

RECONCILIATION AND ‘THE INTIMACY OF HONEST DIFFERENCES’ A Talk in Memory of Dr. David Stevens, 26th March 2019 by Derick Wilson

This talk, at the invitation of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, is to honour my late friend David Stevens, who was a member of the NICRC Board and former Chair of The Council of the Corrymeela Community. David passed away in 2010.

For me, a major theme for David was that “reconciliation involves people finding a way of living **together in difference**”. It is **only** when open and honest relationships were established could people experience ‘the intimacy of honest differences’¹, the robust conversations that take us all forward beyond the cultures of silence, denials, and evasions.

Almost 21 years after the 1998 Good Friday / Belfast Agreement we are still having to argue for, and promote, a practice that nurtures and sustains safe spaces, where people from diverse experiences meet together and, in new relationships, honestly share their differences. Especially in the continued absence of a devolved administration, our task is still to support robust civil society engagements and respectful political engagements grow, in order to prepare an informed and imaginative civic ground capable of engaging with politics as it evolves here. We still need to articulate robust civic understandings from which sound, shared, public policies can be argued for.

Local and Global Reconciliation are interlinked

Building a more just and fair, respectful and diverse, interdependent shared society here demands that we work to a wider global vision to secure just, inclusive, respectful and sustainable ways of living globally².

The just, inclusive and respectful challenges are still proving to be very heavy here, unless we re-commit ourselves to diligently learn our way forward together with our differences.

The environmental sustainability challenge that is now confronting us, especially in the challenge of the Friday Pupil Protests saying “you are not doing enough!” means that, unless we face this challenge, there may be little of life to make just, respectful and inclusive!

As part of our wider strategic programme³, a few weeks ago a group of us at Corrymeela hosted a week for 16 humanitarian aid workers from Aleppo, Beirut, Cairo, Kyiv, Palestine and Amman⁴.

These experienced and exhausted practitioners still **refused to be without hope!**
You and I can, in no way, give up here!

¹ Justin Welby in Prospect, January 2019.

² See appendix on Strands of Reconciliation Practice.

³ In Corrymeela we have redefined our reconciliation practice around four areas under the overarching theme of “Transforming Division through Human Encounter”. There are three residential and locality based programme areas addressing marginalisation, sectarianism and legacies of conflict as well as a Public Theology programme inviting faith and interfaith groups to explore their social responsibilities. Each programme is led an experienced lead practitioner and a number of strategic partners, locally and internationally.

⁴ Locally, Corrymeela is working with the Red Cross supporting refugee families and families from Nationalist and Unionist traditions here. In February 2019 at Corrymeela, we hosted 16 Humanitarian Workers from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine / Israel, Egypt and Ukraine. To hear these people speak about coping and nurturing possibilities between Sunni, Shia, Yezidis (Yazidis) and Christian in the midst of the most outrageous horrors was humbling.

Cities where 200,000 people, of all ages, have been killed; towns of 180,000 having to accommodate a further 180,000 internally displaced people as well as 70,000 returned injured fighters and, in their midst, generating mentoring programmes for young people; creating fishing co-operatives where people from all traditions sit together; christian groups who have been decimated, sharing 99% of their finances to support Muslim families. While we still have many legacy issues to resolve within our conflict, it is important too that we lift our heads and explore how our experience, energy and resources might also be placed at the disposal of others very different to us. We are faced with a wider world, where politics becomes less predictable and secure, and yet, increasingly, where our global interdependence can no longer be denied. We must focus outwards and challenge those who only want to think exclusively local, separate and populist, closing their ears to the wider challenges of living in a changing world, where the impacts of conflict, clashes over water and resources, and the threat to land with environmental change are mobilising potentially many millions to seek new places in the world.

RECONCILIATION- 'A WAY OF LIVING TOGETHER IN DIFFERENCE'

David Stevens was a wonderful friend, irritatingly insistent sometimes, thank goodness, because he insisted we must gain clarity around the meanings of words and concepts around reconciliation. He argued that the work of reconciliation was demanding enough, and we should honour it by being rigorous in how words and concepts are understood!

“Sure, it all goes to show that we are all the same!”

This was one phrase that, when people associated with community relations work uttered it, it was to David's total and utter dismay. What a statement- a ball of cotton wool to quell honest discussion; a blanket to smother open engagement; a gag in the mouth to stop real development. The signal to end further deep conversation!

In his text-'The Land of Unlikeness', David argued how the established statecraft of diplomacy could not deliver in contested societies. **Such societies, if they move forward at all, can only do so through face-to-face meetings, even where each person, and the traditions they come from, can appear to always be trespassing on the others' territory, generating mutual fear and threat.**

He was conscious that if handled carelessly such meetings might only deepen the antagonism between people and he cautioned that 'those who espouse a politics of reconciliation in a contested space should do so in a spirit of sober realism' (p16).

At the same time he never wished to call it a day. David continued the momentum generated by his predecessor Bill Arlow at the ICC, with the Feakle talks with the IRA in 1974, by supporting the work of the Dutch NI Committee from 1975 onwards, the very important publications of the Faith and Politics Research Group on all manner of very sensitive themes, and the Inter Church Working Party on Sectarianism with Mary Mc Aleese and John Lampen as co-chairs.

Another side of David, as a former 2 year full time volunteer with Corrymeela in Belfast after he completed a PhD, was his voluntary energy in association with Corrymeela, especially in bringing the work of Rene Girard to our notice, on the possibilities for people to model freedom and trust in modern society and dissolve and erode experiences of escalating and destructive rivalry.

This became a 40 year voluntary reconciliation education programme using the freely given facilitation time of prestigious ethicists, psychotherapists, theologians and educationalists to help us think through the importance: of understanding the mechanisms through which cultures seek to hide their violent foundations; how we need to understand modern relationship structures and the importance of such conflictual dynamics in our daily lives; and dissolving their power through nurturing relationships and structures that model trust and openness⁵.

BUILDING A MORE DIVERSE, INCLUSIVE, JUST AND FAIR SOCIETY.

John Paul Lederach⁶ identified three gaps as symptomatic of all peace agreements faltering:

1. the interdependence gap, where people are unable to link people from all levels together and effect lasting change;
2. the social justice gap, ensuring all worked to address social inequality;
3. and the process-structure gap, supporting people develop new processes between them that lay foundations for new relationships, agreements and new initiatives locally.

⁵ *On The Way of Freedom*, Kaptein with Morrow, Columba Press, 1993.

⁶ JP Lederach, 'Justpeace: The Challenge of the 21st Century', in *People Building Peace: 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World*, ed. European Centre for Conflict prevention, 1999, 27-35.

Peacebuilding-The Interdependence Gap

If people wish to get something done locally they have to find out the different interdependent relationships people and decision makers are bound within. People and groups exploring the needs of their own areas or towns; undertaking surveys; talking with officials and engaging with different local agencies are all important practices.

Fostering deeper connections between people in community organisations and the diverse voices of need and hope in the society they are in; connecting people from lower levels, mid level and policy making levels to one another; and building an overall sense of interdependence are crucial. **Such practices introduce people to the interdependent relationships needed when people want to effect change.**

Peacebuilding-The Social Justice Gap

In reflective learning groups, when workers support citizens with diverse experiences of life come together the experience of social injustice is often present in those meetings. People not feeling well-treated; new arrivals seeking sanctuary; the LGBTQ community not being accepted; members of travelling families being isolated; and victims and survivors of the conflict not being acknowledged are very often voices that need heard. When practitioners facilitate group discussions, affirming the voices and agency of those who may not normally speak, hearing the voices of those facing extreme poverty or isolation, **then they practically engage the people in the room in addressing the social justice gap.**

Process-Structures

When Community Relations groups bring people together from diverse traditions, cultures or political outlooks; when groups go near and far for cross-community residential; as long as the trips are designed around reaching for open and honest meeting together, these experiences build process-structures. These can be: friendships that may later grow into project commitments; relationships that develop into a group making a plan to stay in touch and develop a project. This process-structure gap is an element in all peacebuilding processes.

Such programmes can be the beginning points of new friendships or new action groups; such initiatives build new bridging and bonding social capital.

The reality often is that politics marginalises Civil Society in peace processes, once civil society has done the heavy lifting. The web weaving potential of civil society is crucial and central to building and sustaining peace⁷.

David saw the need for civil society organisations to insist that they were central to building a sustained peace, not on the periphery and he was very realistic about how difficult that would be!

Dong Jin Kim, a peacebuilding practice oriented academic currently based at Corrymeela, highlights that failure in many peace processes hinges on civil society being moved aside. It is civil society that often gifts the politicians with the heavy lifting work over time, and he argues that civil society is a central building block in any peace process and we must work to have that place recognised as being central by politics⁸.

⁷ Catherine Barnes, 'Weaving the Web: Civil Society Riles in Working with Conflict and Building peace', in *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society*, ed: Van Tongeren et al: Lynne Reiner, 2005, 22

⁸ Dong Jin Kim, 2019, *The Korean Peace Process and Civil Society*, Palgrave Macmillan.

THE INTER-GENERATIONAL RECONCILIATION TASK

David argued that normal diplomatic models do not apply within contested societies. It is a more difficult peace to forge because peace demands face-to-face meetings and the building of relationships between those on either side of the fear and antagonism line between us all⁹. We need experiences of deep learning together.

David, with the Dutch NI Committee and Corrymeela came to know the power and clarity of purpose that comes from people meeting regularly and deeply to consider their own actions; the importance of personal values and behaviour being reflected on and challenged; and the energy that flows when group commitment and understanding grows.

From that legacy of learning, Corrymeela is now exploring how we might, with others, build intergenerational communities of reconciliation learning for the long haul. Such intergenerational learning communities would ensure that:

- clarity of thinking and reflection continued-the bad and redundant practices ejected but the valuable and insightful practice would be nourished and passed on;
- public institutions and departments would be able to access previous reconciliation learning and practice through an institutional community relations memory;
- especially in a more politically challenging funding climate¹⁰, young members of Corrymeela, new volunteers or staff recently employed would be stood with and affirmed, not isolated and hung out to dry or become depressed!

Corrymeela is now of the view that one way of re-energising civil society would be through such intergenerational learning communities around a range of themes, starting with teachers and community youth workers.

At the heart of this inter-generational approach is the creation of relational spaces in which people, with very different experiences and beliefs, can meet and where they, honestly and openly, experience meeting around ‘the intimacy of honest differences’.

TRANSFORMING DIVISION THROUGH HUMAN ENCOUNTER

David Stevens argued in *The Land of Unlikeness* that “the possibility of having real meetings where there is honest conversation, respect and mutual regard is narrow in a contested society”¹¹.

He argued that if reconciliation is a dynamic quest involving spiritual, psychological, social, economic and political dimensions, then there is a need to develop spaces and encounters where all these strands are given time and space. The quality of these meetings, when they work, creates process-structures between people quite new to one another, and such experiences are central to establishing experiences where we experience “the intimacy of honest differences!”

From the Girard influence, David and I came to know a range of diverse people, including some neuroscientists, who argued that human beings are made for stability and

⁹ Frank Wright, 1987, *Two Lands on One Soil*, Gill and Macmillan.

¹⁰ *Funding Peace*, UCT and Corrymeela, June 2018. See <https://www.corrymeela.org/resources/research>

¹¹ David Stevens, *The Land of Unlikeness*, Columba Press, p23

balance, and that a dominant cultural reality is that we learn how to rival and fight for our place. For them and us, we therefore need to learn new ways, together, with our differences, without driving the others away. In such ways we come into the vicinity of experiencing “the intimacy of honest differences”.

David was especially critical of faith communities not working to a set of higher, inclusive principles and was tired of their procrastination about unconditionally embracing reconciliation as a non-negotiable strand in the Christian tradition. He acknowledged the many acts of individuals and small groups within the churches that have, and do, work for reconciliation, often unsupported by the wider institutions. He remained engaged with the institutions, willing them to change from within. The current civil society-politicians meetings convened by the Irish Council of Churches are good examples of this furrow that David and others ploughed.

Like some others, he wanted people in many different traditions within the Christian Churches to acknowledge, and critically engage with, the ecumenical vision of a just, peaceful and sustainable world¹² (JPIC declaration of 1960's)¹³.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF COMMUNITY

From the practical application of Rene Girard's thinking, we learned that, in this society, too often 'community' is generated at the expense of different others, or alleged difficult others, through the often unacknowledged act of driving them from our midst. All cultures, in some manner, are secured in often hidden and often-unacknowledged violence—they are *communities of sacrifice*—the communities of the successful scapegoaters who remain and who feel able to deny their actions.

We need to create *communities of communion*, characterised by all being included and a contrast to the excluding ways we often live. Such ways of communion have to be learned deeply and nurtured carefully, because we are all so deeply invested in the cultural ways of exclusion and sacrifice.

“WE ARE MORE THAN OUR BELIEFS”

- Some people argue they cannot move forward and meet different others because they hold to sacred beliefs or unbargainable positions. Yet in so many positive encounters, if they enter into them, they often learn they are more than their beliefs.
- Some people are told from an early age that they are stupid, or limited, or incompetent, and they believe this and live it out. When these people experience a transformative relationship that sets them free, they experience they can become more than the beliefs and structures that have held them back.
- Some people brought up in political, cultural or belief systems that underpin an expansive practice, are often freed by these belief systems to do more and to embrace new thinking and practices, beyond their current positions and beliefs. They too find they are 'more than their beliefs'.

¹² The Presbyterian and Catholic churches here, especially, often cut themselves off from wider ecumenical actions historically in the world. The ecumenical movement in Ireland was, and still is, linked to a vision that was one centre of opposition to National Socialism in Germany in the 1930's¹²; a vision underpinning many who supported the disappeared in Argentina 1974 to 1983 and, currently, the work in in Argentina and Chile to 'encourage spaces for encounter between the churches in order to give the witness of service to the world'; a vision underpinning the MinJung¹² theological movement of opposing military power in Korea and standing with the poor; the work of the Croatian–Austrian priest and informal educator, Ivan Illich and the Brazilian theologian and educator, Paulo Freire.

¹³ See texts on this <http://www.ebooksdownloads.xyz/search/justice-peace-and-the-integrity-of-creation>

To experience meetings where, in different ways, we learn that we are more than our beliefs is transformational, we can fly and our spirits and imagination can soar.

David understood deeply that in new relationships of trust and openness we all grow and change-we are more than our beliefs!

When we meet together with different others we meet:

- as vulnerable people, people who may have faced some disappointment in life;
- as people with rich and diverse experiences of being loved and loving; people of attainment and disappointment; of diverse experiences of life and with many different abilities;
- as people who have been cared for and have cared for others; we may have experienced disappointment and success-we have been children, adolescents and now adults-we are definitely more than the beliefs of our traditions, cultures, faiths or none.

Such transforming experiences, when honest differences are spoken about and acknowledged, give us possibilities to meet together. In meeting openly, with our vulnerabilities acknowledged, we can re-imagine and choose actions open to us and, if only for a short time initially, move away from the binds of a society too often dominated by wishes for separation, avoidance and politeness.

In such meetings the principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence¹⁴ are relevant too-the boundary of the group meeting is held in a just and equitable manner; the diverse voices and experiences of all are heard; and the experience, when it is sound, is one of people experiencing what it means to be part of an interdependent set of relationships¹⁵.

For me, if we are to create a more open and shared society then we need to ask whether some of the supposedly developmental spaces in this society are contributing to this wider agenda. When we look at the spaces we promote in wider society, we need to look keenly at what is their character and how do they contribute to building a cross-cutting interconnected culture?

For me the different christian traditions could do more to foster developmental spaces where people experience the ‘intimacy of honest differences’. Equally so civil society groups and organisations should critically examine their implicit cultures and root out any support for partisan identities that get in the way of them hosting meetings that explore “the intimacy of honest differences”.

Into this atmosphere it is difficult to appreciate how recent arrivals here must experience this society. In this new world, the old histories of distrust and enmity between members of the dominant traditions here have to be challenged to move on as new arrivals, often with experiences of hurt and trauma, seek a space in the midst of us all, only to be often scapegoated or abused or excluded. If “reconciliation involves people finding a way of living together in difference”, it is time for this more expansive and challenging view of reconciliation and community relations to be taken up.

GOING BEYOND OLD WAYS-THE RESTORATIVE JOURNEY

When people from opposed beliefs or positions meet in open and trusting relationships there is a new energy and freedom associated with that relationship. I use the term

¹⁴ Eyben, Morrow & Wilson, 1997. A Worthwhile Venture? Practically Investing in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence in Northern Ireland. University of Ulster. and related Western Routes and Future Ways practice documents.

¹⁵ It is important too that these principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence are applied as lenses to examine the implicit and explicit cultures of groups and organisations and, where possible, used as lenses on whether public policies work towards a more open, just, diverse and interdependent society.

‘restorative’, in the sense that old patterns have been re-invigorated or new ways have been nurtured¹⁶.

For me the restorative process is a journey, it is future oriented, relational and structural. It is no surprise that the restorative journey is little embraced in this society, especially when our major christian traditions, political identities and cultural identities are still ambivalent about violence and unconditional trust building. However that is only an explanation, not an argument as to why such a vision cannot be promoted.

When I look at the evidence in many other countries: in schools; in the adult and juvenile justice system; in restorative practice models developed by local authorities in their relationships with citizens; attempts to create restorative regions; in serious crimes, post sentencing as well as in lower level crimes, pre-sentencing, I ask does this concept not have something to say to us here?¹⁷

As a starter, I wish to argue that many of the conflict reduction interventions reconciliation groups have become caught up in; many of the problems some civil society organisations are being asked to resolve by being an agency of Government; much of the cost of policing violent incidents that takes money away from developmental work in the community could be put to better use if, as part of reconciliation, we learned from those small numbers of restorative conferences where unexpected breakthroughs really occur. Such breakthroughs are experiences where ‘the intimacy of honest differences’ happens.

As initial steps permit me to make some initial points for consideration.

RESTORATIVE CULTURES AND PRACTICES

Working towards a more restorative society is linked to people working to a vision of acknowledging societal and historical hurts, resolving tension, treating one another more justly, valuing difference and deepening our growing interdependence economically, socially, and environmentally.

A restorative society culture would be characterised by:

- That starting with schools, we establish, cultures of ‘no violence’ or ‘no put downs’ between people;
- That we promote ‘cultures of resolution’ to our children and young people;
- That we value resources being used to help us live well with, and for, one another;
- That we end suspensions from schools and create more inclusive school cultures;
- That we, as far as possible, initially relationally seek to dismantle misunderstandings and dissolve conflicts that so readily escalate.

To deliver the fruits of a restorative culture we need a renewed focus on:

- nurturing new and unexpected relationships;
- nourishing the groups and structures relationships infuse;

¹⁶ Jenkins restorative: the tendency to give new strength or vigour. This interpretation points to something new, something better and healthier, suggesting a revitalisation, or new possibilities that might develop. In this context, restorative suggests something creative and productive. See Alan Jenkins, Shame, Realisation and Restitution: The Ethics of Restorative Practice. ANZJFT Volume 27 Number 3 2006 pp. 153–162

¹⁷ The drive towards societal transformation—a theme that is emerging in papers by Christie (2012), Fattah (2012), Wright (2010), Wilson (2009, 2010), Johnston (2008), Maxwell & Liu, (2007) Strang & Braithwaite (2001), among others.

- re-energizing old stale ways of being with different others;¹⁸
- opening up established relationships and structures, allowing the oxygen of hope into them again.

There is a need to re-assert the importance of people, especially those with different views, meeting and learning together in what Sen calls '*reasoned public discourse*'.¹⁹ Here significant and important communal learning, essential to our common good and the strengthening of civil society occurs, in communities of learners.

Deep within the meaning of education, at its best, is the process of bringing forth or drawing out learning experiences that strengthen our mutual interdependence.

CONCLUSION

Let us never be afraid of showing weakness or vulnerability.

Let us be open to saying sorry.

Let us be prepared to share ourselves and our lives with others in order to move us into relationships with the estranged other, rather than feed fear, distrust, enmity and violence.

Let us never say that forgiveness is not possible-Hannah Arendt suggests that "forgiveness is the unexpected gift of the victim to the perpetrator!"²¹ and also to those of us in wider society. Arendt suggests that "forgiving... is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven."²⁰

In such ways different people around us, and we too, will be opened up to one another more; will hear one another's life experiences more and will experience more "the intimacy of honest differences" without which it will be difficult to we find our ways forward together into a more open society; a more just and fair one; a more interdependent one and a more sustainable world.

¹⁸ See Alan Jenkins and his future oriented definition of restorative as "the tendency to give new strength or vigour. This interpretation points to something new, something better and healthier, suggesting a revitalisation, or new possibilities that might develop. In this context, restorative suggests something creative and productive." In Shame, Realisation and Restitution: The Ethics of Restorative Practice, ANZJFT Volume 27 Number 3 2006 pp. 153-162

¹⁹ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, (2006) and *The Idea of Justice* (2009)

²⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 241 in Hannah Arendt and Collective Forgiving – Glen Pettigrove, *The Journal of Social Philosophy* 37.4 (winter 2006): 483-5

Appendix: The Local and Global Context of Reconciliation

The wider landscape within which we need to locate our organisational vision, learning, and the need to equip people to live constructively, and hopefully, within includes:

Challenges to Acknowledging Diversity

1. **Ethnocentrism and Exclusion:** The growth of ethnocentric ideologies that asserts ‘our people, our land, before all else’ and their companion expressions in sectarian, racist, and religious identity superiority.
2. **Religious Fundamentalism:** The harnessing of religion to support excluding and violent positions (Atran, 2010); a diminishing of the inclusive, ‘social justice, peace and integrity of creation’ aspects we understand faith offers (WCC, Justice Peace & the Integrity of Creation).

Issues of Equity

3. **Population Movement:** The challenges of a diverse world where it is estimated that 65 million people (Observer Sunday, 18th September 2016) are continually on the move seeking work, sanctuary, asylum or new lives and the impact of this movement on societies of origin and those that host.

UNHCR Refugee Resettlement Trends, 2015: www.unhcr.org/559e43ac9.html; Speech by Antonio Guterres UNHCR High Commissioner, www.unhcr.org/55ba370f9.html

4. **Inequality:** The growing divide between ‘the haves’ and ‘the have nots’.
Addressing the growing gap between rich and poor within states (OECD, 2014 2; Pew Foundation, 2014);

5. The need to challenge **the growth of violence against women and children and to secure ‘gender equality’**

Report of the UK Children’s Commissioners, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Examination of the Fifth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland UK-ccs-unhcr-examination-of-the-fifth-periodic-report-july-2015.pdf; Beckett & Warrington3;

6. The responses to the **BREXIT** vote and the need for a more inclusive political and civic culture.

Challenges to Acknowledging our Interdependence

7. **Environment:** The challenge of securing commitments to address global warming and the need to secure our environment for future generations.

UN Global Sustainable Development report, 2015 Edition
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport>;

8. **Systemic Distrust:** A growing disillusionment with many major institutions in many societies- e.g. politics, banking, public and civic society.

The need for new relationships: between those in political power and those who feel unacknowledged; the distance between those in power post conflict and many victims and survivors.

9. **The political responses often associated with societies moving on, post conflict, when the narrative of victims is often pushed aside in favour of the new political narrative and education tends not to be harnessed to the new societal agenda-**(Germany as an exception).

There also can be a political and civil society preference to ignore, rather than engage with, the need to explicitly acknowledge and promote a ‘never, never again’ position. (Rothfield et al, 2012; Eames & Bradley, 2009; Fay, Morrissey, & Smyth, M.1998; See also Shriver, 2005.4)