

LIVING WELL
WITH AND FOR
OTHERS

THE MEANING OF
RECONCILIATION

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THINK PEACE 3

Purpose

To ground the readers in the challenges and implications of the theme.

To support members, staff and friends in thinking about and developing some relevant reconciliation practice as a community.

To bring us more into the present time and face into future challenges

If we Christians cannot speak the message of reconciliation, we have nothing to say.¹

Fundamentally, Corrymeela is committed to peace and reconciliation. What do we mean by reconciliation? It is the restoring and transforming of relationships and structures harmed by division and conflict, so that they reflect a shared humanity and seek a shared future in which we live well with and for others.²

Reconciliation has been at the heart of Corrymeela's life, work and vision from the very beginning of the community. The desire for reconciliation underpins the work that Corrymeela has prioritised over the years, and also the spirit and ethos which it has brought to this work, both within the community and in wider society.

Reconciliation is an especially resonant term for the churches because people of faith are given the mission and ministry and of reconciliation (2 Cor 5.18). In a divided society, this message of reconciliation is a prophetic call for repentance and transformation addressed not just to the churches but to the whole of wider society. Ray Davey recognised that, for Christians, reconciliation is not just one concern among many, it is a deal-breaker in Christian identity.

Yet there is uncertainty and misgivings about reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Talk of reconciliation has become commonplace but people in wider society question its religious associations and what it really involves. For example, research by Brandon Hamber and Grainne Kelly suggested that reconciliation is seen as both asking too little and too much.³ For some it is too little because it is seen as a way to avoid the really hard questions about wrong-doing and what needs to change in society, for others it is too much because it is seen as requiring personal commitment and entails making new personal relationships.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines reconciliation as ‘The action of reconciling persons, or the result of this; the fact of being reconciled’. This is fine as a definition if there is an agreed sense on what ‘reconciling’ means, but otherwise it doesn’t give much help! Given the importance of the term there needs to be a clearer sense of what we mean by reconciliation and what others might understand by it.

In 2001 I moved from London to Belfast to work for the Irish School of Ecumenics in their new programme on Reconciliation Studies. One of the hopes of the programme was to build on previous work on *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* to look at the different meanings that people gave to reconciliation. What are the key features in different definitions of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and around the world? Why did people’s perceptions differ so sharply? What role did religion have in definitions?

I remember some challenging conversations in this work. Whilst many people saw reconciliation in positive terms there were also plenty of criticisms. Some people felt that reconciliation was, at best, an optimistic illusion, others saw reconciliation as a distraction from justice and, for others still, it was a way to forget or avoid conflict and therefore an obstacle to change.

Given the different reactions that talk of reconciliation can provoke, and the different meanings that it can have, there are a number of issues in the definition used in the recent Corrymeela Strategic Plan that might be elaborated in a bit more detail.

Relationships and Structures

One tension that often emerged was between a focus on the transformation of relationships and a focus on the transformation of structures. The transformation of both relationships and structures are important in the aftermath of conflict, but for many people the word ‘reconciliation’ signalled attention to relationships much more clearly than attention to structures.

There are some good reasons for this. The attention that reconciliation gives to relationships is clear in the influential work of the Mennonite peace scholar John Paul Lederach:

*Reconciliation can thus be understood as both a focus and a locus. As a perspective, it is built on and oriented toward the relational aspects of a conflict. As a social phenomenon, reconciliation represents a space, a place or location of encounter, where parties to a conflict meet.*⁵

One of Lederach's key contributions was to highlight the importance of underlying relationships in peacebuilding, as distinct from, and going beyond, the more formal positions that might be tabled in the negotiation stages of a peacemaking process.

Likewise, the emphasis on relationships has also been a vitally important part of Corrymeela's practical approach to reconciliation. Experience has shown that relationships are important, and that building long-term and sustainable relationships takes time and effort. Attention to personal relationships is not a quick fix, a soft-option or an easy add-on.

Nonetheless, definitions of reconciliation that over emphasise 'transformed relationships' are prone to criticisms from those who fear that this will ignore the structural dimension to problems – which involve politics, economics, legal reform and institutional change. On its own, the term 'relationships' might suggest that only personal relationships are at stake. The need for structural change is then lost, or becomes detached from the work of reconciliation and left to the work of others.

This separation of reconciliation from structural concerns is understandable but it is not the only way to view it. Social structures and social institutions do not stand apart from relationships, on the contrary, structures are structures because they formalise general relationships. If relationships were commonly seen as integral to structures then the association of reconciliation with relationships would be less of a limitation – the transformed relationships could be seen as both *personal relationships* and *structural relationships*. For most people though, it is still helpful to highlight the structural element to reconciliation by specifying both relationships and structures in any definition, rather than assuming that the latter will be understood within the former.

Restoring and Transforming

Another objection to reconciliation is that its vision is limited to a return to how things were. Etymologically reconciliation is rooted in the Latin for 'Calling together again' or 'Calling back together'.⁶ Some would criticise this as suggesting that reconciliation is backward-looking not forward-looking. Too much emphasis on the 're' of reconciliation can make it open to the criticism that a simple return to the past is a sufficient response to the problems of the present. This criticism recognises a real danger. What is the purpose of a return to past relationships and structures when these were part of the underlying problem?

Restoring these relationships and structures does not address the issue. Thus ‘restoring’ needs to be balanced with ‘transforming’, because transformation points forward and highlights a sense of positive change. To speak of transformation is to suggest that a return to the past is not enough; it is something new and better that is required.

It is no surprise that some people feel that ‘transformation’ is a preferable word to reconciliation for speaking of challenges in divided societies. The attractions of transformation are indeed appealing, but it is easy to miss the strengths that reconciliation can have, especially when reconciliation is seen as including both restoration and transformation.

To speak only of transformation can underplay that there is often a need for restoration as well. For example, serious conflict is often accompanied by steps on both sides towards dehumanisation and demonising the other side. People on the other side can quickly come to be seen as inferior and without moral worth. To address this, a sense of what is shared in common, and especially the sense of a shared humanity, needs to be reaffirmed. In fact, the re-humanisation of enemies and the restoration of shared humanity is often a key step in conflict transformation. Recovery of our shared human dignity should be at the heart of reconciliation. When reconciliation calls us back together again, it is not just calling us back into better relationship with each other, it is also calling on us to remember a foundational truth about who we are as human beings.

We live well with and for others

In some versions of reconciliation, the social vision is very modest. For some people notions of reconciliation do not extend beyond an end to violence. It does not matter if wider problems are left as they are. For example, it is okay if the divisions that contributed to the conflict remain in place and people continue to live largely separate lives, as long as the fighting is at an end. For some people it even seems that the optimal outcome is to be left alone to live in separation, an outcome that has been described as a ‘benign apartheid’.

The expression ‘living with others’ can mean different things to different people. For some it will suggest a shared society, involving a range of social interaction with people from different backgrounds. For others, it might be little more than living alongside others but keeping largely apart from them, where interactions with those who are different to us are kept to a minimum, and separation is the both the practical convention and the shared aspiration.

The idea of living well ‘with and for others’ signals a richer and fuller commitment to shared society than living alongside but apart from each other.⁷ It signals a reaching out across divisions to promote the welfare of others and the good of all.

From a Christian perspective living well for others reflects the belief that God created human beings to be in community with each other and in relationship with the divine. Embracing the other, and living with regard for others, is not an obstacle placed in the way of a more satisfying life, it is God’s revealed way for us to fulfil our true selves. Dealing positively with difference helps us to grow into ourselves, extends our sense of life in community, and deepens our relationship with God.

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End Notes:

¹ *Rev'd Ray Davey, founder of Corrymeela.*

² *Corrymeela Strategic Plan 2013-16.*

³ *Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly, A Place for Reconciliation? Conflict and Locality in Northern Ireland (Democratic Dialogue Report 18. Belfast: September, 2005.*

⁴ *The Moving Beyond Sectarianism project was a major six-year project (1995-2001) of the Irish School of Ecumenics, focussing on the role of Christian religion in sectarianism in Northern Ireland. It resulted in Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001). A subsequent phase of the project involved development of resource packs linked to the project for different age groups. The packs are available as PDFs through www.ecumenics.ie (under 'resources').*

⁵ *John Paul Lederach, Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1997), p. 30.*

⁶ *Re = 'again'; conciliation = 'bringing together' or 'assembling' (derived from con = together and calo/calare = to call or summon); see Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid, University of Notre Dame <http://www.nd.edu/~archives/latgramm.htm>*

⁷ *Living well 'with and for others' draws on the language of Paul Ricoeur.*

Corrymeela Community

VISION:

Embracing difference, healing division
and enabling reconciliation.

MISSION:

To provide open, safe and inclusive
spaces for dialogue, which moves
society towards social justice, positive
relationships and respect for diversity.

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ISBN: 1-873739-2

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