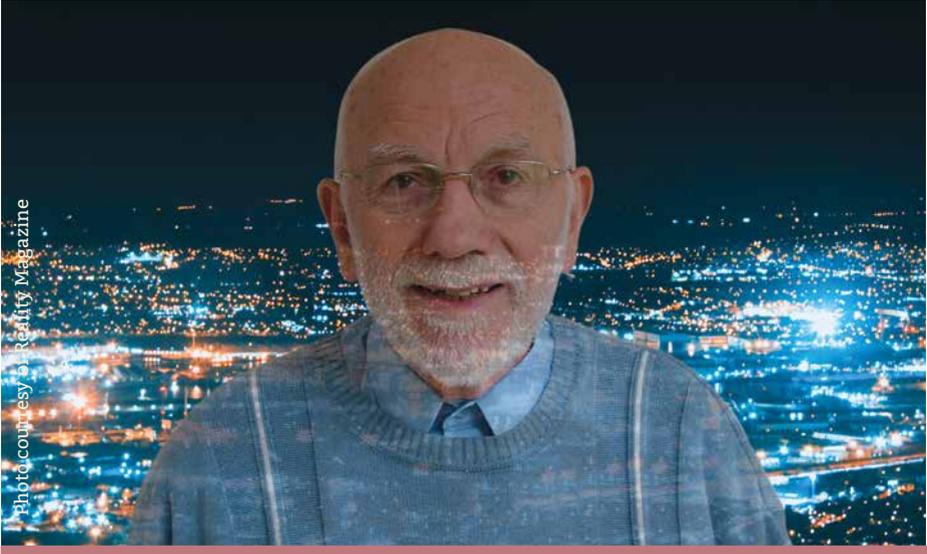




## Fr Gerry Reynolds

To end his series on Irish Ecumenists, **Tom Layden SJ** introduces us to Fr Gerry Reynolds, a tireless worker for peace in Northern Ireland.



For Redemptorist priest Fr Gerry Reynolds (1935–2015), ecumenism was a journey of exploration and a pilgrimage. In the thirty-two years he spent ministering in Belfast (1983–2015), he saw ecumenism in terms of the growing ease of all the Churches with one another. It was an ongoing journey of one small step at a time, walking a pilgrim's path towards that unity that Jesus prayed for his disciples 'so that the world might believe'.

The Mungret (County Limerick) native was ordained on 25 September 1960, the year after Pope John XXIII had called the Second Vatican Coun-

cil, and to which he invited observers from the other Christian Churches. When Gerry headed home to spend some time with his family after his ordination, he knew that many of the neighbours would be coming to the house to ask for his first blessing. But what would he do when Ms Thompson (a Protestant lady who came each week to buy eggs from his mother) arrived? He spontaneously asked her if she would like to receive his blessing too. She was delighted and this became his first lesson in ecumenism.

In his early days in Clonard Monastery in Belfast, he would often stand

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on the top floor looking out on the wall that divided the Catholic Falls district and the Protestant Shankill area. One of his older colleagues had grown up in the area in the years before the Troubles when there was no wall. He knew that people in both districts and said that they had a lot in common because they had both experienced low wages and deprivation. This fostered in Gerry a longing to make contact with the people on the other side of the wall. How could he do this?

He became involved with a small local inter-church group (the Cornerstone Community) living at the peace wall and began meeting with some of the local Protestant clergy. He started bringing groups across the divide so that they could meet each other, become acquainted and see what they had in common.

On 4 August 1986, a thirty-three-year-old man was shot dead on the Protestant side. Gerry was devastated by this killing. He felt a desire to visit the family to express his condolences. He asked Revd Sam Burch (a Methodist minister who was the Director of the Cornerstone Community) to accompany him.

The dead man's house was only three hundred yards on the other side of the wall. His parents lived next door. When the clergy arrived, the father welcomed them into his own house. Gerry was struck by the depth

of their grief and by their dignity as they lived through this agonising day in their lives. He had brought with him a carving of the head of Christ, which a friend had brought him from Chile. He gave the carving to the mother who reverently touched the wood upon which her tears were falling.

The father then took them next door to his son's house where he lay in his coffin. They sat in silence with the wife beside the coffin. After a while Sam asked Gerry to say a prayer. He picked up the Bible from a nearby table and read a psalm. Thereafter whenever there was a killing in the area, Gerry and members of the Cornerstone Community went to visit the family to show their concern and offer support. They would phone in advance to check out that the family would feel comfortable with their visit. Gerry's reflection on these visits was that the unity of the church begins in sharing the pain of life and spending time together with those who are suffering in prayer and friendship.

He formed a close working relationship with Revd Ken Newell in Fitzroy Presbyterian church and a partnership relationship developed between Fitzroy and Clonard monastery.

Fr Reynolds had a knack of getting people together. He was an ecumenical prophet who called people to venture into the unknown to meet the Lord in their neighbours. 