

A Road Too Wide
The Price of Reconciliation in
Northern Ireland

by
David Armstrong
with Hilary Saunders
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10: Problems begin

When I arrived at Limavady I inherited nine elders and before long I felt I was establishing good relationships with the members of the session, and particularly with Ivan Bryne the session clerk, who popped in every morning after breakfast to talk about the issues of the day. We were soon able to co-opt two new elders from the new people who joined the church in the early days of my ministry there, and who had been elders in their former churches. I was thrilled to see people who were already committed Christians coming to live in Limavady and wanting to get involved in the life of the church, being prepared to take a lead in the spiritual life as well as the practical matters which so often tend to dominate session meetings. Towards the end of my first year the congregation voted for committee members who would be responsible for the fabric of the church. I was very glad when Harry Coates received the largest number of votes. It was good to have someone like Harry, an evangelical who was firmly behind me, as a committee member.

The church grew steadily, with about fifty new families joining us in my first year as minister. Noble Boggs reported in a session meeting, 'I look forward to the time when we have to put extra seats in the aisle, because I'm sure it will not be long before we won't have enough seats for all the people wanting to come to church'. Our regular morning congregation grew from about sixty to 240. We started a Bible study group on Monday evenings, which was also a time for fellowship and worship. I suppose the twenty or thirty people who came regularly began to form the spiritual core of the church, the people who encouraged me and on whom I began to rely.

The manse was not ready for us when we arrived, and the church had found a bungalow for us in Bells Hill, not too far from the church. But they were committed to refurbishing the manse so that we could move in within a year, and the whole church reacted generously and sometimes sacrificially to get our new home ready. In the meantime we were happy in our bungalow. The children settled down quickly and made friends with families living in Bells Hill. I was surprised when someone commented to me that some of these children were Roman Catholic and seemed to expect me to object to my children playing with Catholics. Perhaps this was my first indication of the depth of anti-Catholic feeling in the town.

I knew that Limavady was fifty-five per cent Protestant and I suppose I should have realised that this tight balance of power could lead to strong emotions. When the bomb had exploded in the new Catholic church I was astonished and horrified, not only by the explosion but by some of the rumours surrounding it: 'They did it themselves to collect the insurance money.' It did concern me that a few members of my congregation seemed to share this attitude and I could only pray that the love of Jesus would take away any bigotry from their hearts.

I soon came to realise that one of the major influences in the town was the Protestant Orange Lodge, and when they marched to church on my third Sunday they filled most of the seats. Although none of my family belonged to the Orange Order I knew a certain amount about them, and had come across the Lodge in Carrickfergus. But it was nothing like as strong as in Limavady, where the Orange order seemed to dominate many Protestants in the town. Again I felt some concern about members of my congregation who seemed to have a greater sense of loyalty to their Lodge than to Jesus. I would constantly preach on the importance of putting Christ first in our lives, of being full of the power of his Holy Spirit and living a maximum Christian life, not a minimum one.

By the time my first year was up we had moved into

Roevista manse. The church had rallied round marvellously to decorate, lay carpets, and even move our furniture from Bells Hill. People had been enormously generous, both with their time and their money, and June and I were full of gratitude for the love and acceptance we had been shown by so many people. It was a happy time for us with the birth of our fourth child Mark in August 1982.

I was encouraged to see some people coming to faith in Jesus through my preaching, and was glad to see the new wind of the Holy Spirit blowing gently through the church. I started to involve some of the church members in the service, and asked Ivan Bryne to help conduct the service one Sunday. This caused a little difficulty with other members of session, who did not approve, but I hoped that gradually we could get more people involved in leading the services. I could see that God was honouring his promise to 'draw all men unto himself' as I continued to try to exalt Jesus in my sermons and, although I knew that one or two of my elders weren't always happy with my preaching, I felt that after one year we were beginning to get established and the church had all the signs of great spiritual potential.

One morning in early October I received a letter from the Roman Catholic congregation across the road saying that their new building would be opened on 21 November and inviting me to attend the opening service. It was not an altogether surprising invitation. Some months earlier I had been told that a loyalist councillor was thinking of joining my congregation, but that first he wanted an assurance that I would not go near the Catholic church even if I was invited to the opening. At the time I simply responded that I would be happier if any man with that kind of outlook did not join my congregation, but the idea of being invited to the opening service stuck in my mind.

When I received the invitation I wrote to Father Donally, the priest, and said I would be glad to attend. I soon realised that members of my congregation were interested to know how I had replied. They must have realised from the way I

never spoke against Catholics, that I might go to the service, but they did not want to ask me directly. So they made remarks like, 'The minister of Second Limavady isn't going to the Catholic church,' or 'The chaplain of the Orange and Black Lodge has sent a very curt reply to the priest,' and obviously hoped that I would respond with my own reply. I did not want to make too much of an issue of it, so tried not to react. I knew that one of my Presbyterian colleagues in the town was planning to go and was pleased about this, partly because we would be able to support each other. But a couple of weeks later I heard that he had changed his mind and decided not to go in case some of the RUC policemen in his congregation were upset by it. I was very disappointed, not least that he should associate RUC men with bigotry in this way. It looked as if I might be the only Protestant minister there, apart from the Church of Ireland rector, Canon Knowles, who I knew was going.

On Thursday 18 October Connolly George and William Morrison, two members of my session, arrived to see me. They told me that people in the town were saying that I was planning to go to the Catholic service on the following Sunday and they wanted to make it quite clear to me that, as church elders, they did not want me to go. They felt that the church was building up nicely, things were looking secure financially, and they didn't want me to do anything that would upset people. I knew that these two men had come to see me together because they were members of the same Masonic Lodge, and it struck me as a little ironic that they should be criticising Catholic doctrines, when I did not consider some of the Masonic teachings to be very biblical. When they had finished I told them that I was intending to go to the Catholic church, which was only what they expected, and having made their point they went on their way.

The following day, when I was in Magilligan prison, one of the prison officers stopped me at the gate. I recognised him as a member of the congregation at Second Limavady Presbyterian Church. 'You had better not go to the opening

of the Catholic church,' he said, 'or you'll find yourself without a congregation! They'll come and join Second Limavady!' Threats like this, and several anonymous phone calls I received, were a little unpleasant, but most of all it saddened me to realise that there was such bigotry in a small rural town.

On the Saturday evening, June and I went to talk to Ivan Bryne, feeling that as session clerk he had some right to know what I intended to do. 'Ivan, I'm going to the opening of the Roman Catholic church tomorrow. I'm going to stand up in church and tell the congregation tomorrow morning so that they hear it from me and not from anyone in the town centre on Monday.' Ivan had been a marvellous support to me since my arrival, remarkably steadfast and loyal towards me, and a kind and helpful friend to the whole family. He had never tried to tell me what to do, but at this he looked perturbed, and hung his head. 'I would rather you didn't go, please will you think again?' 'Ivan, I really have to go, both as a neighbour from just across the road showing friendship, and because I don't want to be associated in any way with those who blew the church up. I am an evangelical Christian, and although it may not be what people expect from an evangelical, I will be going to the service. I'll just have to take the consequences if the congregation don't agree.' With that Ivan held out his hands to June and me. 'Well, all right! You will still have my support!'

Next morning, I went to church early to get ready for the service and to greet our visiting preacher, Rev. John Ross, an ex-missionary from Malawi. If I had wanted an excuse to get away from Limavady for the weekend, so that I would not be able to go to the Catholic church, it would have been easy. I had been asked to preach at John Ross's church while he was in mine at Limavady, but a friend had agreed to go on my behalf so that I could be at home for the service. We were talking about the details of the service when Ivan walked in. After I had introduced him to Mr Ross, Ivan told me that he wanted to call an emergency session meeting after the service to discuss my going to the opening of the Catholic church. I

was astonished, wondering what had happened to Ivan since I saw him the previous evening, but agreed to announce the meeting during the service.

I could feel a slight tension in the air during the service. At the end of it I climbed into the pulpit and turned to face the congregation. 'I want to be straight with you all and tell you to your faces that I am going to the opening of Christ the King across the road this afternoon. I am going as a Christian to show Christian love to our neighbours just as Jesus has commanded us.' It was not easy to say, my eyes were full of tears, and I was shaking a little as I climbed down from the pulpit. It was difficult to say something which I knew might cause trouble, even though I was convinced that I was doing the right thing by going to the service.

I stood by the door greeting people as they left church, and the vast majority of the congregation spoke warmly to me. One man said, 'I couldn't go to the Catholic church, but you're my minister, and as far as I'm concerned you have every right to go if you want to.' One young man who had recently joined the church said, 'Mr Armstrong, I am totally behind you anyway, and you have my best wishes for today!'

I walked back into the church after all the congregation had left and found the members of session waiting for me. Ivan Bryne opened the meeting, telling me that even at this late stage I was not to do anything unwise but to stay out of Christ the King that afternoon. I couldn't understand what had made Ivan change so dramatically overnight. Then others chipped in to support Ivan, saying that I should have gone to the church membership to ask them whether or not I should go. I thought I would have a very weak ministry if I did everything by a vote from church members. I explained that it was not possible to work like that, 'I can't be told where I can and cannot go by members of session.' This made some of them very angry, saying that in that case I obviously did not want a session at all if I was not prepared to do what they said. One man told me that if I went to Christ the King his wife did not want to have anything more to do with me. I was very upset to see such a different side of the

men's characters and wondered where all the love of Christ that I had preached about was now. Noble Boggs spoke up for me: 'We shouldn't speak to our minister like this. If he feels in his conscience that he is right to go then we shouldn't question him, but wish him God's blessing as he goes to the Catholic church.' I was grateful for his support but felt shattered by the anger and venom I'd seen at the meeting.

Mr Gibson, the governor from Magilligan, had come to have lunch with us at home on his way to the service, and I was so grateful for the support and concern that he and June showed me when I got home. I could tell that June was rather anxious about me. Although she was in full agreement with me about my decision to go to the service, she was apprehensive about what sort of reaction there would be. Lunch was rather a subdued meal and I was quite glad to set off for the service when the time came. At least it would soon be over and then there would be an end to all the speculation.

Mr Gibson and I drove off together and I was very glad of his company. We met up with Dr Mizra from the local hospital. He was a Hindu, and therefore completely neutral about Catholic/Protestant issues and a genuine friend of our family. When we arrived there were people everywhere and the church had a happy relaxed atmosphere which seemed in sharp contrast to the tension in my church across the road that morning! At the end of the service quite a few people came up and greeted me, saying that they knew it must have taken courage for a Presbyterian minister to come to their church. I was not sure whether it was courage or a conviction that I was doing what Jesus would have done. Bishop Edward Daly was conducting the service and he must have recognised me from his visit to the church after the bomb. He came up to me at the reception, asking for God's blessing on me and my family.

By the time I got home, June was feeling a little less anxious, largely because Willie Thompson, the senior elder, had been round to see her while I was out. He was the man we had visited when we first came to look at Limavady, a lovely Christian gentleman, now in his eighties and getting a

little deaf. It was only when he got home from church that it had dawned on him what people had been saying to me at the session meeting and so he had come back into Limavady to see June, knowing that I would be out at the service. 'I want you to know that I think that your husband is right and honourable and I am sorry about the way he was spoken to this morning.' June and I were both very touched by his message and encouraged to think that perhaps we had more support than we realised.

During the next week I became aware that, when I was in town, I was sometimes being snubbed by members of my congregation. But to my surprise only two or three families decided to leave the church as a result of my actions. One of them came to church the following Sunday and told me they were leaving, so I went round to visit them about it. I told the couple that I was sorry and surprised to hear that they were planning to leave, especially since they had come to church on the Sunday after the opening of the Catholic church. 'I only came then because I wanted to hear you preach to an empty church!' replied the husband and there was obviously nothing else I could say. I was glad that this sort of hostile attitude was in a minority. In fact the saddest aspect of the whole business for me was that Ivan Bryne stopped coming to visit me for tea each morning and our relationship became very distant. This did make me sad, because Ivan had been a good friend since we arrived in Limavady, and I was sorry that my visit to the Catholic church should be the reason for him wanting to change this.

I suppose I might have met similar hostility in any town in Northern Ireland, but I think the Roe Valley area is unusual in the strength of the Orange Order and the power this has to influence people's thinking. I heard from other ministers, past and present, in the Roe Valley area, that they had found their ministry exceptionally difficult there, and wondered how much of this could be the result of Lodge activity. I am convinced that many Lodge attitudes only serve to build up the very prejudices that I was trying to break down through the love of Christ.

The Presbyterian minister is a highly respected man in the community, for the majority of Protestants in Northern Ireland are Presbyterians in the Scottish tradition. Their minister is listened to and given precedence within society and greater financial rewards than other clergymen in Britain. Paid from a percentage of the church offerings, he must be careful to maintain the approval of his congregation or he is liable to find himself manipulated by cuts in his people's giving. I have known this happen. Most congregations, especially away from the Belfast areas where the better-travelled and more widely educated people live, are inclined not to want to offend the Orange Lodge or even the Free Presbyterian Church. The minister tends to make sure he does not do anything to annoy the hardliners in the community, and reaps good rewards from working the system as it is.

November and December seemed to bring a slight healing of relationships with some members of the congregation, with the notable exceptions of some elders. But then tragedy hit the town when a bomb exploded at the Drop Inn Well Disco killing seventeen young people. When the IRA claimed responsibility for this dreadful bomb I could just imagine people thinking, 'The Catholics do this and you went to the opening of their new church!' I knew that the local Catholics did not want to be associated with IRA violence any more than, as a Protestant, I wanted to be associated with any UVF atrocities. But suspicion and prejudice run deep in Northern Ireland, and I realised that it was only as one starts to build reconciliation at the grass-roots level that there will be an end to these prejudices.

Rex Rutherford retired as minister at Magilligan Church at the end of 1982, and I was asked if I would take over running his church as well as First Limavady. I was to be 'stated supply minister' which would mean preaching and leading services, charring session meetings, and visiting round the parish, without actually being minister of the church. It meant I would be very busy, taking Sunday services at the

prison, Magilligan Church and at Limavady, but I felt quite honoured to take over from Rex Rutherford. He had built up a marvellously loyal and committed group of Christians in the church, and I knew that they would be a real encouragement to me. The major problem was that the more work I took on, the less time I was able to spend at home with June and the children. It is probably a cause of tension that many ministers have to face and I'm not sure that I was always able to spend enough time with the family. June has always been a marvellous support to me in my ministry and it was with her agreement that I decided to take on the responsibilities at Magilligan church.

I worked it out that I could take the service in the prison at 9.00 a.m., a service at Magilligan at 10.30 as arranged by the Presbytery, and then drive the seven miles of twisty roads back to Limavady by 11.30 a.m. The timing would be very tight, and I hoped that Limavady would agree to hold their service at 11.45. After all, it was a Presbytery decision that I should take on Magilligan, not something I had independently chosen to do. However, I did not want to have to ask the elders at Limavady so I just had to make sure I timed everything so as to get back by 11.30.

When I told the elders that I had been asked to take the services at Magilligan Church some were very annoyed. One elder who had many friends at Magilligan Church said I had no right to do this and Presbytery had no right to ask me to do it. I tried not to argue, because I knew that when the church had first called me to come as their minister, both they and I had agreed that I would be available to do extra work as Presbytery directed. It was quite a normal practice for a larger church to be linked with a smaller one to save having to pay two separate ministers. Besides, somehow I felt that at the bottom of all the fuss and anger at the elders' meeting was the issue of my having gone to the Catholic church. It was almost as if they were saying, 'You may have gone to that service, but this time we will get our own way.' In the end Presbytery sent someone to talk to the elders and with some reluctance they agreed to let me take on the work at

Magilligan. But although the matter was settled I knew that under the surface there was still some resentment towards me.

In November 1983 I was visiting a member of my congregation in Roe Valley Hospital and in the corridor I met a Roman Catholic Priest whom I had not seen before. I stopped and introduced myself and he told me that his name was Kevin Mullan and he had just been appointed the new priest of Christ the King, across the road from my church. He told me that he had heard about my going to the opening of his church and that he had been looking forward to meeting me. I knew his name too. I remembered once in Carrickfergus visiting a family who had a policeman son killed in a shooting attack, and they had shown me a letter they had received from a Catholic priest called Kevin Mullan, who had written expressing his sympathy and assuring them of his prayers.

I was very pleased to meet this man, who seemed to be quite at home talking to a Presbyterian minister and treated me like an equal. I had no doubt that this new priest from across the road was my brother in Christ, and I was encouraged to think that we might be able to show one another friendship. As a prison chaplain I had developed some insights into the way the para-military organisations were thinking and I was convinced that the battle for Ulster was going to get fiercer. I was all too aware of how little I could do myself to call for reconciliation in the community, but I knew that Kevin Mullan could not be called biased towards republican para-military killings. I was thrilled that Bishop Edward Daly had sent a priest like this to Christ the King and I sensed that Kevin and I could become good friends. I felt that Kevin Mullan's arrival was a sign of hope for Limavady in the future.