

At the Heart: Corrymeela as a Community of Reconciliation

Revd Dr Alex Wimberly, Leader of the Corrymeela Community

In 2019, Alex succeeded Padraig O'Tuoma as Leader of the Corrymeela community which he likened to a little candle in the darkness. In his inspiring talk, Alex explained that the Corrymeela Community had been founded in 1965 by Ray Davey who had been a Presbyterian Chaplain to POWs during the second world war. Ray had also worked in Africa, Italy and finally, in Dresden where he survived the fire-bombing in 1945 and was profoundly shaken by what he saw as he wandered through the devastated city.

He became interested in the way guards and prisoners created their own community and were able to see in the enemy and the stranger a child of God. He realised that we are not all that different from those we call 'other' and, in today's broken world, the ministry of reconciliation is even more pressing.

Ray's first community began in 1965. It started with very little money and was staffed entirely by young volunteers. Early ventures included summer camps run by young volunteers, with 250 children staying for 3 weeks. Today, it continues to be supported by 18- to 30-year-olds who usually spend a year volunteering there.

When the community moved to Corrymeela, it was thought that the name meant 'Hill of Harmony' but more recent linguistic awareness indicates its true meaning is closer to "A Lumpy Crossing Place" which better describes the challenges it faces. Founded in the optimistic era of civil rights, its mission was soon overshadowed by the reality and horrors of the civil war in Northern Ireland. Today, Corrymeela is an ecumenical centre of Peace and Reconciliation with a focus on welcome, hospitality and mediation.

Ray learned a key lesson during the Troubles: we cannot argue our way to peace. Reconciliation cannot be imposed, only co-created. We need to turn discomfort with the other into curiosity about them and that will then lead to empathy with them....A key question for each one of us needs to be: "What is driving this fellow child of God to do what she/he is doing?"

It took Ray and his colleagues immense courage to found the community (NB the French for heart is Coeur, which is what underlines being courageous). The central building at Corrymeela is actually called 'Heart' and we have to 'take heart' in a darkening world. Central to mediation and understanding of any kind is the ability to listen with the heart.

Listening is at the heart of community and reconciliation. Corrymeela feels it is important to be a listening community of faith not certainty because faith comes with uncertainty. It involves trust. If something is divine and true, it will not need our protection. It is all in God's hands...

Its goal is to be a place of welcome and belonging in a divided society, just like a Cathedral. When people visit Corrymeela, they feel at peace in the beautiful surroundings in rural and peaceful countryside. Similarly, visitors to a cathedral can find peace and solace. Both places offer beauty, inspiration and renewed courage to take back into the world of change and compromise and into whatever conflict zone they are experiencing.



This Keynote Address was given at the Cathedrals Plus Conference 2026 at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin on 13th January 2026 by Revd Dr Alex Wimberly.

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