
MAIREAD CORRIGAN MAGUIRE

On 10th August 1976, three children, Joanne, (eight-and-a-half years old), John (two-and-a-half), and Andrew (six weeks old) were killed on a Belfast street corner and their mother, Anne, was seriously injured. A British army patrol had shot and killed an IRA gunman, Danny Lennon, whose car then ploughed into the sidewalk along Finaghy Road North in Belfast. This was the seventh year of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland and sixteen hundred people had already lost their lives.

The day the children were buried, on Friday, 13th August 1976, their aunt, Mairead Corrigan met Ciaran McKeown and Betty Williams at Milltown Cemetery in Belfast. On that day, the Peace People movement was born.

With her two new friends, Ciaran and Betty, Mairead galvanised thousands of people to take part in weekly peace marches to say NO to the violence that had wracked her native land.

"Enough is enough!"

She led demonstrations that saw half-a-million people take to the streets in Northern Ireland, England, and Eire. This was a tremendous job in a country torn apart by sectarian strife and animosity, where processions could set off further violence and killings. It called for considerable courage to work for peace when so many seemed to delight in baying for blood and spewing forth hatred and intolerance.

The day after the funeral of the three children, Mairead met her new friends and together they wrote the "Declaration of the Peace People" which was read at every rally and gathering they organised.

"If we want to reap the harvest of peace and justice in the future," Mairead said, "we will have to sow seeds of nonviolence, here and now, in the present." Mairead not only organised demonstrations, she also wrote letters to the IRA, to Gerry Adams and to many others. She called for a *"politics of mercy and forgiveness"* and encouraged Irish women to join in the struggle for peace.



The movement met with great difficulties at times and it has made many changes since 1976. Mairead is still with the movement doing both international and local work for peace, human rights and nonviolence. She believes that *"hope for the future depends on each of us taking nonviolence into our hearts and minds and developing new and imaginative structures which are nonviolent and life-giving for all."*

"Some people will argue that this is too idealistic. I believe it is very realistic. I am convinced that humanity is fast evolving to a higher consciousness. For those who say it cannot be done, let us remember that humanity learned to abolish slavery. Our task now is no less than the abolition of violence and war.... We can rejoice and celebrate because we are living in a miraculous time. Everything is changing and everything is possible."

"Wherever we are, wherever we live, we need to ask ourselves as Christians, if Christ lived in Belfast would he carry a gun and kill for the cause? If Christ lived in America or Britain would he support nuclear weapons or prepare for a limited nuclear war that could annihilate millions of our sisters and brothers in the world? That's your question. I have answered it for myself, and my answer is, No, he wouldn't."

Peace for all humanity

"Violence has created only further violence and hatred and broken hearts. In Northern Ireland we can prove it", says Mairead. "Our hospitals are full of men in wheelchairs, half-blind, without arms, permanently wounded. The people of Ireland, North and South of the border, are beginning to realise that there's got to be another way to solve our problems. The price of war is too high."

The whole idea of war, the so-called "just war" theory, the notion that Christians can arm themselves and kill their enemies and still follow Christ, has come into question in Ireland and in many other parts of the world. Mairead believes that Christians can live in a different way. *"Wherever we are, wherever we live, we need to ask ourselves as Christians, if Christ lived in Belfast would he carry a gun and kill for the cause? If Christ lived in America or Britain would he support nuclear weapons or prepare for a limited nuclear war that could annihilate millions of our sisters and brothers in the world? That's your question. I have answered it for myself, and my answer is, No, he wouldn't."*

Peace by peace

Mairead continues her witness for peace today. In March 2003, Mairead, with members of Pax Christi USA and Christian church leaders, took part in a nonviolent blockade and prayer vigil in front of the White House in Washington to protest against the war against Iraq. They were arrested for their actions. Mairead said *"I am here to break the law because my conscience tells me I must. Each of us has a moral responsibility to do all we can, in a nonviolent way, to oppose the evil of this immoral act"*.

A challenge to us all

Mairead believes that there is something deadly wrong with our world when so many hungry people are crying out to be fed, yet the best minds are planning mass destruction instead of feeding the starving. She invites us all to join the struggle to put this right.

"You may not want to be involved in party politics or become a street activist. So you can begin in your home. Remember that throughout the troubles in Northern Ireland, the voice of women was often heard calling for compassion instead of conflict, collaboration instead of coercion, and cooperation instead of competition. We need not be on the streets of Belfast. There is much to be done for human rights, for peace, for reconciliation and justice right where we are. Together we can say, 'We are a People of Peace'. This is the way forward for the world."

As co-founder of the Peace People Community, Mairead shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976.

For more information:

The Peace People, 224 Lisburn Road, Belfast,
Northern Ireland BT9 6GE
www.peacepeople.com

Read:

Mairead Corrigan Maguire, *The Vision of Peace: faith and hope in Northern Ireland*, Orbis 1999

Northern Ireland: Roots of Conflict, Routes to Peace: a teaching pack for Key Stage 4 and A-level History, National Peace Council 1999, £9.99
Available from Pax Christi

Declaration of the Peace People

We have a simple message for the world from this movement for peace. We want to live and love and build a just and peaceful society. We want for our children, as we want for ourselves, our lives at home, at work, and at play, to be lives of joy and peace. We recognize that there are many problems in society which are a source of conflict and violence. We recognize that every bullet fired and every exploding bomb makes that work more difficult. We reject the use of the bomb and the bullet and all the techniques of violence. We dedicate ourselves to working with our neighbours, near and far, day in and day out, to building that peaceful society in which the tragedies we have known are a bad memory and a continuing warning.

Pax Christi, St Joseph's, Watford Way, Hendon, London NW4 4TY
phone: 020 8203 4884 email: info@paxchristi.org.uk
website: www.paxchristi.org.uk