

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOHN MAIDEN: Good to meet you, Alex.

ALEX WIMBERLY: Thank you, John.

JOHN MAIDEN: Welcome to Corrymeela.

ALEX WIMBERLY: Thank you.

JOHN MAIDEN: Could you talk to us about the troubles and what Corrymeela was doing during the troubles in order to try and bring reconciliation, erm, peace building.

ALEX WIMBERLY: We predate the high troubles. The troubles start off in its high period from '68, '69, into the early '70s and then all the way to the agreement in 1998. Back in the mid-1960s, when we were formed, we were really trying to be a place of optimism. The world was changing, civil rights in the States, civil rights here. We're going to be a part of a new Ireland, a new way of being together.

With the civil rights movement becoming more violent and with the troubles really erupting into that dangerous and horrible period, Corrymeela became a real place of holding on to hope, and a place where people from different communities could gather to get a glimpse, a reminder of what life, what the kingdom could really be like in some ways.

And so what we were doing in that high period of the troubles, we were deliberately bringing people together who might not necessarily get to know each other because of a divided, segregated society. We probably weren't bringing them into rooms to talk about the conflict. We find that when you bring people who are in conflict or who are-- where there is that stark disagreement, talking about those matters only pushes us away from each other, even if we have great solutions. If we try to impose our solution on others, it will only push them away. So what we were trying to do and continue to do is simply work on the relationships, find the commonalities, play games together, sing songs together, express ourselves through art. And when you have those shared experiences and build relationships with each other, then whatever solution or new understanding is possible will arise naturally in the space that you create together.

JOHN MAIDEN: And how would you say that Christianity specifically, or ideas within Christianity have influenced that approach to community?

ALEX WIMBERLY: Yeah. Well, I think a couple of things. One is this idea of hospitality, the idea that you are welcoming people into your space, but you may actually be welcoming Christ, this idea that Christ lives in each human being, each child of God.

And so when we welcome people, we are trying to see them as God would see them. And then it becomes less about us being able to impart something to them, but rather for us to learn more about ourselves, about God, about the world through their experiences and through the experiences that we create together.

And this is the dining area, seating in here for about 80 comfortably. And then we have larger groups, 100, 120, sometimes 140 or 50. And so there's an emphasis on bringing people to the table, bringing people together. Hospitality. They may not think that they have a lot in common, but around these tables, around a shared meal, they discover they actually have a lot in common. And they learn from each other their own experiences.

The other thing I would say is that particularly in areas of conflict like our own in Northern Ireland, the teachings of love, grace, forgiveness have been really central to our conversations about relationships, about healing, and about how we need to approach each other, even those who have hurt us, with a sense of compassion, empathy, curiosity about what has led this person who was not born a monster, to perhaps do monstrous things. What led them to that? And can I understand more about them? That might lead us to a place where we can maybe not agree with what they've done, condone what they've done, but perhaps gain a glimpse of that understanding that maybe if I were in their shoes, I would have

been led along a similar path.

JOHN MAIDEN: As the island of Ireland has moved into a post-conflict situation, how has the work of Corrymeela changed with that?

ALEX WIMBERLY: Well, it has changed. And we talk about post-conflict, but really we're in a post-agreement period. The conflict in some ways is still there. But what we would say is that conflict with humans is inevitable. Harm from conflict isn't. Better understanding through conflict is possible.

And so our work, particularly in the last 25, 30 years, has been how do we move from that passive peace, which is the cessation of violence, to a more active peace, where my way of being actually helps you to live well. Your way of being helps me to live well.

JOHN MAIDEN: And we've been looking around the centre this morning and various activities going on. Can you tell us a bit about what's happening here today.

ALEX WIMBERLY: Yeah. Well, today is-- I mean every day is different. At Corrymeela, we have people coming from all over the world, staying for a few hours or a few weeks. People from all different backgrounds.

Today, we have two groups that are staying with us. One is a group from New York City, a church in New York City, which has gathered together a group of young people from different faiths, particularly Muslim and Christian. And they are spending a few days, I think, getting to know themselves and again, having that space away from their own context, which allows them to see themselves and each other in a different light.

And then the other group that we have is a group from London, again, young people who are coming from a lot of different backgrounds, maybe with needing a place of respite, a place of shelter, where again, you can catch up with yourself or you can reconnect with something perhaps you've neglected within yourself, or haven't had the time, or the space, or the care to really process.

And a space like this allows you to really work on that and then find yourself with that sense of belonging, with that sense of being loved and welcomed. You're then able to reach out and have better conversations with the people who are alongside you.

HEATHER JOHNSTON: They absolutely love it. I mean, I'm always very nervous about taking students out of their comfort zone, out of their environment, and bringing them to somewhere that is so completely different. But they've really enjoyed the space, how beautiful the environment is, but also how helpful and how calm staff are with them and how positive they are.

Our students are very used to people viewing them negatively. They've been rejected from Schools. They often have lots of services involved with them. So to come somewhere like Corrymeela where everyone's really welcome and really positive about them, really showing that they're accepting of who they are and regardless of what their experiences have been in the past.

JOHN MAIDEN: You've used the word shelter-- a good thing with all the rain today. But this is a place that is quite—it's a beautiful place, and it's quite withdrawn in some ways from some of those urban settings that we might associate with conflict. Could you talk about some of the challenges and possibilities that come with this setting.

ALEX WIMBERLY: Yeah. Well, I mean, we would use the beauty of the place to our advantage. I mean, this is a gorgeous place. And it doesn't matter who you're angry with. We can all agree that this is pretty gorgeous. But also, it is that you get arrested by the gorgeous, the beauty of this space, and are reminded of being human, of being a part of something greater than any of us.

JOHN MAIDEN: So Corrymeela begins when you leave people taking their experiences here back to the places where they live. How successful would you say Corrymeela has been in its mission? It's a difficult question to ask, but standing back from what Corrymeela does, how successful do you think it's been?

ALEX WIMBERLY: It's hard to measure that. I mean, this is long-term relational work. Reconciliation is so difficult. It is so slow, and it's hard to prove that anything particular has led to the violence that didn't occur, the relationship that did happen that wouldn't have otherwise have happened.

I do think that there are so many people who have come through these doors through these past six decades, who have experienced something here that they-- just knowing that it is possible, they have been able to take that into their own work.

And we have members of the community who have grown up in the community and now take some of the practices, some of the techniques that they learned here at Corrymeela and applied them to the prisons, bringing in restorative justice in the prisons.

Others who have taken this and gone into social work or the schools and developed a sense of how do we build good human connections with people in the classroom, in churches.

JOHN MAIDEN: Alex, that was fascinating. Thank you very much.

ALEX WIMBERLY: Thanks, John. Thank you. You're welcome anytime.

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