

“Exploring Difference- the benefit of not being at home”

Bishop Trevor Williams

*Irish Association Christmas Reception
12 December 2017, Ulster Reform Club Belfast*

It is an honour to say something at his Irish Association Reception. The Irish Association, which it is about, ‘keeping the conversation going’, across the divides – North and South, cultural divides, economic divides and social divides. I am with you. We learn, grow, develop, through exploring difference. That’s my experience and that’s what I mean by this title “Exploring Difference – so it can be a benefit to not being at home.”

Northern Ireland was the last place I wanted to live. I grew up at a time when Northern Ireland was a weird and strange place to Dubliners. But for all but 6 years of the last 40 years, I have lived in Northern Ireland. Every time I listen to the news on Radio Ulster, I am reminded of difference, that I don’t belong, and what matters to me is different from what is important to many people in Northern Ireland, especially people from my own religious tradition. I am a stranger here. Living as a stranger is uncomfortable, unsettling..... sometimes annoying, but never dull.



Bob Collins, President, Ir Assoc, & Bishop Williams

I remember a conversation in a pub near the BBC in Ormeau Avenue with Davy Hammond, that great singer, film-maker, educator, broadcaster and wonderful human being. We were working together on something, I can’t remember what and afterward went to the pub for a drink. I was talking about not feeling at home in Belfast. He said words which have stuck with me. “Never underestimate the contribution of the ‘stranger.’”

In a way Davy Hammond occupied a rare space, while owning his origins, he enlarged his home territory, embracing difference and celebrating it. As a result his contribution to the well-being of this island was, and remains immense. And his words to me, wondering what I was doing in Belfast, gave me a sense of place, a sense of unusual belonging, and the possibility that my difference may in some be valuable. I could be at ease with my discomfort living in Northern Ireland away from home.

I was born in Dublin in 1948. I have an elder brother David, who is five years my senior. My father worked in insurance, but much of his spare time was spent visiting market towns around Ireland preaching the Gospel from a soap box as people mingled to sell their cattle.

He was the preacher at an Evangelistic Mission in Ringsend, down by the Dublin docks. He travelled everywhere by bike. But on his way, he was knocked down by a drunken driver. Four days later he died in hospital. The driver of that car was a Catholic priest.

A local Garda superintendent visited my mother and said. Mrs Williams I am going to see justice done. I will personally handle everything to do with this case - every letter, every phone call, I will take care of it. He assured my mother that he wasn't going to have the evidence tampered with. The case came to court and when the judge gave his charge to the jury, there was uproar in court, that the priest should be subject to the decision of the jury. The judge adjourned the proceedings and took the jury to the scene of the accident, a "T" junction where my father had been waiting to join the major road and where he was struck by the swerving car.

The jury resumed and found the priest guilty. Again, there was uproar in court – there was shock that a Priest could be found guilty. How times have changed! The priest was given a suspended sentence. But the compensation I received provided me with a good education in a Protestant school and later in Trinity College Dublin. The poor unfortunate priest, a missionary, home in Ireland for break, came to our home to visit my mother, full of remorse, to say how sorry he was. He was a good man.

As a kid, I played with Roman Catholic friends on our street, and there was nothing more I liked than discussing the differences between Catholics and Protestants with Noel Lowry my best friend. But our social lives were separate to avoid any unfortunate liaisons, and the consequences of the Ne Temere decree on Mixed Marriages. Joyce and I met at evangelistic meetings in the Dublin YMCA, the Young Men's Courting Academy! And despite such a start, we are still happily married.

My mother, was eternally grateful that the only other Protestant family for quite some distance, lived next door. Isn't God good, my mother used to say. But she was greatly respected among her Catholic neighbours. She was wise, kind, always ready to give a helping hand, or listen to someone who was going through a bad time. But there was a sense of 'us' being better than 'them' – she was genuinely compassionate to people she saw as being under the thumb of the Roman Catholic church. Her own faith was a real strength to her - and to me. Frequently we were short of money. She would share this with my brother and me, but always saying, 'Don't worry, our Heavenly Father will look after us'. I believed her. And I still do. Some things you don't shake off, for better or worse.

I was thinking about studying Engineering, or becoming a Social worker when a friend of my brother persuaded me that I should think about being ordained in the Church of Ireland. I had never thought of that. I was accepted, but first I had to do a primary degree. Classics, or Hebrew and Greek, or something strange called Mental and Moral Science was an obvious choice. No! I wanted something different. I graduated in Microbiology, loved it and was offered a position to do research. But I turned it down. I'm really grateful for my training in science, and the opportunity to look at religion from the other side. At the graduation party, I had an argument with my Professor accusing him of being unscientific to dismiss all religion so callously. The arrogance of youth!

I decided to train for the ministry in the Church of Ireland but again being the awkward kind of person I am, found a better course in England than was being offered in Dublin. Three fantastic years in Nottingham, with the majority of studies at Nottingham University. The Theological College was

building a Radio Studio. I spent more time researching microphones, recording machines, acoustics and studio design than theology. Having built the studio, I was sent on courses to learn how to make programmes which I did for BBC Radio Derby and then during my first curacy in Maidenhead in Berkshire, for Thames Valley Radio as it then was.

Then came a letter from a friend who was Chaplain at Queen's University Belfast. Instead of doing a second parish curacy, as was expected at that time, come and be an Chaplain with me at Queens' for 3 years. Sounds great!

'Yes please!'

But Belfast, 1977?

We came anyway!

On Elmwood Avenue there's the Presbyterian Chaplaincy, the Church of Ireland and Methodist Chaplaincy, the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy. This was the first chance for many of the Catholic and Protestant students to work together. And if we didn't do things differently our separate chaplaincies would do a fine job of enhancing the sectarian divide. So, the Chaplains formed an inter chaplaincy group and took them to engage in conversation at Corrymeela. For me, a religious leader in Northern Ireland I had to be part of an ecumenical community committed to peace building. I joined Corrymeela and have been a member ever since.

There was a vacancy in BBC Northern Ireland Religious programmes for a programme producer. I applied, and didn't get the job. But Fr Jim Skelly, head of Religious programmes, said, I want you to present a new programme come in for a microphone test (as he called it). I did. All was well! But I said, Jim I have a young family, and what you can give me as a free-lance is only half a salary. Leave it with me. He rang me back and said Dan Gilbert, Head of Current Affairs wants to see you.

Jim Skelly sent me over, I said to Dan. 'Your in luck', he said. 'I sacked three reporters yesterday when can you start?' 'Anytime'. 'You're on tomorrow morning'. I turned up and I shadowed Sean Rafferty for a day, and after that I was a reporter doing a full week on Radio current Affairs, doing documentaries and regular inputs on Northern Ireland for the World Service, there were opportunities to make programmes for Radio 3 and 4 and at the weekends launching a programme called Sunday Sequence.

The early days of Sunday Sequence were dominated by the Hunger Strikes. This was the first live programme in Northern Ireland that linked the news to religious and ethical issues. There was a phone-in during the programme. I suppose we were a precursor of Talkback. I'm afraid I could never be a Stephen Nolan. It was the early 80's, there was direct rule and every week we were not only responding to the news but because we were the only live programme on a Sunday morning (apart from the news), we were frequently making the news through our up to the minute interviews with political, community and religious leaders. It was heady stuff. Sunday Sequence was the most listened to programme in Northern Ireland at that time. I became well known. That is a mixed blessing. The programme was controversial for some and criticism, complaints, and sometimes threats were part of the job. I have deep respect for the burden that many journalists bear. After eight years of this, Joyce said to me. I think it's time for you to leave the BBC. You are changing. You are become harder, more defensive, less open. Is that what you want? No! it wasn't.

So, I went to work in a parish in Newcastle and then was asked to be leader of Corrymeela. During my time Corrymeela was nominated for a Peace Prize by a lay Buddhist movement in Japan. How remarkable is that, a Buddhist prize for a Christian Community. Joyce and I and another Catholic member of Corrymeela were invited to the award ceremony in Tokyo as honoured guests and VIPs. A very strange experience. But there was a lengthy public interview with the leader of Rissho Kosei

Kai on Peace. We were separated by geography, culture, and religion, but it proved to be a wonderful exchange as we shared our insights into peace and peacebuilding. A wonderful experience of finding common ground across such a wide range of difference.

After Corrymeela I moved to a parish in North Belfast. The Rectory on the Ballysillan Road was opposite a UVF Taxi rank. It was attacked frequently enough. There were two churches, one at the top of the Oldpark Road and the other on the Ardoyne Road, on the Glenbryn estate. It was shortly after the Holy Cross dispute, where my predecessor had said he and the Church couldn't support the protest because innocent children's lives were being traumatised. He was told it was no longer safe for him to visit his parish.

When the dispute was over, he moved to another parish and when I arrived the community welcomed a new relationship with the Church. I was Chair of the Upper Ardoyne Community Partnership. But I also worked closely with Fr Aidan Troy and Fr. Gary Donegan of Holy Cross parish as well as Norman Hamilton (Presbyterian), and Jim Williamson (Methodist).

Gary and I blessed a new Dunnes Store on the Crumlin Road. It closed after three for four years. Not my most successful ecumenical endeavour. We still laugh about it when we meet.

I was asked to attend the opening of a new Youth and Community Centre on the other side of the peace wall, in Catholic Ardoyne. What if my picture appeared in the paper next to Community leaders from the 'other side'? What would the Glenbryn Community leaders make of that? Remembering how not telling your community what you thought, or what you were about to do was a bad thing, I went to the community leaders and told them I was going. I explained that Glenbryn would never be at peace until it felt confident and proud of its identity. And the same is true of lower Ardoyne. Anything that enhances, builds and strengthens their community, contributes to us in upper Ardoyne living in peace with them. There was a moments silence, and then they said, Thanks for telling us anyway!

After North Belfast, I was invited to be Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe. That was a surprise! I wasn't heavily involved in central church structures, but the Church of Ireland is democratic enough for wild card to slip through from time to time.

Being a Bishop carries with it a certain privilege in some places – something I am not that comfortable with. Privilege, isolates. You are always the Bishop. They say that as a Bishop you will never be hungry and you will never know the truth. There are benefits, opportunities to meet interesting people, influential people, to travel..... and to chair endless committees. But the Bishop, as a colleague put it, is the person who leaves. Your everywhere, but nowhere. You don't have a community you belong to. You visit parishes, schools, and attend community events for an endless series of special events and quickly you understand that next day it will be back to normal. You're the person who leaves. Any change will come through local clergy and lay leaders.

The burden of history lies heavily on the Church of Ireland in the counties of Clare, Limerick, Kerry and all the connecting bits. Far too many Churches, and far too few people, means we have struggled to keep going. But thanks to the goodwill of the Catholic Church we are given a place or influence which our numbers don't deserve.

There's an apocryphal story which only slightly exaggerates the truth. A bishop had been trying to close this church for years. But the six parishioners held out, and refused to quit. One winter there was a terrible storm which did terrible damage to the roof of the Church. The bishop visited the devastated congregation of six. Reluctantly they agreed that there was no way they were going to be

able to afford the repairs costing 15k. They agreed the church should be closed. The Bishop went home pleased that common sense had prevailed at last. Next morning there was a knock on the Bishops door. The local Catholic priest was there with a cheque for 15k. You can't close our Protestant Church.

On Valentia Island, there is one Church of Ireland church and one parishioner - who is English. The church has been renovated, it has solar panels on the roof and the grounds have been converted into a multi-sensory garden. Truth can be stranger than fiction.

I found the two Catholic Bishops, Bishop Donal Murray, and Bishop Brendan Leahy to be wonderful colleagues. Colleagues because we were working together. That's how we saw it. I was invited to share in their liturgies, offer some training to their clergy and numerous other ways of working together. But more than colleagues they became and remain genuine friends. Relationships between the Church of Ireland and Catholic Church in Limerick are wonderful.

I am saddened by the popular anti-religious rhetoric that is going around today. My own religion is Christian – you may have guessed. And like all religions they provide a story to live by. The story of Christianity as I understand it, is that each person irrespective of colour, class, creed, what they have done or not done, is uniquely valuable, and loved by God. And its knowing that we are loved that we find freedom to love others.

That's why I need to go to Church. To immerse myself in that story and identify with the community that holds that story -so I can remember what life is about.

That story teaches me that the true currency of life is not in the size of my bank balance, but in the quality of my relationships. Love and being loved is the key to abundant life.

Where we are sold a myth of scarcity, that fuels rivalry and drives us (including me) to the January sales, less we miss the bargain.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann encourages us to resist the voice of scarcity in society: 'It is our propensity, in society and in church, to trust the narrative of scarcity. That's what makes us so greedy, and exclusive, and selfish, and coercive. But the narrative of abundance persists among us. Those who sign up and depart the system of anxious scarcity become the history makers in the neighbourhood.' Abundant life is not measured in 'things' but by the quality of our relationships.

What is missing in our world is opportunities for deep human encounter. To meet the humanity of the other, it is necessary to set a pattern of acceptance, care and respect.

These ingredients provide a safe space that allows people be themselves and find the courage to meet the stranger.

We learn most about ourselves through encountering those who are different. The stranger is an angel in disguise.

This is why I believe life is about exploring difference, it is a benefit not to live at home, if home is a space that shields you from difference and is merely a repose for the like-minded.

This Christmas may our homes into places of encounter, of welcome, of hospitality and generosity.