

A Road Too Wide
The Price of Reconciliation in
Northern Ireland

by
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(1985)

Originally published by
Marshall Morgan & Scott

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11: Happy Christmas!

It was Christmas Day 1983. I was standing at the back of the church greeting families as they arrived for the service, admiring the toys that the children had brought to show me (I had said that I would be glad to see any Christmas presents except livestock!), and chatting to members of the choir. The whole place had a festive atmosphere, with a Christmas tree and crib and lovely decorations. Everyone seemed happy and relaxed and once again I was glad to have initiated this Christmas Day service two years previously.

Ten minutes before the service was due to begin, Aubrey Douglas, a longstanding elder, came up to me as I was talking to two small children. He smiled at me, 'One of your friends is in the vestibule by the front door,' he said. 'Which friend?' I asked. 'Go and see!' he said with a smile. I went down to the front door of the church where I could see old Willie Thompson, our senior elder, shaking hands with someone. As I got closer I realised that the man he was greeting was Father Kevin Mullan. I was very surprised to see him in my church, but at the same time very pleased.

'David, I have just popped across the road to ask if you would relay a message from me to your congregation; I want to say Happy Christmas and trust that the blessing of Our Lord be upon them over the Christmas period. I have come to say to you that my people across the road wish your people a Happy Christmas!' I looked him straight in the eye: 'Well, Kevin, our service is just about to start. Before we begin I'll get people's attention and you can wish them Happy Christmas yourself.' He hesitated, 'Well if you're sure you don't mind.' I think he was rather taken aback, but he followed me into the church.

There was a happy buzz of noise: people greeting one another, children laughing and talking. Today was a festival occasion and we were going to have a special celebration this morning, the baptism of a new-born baby. As I looked over the congregation I could see the baby and his parents and I thought what a lovely visual aid they were to remind us of the birth of Jesus and what his life on earth meant. It seemed very appropriate that Father Mullan should be here too.

I clapped my hands, calling for people's attention: 'Please settle down now and listen to me! The clergyman from across the road has just popped in and he's going to wish you a Happy Christmas!' That is exactly what he did. He asked the people to accept his best wishes for Christmas from him and from his congregation across the road. I thought my people would receive him politely, it was Christmas after all, but I was taken by surprise at the spontaneous applause that greeted his message. As Father Mullan made his way down the aisle to the door people reached over to greet him and shake his hand. It was a very moving sight for me.

At the end of our service I shook hands with everyone as they left, and duly admired all the new toys. Everyone seemed very happy and no one made any objection to Father Mullan's visit. I suppose I had wondered if some people would be angry, but basically the man had only said 'Happy Christmas!'. After everyone had left I stood outside watching the cars drive away. I could hear singing coming from the Roman Catholic church, and remembering that their service had started fifteen minutes after ours, I guessed that this was the sound of their closing hymn.

I walked across the road and through the glass doors into the church. The hymn was just finishing, and I realised that Father Kevin could see me standing there. As people moved around to pick up their belongings Father Kevin clapped his hands and asked everyone to sit down. 'Although the service is over I'd ask you to wait for a moment, because David Armstrong, the Presbyterian minister from across the road, is here and I think he wants to pass on his greetings to you.'

I felt a little bit conspicuous as I walked to the front, well

aware that everyone was watching me. I turned and wished them all a happy Christmas, asking for peace and understanding in our community, and praying for the love of Christ in the New Year. 'I want to wish you God's richest blessing at Christmas time, the time when the Prince of Peace came into our world.' As I finished speaking there was a very strong and loud burst of spontaneous applause and people gathered round me wanting to greet me. By the time I got home for lunch my hand was aching from being shaken so many times! I told June where I had been and we talked about Kevin Mullan's visit to our church. We agreed that it was indeed a very happy Christmas!

Over the next few days I received some lovely letters from members of the Catholic church. I remember one in particular from a lady in her late seventies, who said she had spent many Christmases in Limavady but this one had been the happiest she had ever experienced because the Presbyterian minister from across the road had come in to wish her the blessing of Christ. I was very moved as I read her letter, realising that what had after all been a very simple action had meant so much to her.

As I took up my normal visiting patterns again after Christmas I went to see members of my congregation both in hospital and at home. Everyone greeted me warmly, and I didn't encounter any anger or hostility about Father Mullan's visit. I was glad to see that my congregation had such a healthy attitude, and began to feel that the love of Jesus was beginning to break through some of the barriers and prejudices in the community.

In the middle of January Aubrey Douglas had a heart attack and was seriously ill in hospital. He had another two attacks in hospital and June and I were very worried about him. I tried to spend as much time as possible praying by his bedside, supporting his wife, daughter and brother Mervyn.

By now Ivan Bryne had stepped down from being session clerk and his place had been taken by Henry Harbinson, a well-respected farmer. Henry was a committed Christian and

a great prayer warrior and I had grown close to him when his only daughter had been seriously injured in a car accident. We had spent many anxious hours together praying for her full recovery and had been thrilled to see how God answered our prayers. Out of that, Henry and I had developed a good relationship and I was delighted to have him as session clerk.

When he contacted me at the end of January to say that he had been asked to call a meeting of the session, I asked what it was to be about. It had been a rule at Carrickfergus that whenever someone wanted to raise an issue at a session meeting they would tell the person concerned in advance, so that they would have time to find out all the relevant details about the matter. I thought this was a fair rule and had tried to introduce it when I came to Limavady. So when I asked Henry what the meeting was going to be about and he didn't know the answer, I was rather surprised. All he could tell me was that Connolly George had asked him to call the meeting and he was not sure what it was about.

Ten days before the meeting I met Connolly George and his wife in the church grounds when I was on my way home for lunch. This was my opportunity to ask him about the session meeting and find out what he wanted us to discuss. 'Connolly, I believe you have called this session meeting and I wonder if you could tell me what it's going to be about?' I asked. 'You will find out when you get there,' he replied enigmatically. 'Can't you tell me now?' I asked. 'Do you mean to say you don't know?' There was a hint of disbelief in his voice. 'I honestly don't know; please do tell me.' 'Well,' he said, 'it's all about the priest being in the church.' 'That was on Christmas Day! What's the problem now?' 'You're not to do things like that,' he said. I was quite upset by all this and wondered why he was suddenly raising the issue. 'But the congregation don't seem to feel like this,' I replied. 'I've been round visiting lots of our members since Christmas and no one has said they objected.' 'They do object!' was his reply. 'Well, if I thought that members of my congregation would object to something like this, I would have to step down and go elsewhere. But I'm convinced that you're wrong, they don't object, and I think

they're quite happy with me as their minister!' At that Connolly and his wife got into their car and drove off.

I stood staring after them, feeling shattered. It was a long time since I had been so close to losing my temper, but as the anger drained away I felt completely devastated. I found it hard to believe that the conversation had really taken place. I could only think that someone had put Connolly up to this and I had the strangest feeling that some of the people who had persuaded him to raise the matter at a session meeting were not members of our church at all.

I decided that I would say as little as possible at the session meeting, determining to keep my cool. There were only nine members of session there as Aubrey Douglas was still in hospital and Willie Thompson was too elderly and infirm to come. Ivan Bryne made a long speech condemning Roman Catholic teaching and Connolly George took up where Ivan left off. Connolly said that since I was the minister and I was responsible for bringing Father Kevin Mullan into the church I would have to leave. He could not get any of the others to second his motion, but I was devastated that five of the elders agreed to censure me officially for my behaviour and asked that it should be recorded in the session book. With two elders absent, the majority of the elders present opposed me. I felt as if I had been blitzed. Noble Boggs came to my rescue, saying that he did not see any harm in what I had done. He made a long speech in my defence, but the damage was done. Outwardly I remained calm and said very little, but inside I could hardly bear the pain. I felt as if I'd been betrayed by the very men who should have supported me.

I had arranged to visit Harry and June Coates after the meeting, but it must have been the worst 'minister's visit' I had ever made! I felt so numb inside I could not concentrate on what they were saying and I really do not know that I said anything very constructive.

June was asleep by the time I got home and I was quite glad not to have to tell her about the meeting that evening. I hoped that it might all look better in the morning. But as I woke it all came rushing back to me, like a nightmare, with

new feelings of sadness and pain. June could tell with one look that it had been a terrible meeting and made me tell her all about it. 'I've never seen anything like it in my life. I have never seen such anti-Catholic feelings, and what's more it was from my own elders. They don't even respect me any more!' I had heard that other ministers in the Limavady area had not found their ministry there very easy, particularly finding that people could have very negative attitudes to the minister himself. I had never expected to know anything about this at first hand. I suppose I had always found it fairly easy to get on with people and it was quite a shock to realise how strongly the elders disapproved of me.

I talked confidentially to some friends about the situation, saying that it did not look as if I would be able to stay as minister of First Limavady for much longer without the support of five of my elders and I told them the story of Christmas Day. It struck me as very sad that all I had worked for in the parish and at Magilligan – sometimes working up to eighteen hours a day – was not as important to the elders as saying Happy Christmas to the Catholics.

I really do not know how the story got out, but someone talked to the press, for the next Sunday the story made the front page of the *Sunday World* with an article by Jim Campbell, a well-known journalist. I certainly had not talked to anyone from the press, but the journalist had done a good piece of detective work. The article reported how a majority of elders at First Limavady opposed their minister and rather inaccurately said that they had told me to leave. It's worth pointing out that only Connolly George had wanted this and he had not been able to find anyone to second his motion, even though they were prepared to censure me.

An emergency session meeting was held after the morning service and I could tell that the elders were very embarrassed that the story had broken in the newspapers. Perhaps because the article was sympathetic towards me, some of them thought I had gone to the newspaper with the story, but that was the last thing I would have done. It was bad enough to be criticised by my elders without the whole world knowing about it.

I never like to have session meetings straight after the service, especially when I know it will be difficult. It disappoints me that I could be preaching about the love of God and as soon as I finish, the elders are waiting to argue with me. When I assured them that I had not taken the story to the press, I think they believed me.

I remembered a conversation with a fellow minister in my Presbytery when I'd rung up to ask his advice about going to the opening of the Catholic church. Rather to my surprise he told me not to go near it: 'You will only destroy your ministry and you won't get any thanks from the Catholics for it!' It was beginning to look as though the first part of his comment was prophetic. But I think the last bit was wrong; it had been well worth showing God's love to the Catholics.

When I went home after that Sunday morning the phone never stopped ringing. There were journalists from newspapers, radio and TV all over Britain who wanted to speak to me. June dealt with each call: 'My husband is not available for comment.' In the end we had to take the phone off the hook to get any peace. On Monday the story was a hot item on all the news bulletins and the journalists were still speculating that I was going to be put out by the five elders. I wished I could have put them right about that, explaining that not all five wanted me to go, but I knew that if I said anything it could make matters worse.

Henry Harbinson rang me in the afternoon. As session clerk he had also been inundated with phone calls from the press. 'I've also had calls from some of the session members, David,' he said, 'and they want to meet tonight.' I was very wary of having another meeting unless it could achieve something positive. 'What's it about this time?' I asked. 'They may want to give you a vote of confidence and try to put things right again,' he told me.

I saw in the *Belfast Telegraph* that Wesley McDowell from the Free Presbyterian church had joined in the row. He said that a member of my session had been in contact with him all along about my attitude towards Catholics. That really hurt me to think that someone would go out from session meetings

and talk to Mr McDowell about me. If nothing else I thought it showed extreme disloyalty.

The meeting that Monday was relatively brief. All nine elders present gave me a vote of confidence and agreed that I was entitled to my views. I said that they were entitled to theirs, and that I could respect their views. If they did not want to come with me to say 'Happy Christmas' to the Catholics across the road I was not going to drag them along. But at the same time I made it clear that they must recognise that I was determined to work for reconciliation, trying to show the love of Jesus in the way I lived, the fruit of the same Spirit I had tried to preach about, the Holy Spirit of God.

The five men wanted their names taken out of the session book where they had previously registered their move to censure me. It looked as though the worst was over and although the memories were still sore I was convinced that the love of God could bring healing to our relationships. We agreed to keep quiet and hoped that the media would soon leave Limavady alone.

But I was to learn that the press don't give up so easily! I kept seeing myself in print with 'exclusive quotes', when I had not said anything to a reporter. Sometimes the press sat outside my door waiting for me to leave the house. 'What do you have to say to Ian Paisley, Mr Armstrong?' 'Go away,' I would reply, referring to the media man! Next day I would see the headline 'David Armstrong says to Ian Paisley "Go away"!' The *Belfast Newsletter* described me as the 'Papal Minister' and there were other terms that could only mean trouble for any Protestant minister in Northern Ireland.

Then I read in the paper that Wesley McDowell was calling my elders cowards for giving up on their battle to get rid of me. He said he was going to continue the fight and I knew that the issue of 'Happy Christmas' was far from settled.