

One of the reasons I was interested to go to Corrymeela as a college student was based on the respect that I had for Mervyn Love. He had spent a semester at Earlham the preceding year, teaching a course on the Theory and Practice of Reconciliation. It was a small class and a significant aspect of the course was looking at our own lives as a context for understanding the ideas of reconciliation. During the course, I was struck by how open and honest Mervyn was in relating to us. In particular, it was his willingness to make himself vulnerable and sharing his own journey of pain as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland. He spoke freely of his involvement with Corrymeela and the relationships he had developed there, and how instrumental those relationships had been in his recovery from his own trauma. I learned as much about reconciliation and relationship building from the way he related to us as I did about the academic field of peacebuilding. In a way this experience was a foreshadowing of the kind of people I would meet and later work with at Corrymeela.

Our arrival at Corrymeela that week is still very clear to me. I remember it as a rainy day, only about 4 p.m. but dark already. We drove up a narrow and winding road past the roaring sea. The road turned up a steep hill and as we turned the corner we found a big white house perched at the top of the hill. The bus pulled up in front and out from the house and into the rain came people to greet us and help us with our bags. My memories of that week include late night conversations with the long-term volunteers, many cups of tea, karaoke, and singsongs at the pub. Some of the friendships begun during that week continue to this day.

My involvement since that first week has taken many forms. As part of the Earlham program, I spent 10 weeks on placement at Corrymeela, working alongside the long-term volunteers linking with Protestant and Catholic ‘cross-community’ groups. I returned to Corrymeela that summer to be a member of summer staff for several weeks. During that time I applied to become a long-term volunteer and was accepted to come back in March 1994 initially for six months, and then was asked to stay on for an additional six months through February of 1995. Since 1995, I have been back and forth several times and have continued to look for ways to stay involved with Corrymeela.

When I ask myself the question, “What has Corrymeela meant for me? ”, I answer with one word, community. The relationships I have developed at Corrymeela have been an integral part of my learning process and personal development. In saying this, I include groups I have worked with as well as fellow staff members. In fact, my experience of relationship building at Corrymeela has become central to my own understanding of the reconciliation process. Intertwined with this has been my experience of living and belonging in community. I have come to believe that any reconciliation, conflict transformation or violence prevention process is intimately connected with, and ultimately dependent on, building community. I have also come to believe that authentic experiences of belonging in community are potentially transformative.

I am not trying to paint a picture of utopia. I have experienced my most joyful, euphoric, and painful moments at Corrymeela. I have been challenged in ways that have impacted my own life profoundly. In fact, it was my experiences with Corrymeela that led me to graduate school to study the field of conflict transformation. From the beginning of my graduate training, one of my main goals was to better understand the work of Corrymeela from a theoretical perspective. Although I may not have known this at the time, my motive may not have been only to understand better, but to see if others shared my own transformative experience. All roads lead back to Corrymeela...

So, in the spirit of transparency, I acknowledge that this project is about myself as much as it is about any of the interviewees, and my own story is interwoven in it. As Duncan, my mentor rightly told me “You are part of the story, you are not an outsider here, you have significant history here and belong to it.”

Background on Northern Ireland & Corrymeela: History is Present Tense

Northern Ireland has been a land of tension, conflict, and bloodshed for centuries. Some trace the patterns of invasion, repression, revenge, and retaliation back as early as Viking invasions of the 1100’s, while others focus on the impact of national and religious battles in Europe as a result of the Reformation. The “truth” depends on whom you are talking to. In both the Catholic and Protestant communities, all history is present tense. Dates attached to historic memories of massacres, famines, and battles such as 1641, 1690, 1848, and 1916 are understood and felt as vividly as if they happened yesterday.

During the 1960's and 1970's as sectarian violence on both sides escalated, social divisions and community polarization increased. Residential areas that had once been integrated became ghetto-ized. Residents, both Protestant and Catholic, were burned out of their homes and forced to flee to areas of "their own kind." Those of mixed marriages were often threatened, harassed, and ostracized by both communities. Schools were already segregated, and with the increasing division it was possible for some children to grow up never meeting members of the other community. As years went on, violence, often aided and fueled by paramilitaries who enforced and intimidated their own communities to maintain divisions, escalated, and every aspect of society became polarized.

It is out of this context of division and sectarianism that the Corrymeela Community was born. Pre-dating some of the most violent years of the early 1970's, Corrymeela was actually started in 1965, during the enthusiasm and idealism that marked the first years of the civil rights era. Corrymeela was founded by Ray Davey, who at the time, was the Presbyterian chaplain at Queen's University in Belfast. His vision was profoundly shaped by his own experiences in World War II as a chaplain with the YMCA. Captured in North Africa, and held as a POW for several years, Davey found it was the human encounters and support in the community of captives, responding to the daily fear, insecurity and suffering of war, that he later referred to as "a prototype of a meaningful Christian Community."¹ As a prisoner he was later moved to Dresden, and was there during its bombing by the allied forces, where he was profoundly effected by seeing the death and destruction that the "violence of nations" waged on each other.

After the war ended, Davey returned to Northern Ireland, taking a position as a chaplain of Queens University. In his new position, Davey spent hours talking and listening to the students about their hopes, fears and ideas for the future. Coming of age during the idealism and social action of the 1960's, the students were looking for ways to apply their Christian faith by overcoming social divisions.

The vision became a reality in 1965, with the purchase of Corrymeela's main site on a cliff-top in Ballycastle, a small town on the North Coast overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Community members, many who had been students at Queens of both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, recognized early on that in order to be living their Christian faith they had to work towards ending social divisions. As violence began to increase in the province, Corrymeela became a place of respite and a "safe haven" for both Catholics and Protestants suffering as a result of political violence. Based on their Christian values and ideals, but without any proven theoretical framework, Corrymeela began to develop an intuitive response to the violence of the conflict.

There were, however, several specific principles that formed the underpinning of Corrymeela's approach towards reconciliation, and which laid the foundation for the

¹ Wells, Ronald. People Behind the Peace: Community and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1999) p. 60

development of their models. The first is the importance of community and relationship building through personal encounter.

The importance of community was to offer people of both traditions a ‘safe space’ to encounter each other, and share their stories. Through sharing trust would be built, and stereotypes and misperceptions could be explored and dissolved. This was especially significant in a society where it was not deemed ‘safe’ to speak about politics and religion in a mixed community.

Another key principle stems from their interpretation of the Christian Gospel that Jesus was a ‘prophet of the people,’ and associated with those that the religious hierarchy of the times disdained, such as thieves, tax collectors, and prostitutes. To be an “open community” grounded in the real world of human lives and suffering, they had to accept that no one was any better or worse than anyone else. Corrymeela’s practical application of this belief was to accept and “meet people where they are.”

Corrymeela continues to follow these same principles in its approach, and to build community amongst division. Despite the recent peace process, Northern Irish society is still significantly divided. While there are exceptions, Catholic and Protestant communities on the whole continue to live in separate neighborhoods, attend segregated schools and socialize in their own communities. Over the years Corrymeela has played a significant role in the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland, working with thousands of people each year in the areas of youth development, family respite, Christian Education and schools. This work has been very influential in the development of the field of ‘Community Relations’ in Northern Ireland.

Having been founded by students, youth and young adult work has been a particularly important area of focus for Corrymeela. With several youth workers on staff, Corrymeela runs a number of different programs and volunteer opportunities with a focus on youth and young adult leadership development. These programs have played a significant role in furthering young adult involvement with Corrymeela and leading many to become members of the community. One of Corrymeela’s most popular and longest running cross-community reconciliation programs for young adults is the Seed Group.

II. Research Project: Impact and Experience of Involvement with Reconciliation at Corrymeela

Goals

My main research goals were to understand the nature of the change process that occurred in young people as a result of Corrymeela reconciliation programs. Realizing that I would need to narrow the research to keep a clear focus, I chose to limit the criteria to individuals who had been involved with the Seed Group. In addition to having been a participant in the Seed Group, I added a criterion of continued involvement with Corrymeela as an additional factor that might signal change. Using a qualitative case

study approach, I interviewed 13 young adults all of whom had involvement with the Seed Group in the last four years. I asked them to reflect on how they became involved with Corrymeela, what they experienced both informally and in the formal Seed Group program, their perception of the impact of the experience on their lives, and how this related to their continued involvement.

Methodology

Selection Process

The selection process was heavily guided by suggestions from program staff as they knew and had access to the participants who matched my criteria. Two individuals who were particularly helpful in providing access to participants were Corrymeela's youth worker and Seed Group facilitator, John Doherty, and David Robinson, the coordinator of the short-term volunteering program Quest. An additional component of my research was to be a participant-observer in the final three months of the Seed Group weekend residential meetings. My goal in that role was to aid my interpretation and analysis of the participants' reflections of their experience.

Interviewee Backgrounds

I had hoped to interview an evenly balanced and representative group in respect to gender, religion, and class. I was more successful in some of these categories than others. Limiting the criteria to those who had both been members of the Seed Group and had continued their involvement actively somewhat hindered achieving a greater balance. In the end, I interviewed 13 people who had been Seed Group members and continued their involvement with either or short term or long term volunteering, or by becoming a member of the Community.

The following is a rough summary of backgrounds:

- All between ages of 19-25. Average age of interviewee was 23-24.
- All had been a participant in the Seed Group in the last four years.
- One half became long-term volunteers after their Seed Group experience. {7/13}
- Roughly one third went on to become Community Members {4/13}
- Majority were men {11/13}
- Majority were Catholic {10/13}
- Majority are currently employed {9/13}
- Majority had either technical training {7/13} or have attended University {6/13}
- Group split fairly evenly between working class and middle class.
- Most had at least one experience in a cross-community activity, but most interviewed did not have any significant experience in any long-term cross-community program prior to Corrymeela.
- Two thirds grew up in areas that would be considered predominately ethnically homogeneous.
- Majority from Northern Ireland, a minority from the Republic of Ireland. {3/13}

Significant Findings and Themes

A. Why Do People Come to Corrymeela?

1. Trust of invitation

For nearly all interviewed, their first experience of Corrymeela came through the invitation of someone they trusted who had prior experience with Corrymeela. For some it was their parish priest, for others it was a teacher or close friend. Two exceptions were that one individual found Corrymeela after an intentional search to get involved with peace work, while another was working on-site as a member of a building crew. Most returned because they were invited back through personal invitation from a staff member or through mailings.

2. Openness to a new experience and people

While some admitted they were initially wary, most all interviewed indicated that they were interested in having a new experience and were open to meeting new people. Comments were made that those who become involved with Corrymeela are generally open-minded, and that Corrymeela might not work for someone who was too scared or threatened by something new. However, several interviewees commented that they were purposely not told much about Corrymeela other than a description of the location because of the label of Christian and what it might connote for them.

When you describe Corrymeela - a lot of times is first of all 'it is a Christian Community'. If someone had told me that at the start I would have been 'hold on here, I am not very fond of that'. Those words would have scared me.

Mick

Those same individuals also indicated that they would adopt a similar method of invitation because they felt Corrymeela was something one had to experience, as descriptions couldn't do it justice.

You have to experience the place before you can make your own judgement of it. Like I can honestly not tell you now that I could sit down and explain to someone what Corrymeela is in my own words because I'd rather them come and experience it for themselves. Let them have the cup of tea, have the talk over lunch or come in and see worship.

Pettsy

Many interviewed were looking for new social experiences and specifically attracted by the opportunity to meet new dating partners and new friends. Several others commented that another motivation for coming to Corrymeela was as an 'escape' from their own environment. Some felt they were escaping from drugs and violence, while for others it was homogeneity, narrow-mindedness or sectarianism.

There was a whole new different group of friends to make. Whereas back home everything would have been very similar. Work in a factory and then go to a pub and maybe go out and play football. It was all based around the same things. People had the exact same problems. There was something very similar to life there whereas up here there was people from all over the place, all different backgrounds, from all over the world. That was excellent. That was something different. I did want to broaden my horizons and meet new people and this was one place where I could do it.

Mick

When you come up here you just want to forget about everything, forget about the small village of Dunloy, just get away from it all. We actually moved out of the village when I was about a year or two. But I am glad we did because I would have been brought up with republican ideas in my head coming from such a large Catholic area. I enjoy going out and socializing around Dunloy, but is good to get away from it. Just the whole idea of 100% Catholic.

Frankie

Although some were wary, particularly of the label of being a Christian Community, all had significantly positive first experiences. It was this experience of having fun and being at Corrymeela as part of group that made them want to return.

We came up with the school then. We had a great time. Great craic and good community work.

Niamh

Even though I hadn't been up since the time I came up as a leader there was just something - I can't put my finger on it. There was something that I just wanted to come back to.

Mick

B. What do people experience at Corrymeela?

Throughout the interviews it became clear that there were elements that happened at both an *informal* and *formal* level which impacted and contributed to individuals experience of Corrymeela. I am using the term *informal* to describe the elements that build a context conducive towards reconciliation such as the ethos and atmosphere, relationships, space and location. The *formal* program refers to the structured program activities of the Seed Group.

Informal Elements: Creating a Context for Reconciliation

According to interviewees, Corrymeela's atmosphere creates a strong sense of belonging. What was significant for interviewees was that their sense of belonging was not based on their social or religious identity but on their personal traits and attributes as individuals. This was important because they felt they didn't have to prove that they were worthy of belonging because the underlying message/ethos was that 'you belong first.'

Those who had experienced exclusion or marginalization for any reason due to their background, religion, class, gender, or disability found a strong sense of acceptance and belonging at Corrymeela. Several specific elements that contributed towards creating

a sense of belonging was the focus on community and the welcome, an atmosphere of acceptance and non-judgment, the casual and home-like residential layout, and the peace and beauty of the location.

1. Welcoming into Community: “The Buzz of Affirmation”

Nearly all interviewed spoke about the importance of their welcome at Corrymeela. Many described initial experiences of shyness and discomfort and the importance of being recognized and greeted enthusiastically by volunteers and staff as they arrived. Individuals commented on how immediately they felt at home as staff and volunteers greeted them, said hello, offered cups of tea, and took time to talk with them. This welcome was extremely important as a first step in beginning to build trust and relationships.

The moment you walk in that door in the main house you are made to feel welcome. People say ‘thanks for coming’, just little things like smiling, and there is a buzz of affirmation all the time like, ‘thanks for telling me that ‘or that’s a good point’ little things like cups of tea that they get you. All those things make people feel welcome, you know.

Emmet

There is always people standing round at reception and you just come in and talk to somebody and you know, even if you haven't seen somebody for a month or something, or longer - maybe a year, you know everybody. You wouldn't get that somewhere else. It is the whole community - you could go somewhere else and you wouldn't get that. It is the whole ethos of the community.

Mark

The atmosphere of the place really was a big factor in me coming back up. The volunteers were always very friendly. The staff were always very friendly. A lot of times when I was coming up- it was before the house was built. This was just a building site but even still there was something magical about the place.

Mick

For many it was this atmosphere of welcome that lingered in their minds. Some commented that even after coming up on a regularly basis, they were still nervous, and it was important to them to continue to be welcomed.

2. Atmosphere of Acceptance and Non-judgement

Many commented that being welcomed in this way made them feel accepted, and that it an important part in creating an atmosphere of non-judgement and openness. The message was that they were a person first and their background was not important. For many this was different from their experience in the “real world.” This is particularly true in Northern Irish society where who you are and where you come from are usually “sussed out” within the first five minutes of meeting. Those coming from stigmatized areas commented on the significance of not feeling judged for where they were from, but accepted as people.

Ballymun is completely full of drugs and it has a really high percentage of unemployment. So it was strange because I think coming up here you were allowed to be yourself and not judged for what your life was like at home. I didn't feel threatened when I came up and felt I could just be meself and not have to answer to anyone. I think that was the biggest thing not having to answer to anybody for when you are up here is a major factor to why I do come up. I know I can be meself and not feel ashamed.

Pettsy

The atmosphere of acceptance is important for two reasons. It gives individuals freedom to be a different person than they might be in their own environment because they don't feel they have to live up to externally ascribed labels. Secondly, not having to live up to stereotypes frees individuals to not stereotype others, and to relate to others in a different way.

Up here you could be working with someone from another tradition and yet, you don't have time to sit back and think about it... You get to know the person when you are doing the task along with them. Then when you find out what their background is - it doesn't matter, really. It doesn't seem to matter because you have got to know the person first. The trouble I think with Northern Ireland, people tend to try to get to know someone's background before they try to get to know them personally and that fuels a lot of the hatred, I think.

Frankie

3. Comfort of Space

The space at Corrymeela is laid out in a comfortable and home-like atmosphere. Each unit has a fireplace, dining area, living room- lounge area and communal kitchen. Groups that come to Corrymeela are given a space in one of the residential units and the group is asked to "treat it as your home for the weekend." Both the physical layout and the ethos create of a sense of comfort and group ownership.

This is mine, this is yours, this is everybody's that comes in. This is why Corrymeela becomes so special to a lot of people.... Because it feels like a part of this is theirs. It is a place that for a short time you own a part. You keep on saying treat this as your home.

Michael

I would always come up and put my slippers on, whereas I would do that at home no problem. And to this day I still do bring a pair of slippers with me, it's so comfortable. So they probably got to the stage where they know 'o.k. well he's definitely comfortable because he's got his slippers on' and you don't just wear your slippers anywhere you know.

Pettsy

4. Location: Isolated and Beautiful

Many commented that the location of Corrymeela was an immediate attraction because of its natural beauty. Others discussed that because Corrymeela is isolated and in the country you would have no other associations with the space and no reason to go there except to participate in its programs. Therefore, when you arrive you are already in

a cross-community mindframe. Others described it as a safe haven away from the tensions and divisions of the city.

Your going someplace that is very different and with it being so different and it with the spiritual and religious aspects to it means that when you cross the threshold I suppose you're in that headspace thing. You are thinking right it's Seed Group weekend, we're in Corrymeela, this is what we are here to do and this is how we are going to be. Even if you were in Ballycastle town you wouldn't have that because there are other things that go on there and you may have other experiences in Ballycastle town. Because Corrymeela is literally plunked in of a load of fields the only reason why you would have ever been here is Corrymeela- so you put on that head when you come through the door.

Ryan

There is something - once you go through the gate - it is very strange. But you change. I don't know what it is.

Alan

It is like a safe haven.with the sea out there. You have got the fields over there. And you have got all these lovely buildings and it is like a haven. It is like a safe place.

Mark

Formal Reconciliation Program: The Seed Group

The Seed Group brings young adults between the ages of 18-25 together for a weekend retreat once a month for six months. The group is intentionally recruited for diversity. The group brings together both male and female participants from the Protestant and Catholic traditions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and from the working, middle and upper class. All voluntarily apply to be part of the program and participants are selected from the pool of applicants.

The Seed Group is both planned and facilitated by a paid youth worker on staff at Corrymeela, supported by several community members who have been working with this program for many years. Each month is intentionally set up to build on the work of the previous one. The basic format of the six weekends covers the following areas:

First Month: Introductions and getting to know each other.

Second Month: Relationships

Third Month: Family

Fourth Month: Spirituality and Religion

Fifth Month: Politics

Sixth Month: Evaluation

End of Six Months: Trip to other country of conflict

First Weekend: Introductions, Getting to Know Each Other

During the first weekend most of the attention and focus is on setting the atmosphere and building trust. Facilitators use creative exercises such as Life Maps, during which group members share their backgrounds, values, and experiences. Activities are designed to elicit self-disclosure but typically don't get too controversial. There are different degrees of comfort with this type of disclosure; for some who have never shared in this way it seems too emotional, and for others not enough. The goal is to strike a balance.

Second Month: Relationships

The group examines significant relationships in their lives, reflecting on who has been influential and why. The group also covers relationships between genders, with a session designed around both men and women asking each other 'questions you've always wanted to ask.' The tone of this weekend tends to be somewhat lighter as the young men and women explore stereotypes each has in regards to the other.

Third Month: Family

The focus of this month is to explore roles and conflicts that exist in the family. Activities such as sculpting exercises are used to elicit discussions and sharing on family systems and roles. In Northern Ireland there is taboo in admitting family problems outside the family. For this reason these sessions can bring up many emotions. It can become especially sensitive at this point for those who have had family members who have died because of the conflict or for any other reason. While the intention is not become a therapy session, the support can have a therapeutic effect.

Fourth Month: Spirituality and Religion

In Northern Ireland, spirituality and religion often become lumped together and treated as one and the same. This of course, is not always true. The focus and purpose of the weekend is for the group to reflect on what makes them who they are, and what are driving factors in their lives. Through several exercises they examine their own worldview through their values, beliefs, attitudes and actions.

Fifth Month: Politics

The focus is to examine "what is politics?" by exploring and unpacking the terms of politics. The group discusses issues such as the future of Northern Ireland, paramilitaries, arms, and terrorism vs. liberation. Unpacking the political terminology helps young people to explore their own assumptions about what is political. Sculpting and continuum exercises are used with group members to explore their own political identity by moving to stand under flags and symbols that they feel represent them, such as the Union Jack or Irish Tricolor.

Sixth Month: Evaluation and Follow-Up Trip

At this final weekend, facilitators use creative and artistic activities with group members as a tool to reflect on and express their understanding of what the experience has been for them. As a final event, each year the Seed Group goes on a trip outside of Northern Ireland to visit another area of conflict. The purpose is to provide an opportunity to reflect on their learning, both from a distance and from the perspective of another conflict situation.

What Interviewees Found Significant in the Seed Group

All interviewees had some prior experience at Corrymeela, and many saw the Seed Group as a way to deepen and continue their involvement. Most heard of it through word of mouth or were invited by staff to apply for positions with the group. The majority interviewed felt that their participation with the Seed Group was significant to their personal development and further increased their desire to remain involved with Corrymeela. Several aspects of the program were highlighted as being particularly important such as intentional trust-building and community, the safety of the group process, and the opportunities for self-discovery and encountering diversity.

1. Trust-building and Community

- ◆ The residential component was significant for people.

The retreat business is significant to me. You come up on a bus and you're here- you're not anywhere where you can go away for two hours and meet anybody else. You're here and you're living in each other's pockets for that time and you have to get on with it Being in each other's space for 48 hours...

Ryan

- ◆ The rituals of icebreakers, eating together, washing up, and sharing rooms contributed to building group solidarity and cohesiveness.
- ◆ Time was also a significant factor in that interviewees stated that their own comfort increased as the weekends progressed.
- ◆ Participants commented that both formal program and informal time played an important role in building trust and a feeling of community in the group.

But it wasn't necessarily the set program as such which had a big impact on me, it was the quiet conversations you had with someone over a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, and a bit of toast or a cigarette. I was sitting there, I was chatting to a girl and I thought I knew her quite well, and it was about two o'clock in the morning. We were just sitting there having a chat, and she said something to me and it was really so personal, and it really blew me away. The fact that she trusted me to tell me that. Some of the things she told me I could never associate with her at all.

Emmett

- ◆ Social Aspect, Craic and Banter

Most interviewed commented that the opportunity to socialize with the group at the pub was important as this was something they would not get a chance to do in their own environments.

You can go to the pub anywhere. When you are at home, when you are on holidays, when you are up here. But you just can't go to the pub with the people that you meet up here when you are at home. That is one thing you notice.

Frankie

2. Group Process

All of the above helped to create a sense of safety and trust with the group and laid the foundation to explore sensitive topics. The formal program gave a structured opportunity to discuss issues that were unsafe to talk about in mixed company. Participants commented on several additional things that helped to ensure safe space.

- ◆ The sequence of the programming

Many commented that it was important that time was given to build up the trust and the personal relationships before sensitive topics such as politics and religion were discussed.

- ◆ Role of facilitators

Facilitators were perceived as important role models. Several of the male interviewees in particular commented that they developed strong relationships with their male facilitator and that this relationship was important in role modeling.

I got on very well with Stephen (the leader). Stephen and I had an awful lot in common. He was a hard man. I could see him put down barriers and just open up. If he could do it - anyone could do it. Stephen got a lot out of it as well. It was great for him to be himself and to not have to play the hard man. He really touched me - just the way he could be himself. That made me feel very comfortable.

Mick

Participants also commented on facilitator's skill in guiding group discussions, and in dealing with conflict:

The best thing was that no conflicts that got heated were ever let go on to the following weekend, they were all dealt with on the one weekend. I suppose a lot of that had to do with the way they were facilitated and I think Corrymeela created the safe space for people to actually talk about stuff like that.

Pettsy

- ◆ Contracts, confidentiality and non-judgement

Participants were encouraged to share their feelings and experiences but to speak for themselves. Contracts of confidentiality are made and respected. When sensitive topics were discussed the group did so in a manner which respected the person even if beliefs differed.

Some of the people in the group had lost family members or uncles or whatever in the Troubles, from one side or the other, and if someone is coming with a viewpoint from that particular side it could cause a lot of hurt and a lot of pain. We were all very aware of doing it [discussing] in a way that you are not focusing all your hatred or anger on one person in the group because they are from that area or because their family or they support that group. Seeing the person first and attitudes second. Separating the person from what they believe.

Sheaneen

3. Opportunities for Self Discovery, Reflection and Discussion

For many interviewed, the Seed group was the first opportunity that they ever had to critically examine their own lives through exploring their values, attitudes, thoughts and beliefs. The nature of the program provided individuals with the structured space to think about life and experiences to this point. Reflecting on their relationships with friends and family, thoughts and beliefs on politics and religion forced them to have to critically examine who they are, and to understand what is important to them and why.

[Seed Group] had a major impact on my life, my behavior and my attitudes toward people have changed. It made me think more about Corrymeela, it made me think more about peace and reconciliation. It also made me think more issues such as sexuality, friendship, made me think about a lot of things you know. Anything that you can think about on anything: culture, music, media, literature, thought about it all. It's a quiet thing, you know it's not a major where you start out as one person and you are another at the end of it. It's just that I think it helps develop and realize more of your potential.

Emmet

4. Encountering the Challenge of Diversity

For many interviewed this was the first time they had developed any significant relationships with a diversity of individuals. This diversity extended beyond sectarian lines and included class, gender, sexual orientation and nationality. What also seemed to be different for most participants was the quality of the relationships and the chance to discuss and acknowledge topics that were culturally taboo.

The only time I would have seen my mates was playing football and then straight to the pub and all we talked about was sex, drink and football. Basically there was nothing else. Golden rule was you don't mention God and you don't mention politics because it always starts arguments. It's not a cool thing to talk about what you believe in God. It's not cool. So for me to have a chance to talk about those things and feel comfortable in doing so, in my opinion was okay. It was good to be able to get a chance to talk about these things.

Mick

Individuals commented that this experience helped them to understand themselves and each other better, breaking down their previous held assumptions. For some it was a challenging experience to disclose their lives and for others it was a challenge to have to hear difficult stories.

I didn't have any problems with people being from different backgrounds...I found it harder maybe dealing with the things that had happened to people. Looking back, [and] thinking about what people would say about their own life growing up. I feel kind of lucky that I have had quite a quiet life, you know nothing major has happened.

Robert

The experience also helped them to explore and understand each other's perceptions, particularly about divisive issues such as history, myths, the marching season, and flags. As such, it was an opportunity to understand how and why the issue was important to someone else.

What I found quite strange was that some people found flags threatening which I didn't. It wasn't like I found security in it or safety. I saw it as a flag and as a symbol but never really saw it as anything more, and these people found it very threatening and that it really hit at them. So it wasn't a conflict in that we fell out over it, but it was more of an argument like I can't see why this is. But at the end of the day we kind of put those things behind us, you know. We accepted our differences, it is all about the fact you promote what you have in common and you also acknowledge and accept your cultural diversity.

Emmett

Even though it was sometimes difficult, groups were about to also find commonalities in many ways whether it was in relationships with parents, sports, music, or in the context of dating. Sharing common difficulties in the context of the group became a form of support.

[In] the family one [session], we really would deal with family problems in that we would sit and laugh and make fun of ourselves - if there was a problem in the house - say an alcoholic father - which was common enough. What we would do was actually slag ourselves and that was how we would deal with it. It was great. It was something that actually helped me instead of keeping stuff in. So in that respect it was excellent.

Mick

C. Why People Stay Involved: Long and Short Term Volunteering, and Community Membership

The great majority (11-13) of those interviewed followed their Seed Group experience with another level of commitment and involvement through volunteering either as a short term (weekends or summer) or as a long term (one year live-in) volunteer. In fact, seven of thirteen had gone on to be long term volunteers with Corrymeela, committing to living and working at the Center for a year without compensation. Several of these individuals even left salaried positions for the volunteer post. In addition, four of those interviewed had become community members after finishing their volunteer year. Those interviewed commented that they continued their involvement with Corrymeela for several reasons: to continue the experience, to maintain relationships, contribute back, and because they were sought out by Corrymeela.

1. To continue the experience:

Judging from themes that emerged in the interviews, it seems that most people stay involved to continue and to build upon their initial experiences. The metaphors that individuals used to describe their continued involvement were: hooked, the buzz, the bug and a sense of being called. These metaphors allude to an experience that gets in your system and motivates you to need more, even beyond your own control. Those who went on to be year long volunteers commented that there was a direct link between involvement in the Seed Group, and in their short term volunteering, with both building on each other and integral to their ultimate decision to become long term volunteers.

After coming up on the Seed Group and even during the Seed Group, in between each time I had to come up, all I was doing was looking forward to coming back. So I got involved as a short term volunteer and got involved with GIT. The short term volunteering side of it was fantastic. We actually got to know the long-term volunteers. Through that and I suppose, even then, I would have had it in the back of my mind to go for a year... If I had not done the Seed Group I would not be here. Is that simple enough? If I had not done the Seed Group I would not be here at all.

Mick

Those same individuals also commented that continuing their involvement was a way to challenge themselves to translate their experiences in the Seed group and it had prepared them for the diversity they would encounter as a long term volunteer.

The whole diversity within the group got me thinking and then when I went back to my own house I could not just fit back in with my own perceptions and views and prejudices. I found I had to challenge them myself and I suppose again during my volunteer year the same, and possibly a bit more intense because we were all living together. But I think if I hadn't had the experience of the Seed Group first, looking at that, it wouldn't have been as easy to fit in with a volunteer team full of diversity.

Sheaneen

2. Maintain the Relationships

Many commented that continued involvement was a way to maintain the personal friendships they had made with people at Corrymeela, as well as an opportunity to continue to meet more like-minded people. What seemed to be important was that the qualities of relationships were different and possibly more satisfying as a result of the personal development and growth they had experienced while at Corrymeela.

I think the friendships here are deeper and a lot closer than any of the friendships I have anywhere else. I think just the people that come here are like a different mold. They are not the very superficial standard type of mould of people that I think you get anywhere else.

Graeme

3. Desire to Contribute Back

In addition to staying involved to continue their own experience, many individuals stayed involved as a way to give back to the community.

You get a buzz. You get a satisfaction at the end of the day. When you meet a group of kids or whatever from both sides of the tracks who are very wary of each other and at the end of it maybe they are friendly, or maybe there are just a couple that have got on really well and you can see those things happening. You can see the change at the end of the day on the Sunday after they are leaving. There is a change and that is what you get the satisfaction from.

Emmett

I feel like it is something that I am part of...but also seeing the things that come out of it. Last year we had a guy who was the son of an RUC police officer and met up with a girl from Dublin, from Ballymun, and they hit it off and started going out, it's just a little ironic thing. You might look at somebody beforehand and say I can't imagine that happening....

Robert

As their involvement grew, individuals indicated that they needed to have ownership in order to deepen their commitment. For some this meant taking on leadership in running programs. Others felt more committed when they were invited to become community members or to take positions within the organization.

4. Sought Out, Needed and Trusted

Individuals also commented on the importance of being sought out and trusted to take on and carry out tasks. To be trusted unconditionally was a new experience for some individuals. This is important because it helped them to feel free to take risks and explore new interests and even to make mistakes in an accepting environment.

I was always fascinated by the music thing. I used to always go up and say 'well will I do a Disco for you?' And usually they would say go ahead and do it-I wasn't asked 'what

was I gonna play and why are you playing that.' I was just allowed. They trusted us to do whatever you wanted to do and gave you the chance to do it.

Pettsy

I was told on the Wednesday the person that was supposed to be running the program wasn't there and they would like to know if I would like to lead the program? So I devised the program then on the Wednesday and the Thursday, and then ran the program with the help of 2-3 of the short-term volunteers. That was really how I started to get involved in that aspect of things, and then it became a sort of snowball effect where I sort of helped out every other weekend.

Emmett

Being sought out, needed, and trusted helped to further strengthen and develop a strong sense of belonging at Corrymeela.

There is definitely a sense of belonging but it's a strange belonging because it's not a belonging as in you always have to be there to be part of the place. People know you for what they have seen of you, how they have experienced you and if they need someone like that maybe they call you up and say can you give us a hand now? Can you help me with this? It's really good to progress to that stage where I can actually say that I am part of Corrymeela.

Pettsy

III. Analysis of Research Findings: Overall Impact of Involvement with Corrymeela

One of my main goals for this research project was to understand the type of change that Corrymeela's reconciliation programs promoted. The short answer to this question is that changes occurred as a developmental process rather than a conversion experience. While most individuals came into Corrymeela with some openness towards expanding their worldviews, the research indicates that many might not have anticipated the broadness of this expansion. It is my analysis that development occurred which catalyzed further development at three interconnecting levels: the personal, social, and transcendent. As I stated, while all are interconnected, my main distinctions are as follows:

Personal Development: Changes and development which effect how the individual views himself/herself. Examples are increased self-awareness and self-esteem, confidence, ability to take risks, and leadership skills.

Social /Relational Development: Changes in the way that people relate to each other and development of new relationships that would not typically have been nurtured. Examples would be breaking down stereotypes and building more open and trusting relationships between Catholics and Protestants, but would also include building positive relationships between homosexuals and heterosexuals, men and women, or men and men.

Connection to Transcendence: Development and reconnection to some form or experience of transcendence such as spirituality, nature, common humanity, or love.

A. Personal Development- Exploring and Building Secure Identities

Corrymeela refers to the Seed Group as a personal development program. As the name suggests, the program is designed to help young adults build self-awareness, self-esteem, confidence, and leadership skills, contributing to an overall growth process. Personal development is not a strategy unique to Corrymeela and is utilized in other organizations in Northern Ireland working in community relations. A component of the theory is that by developing a strong and secure personal identity, individuals are less likely to gain self-esteem from sectarianism or tribalism.

But the key thing is the process that the individual is going through. It is about growth and self-esteem. If you want to enable people to relate better to others - they need to be in a position where their own esteem and their own confidence is [strong]- where they are working on that themselves – and they are developing that. Those relationships that we are hoping to develop in our work -they won't be developed, or they won't be as positive, without any kind of process that that person has gone through in terms of their personal self-esteem work.

John Doherty, Seed Group Facilitator

In reflecting back on their experiences, all interviewed felt that their experiences in the Seed Group and with Corrymeela had made a significant impact on their lives. Several themes emerged which described the areas of personal development.

1. Self Awareness and Exploration of Identity

Opportunities for reflection, both formally in the Seed Group, and generally at Corrymeela, increased participant's awareness and understanding of themselves, their assumptions, their values, beliefs, viewpoints, and their relationships. Through self-examination, activities, and discussion, individuals gained greater knowledge about their own identity.

Corrymeela gave me the space to see who I am inside and to analyze me beliefs, values, me outlook on life. It gave me a chance to see where I was coming from, and see how I perceived things, and how I reacted in different ways in different situations [and] how I reacted under pressure. In a sense it gave me the chance to see what kind of thing motivates me.

Pettsy

Corrymeela wasn't really trying to achieve anything except getting you to look at yourself and examine yourself, at least that is the way I looked at it. It was good that way, so I got a lot more out of it personally, on a personal basis. I became more aware of myself, it was self-awareness, self perception increased.

Emmett

For some it was surprising to examine parts of their life that they took for granted. For instance, it stimulated thinking on how they defined themselves through political identity as Irish, Northern Irish or British. Participants reflected that space was provided

for them to question and explore the ways in which they fit or didn't fit in typical identity lines. For one Protestant participant, this meant identifying parts of the Irish identity that were important to him, while for a Catholic Nationalist participant it was acknowledging that they didn't feel particularly Irish.

Corrymeela changed my views slightly on that because I did begin to identify with being an Irishman. I always felt Irish but I think part of that is maybe growing up as well. I always felt Irish and I was always exposed to it, but I think I identified with it more when I came here. I have never felt British. Never.

Graeme

Ireland doesn't belong to me. I am trying to make Northern Ireland belong to me. I know I belong to it-but it's never felt mine. I know that I am Northern Irish. I know that I am not Irish I'll never be that. And now in a strange way I do feel Northern Irish slowly but surely.

Michael

Nearly all confirmed that Corrymeela provided the environment for them to try out new roles and to explore parts of themselves and aspects of their identity that they would not have been encouraged to develop in their home environment. For some it was the freedom to express a type of spirituality that did not fit into the traditional religious confines, such as leading a worship service using a rock song. For many men interviewed this freedom took the form of breaking from traditional stereotypes of masculinity by washing dishes, and taking care of children. It also included developing strong friendships with other men, expressing their emotions, and even pursuing interests in non-traditional health fields like aromatherapy or massage.

You were discovering things about yourself that you never thought about-just a more spiritual side. Sitting here and there on the cliff top beside the sea and just the natural part of it. Things like that there is spiritual. You just would have thought it's sissy because it's not a man like thing to be. That was one thing that I discovered. That I wasn't a 'big man' and I didn't want to be either.

Frankie

For many interviewed, the freedom to explore and grow led to concrete changes such as new interests, travel, careers, as well as shifting perceptions of themselves and life choices.

2. Awareness of Self in Relation to Others

As a result of increased self-awareness, individuals also felt they had a greater understanding of themselves in relation to the world. This led them to take more responsibility for their thoughts, actions, and beliefs and how they effected other people.

It has also made me very aware to think before what I actually do say. Rather than coming off with a snarish remark. Thinking to myself, and always relating to the person to say 'I feel' rather than saying and making a sweeping complete generalization of the whole thing- you say 'in my experience I felt this when this happened.'

Pettsy

Well, I consider myself open-minded and very aware. Having said that, I am still challenged, and my opinions are still challenged about Protestants, about people from other countries, about people from other sexes, in fact maybe I am sexist. Things like that there, as well as even the degree to which I was comfortable with my own sexuality or other people's sexuality.

Emmett

3. Confidence and Self- Esteem

In Expressing Views:

Confidence was gained during the Seed Group through having to reflect and articulate their own viewpoints in a diverse group. For many, the chance to explore different aspects of their own identity in this context and be accepted resulted in greater self-confidence and security in their identity. An important factor for participants was that Corrymeela did not have any explicit agenda for changing views, but offered in the context of a diverse group, the space and freedom to explore and examine what those views were and why. All commented that they were open to hearing each other's views, but that it didn't necessarily make them change their own. In fact, several commented that some of their views had not changed but the experience had left them more confident and comfortable in them.

But instead of just agreeing with the majority I could agree with what I felt and speak out if it was not. Because I knew if I was accepted and it didn't matter if it wasn't necessarily what my friend believed or what the group believed. I could still be different because that was OK.

Sheaneen

I would have strong political views that would be diametrically opposed to others and I felt absolutely no hesitation in being able to stand up and say that. The Seed Group didn't change those views or make me more mellow or middle of the road, it just made me feel less awkward and guilty about expressing them.

Ryan

In Taking Leadership:

Many demonstrated new confidence in their leadership skills as a result of their involvement with Corrymeela. Many spoke of developing confidence in their own individual skills and abilities, as they were given opportunities to take leadership with different tasks, and given feedback. Some found they became experts and were sought out to lead activities in which they had no prior experience before Corrymeela.

[I have developed] the confidence to lead out sessions and organize. Just to be left to organize things. I was doing recreation - to organize the river walk - to get it sorted or organize a camping trip. I would never have the confidence to do that sort of thing, or the opportunity to try it.

Frankie

This was particularly true for those who went on to be long-term volunteers as leadership skills are an essential part of this role. In particular, leadership involves working as a member of a team. This type of leadership involves care taking of the group assuring both physical and emotional safety. Rather than taking authoritarian approaches, leaders learn to model respect in relating to group participants as equals. This can be demonstrated by something as silly as making a fool out of oneself during icebreakers to help the groups feel comfortable.

Ability to Accept Risks and Challenges:

Individuals commented that their experiences at Corrymeela have also helped them to challenge themselves to take risks without fear of making mistakes. For some this took the form of trying out new activities, changing careers, traveling, and moving away from home. Others developed courage and confidence in their ability to both confront and intervene in conflicts.

I've traveled around the world since the Seed Group and I think the Seed Group gave me that chance. I am going away, I will make mistakes, I will do things that I'll probably end up regretting but to go and do them. Because if I sit there and don't do them and don't risk and don't try and do them is worse.

Michael

[I am] challenging myself now and if anything comes up that I don't agree with- to have the courage to speak out whereas before I did the Seed Group I would have put my head down and not listened, and let it go past. Now I feel I have more confidence to say 'how is that and how did that come about?' I am still being challenged, but now have the courage to go with the challenge and see where it takes me, whereas before I was just - 'hey I don't want to listen to it' - and carry on ahead.

Sheaneen

And I am not afraid to go into a conversation if I see it's a heated argument. I am not afraid to actually say 'ok what's going on?' And do a mediative thing- 'why did this happen, what caused it? Why do you feel like that, why do you feel like this.'

Pettsy

Others commented that they developed the confidence to take emotional risks and felt they were more aware, open and expressive of their feelings and able to trust.

I'm a better person. I've become that more open and more expressive, not giving a shit about if I say 'love you loads' to somebody or I care for you.

Niamh

While not everybody made such direct links, it seems clear that developments in all of these areas are directly tied to an increase in self-esteem and contribute to building a secure sense of identity.

I go and I walk with me head up high now. I don't look down at the ground anymore. Before I would have been very afraid to walk into a crowded room, whereas I am not

now. I can walk in and say “How are you doing, how are you doing and what’s going on?”

Pettsy

In this respect, the metaphor of the Seed seems to be accurate. Through a supportive and nurturing environment people have an opportunity to develop, and blossom in a way they would not have been able to do in their home environment whether due to the rigidity of identity lines, social constraints, homogeneity, sectarianism, or lack of opportunity.

I wouldn’t say I am a completely different person but I’ve found things out about myself that I probably wouldn’t have found out if I hadn’t have come here. [The] way I kind of look at it is maybe the person that I am now has always been there but at home I never got the chance to flower or break through the surface whereas being up here has allowed me to be that.

Pettsy

B. Social-Relational Development

The second area of development for those involved in Corrymeela was a change in they way they related to others, and development of new relationships that would not typically have been nurtured in their home environment. An important part of this is how they relate to each other. After experiencing acceptance and inclusiveness at Corrymeela, the hope is that this experience challenges people to model the same behavior in their own communities, viewing people first without stereotypes and labels. The belief is that through these individual relationships, barriers and walls within and between communities can be broken down and bridges built. According to my research this seemed to be happening in a number of ways:

1. Breaking down stereotypes by developing and role modeling different types of relationships.

The core of the work of Corrymeela involves relationship building. While the conflict in Northern Ireland has focused much of the work of relationship building to be between the Catholic and Protestant community, the impact of Corrymeela’s approach appears to be much broader. In interviews, while individuals spoke of the cross-community component as an important part of the experience, there were also many other types of relationships being built at Corrymeela, and many other types of stereotypes being broken down. Exposure to diversity and the ethos of acceptance and inclusiveness was extended beyond just the Catholic and Protestant divide to a broader vision of inclusive community.

A lot of people come up here are open-minded but they are not just open minded about Catholic/Protestant, they are open-minded about everything. People’s beliefs about sport, fox-hunting. There are people who have beliefs on – a variety of thoughts - things like people from an Asian background, or atheists, or homosexuals. There are various people and everybody is up there.

Frankie

In fact, what is significant is that not only are new relationships being developed, but also it is the quality of the relationships that are important. What is being modeled are relationships based on greater equality and respect. This becomes a counter-cultural model of relationship in comparison to the traditional roles and relationships. An additional component is that individuals are role modeling these relationships and ways of relating to groups and individuals that use the center. The following are several types of relationships that interviewees identified being built at Corrymeela:

Catholic/ Protestant:

Generally speaking, Catholics and Protestants don't live in the same area, don't go to the same schools, or socialize with each other. If they do meet there is a culture of politeness because it isn't safe to talk about their differences. Corrymeela challenges this by bringing the two communities together and providing a space so that even for a short time they can live in the same area, socialize together, and talk about similarities and differences.

I mean, I don't meet Protestants in my normal every day life. I don't have Protestant friends. Other than people who come to Corrymeela. I don't meet people like Alan - I would not normally meet him. I don't want to live in a world where I only meet Catholics.

Mark

Female/ Male:

In Northern Irish society male and female roles continue to be traditional. In many households, even if they are working, women are still the primary caretakers of children and the home, while men often are looked to as the main breadwinners and decision-makers. As in many societies, domestic violence and abuse also exists. At Corrymeela both men and women are asked to help with cleaning and dishes, and both male and female volunteer staff work and play with children.

Also it was very important to work with women's groups, as well, so that they don't all form a bad opinion of men or think that all men are bastards. Which I think some of them do and rightly so. [They see] that there are some men who will wash dishes and play with the kids and serve food and do all those sorts of things.

Graeme

Male/ Male:

In Northern Ireland and in Ireland in general, most young men would not typically have close or emotional relationships with other young men. In fact, some have difficulty expressing their feelings at all. Conversations would more likely be about sports or women. At Corrymeela, it is acceptable for men to express their feelings, and develop more intimate and caring relationships with both men and women without threatening their masculinity.

When I broke up with Mary, I went round to see David, you know, and I literally cried on his shoulder. Those friendships are hard to find, I think more so among men than anywhere else.
Graeme

Homosexual/ Heterosexual:

While small changes are beginning in this area, homosexuality, for the most part, is taboo in Northern Ireland. It is still very unusual to meet somebody who is openly gay. Interviewees commented that they had met homosexuals at Corrymeela, and that it had challenged their prejudices and homophobia. Individuals commented that the ethos of acceptance at Corrymeela helped them to be accepting of homosexuality.

I was very much Jack the Lad, typical Irish male. I drank lots of beer and tried to chat up as many girls as I wanted, and I didn't like gay people. It wasn't like I didn't like gay people, but it was like I didn't know about it or didn't understand it, out of ignorance as such. I think over the last three or four years, I have changed my perspectives because I have met more people, not maybe through Corrymeela but I have met them through my social life or whatever, but because of the way I have been at Corrymeela it has made me more open to understand things.

Emmett

It has definitely opened up my eyes to so many other things - homosexuality for one. I would have been extremely homophobic. I have met homosexuals here and my views have now changed completely. Definitely, completely. I would have been very homophobic. I would have been a person who would, especially on gays, that would have been a label, queer, pouf, you know. That is it. It doesn't matter what else. But up here everything is broken down and your view on matters change. It is people first now.

Mick

Class:

While class is often not talked of being as big a divide as religion, it is still a point of division and difference. It is often said that the working class would have more in common with each other despite sectarian differences. Likewise, the same could probably be said to be true of the middle class. Interviewees commented that they developed relationships across the class divide at Corrymeela.

There were all these girls from Ballymun. And they were a bit older than me. Some of them had kids but they were from a very different background. They were from a very working class Dublin background and I just thought I have nothing in common with these people. I am not going to get on with them. That was my first impression but since then I have really got to know them. It was really good.

Mark

North/ South:

It is often said that Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland have more in common with each other than with a person of the same religious tradition from the Republic of Ireland. Each carries a lot of stereotypes about the other, that “everyone up North is a terrorist” and that “Belfast is a war zone,” while Northerners stereotype that “those Mexicans (slang for people from the Republic) are all druggies.” Even though Dublin is only three hours from Belfast, there are many people on both sides who have never traveled to the other city. Because Corrymeela draws both volunteer staff and groups from both sides of the border, it becomes an opportunity to develop cross-border ties.

They called me a mucker or something and I challenged them on this. “You don’t even know me, why are you calling me that?” Well you’re from down South. And I says, “And what does that have to do with me?” The leader that was taking the group said to me, “Pettsy, they’ve never heard a southern voice before, it’s strange for them to hear a southern voice.” Even for them to experience a southern voice was probably the best thing that they’ll take away with them from the weekend.

Pettsy

2. Challenging Stereotypes and Roles in the Family and Community

There are a number of ways that individuals translate their experience of relationship building in their own community. Interviewees reflected they made efforts to see people as human first rather than labels, and to challenge friends and family who stereotype others. Others began to question their own family roles and relationships.

I am not as quick to judge people now as what I would have done. I suppose this is a place where you can actually get to listen to people. That is one of the main reasons why. Once you can listen to people and get to know people for who they are and not for what they are. It makes a hell of a difference. I wouldn’t say I see the world differently but I give more respect to people’s opinions, no matter what or how different they are from me.

Mick

I always do reflect on how much me life has changed from being up here and sometimes I try and sit down and try and analyze what parts of Corrymeela have I brought back with me. Not so much to where I live but I suppose it has given me more, from my own family situation.... I have more confidence to turn around and tell me mother how I am feeling, and why I am feeling that way, well for whatever the situation is.

Pettsy

Once you have been challenged you cannot go back. When I came up on the Seed Group I had all these views of men and women and religion - not just politics or that. But all these views have been challenged. I suppose in my house my father was the breadwinner and mother did all else - she stayed at home and looked after us all and if we wanted anything it was always ‘go and ask your Daddy’. Which, I suppose, sort of just went on and the secret is challenging it and seeing there are equal people here, it is not men or not women. Then when I came back into my own house and ‘bring your dinner in to your

Daddy'. 'Why, can he not get up and get it himself?' Because I could not go back. This is the way I was doing it.
Sheaneen

3. Exposure to Complexity and the World Beyond Black and White

Having had exposure to diversity and opportunities to listen to and explore different viewpoints, participants commented that they have a better understanding of the complexity of life in a number of areas. Specifically, they commented on a greater understanding and awareness of the complexity of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

What you are dealing with is a lot of hurt. You can see the hurt and what effect. I know people were doing a job protecting their community for what they thought was right. The IRA thought what they were doing was right, and the loyalists thought they were right. So how can you say that one is better than the other? Now I can say that, before I wouldn't have said that.

Michael

See Northern Ireland, I fully know now that I can have a grasp of both sides of the conflict. I see where the loyalists are coming from and where the republicans are coming from, yet even though I am from the Republic of Ireland I don't always associate myself with being a Republican. I wouldn't say I am in total agreement...At home you can always say "well why can't you just do this" or "why can't you just do that?" Now I can understand why they just can't turn things over. Here today and gone tomorrow. Or here today and its completely different the next day.

Petty

For some, being involved with Corrymeela exposed them to meeting people whose lives had turned out very differently from their own which challenged them to acknowledge many of the problems they had not personally experienced.

I have the easiest family life ever, I think. I was very lucky and I was extremely naive in that I thought, (I knew that every family was not like ours) but I didn't think they were as bad as I heard stories of. That came as a bit of a shock and it was upsetting and I remember feeling guilty and slightly awkward. And when people did ask about my family I couldn't say anything because there was nothing really bad to say. We never had financial problems. Nothing has ever happened really big in our family, no deaths. It was tough for a lot of people. It was tough for me in a different way.

Graeme

4. Conflict Transformation:

When in mixed company, conflict is usually avoided as it is seen to lead to tension, falling out with people, or at its worst violence. For this reason, it was significant that people had the opportunity and felt safe enough to express their views in mixed company at Corrymeela, listening to each other, and even disagreeing with each other without losing friendships or 'falling out over it'.

There is conflict here but it is the way that you deal with it. You are not too quick to judge. And you aren't too quick to think that everything is rosy. Nothing is perfect at Corrymeela-but that is part of Corrymeela. And if you accept the good bits you have to accept the bad bits.

Michael

It helps me understand and accept it, but at the end of the day, I still have my view and I'll probably still stick to it. But it's not a case of falling out with people. You see a lot of people tend to think you have to have one or the other, and I don't really see it as such, you know.

Emmett

C. Connection to Transcendence

The third area developed through involvement with Corrymeela was a reconnection to some form of universalism that I am calling transcendence. This transcendence reminded individuals of a common and unifying bond and interdependence of all forms of creation. For some, this was a connection to their spirituality, for others, it was nature, common humanity, or love.

1. Space to Acknowledge Spirituality:

While Corrymeela is a Christian community and worship is offered on a regular basis, not everyone who becomes involved would describe himself or herself as a Christian or even religious. However, most commented that having space to acknowledge a common spirituality was important. This space was provided both physically and symbolically in the Croi and during optional worships. Many commented that the lack of pressure in attending worship was very important. Even those that did not go to worship regularly, or consider themselves Christian, found it important as a presence.

I am obviously not Christian. I still go to worship sometimes and I have actually done a few worships but it wouldn't be necessarily around 'God'. It would be around something else. But that is the good thing about worship. People do it around all different things. Still, just the fact that it is there. I enjoy it.

Mick

Those who attended worship commented that the freedom to express many types of spirituality was important. Also, the opportunity to lead worship was a new and unique experience for most people. For some this involved reading poetry, playing rock songs, or using quiet meditations. The freedom to lead and experience non-traditional services was refreshing and meaningful for many. The fact that services were non-denominational and felt inclusive to both Catholics and Protestants was also important.

I would like it if there was no 'Catholics' and no 'Protestants.' You know, like everyone could be friends without having to go different ways. You know the way in Corrymeela, the worship thing – it's everybody. It doesn't matter what you are and what you believe.

Niamh

The Croi represents something that binds everyone. I think the Croi and that space is the place where the whole thing comes together.

Seaneen

2. Connection to Nature, Community and Love (Agape)

As referenced to in earlier sections, for many, especially those coming from urban areas the location and natural beauty of Corrymeela was important. For many it would be their first time being near the ocean, forest and the countryside and consequently became a significant aspect of their experience.

The experience of acceptance and community at Corrymeela seemed to connect individuals to what some have called Agape, a type of transcendent and universal love.

You discover one or two, even more than that, several sides of love that you never thought of before. Okay, there is love-you love your family, then you fall in love- but that is it. When you are at home that is all you would ever think about. But up here there is just so many different types. ...

Frankie

I think Corrymeela is an entity in itself. You can take the people away from Corrymeela but you can't take Corrymeela away from the people... Corrymeela is everybody put together. You, me, the community members, the volunteers, the groups that come up here to Corrymeela. Corrymeela- it is not just these stones or just the volunteers or just the people that work here or just the members. Sometimes I think that people just think that Corrymeela is a place. Corrymeela is bigger than all that. I think Corrymeela, and this really sounds sentimental, but Corrymeela is a space in your heart that you never knew you had.

Michael

3. Hope: One Person Can Make A Difference

Individuals reflected that they gained an appreciation and a belief in the power one person has to make a difference through the building of a relationship. One interviewee, a Catholic from Dublin, told a story to illustrate this point. He described a potentially life-threatening encounter in Belfast, which he escaped because of a warning given to him by a Protestant Loyalist whom he had met previously at Corrymeela.

To me that in itself was a big thing because I thought- we have obviously touched them in some way. I touched that person. We've changed his life where he values, and to me that was the biggest thing, was the friendship there. What we built up in the whole weekend saved our lives- you know what I mean? Just in a complete turn of five minutes, which was mind blowing at the time.

Petty

IV. Challenges: “Corrymeela Begins When You Leave”

While all interviewees felt they had significant and transformative experiences and had chosen to stay involved with Corrymeela, there were several themes that emerged which highlighted challenges people faced. One of the main difficulties was a type of ‘identity crisis.’ Many commented that Corrymeela is very different than the ‘real world,’ and struggled with a Jekyll and Hyde syndrome when moving back and forth between the two.

1. Real World vs. Corrymeela: Living in the Tension

Having the opportunity to explore new sides of yourself and new relationships, breaking down stereotypes, and changing attitudes opens a window for people. It can also make life difficult as they find themselves trying out new identities and learning about themselves. Having to translate these changes creates a lot of internal tension, as individuals can’t fit as easily back into their old roles at home with family and with friends.

Sometimes it can be quite difficult actually to go home. I have some weekends when I have just left Corrymeela and went home and then been in bad mood for no reason other than the fact that I am home. This experience hasn’t helped me find out what I want to be. It has made it harder actually. It just throws up a lot of questions as to whether I want to be bricklaying all my life. At home I don’t fit in with my mates with what I do at the minute.

Frankie

I changed my entire group of friends. The people I was mates with before - after six months here - I just couldn’t talk with them any more. ..They want just a drinking, matey friendship and I think my tolerance for those is just gone. I just don’t want friendships like that anymore.

Graeme

This tension can be very difficult and confusing. People articulated that they find they are able to be their ‘real self’ at Corrymeela, without labels and stereotypes and conformity to what others expect. However, some comment that they feel they can not be this same way at home or use the same parts of their selves, leading to certain schizophrenia.

[In] entering an experience in which you can be real, one of the problems, but also one of the benefits is that once you have had that experience it becomes part of the truth of who I am. So if you think that ‘here is a place in which I can be real’ and the ‘normal’ world is the place where I have to be ‘normal.’ It is very difficult for me to be ‘real’ in the ‘normal’ world because it is a contradiction or a counter-culture thing. For all of us it is very hard to be real in the normal world. But for me that is the challenge. So long as you deny that aspect of yourself which is and becomes a truth then you will always be frustrated.

David Robinson, Quest Coordinator

It is also challenging to people to be ‘real’ and take their experience back into their own communities when it is not a safe environment.

I would try and bring a lot of what I had got out of Corrymeela, back. But it was never quite the same because it was not a safe place where I was. It was a safe place for the children to say their views and not have them challenged and just grow up with blinkers and say 'that is because my Daddy says so'. Whereas I had the freedom and my family were very supportive of me coming up.

Sheaneen

I know that I will go back and there will be certain things I do now that I will have to change. Like the way I get on. Up here I accept everything it's not a problem. In Belfast you can't do that all the time. Because you have to protect yourself and up here you don't need to protect yourself because it is a safe place. I think you can trust more as long as you don't trust wrong. When I go back to Belfast-where I am going not everybody is going to be as open as trustworthy. This is giving you the chance to see how it could be like.

Michael

What comes across is that a great deal of support is needed to help people make sense of their experience at Corrymeela. I would suspect that individuals who experience this crisis most acutely continue to stay involved with Corrymeela as a source of support. In fact, while I did not specifically look at this correlation, I am speculating that those who experience more of this identity crisis may be at earlier stages in their own journey and personal development.

One interviewee, Niamh, commented that in order for Corrymeela to work, you had to accept being accepted and challenge how others treat you in the 'real world.' She recounted that her friend had come to Corrymeela and was very moved by the experience, mentioning that she had never felt as accepted so quickly anywhere else. However, she did not end up coming back. Niamh speculated that her friend couldn't handle being accepted unconditionally because it was so different from how she was treated in the 'real world.'

I think it might have been too much acceptance and she couldn't handle it all at once. She says she might try again in a couple of years but not just now. People come up here having been put down all their lives and then they think it is great that they get this. But other people come up and they have been put down all their lives are like 'Oh God youse are scaring the fuck out of me.'

Niamh

2. Relationships Formed Out of Context

A few of the interviewees were uncomfortable with what they perceived as the inorganic nature of the relationships that were built up, particularly in the Seed Group. Those individuals felt they no context for the relationships, and felt under pressure to make themselves vulnerable and develop emotional intimacy with the group. They commented that in order to bond they had to be really open. Interestingly enough, both interviewees who commented on this also recognized that while it was uncomfortable, the sharing was a significant part of the experience.

I don't think that the relationships were organically formed, they weren't formed the way that you normally form a relationship. You are just thrown into a room with these people and you make friends with them. You are forced to become really close with them really quickly in a way because there is so many personal discussions where your whole private life is put under the microscope. You don't have to reveal anything, but you are under pressure to give personal details to create a bond. The more you put into the group the more you learn about yourself. But at the end of the day I am still friends with them.

Peter

3. Challenge to Sustain Relationships

While the majority of those interviewed said they had stayed in fairly good contact with people they met through Corrymeela and the Seed Group, most commented that ongoing contact happened through continued involvement with Corrymeela. Some relationships become hard to sustain due to physical distance, or lack of transportation. One interviewee commented that the relationships were hard to sustain because his home life was so different, and that he had viewed the experience as a holiday.

While I was in the Seed Group I felt very close to them. Whenever I stepped outside and went back to my own school or wherever I was working or whatever, it became completely different. I went to the Seed Group and definitely enjoyed it when I was there and made loads of friends and got on with everybody and it was great craic but then whenever I went back it was like... I think I looked at the weekends like a holiday, you know. It was a chance to get away from the whole routine as well. It was just somewhere else instead of something that is part of your day to day routine.

Robert

VIII. Final Analysis and Conclusions

Development not Conversion

I set out to understand the nature of the change process and how are people were impacted by their experience at Corrymeela. As I have stated before, the type of change that seems to be occurring is a developmental change, in contrast to a conversion experience. For some individuals this change was more extreme or dramatic than for others although all seemed to reflect some type of change.

I would say it probably speeded up a lot of stuff. I think I would have ended up being the same person with the same views now as what I was always going to be but I think that speeded it up. It made me much more aware of differences and stuff like that. Because this was the place where I was going to see it - I certainly was not going to see that sitting in the Towers in Ballymun.

Mick

Corrymeela is essentially providing the fertile soil, and good weather conditions, to create an environment that is conducive for growth. All interviewees commented on having some degree of openness to having a new experience, which may indicate that the seed was already planted in them, and they were looking for an opportunity to grow.

Individuals indicated that they may have been open initially to coming for a cross-community experience, but there were other experiences they would not have been open to initially, such as meeting a homosexual or having a discussion about spirituality. This indicates that the experience also had the ability to plant new seeds that may not have been there before. In this way, the first set of changes ends up catalyzing others.

This developmental approach also appears in a pattern of involvement with Corrymeela, with a strong relationship between being a Seed Group participant and all types of volunteering at Corrymeela. Development occurs in stages with each experience sowing the seeds of deeper involvement. In creating a context conducive for growth, an additional point is that the informal (the residential component, the atmosphere, the way they were treated) was just as important as the formal program activities in contributing to processes of change.

The importance of the developmental approach is that it can be seen as part of the process of capacity building with young people. These types of programs develop in young people skills and abilities that will equip them to be able to contribute towards the creation of a Northern Irish society that is open and tolerant of pluralism. They have acquired through their development the ability to take risks, both emotional and physical, to see themselves in relation to others, to take on collaborative and team-oriented leadership, and have developed their ability to trust those who on the outset seem very different. All of these skills and qualities are the integral infrastructure of a civil society that is built on principles of equity, diversity and interdependence.

Systems Theory: How systems of change interrelate

One of the ongoing questions I had during this research was to try to understand how personal development and community relations/reconciliation related to political change and the peace process. Does helping individuals increase their self-esteem, and providing opportunities for individuals to develop positive relationships across various divides, relate to politicians or other extremists becoming more willing to accommodate each other?

In analyzing my conversations and interviews at Corrymeela, systems theory offers some possible explanations to this question. We all operate within systems of relationships comprised of our families, friends, and larger communities. When changes begin to happen so that one individual begins to question themselves and their role in their family and the community, it can make a ripple effect. Politicians and others who hold power such as paramilitary organizations and other extremist organizations such as the Orange Order, especially in the tight knit society in Northern Ireland, are also part of that community.

John Doherty, Corrymeela's youth worker, reflects that in the last several years he has witnessed a change in the both the language of politicians and the way that politicians are beginning to relate to each in Northern Ireland. He comments that they are using the language of the field of community relations, terms such as conflict resolution, and

‘seeking an accommodation’ instead of ‘slugging matches across the table’ confirming his belief that grassroots community relations ideas and processes work may have begun to influence the political processes.

Another recent example was the political review that George Mitchell organized in the fall of 1999, bringing all the leading figures in the peace process away to a retreat house in England. This was significant because George Mitchell was intentionally trying to build community and trust with politicians who would not have even been seen in the same room together only a few years before.

People were talking about creating a community for instance, where they took all those politicians off to Lancaster House, and they put them there for a few days. George Mitchell's motivation - was about building trust. So they lived in community with each other. But a crucial part of that, and people talked about this, is it was more about the conversations that went on about the dinner table and the strolls in the garden. It was more about those conversations. I think that interaction. Trying to imagine it - sitting down at dinner and David Trimble comes down and sits opposite Martin McGuinness, just that thing about 'How is it going Martin?'

John Doherty

Reconciliation as Paradigm Shift

I understand the term reconciliation to mean rebuilding and reconnecting things that were divided or disconnected. One of the areas that I consider significant in looking at Corrymeela’s approach to reconciliation is that it is taken to the broadest possible level. It is understood as a process, and a way of building relationships and connecting brokenness at a variety of levels. Therefore, community relations are a component of this but the vision is even wider. Its vision is of transforming the *way that people relate* and view their relationships interpersonally, intra-personally and with all of forms of creation and the earth. It is not just connecting each to the other but helping to reconnect to the whole.

Colin Craig, the director of Corrymeela, calls reconciliation a paradigm shift. He sees reconciliation as a challenge to the dominant western cultural model of individualism and disconnection, through offering a vision of interdependence, belonging, responsibility and connection. In this way, he sees the work of Corrymeela to be akin to the traditional teachings and holistic worldviews of non-western societies such as the Native Americans.

*The word reconciliation literally means to bring back together that which has been separated. Our wider cultural story continues to drive us towards increasing modes of existence which are not just based on separation but celebrates that very disconnection.*²

Judging by how often the theme of belonging surfaced in the research, I would conclude that many of the individuals interviewed were describing ways in which their experience at Corrymeela was challenging a cultural model of disconnection. In fact,

² Craig, Colin. Draft Paper. “Five Tides”

creating a sense of belonging at Corrymeela is an experiential way to educate people to understand and feel the importance of interdependence and connection. This may also reveal some of the tension surrounding the challenge of translation when individuals don't experience the same type of belonging and connection to their own environment. Thinking about it from this angle, the phrase "*Corrymeela begins when you leave*" may be suggesting that it is only through finding ways to give to others an experience of inclusion and connection that you find again your own experience of belonging.

Points for Future Research

This research was explicitly set up to examine the change process involved for individuals who were participants with the Seed Group and who had chosen to remain involved with Corrymeela. Therefore, my sample was for the most part only examining those who had positive experiences and who had experienced some type of change. It would be worth examining, however, others who did not stay involved with Corrymeela after their involvement with Seed Group. One might find those who had negative or even positive experiences but chose not to remain involved. It would be a further step in examining the change process and how and why it works for some and not for others.

In addition, everyone whom I interviewed had been a Seed Group participant and had been involved with Corrymeela in the last four years. Another area of research would be to examine more long-term effects of Corrymeela by locating a random sampling of individuals from different years but all longer than 10 years ago. It seems all this information could be helpful in further strengthening both the Seed Group model and Corrymeela's approach to youth work and young adult programs.

Final Words

As I said in the beginning, this project has been as much about my own journey of personal development as it has of the interviewees. I came to Corrymeela on the basis of a trusted relationship. I felt welcomed and accepted, had late night conversations, many cups of tea, sang karaoke, socialized at the pub, and developed strong friendships.

As a long-term volunteer I experienced both the opportunities and challenges of meeting and living with diversity. I got "hooked" on Corrymeela and continued to look for ways to stay involved and make sense of my experience. As I said earlier, I have also experienced my most vulnerable and painful times at Corrymeela. Finally, I have been faced and continue to be haunted by the message that *Corrymeela begins when you leave*. I know what it means but I am not sure how to do it, and that is my challenge. But as John Doherty says:

At least the challenge has been placed there somewhere. That is what I meant about opening up a window. Because whenever that happens, you can't close it again. You can try very hard but somewhere down the line it is going to jump up and bite the arse off you because it has been planted there!

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Emily Stanton
October 2000

Appendix I: Research Questions

1. Introductions and background information, some of which I may know prior to interview.
 - Where interviewee is from and currently living, age, male/female, religious background, employed/unemployed, what year they were in Seed Group.

2. What was the nature of decision to come to Corrymeela? Was this their first time in such a group or had they had similar experiences in other groups either within or outside of Corrymeela? Was there a precipitating factor that made participants open to Corrymeela?
 - How did they hear of Corrymeela, or decide to get involved in specific program?
 - Had they ever been involved in cross-community group before?
 - What did friends and family think about choice to get involved?

3. How did former and current participants experience Corrymeela and the Seed Group? What do they understand to be significant for them, and why?
 - What was first impression of Corrymeela? What did you think of the group? What did you like about it, what didn't you like? Had you ever done anything like it before?
 - Group Dynamics: How did group as a whole work? Were there any conflicts/problems and how were they dealt with?
 - Did you feel there was trust in the group? How did you know?
 - Did you feel accepted by the group? If so, how did you know? Was this important? Why?
 - Was it your first experience of sharing at this level before? In a mixed group? Was this easy or difficult for you?
 - What were the parts of the program that were impacted you the most? How do you think they impacted you?

- Did you find yourself more interested in discussion-based activities or more active/outdoor oriented approaches, arts and crafts, or teambuilding activities?
4. At what level did transformation/change occur? What are the relationships between this level of change and other levels?
- Do you feel like the same person that you were before the experience? What is the same, what is different?
 - Do you see political situation differently? People from opposite community?
 - Do you think it has changed you? If so, in what way?
 - Do other people (friends and family) think you have changed?
 - Any consequences to change? Negative or positive?
5. What was part of the context that may have contributed towards a transformative experience/change process, thinking in particular about dynamics unique to the culture of Corrymeela, but maybe larger societal changes may also be explored.
- How is being at Corrymeela different than being at home-in terms of how you relate to people?
 - What parts of Corrymeela beyond the group experience did you like or think were important? Worship? Meals together, pub, chores, location, singing karaoke, silly songs, icebreakers, other groups on site at same time, relationships? Why?
 - Did you feel you were accepted at Corrymeela beyond just your group? If so, how did you know that? Did your group interact with other groups?
 - If were to try to describe Corrymeela to someone who has never been there what would you say?
 - Transition between Corrymeela and own community-going back and forth, what was that like?
6. Why did participant continue involvement with Corrymeela?
- How and why have you stayed involved with Corrymeela?
 - How did Seed Group or other experiences with Corrymeela (short-term or long-term volunteering) relate to your continued involvement?

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