

Safe spaces: A place for dialogue and forgiveness

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

In times of crisis, churches rise to the occasion. [Rich Preheim's article](#) about ministry on the Gulf Coast makes me proud of the often-maligned institutional church, which has poured dollars and volunteers into the disaster-struck areas. [Ronald Wells's article](#) on reconciliation in Northern Ireland shows us the church, in the person of Desmond Tutu, engaged in a difficult but critical witness for peace and reconciliation. Peacemaking requires patience, forbearance, determination and vulnerability. It can also get you in trouble and occasionally in danger.

Wells mentions that there are communities in Northern Ireland that provide “safe space for dialogue and forgiveness,” such as the Corrymeela Community in Ballycastle. It is an ecumenical peace community that grew out of Coventry Cathedral's Cross of Nails Fellowship.

I once took a group of teenagers to Corrymeela to meet with Irish teenagers, Protestant and Catholic. The kids got along wonderfully. They soon moved beyond issues of peace and violence—which the Irish youngsters were candid about and the American teenagers stunned by—to talk about pressing issues like rock music.

At the time, Corrymeela was hosting a group called Belfast Mums—wives of operatives in the Irish Republican Army who were being held in the British prison of Long Kesh. One of the most prominent of those prisoners, Bobby Sands, had just died at the end of a long hunger strike. His picture was everywhere in Belfast and Ballycastle. Corrymeela had invited the Mums and their children to have a small holiday near the ocean, away from the crowded tenements. Every evening, after their children were in bed, they gathered to talk. I got to sit in one evening.

The conversation began awkwardly at first. But then one of the Mums pulled out a bottle and passed it around the circle. Then they started talking about their husbands, the violence in which they lived, the hatred they experienced from the Protestants and the hatred they felt in return. The bottle continued to be passed.

“Let’s sing one for Bobby,” one of them said, and they sang a lament for their husbands, their children, their hopes for peace. I learned then that peacemaking means being patient and quiet, listening and sometimes “singing one for Bobby.””
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