The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 2

Thanks so much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. You might like to discuss the episode and the accompanying questions with friends, family, or a discussion group, or just use them for your own writing and reflection.

If you're part of a group, be mindful and considerate of one another's willingness to engage in the discussion - leave space for people to keep their reflections to themselves if they want to. You might also want to agree on some general principles to stick to, like: everybody's invited to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and: try to assume that everybody is speaking with good intent.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness among you.

You might like to choose one or two of the Very Short Story questions that we like to put to guests at the end of each episode. Your answers to these can be one sentence long, or a few. Belongings are plural, as are identities and nationalities. So feel free to respond to these prompts in a way that reflects your own story.

- What's something important that you've changed your mind about?
- Are there books, poems, films, albums, works of art, etc that you've turned to again and again?
- Tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you.
- Tell us about a time when you felt foreign.
- Is there a very short story you can tell us about a time when you said something that surprised you?
- Has anyone ever said that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities? Why?

Season 2, Episode 10. Rev. Dr. Lesley Carroll

reflection questions & episode transcript

1. Lesley talks about how, whilst at university in England, she saw an outsider's perspective of the place she'd grown up in. She says: 'there was certainly for me a sense of what I'd experienced being turned on its head'. Have there been times when being in a new place or different community has challenged or disrupted your own narratives?

2. Do you think that faith communities still have a role in shaping society? Do you think that they should? What might it look like for them to be 'in discussion with the rest of the world'?

3. What might it look like to 'anchor ourselves in the present' in the aftermath of conflict, whether at a personal or societal level? Do you agree that being 'present to the present' is important to bear in mind whilst addressing the past?

4. Did anything strike you about the way Lesley described the process of the Consultative Group? Are there other political or civic issues that you'd like to see approached in that way?

5. When talking about the opportunity to take part in the Consultative Group, Lesley says that: 'When you're committed to this peacemaking thing, every poisoned chalice has to be grasped'. Would you describe any of your own choices in that way?

Lesley Carroll is an ordained Presbyterian minister. She has held a number of public roles in Northern Ireland, including serving as deputy chief commissioner at the Equality Commission, and as an associate member of the Victims and Survivors Forum. In 2006, she was appointed as a member of the Independent Consultative Group on the Past. She has served as the Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland since 2019.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: exploring stories and ideas about conflict, peace, theology, and art.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Lesley Caroll. Lesley is an ordained Presbyterian minister and has held a number of public roles including serving as deputy chief commissioner at the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland, and as an associate member of the Victims and Survivors Forum. She was a member of the Independent Consultative Group on the Past which was established in 2006 to seek views from across the community in Northern Ireland on the best way to deal with the legacy of the past. And since 2019, she's served as the prisoner ombudsman for Northern Ireland. Lesley, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Lesley Carroll:
Thank you, Pádraig. Nice to hear you again.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I'm curious to start off with, Lesley, by asking you a question. Was there a particular experience or friendship in your childhood that you feel prepared you for the work you do now?

Lesley Carroll:
My goodness, that's a very interesting question! Erm, childhood for me was Tyrone. Coalisland we lived in; went to school in Dungannon. During the rough tough years of the Troubles, I would have to say. So was there a particular friendship in all of that? …We had a very strong alliance with our friends, if you like, in those years. The Troubles were such that life was limited in terms of what you could do with your day. So we went to school with the same group of people as we socialised with. And socialising meant badminton club in the Church of Ireland, Christian Endeavour in the Presbyterian, youth group at a different Presbyterian. And one or two other little things, but there was, so there was a lot of church involved there, Pádraig, and the same group of friends, more or less, in all of those settings. So I wouldn't say there was a particular friendship, but I would say that those years with a particular group of people was very significant; there was something important about growing up in a small community in which we all knew each other, in which we shared faith, and struggled together to understand

our faith, not necessarily in the context of the Troubles. But certainly we struggled with the scriptures and struggled to understand them, and I think those friendships, and the ways in which we tried to live out our faith - because it was core to everything, including school - I think that shaped who I am today.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You know I've heard from other people who have said that in the midst of growing up in the Troubles that there wasn't always a huge amount of talk about the Troubles when they were younger. And some of them have said that that was actually part of a safety mechanism rather than pure denialism or anything like that. Would you say the same thing for you?

Lesley Carroll:
I would. I think that to dwell on it in conversation, on top of the daily experiences and they were daily, at least daily, experiences of something coming from the Troubles… That would have been hard work. And at the same time I want to say, and I think it's important to say, that when we were struggling with faith and bringing the living word into people's lives, and to avoid the Troubles was also not correct. There was something off about that. Erm so, yes, yes, it's true, it protected us in many ways. And on the other hand, yeah, we didn't quite get it right, either.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. Well, I mean, d'you think there is any way of getting it right when you're living through terror?

Lesley Carroll:
Absolutely not. I mean, I think the longer I live, the more I understand how chaos affects us. And those were chaotic years. So to think of an ordered response to chaos or an ordered response in chaos, is simply ridiculous. So you're quite right, getting it right would have required some ordered thinking and planning and responding. And that's ridiculous, in the midst of chaos.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You moved to England to study in Plymouth and then continued studies in Belfast for ordination training. What was it that motivated your choices of studies?

Lesley Carroll:

I knew very early on Pádraig that, I, I wanted to be a Presbyterian minister. I was discussing that in my last two years of school with friends, family, mentors, careers teacher, who'd never ever helped someone plan a career to be a Presbyterian minister- I went to an all girls school. So maybe somebody at the all boys school might have been planning, or helping people plan how to be a Presbyterian minister, but not in, not in the all girls school, so that was a bit of a shock for her; she survived well, I have to say. So I knew very early on, I knew very early on that that was something I wanted to do with my life and felt that to be a calling that I had, so everything that I planned from the age of 16 onwards was around that idea. So, I wanted to do something that would be a little bit off the beaten track, I suppose, so I went to England, so that seemed to me to be off the beaten track. You know, it would probably have been more acceptable if I'd gone to Scotland, or even to the south of Ireland, where people felt there was some affinity with the places there. But to go to England, to the English, was a bit shocking.

I have to say I had the best of times. It was actually an Anglican college I went to, so originally – the College of St Mark & St John – originally was an Anglican college, education college, founded by the Anglican church to train people to be teachers, and then they expanded their base to include a humanities degree. So there was, were a number of things that were very lovely about it in terms of the experience I had: one was it was small, and we got to know an awful lot of people. Two was the faith core was still there, so there was a, an Anglican chapel on campus, a full time chaplain there who ran that. The college was out, way out on the edges of Plymouth, so to get into a United Reformed Church, or any other reformed church, on a Sunday morning took five buses, so I ended up becoming an Anglican for three years, and enjoyed that. We interestingly had at the college a number of overseas students, some from the United States, whom I've remained friends with until this day, and some from Africa, and I grew up knowing about things like the Qua Iboe mission in Nigeria, but there would have been students I met from Nigeria, in college, who had been through the Qua Iboe mission and received an education through that mission. So that was also interesting for me. But it was also just great to be away from the Troubles.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What years was this, Lesley, that you were away?

Lesley Carroll:
So, oh good gracious, now that's a very difficult question. Erm, 1980. 1980 to 82/ 83. Yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Those were tough years. My God.

Lesley Carroll:
They really were tough years, you know, and I'm saying to yer, it was, you know, I wanted to get away from all of this; I wanted to breathe some different kind of air and have some different kind of experience. And ultimately, I did, but I mean I have to tell you that the first meeting of the students' union that I went to was a meeting about the hunger strikes. And following on from the death of Bobby Sands, there was a significant reaction amongst what was effectively a Labour-led students' union in our college. And they were discussing Northern Ireland and the hunger strikes. And I was, first of all I was floored that people knew about it. I don't know why I thought people wouldn't know about it, but I was floored that they did. And I was also floored by the angle they took on it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Say more about that.

Lesley Carroll:
Yeah sure, I mean, they were very, it was very much focused on Thatcherite abuses of people, and the way in which Bobby Sands had been allowed to die, and that shouldn't have happened, and all the rest of it; now I have to say if I'd been standing in my own front room back in Dungannon, [I] might have been saying exactly the same thing, or something similar, you know that it was a, there was something wrong when people died on hunger strike. Erm, but because I was in England and there wasn't a snifter of understanding of the unionist position or why the British government went the way that it went, there wasn't a snifter of understanding of that at all. Because of that, I felt somewhat overwhelmed and I think, began a great dawning that the narrative of unionism is not attractive. Northern Irish unionism is not attractive beyond these shores.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well I was, I was actually going to ask whether being in England for those years was a deepening, in a sense, a connection with unionism that you had, but it almost sounds like it was the opposite.

Lesley Carroll:

And I don't really know the answer to that, Pádraig, whether it was one way or the other, but there was certainly, certainly for me a sense of what I'd experienced being turned on its head, I suppose. So back at home in Northern Ireland, we were the unionist majority, I knew we were the unionist majority. I knew that because of where I lived, quite apart from broader Northern Ireland, but, you know, I came from the same town outside Dungannon as Bernadette Devlin, whom we knew, and whom we'd heard on the street, etc. So I knew that nationalism and republicanism felt strongly about housing rights and other rights. I stood in the square in Dungannon and I watched women from the nationalist republican community, Catholic women, marching for their civil rights, and I, so I was aware of my own privilege, I suppose, maybe is the word, I was very aware of that. But standing on English soil, the narrative around Northern Irish unionism wasn't a narrative of privilege at all, I felt. At least, sorry, I didn't experience it as such: I suddenly felt very isolated. Very separate. Um and that was significant, I think.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. You worked as a Presbyterian minister then, for many years. It sounds like the kind of early vocation towards that drove you and sustained you. And my guess is, probably still does, you know, even though you're, you're working in different contexts now. But what was it about congregational ministry that was, that was so important to you? And that- well what was it that sustained you throughout it, not just in getting into it, but then in staying in it for so long?

Lesley Carroll:

Sure. It had everything to do with the Troubles. And it had everything to do with the Troubles in the sense that I read the bible in my fundamentalist way ‘cause that's the background I came from. Perhaps at the evangelical end of fundamentalism and not the deep end of fundamentalism, if you know what I mean. I read the bible that said: ‘Love your enemies’. Erm ‘...pray for those who persecute you’. We were very clear when I was growing up who the enemy was. So we waved at the soldiers in the back of their Land Rover. And, and we brought

tea to the soldiers or the police on the checkpoint at the town, or any checkpoint along the road. We allowed the army to crawl around our house so that they would be safe when they were being shot at outside the house. We knew they were our friends. And by default we knew who our enemies were, also. And there wasn't I suppose that much loving them in many ways; I mean we lived on a, on a bit of the road where it was a Protestant house, a Catholic house, a Protestant house, a Catholic house... And we were all good friends, and you know, we say that in Northern Ireland all the time; it was actually true. If you lived around Coalisland, you, you certainly would be very lonely if you only had Protestant friends, so we had a great variety of friends. But amongst those Catholic friends were people who were shot dead. Two people in particular: Gertie and Jim Devlin, whom I remember- members of the SDLP. Inoffensive, decent people who were shot dead by loyalists. And we couldn't go to the mass, nobody went to the mass. Nobody acknowledged their death in our pulpit.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Was that for fear of personal safety, that you didn't go?

Lesley Carroll:
No, we, I mean, it was for theological safety, Pádraig. We didn't go into those places where we might give credence to the Catholic faith. So we didn't go. So that seemed to me- and I was young at the time, I was 10 or 11, probably. Erm, that seemed to me to be not quite right. And certainly not loving our enemies and praying for those who persecuted us, and... So there's something off about that for me. So that was a significant part of the vocation, if you like. I really believed that, and I still believe, that the Christian faith should be such as to shape a society or help to shape a society – not on its own, but in collaboration with others of like mind – should make and shape a society in which peacefulness, collaboration, a place for everyone, where there are none who have to scream and shout for their civil rights, but rather a society that welcomes, embraces, and makes room for everyone. I believe that's what the Christian faith calls us to. And I believed that that would be an opportunity, or- the ministry would be an opportunity for me to live that conviction and to contribute to peacemaking in Northern Ireland.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
We'll talk about this in a while, but you mentioned when you were talking about your PhD that, you said: 'When I was doing my doctorate, I was trying to make sense of my life, make sense of what I believed in and trying to make sense of why I believed what I believed in'. It

sounds like, you know, while that was your PhD, that's actually also been your whole life, you know to pay attention to rural experiences, murdered neighbours, questions about whether you can or can't feel theologically safe, or personally safe, you know, engaging with each other. It's a complicated thing to try to make sense of those when, when life and death is so near the surface. And when that sensemaking started so young.

Lesley Carroll:
Yeah, I mean, that's, that's an interesting way of thinking of it; I suppose by the time I came to do my PhD, Pádraig, I had been a minister for a good number of years and I felt, I felt a little bit battered by the criticism, and the insinuation that because I was ordained, I was not of a biblical faith. So I was feeling a little bit beaten around. And that's, I was, I was really, I suppose, trying to say when I was talking about my PhD in that way, I was trying to reassure myself that I hadn't strayed from the root of the faith, if you like.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And, because you were ordained as a woman?

Lesley Carroll:
Yeah, yeah. Correct. Sorry. Yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And we'll talk more about theology and your studies and that later on… ***You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is Rev. Dr. Lesley Carroll.*** I'd like to talk to you about the past. I mean, we'll talk about the Consultative Group on Dealing With the Legacy of the Past, which is sometimes called the Eames-Bradley report. We'll talk about that, but, but really we'll talk in more general terms about what it's like to remember, is it possible to remember, but, broadly, would you be able to give a brief pencil sketch about what that process of the Consultative Group on Dealing with the Legacy of the Past was? And how did you get involved?

Lesley Carroll:
OK, sure. I just had arrived in Spain for my holidays, actually, and dropped my suitcase on the floor when the mobile phone rang and it was Denis Bradley to say: you'll be getting a phone call shortly from the Secretary of State and he'll be inviting you to do this job- being a member

of the Consultative Group on the Past. I was pretty breathless I have to say at that moment, it was like: what do I do now? Erm, the phone call came very quickly, I had a very short time to make my mind up. I think it was simply 24 hours; so I had to get permission from presbytery and the congregation to do it, so all of that was in place and I said yes. I didn't take long to think about it, partly because there wasn't long to think about it…

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You weren't given!

Lesley Carroll:
… I wasn't given any length of time at all! [And] partly because Denis was very persuasive, you know, and partly because: 'Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you', like, if you're really committed to this peacemaking thing, every poisoned chalice has to be grasped, you know, you can't just walk away from it, so, so I felt it was in harmony with the kind of direction of travel of my life. So that was it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And the remit of the, of the report: what would you say that was, briefly?

Lesley Carroll:
We were instructed to consult widely and to bring recommendations to government about how Northern Ireland could deal with its past. So our original first set of meetings was really pulling that apart and wondering what it meant, and how we would apply it. So decisions about how to consult, who you would consult with, all of that, that was all in our hands; we could've consulted very few people, but we decided to consult widely. So we took erm, we took the opportunity to advertise in newspapers all over the country, for people to put in written submissions. We were swamped. We had some big formal public meetings, which were absolutely gut-wrenching meetings to sit through and listen to the pain of people's lives just…well like, like a volcano sludging down the side of a mountain at its own pace, unstoppable emotion, which was fiery. And we did a number of those in Northern Ireland; we also did a couple in the south of Ireland, organised by people who had been affected largely by the Dublin and Monaghan bombs, but, there were others involved as well. And we did some private meetings then depending on what people were requesting. So, some victims found it very difficult to come forward, some didn't want to come forward, some felt they could speak

to one or two of the groups, some felt they could speak to the whole group but not in public, you know, so we facilitated as many different ways of people making an input into the process as we possibly could, so when I say we consulted widely, we consulted widely. In Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland, and also we went over to Whitehall, and talked to, I suppose the securocrats over there, is what you might call them; some politicians as well, former secretaries of state; erm we talked to as many many people as we could, so it was a very wide input, and what, what our task really was was to surface something that might satisfy. Now, during that process, it became evident that we could not produce something that would satisfy everybody. But what we tried to do and what we, what I think we made a good attempt at doing was providing something that would give everybody something.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
There were 31 recommendations made in the report, weren't there?

Lesley Carroll:
There were. There were. So if you didn't want to talk about what had happened to you, you never would have to. If you wanted to go down the judicial route, you'd have that opportunity, in limited form, albeit, but you would have that opportunity. If you wanted to gather some information, but not be judicial in that approach, there was an opportunity for you to do that. And then we also took seriously what to do with this society: how would you, how would we, within the context of our remit, think society could reflect enough on its past for it not to repeat itself? So we’d recommendations in there about education, and oral history, museums, and all the rest of it. In many ways, what anybody who's interested in the past is discussing today is what we were discussing then. The narrative around dealing with the past hasn't changed- the parameters, sorry, of it, they haven't really changed at all since those days.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I mean, by and large, and very quickly, it seems like, the final report that was produced was kind of put on the shelf very quickly, even though many of the recommendations have tacitly continued to be worked on, or people are calling for some kind of measures of this or some kind of measures of that; do you think that some of the recommendations, or the timing of the whole thing was too early, even if the recommendations were insightful? Or, how do you reflect on it now, I suppose it's about 15 years, maybe a bit longer since that report was published.

Lesley Carroll:

I, as I look back, I mean, I return to a belief that I've, I held very strongly at the time, which was: we needed another six months. We needed another six months to talk to people about the report. So producing a report and launching a report is an entirely different thing than engaging with people about the content of the report. So we had no opportunity to explain why we had made the recommendations we had made. Was that something that would have been welcomed, would be my question. And I think not, I think that at some time, in the three to four months before we completed our work, there was something happened somewhere in the system, whether intentionally or accidentally, which said: we're not going to go with that process. Now, perhaps it was the payment that we had recommended, you know, it was a, kind of an acknowledgement payment…

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You'd agreed, recommended a payment to every family who'd been bereaved through the Troubles, and that was a very, very divisive and controversial recommendation from among the 31, yeah.

Lesley Carroll:

It was and it actually reflected something that had occurred in the Republic of Ireland, many years previously, so it wasn't that it wasn't a tested model. Erm, but the fact that we- well the whole thing fell on that, really. But again, there was, there was a strong rationale for that recommendation. And it was around, erm, it was around the difficulty of acknowledging everybody equally. And I suppose we then get into the: well, did everybody equally suffer? And of course, everybody didn't equally suffer. But everybody did suffer. So it was a levelling the ground exercise, if you like, and we never got to talk to anybody about that, so I think that is a real difficulty. And I think it is now interesting to watch the mechanisms for current proposals unfold. Because they are not consulted. They are not agreed. And nobody has managed to construct a narrative that is persuading anybody.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah I was gonna say it is interesting that one of the few things that has bonded all the Northern Ireland parties together in the last while has been their opposition to the UK government's legacy and reconciliation bill: it's a strange irony that, you know in the midst of not having had an assembly that there is unanimity about this one thing. But before we talk about that, though,

like I'm, I'm struck by what you said earlier on in terms of your own personal life that, you know, 'love your enemies', pray for those, erm, do good to those who persecute you, that in a certain sense that what that private personal experience of your own faith was, it was tapping into kind of a deep psychological crisis in any situation like, you know: who is the enemy, who started this, you know, depending as to what community you work with. In the north of Ireland, people will say: well, this is who started it or that's who started it or you start with the Troubles or you start with partition, or you start with the famine, or you start with the Act of Union: there's very live ways within which people have genuinely and deeply held belief as to who the agitator is, and to who has suffered, and so the enmity question, the moral question as to who has been doing wrong is fundamentally divisive, here. And it seems like, you know, in your own life that has kind of called and troubled you, but certainly in the, the question about the recommendations and this bill about remembering the past: in a situation where there is no consensus about wrongdoing, and who's to blame, to say a crude phrase, it- do you think it's ever possible to, to address the past when the past is so divided?

Lesley Carroll:
It's very, I mean, it's an impossible question to answer, Pádraig, and I could give you a different answer today than I will tomorrow. So, what's your-

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Give us a few!

Lesley Carroll:
…what's your view on the current British legislation, well, you know, I know what they're trying to do. But you can't, you can't stand over it in the face of the lack of engagement and lack of support from the broad, broadest group of people in Northern Ireland. That'll be one reaction; then the next day, I'll be saying: ah, dear, listen to that, and there's people and they're anxiously awaiting some, some truth or some information that's never going to come- we just have to stop this, d'you know, so I, I think, in my very being rehearse every emotional response to this that we will hear across society. I think for me, I mean I reflect on one event, right. I reflect on sitting in one of those public meetings, and somebody in the audience started to tell their story about how they'd been nearly murdered, and colleagues with them had been murdered, actually. And I listened, and I knew that two young men from the congregation I grew up in had carried out that atrocity. And in that moment I was: what the hell do I do with

this? Not that I knew the two young men well, by any means, but I did know their family. I also knew they had come up through the youth organisations in the congregation with my parents. And in front of me was a man whose life was miraculously saved. And it was such a moment of presence.

And I think that's the difficulty with the past, is that we don't anchor our- we can't get ourselves anchored in the present, we can't get ourselves present to the present, if you like. And that also is the story of the power of chaos. So once you're caught by the power of chaos, it is really hard to anchor yourself here and now in a moment. And it's only here and now in a moment that you can begin to resolve things. So I went and spoke to that man afterwards. And it was a very brief conversation; he probably thought I was a bit crazy, but, it was a really important conversation for me. Just to say: I know, I know this. So being- I don't even know if I'm explaining this well at all or not, Pádraig, but the trouble with dealing with the past is the chaos that the past has brought us. How do we anchor ourselves into a now, so that we can stay balanced enough, emotionally and every other way, so that we can have a less subjective look at things and a less subjective treatment of one another. And a less subjective judgement of perhaps victims' demands because there's that in the middle of it all, too.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Um, I know that the Eames-Bradley report did speak in kind of a preemptive way about, about how any bill about reconciliation or remembering or legacy should be dealt with, and it said: 'Any initiative along these lines, if it is to have any prospect of success, must come from the Northern Ireland executive and be endorsed by the assembly'. I mean we're in a situation now where we don't have an executive or a sitting assembly, and London is putting forward this legacy and reconciliation bill, which is fairly widely opposed by people from all kinds of differing backgrounds in the north of Ireland. What do you think is possible? I mean, I'm sure I can imagine what you might hope for, but what do you think is possible, or what do you think is being done?

Lesley Carroll:
I think that the British government intends to deliver this process in full in the way that they envisage it, and that it really doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. Now, you asked me previously was Eames-Bradley too early, too- before it's time, I suppose is what you were saying. And I reflect that the current legislation is not unlike much of what was in that report

that we produced. I don't think we were ahead of our time. But I do think it is now too late to do what we proposed then. Therefore, I think there is a misjudgment on behalf of the British government. And I think it's a serious misjudgment. I think that the only good I can see coming from it is the fact that there is, as you've referenced, almost unanimity in opposition, political unanimity in opposition to it. If we could buy into that unanimity at this point, there might be hope for us. And we're really not letting ourselves because again, we can't deal with the past. So I'm not all that hopeful, I would have to say, Pádraig, for it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I know your friend and colleague, Denis Bradley, had suggested that some of the day-to-day running of the Northern Ireland assembly should be separated from the serious questions of legacy, so that when there are impediments to that, that the day-to-day running of health and education and spend, etc, and roads and infrastructure, that that isn't held up while the very complicated chaos, as you describe it, can be dealt with with a separate group who can concern themselves solely with that: is that an idea that you think has legs? Um, yeah, I'm curious what your thoughts are about that.

Lesley Carroll:
I think it's not a bad idea at all. I'm not quite sure how it could be delivered. But then, d'you know, we have a great and unique and unmatchable, I think, ability in Northern Ireland to create these kinda crazy constructions that allow us to deal with things. So there may actually be a way of doing it. But I think Denis is quite right that if we, if we don't deal with the other things, there ain't no future. And we aren't going to deal with those other things if the past is sitting in the middle of it all.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama; with me today is Rev. Dr. Lesley Carroll. Lesley, I'd like to go back to talking about religion. You know, you have spent your whole life, it seems, from a child to, to an adult, you know, formally employed by the church for many years, and now, still speaking erm, still speaking theologically, you know, in the midst of your different roles; you're now working as the prisoner ombudsman for Northern Ireland, you'd worked with the Victims Commission, and the Equality Commission, as well. I wonder what you would say about the role of the churches. Does the church have a

role in speaking to the wider society, what is that imagined role, and what do you think the reality of that role is?

Lesley Carroll:
It’s interesting that you use the phrase ‘speaking to’. So I find myself just a little bit uncomfortable with those words, Pádraig. Because I suppose there's two ways of speaking to, and the old colonial way of speaking to, I suppose, is the most uncomfortable piece for me. So, I grew up in a type of faith, where as long as you knew what the bible said, that was enough. So, you know, you declared and proclaimed what the scripture said, without any engagement in terms of the context. And d’you know, that is just not how life works, it's not how we read a text as human beings. Erm, and it's not, I think, how we gain any traction in a society. So I think the churches should be influencing society from a faith perspective. And if that's what you mean by speaking to, I'm OK with that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Speaking to/ speaking with, but I appreciate your caution and concern about it, yeah...

Lesley Carroll:
Yeah. So I think, what I think the terminology, I suppose, speaks to me of a way of going about it, Pádraig. So I think there's a way of going about this for the churches in this day and age, and the way of going about it is to, for the church to become part, fully part of the life of society. And we’re- we in the churches are not that; we are engaged in different ways and at different levels. I mean as the structure of the church. But, but there's some disconnect there. And there's some disconnect on a Sunday morning, when people- I was gonna say pour through the church doors, but that would be an exaggeration - in some places they do still pour, but not like they used to - but they come into the church on a Sunday morning, people come in from all sorts of walks of life. And it's almost like those walks of life stay outside.

So I work for example now with the civil service. And, I'm not a civil servant, but my staff are civil servants. And I see all of the civil service material, and it constantly has an equality dimension to it. You know, if you've got a recruitment process underway, for whatever grade you're recruiting for, there will be figures from across the civil service around the protected categories: women, or gender, sexuality: all of those protected categories, as set out in Section 75, so we will know that at that grade, whatever grade it is, there aren't as many Protestants or

Catholics, or there aren't as many Catholics as Protestants; we know there aren't as many women as you would like to see, etc, etc. And there will be a note go on to every recruitment process, which says: applications would be welcomed from, and they're from these groups that they're short of at that grade. And that's a whole different world than being part of the church. Also, you will see regularly coming up on your weekly bulletins stuff about diversity, stuff about being trans and how someone who is living through that trans journey is accommodated in life- in life within the civil service. You'll hear about reasonable adjustments for people with disability, and not only conversations about accommodating people with disability, but also about business areas within the civil service changing their minds and their approach, so as to welcome, or look out, or dig out people with disability because that would bring something to their business area. Do I hear any of this conversation in the church? Frankly, no. That's the beginning and the end of it. So I think I would like the church, not to change its beliefs, necessarily, but to bring its beliefs into discussion with the rest of the world, and from that to speak. And I think that that brings with it a credibility that the church has basically lost. We become authentic in that kind of engagement. I don't know what it is that makes us think that sitting apart and staying apart is better than engaging in. I actually trust God enough to protect me in this awful world. And it is an awful world at times. Mightn't need as much protection as I think, of course.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What do you think um, the contribution from the repository of faith - not necessarily from one denomination or another - what do you think the contribution from scripture, from a Christian-believing people or people influenced by the Christian faith, what do you think that contribution could be in a society like ours that has known so much trauma and division?

Lesley Carroll:

A couple of things come to mind, Pádraig. I mean, I've done a lot of work around trauma and resilience and what it does to the biology of our being, and how it can shape and form our reactions and how we can resist that then, how we can become people proactive enough to reshape our own biology if you like, so that we become less dominated by the, the chaos and the trauma and the toxic stress that we experience. And as I do that work, and I do training in that now as well, I see prayer in a new light. Erm, so, the, the provision of moments of reflective space, you know, grounded in a building or a group, or even, even grounded virtually in a group, you know, however we do it, that is reconnection to a less chaotic self, therefore a more

God-like self. So I think what we offer as places of pause, places of reflection, places of prayer is actually much more significant than we realise. And we may bemoan the fact that a very small group of people might turn up at things that we provide, but actually what we're doing is sending back reformed people into their workplaces and their communities and their neighbourhoods. And if that's not the church at its best work, I don't know what is.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Lesley Carroll, thanks very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast, it's been a pleasure to talk with you.

Lesley Carroll:
Thank you, Pádraig.

The Corrymeela Podcast is created in partnership between Corrymeela and FanFán. It's produced by Emily Rawling, with mixing, editing, and theme music by Fra Sands at Safeplace Studios, and presented by me, Pádraig Ó Tuama. The podcast is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland, and the Irish government's Reconciliation Fund. Thanks to them, and thanks to Corrymeela's friends and supporters, and thanks to you for listening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Lesley, for the first Very Short Story question, has anyone ever said to you that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities, Lesley?

Lesley Carroll:
I think people have probably thought that, but nobody's ever said it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Why would you say that?

Lesley Carroll:
Er, I mean, so I reflect back on a time when an elder in one of my congregations took his retirement. And really what he wanted to do was to resign, because I was chaplain to Sinn Féin

Lord Mayor in Belfast, and I think he felt completely betrayed. So I think people have at times thought it, but not said it.

Pádraig Ó Tuama :
What's something important that you've changed your mind about?

Lesley Carroll:
Erm, I've probably changed my mind, and I changed it a long time ago, about the Catholic church. So I grew up believing and being taught that it was an awful thing. It's no more awful than any other church. And it is a church.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And are there books or poems or films or any kind of work of art, like is there any particular one that you've turned to again and again throughout your life?

Lesley Carroll:
I have two things that I- I'm not a great one for going back and back and back to a thing now, I mean, obviously you go back and back to the bible as a Christian but, apart from that, there are two things that, that regularly come back to me in times of challenge: one is Rublev's Trinity and I have the icon in my office here. And of course it speaks of community and communion and distinctiveness at the same time and that's important. The other thing is Robert Frost's poem, 'The Road Not Taken': 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less traveled by/ And that has made all the difference'. I always hope I'll choose the road that will make all the difference, whatever 'all the difference' is.