

A Road Too Wide  
The Price of Reconciliation in  
Northern Ireland

by  
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with Hilary Saunders  
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## 15: Farewell and Future

There was a session meeting planned for the end of February and I was hoping the elders might have changed their minds about taking the issue to the March meeting of Presbytery. While I had been away Mervyn Douglas had phoned June and apologised for the things he had said to me at the previous meeting. He came round to see me and said, 'Things will be all right, they'll be all right.' I hoped that he was right, but in fact the session meeting was just as bad as the one in January and just as devastating for me.

I found it very difficult to cope with the tension. My father was so ill that he had gone into Musgrave Hospital and my mother could not cope at all. It meant I had to make constant visits to Belfast and I felt torn between sadness about my father and horror at the situation with the elders.

A few days after the session meeting I had a phone call from the Moderator of the local Presbytery. 'David, it seems to me that there is only one way out of this situation, and that is if you were to tell your elders that in future you will just send a card to the priest at Christmas-time.' I was taken aback at such a simplistic view, which to my mind showed very little understanding of my position, and was rather worldly advice. He suggested that I should go round to see him and when I arrived he showed me a letter that he had received. It was from six of my elders: Connolly George, Mervyn Thompson, Ivan Bryne, William Morrison, Aubrey Douglas, and Jim Bond. The letter said that they objected to Father Mullan coming into the church and to my visiting the Catholic church, and that they also objected to my planned visit to the States with Father Mullan, implying that we would be visiting Americans who were anti-Protestant.

My first impression was that the letter was rather weak and I did not think it would receive much support from my colleagues in Presbytery. I was still confident that the elders weren't reflecting the views of the majority of the congregation, but I felt sad for these men who had written the letter behind my back. I realised that the letter had been posted before our recent session meeting and wondered why they had not had the decency to tell me that they had done this. It made me sad that they couldn't see that all I wanted to do was work for peace – not peace at any price, but love at all costs! I was going to the States with Father Mullan to visit people who believed in peace and we were going to plead for work for our community. It was as though they deliberately refused to understand what I was trying to do.

On the Sunday before the Presbytery meeting a group of thirty-five visitors arrived by coach at our church. They were a group of lawyers, doctors and senators from the Irish Forum in California on a fact-finding mission to meet politicians and others on both sides in Ulster. I knew that they were in church and during my sermon I spoke about a recent horrifying bomb attack in Newry which had killed several policemen. I appealed to our visitors not to have anything to do with organisations which build hate in our province and asked them to make sure that Americans were aware of the damage they were doing when they supplied money for weapons in Ireland. 'It is wrong and cannot be reconciled to Christianity,' I said.

I went on to tell the congregation that a letter from members of session criticising me was going to be read out at the Presbytery meeting on the following Tuesday. I told them that I did not believe that the letter reflected a majority view, but that it was going to be a difficult meeting for me. I also told them that June and I were under a great deal of pressure at the moment from unpleasant phone calls and letters, but despite all the pressures I assured them that I was definitely going to the USA with Father Mullan. I hoped that saying these things would encourage people to pray for us and I realised how much we needed their support

in this way. When I greeted the American party at the door some of them told me that they had not been to church for thirty-five years, but what I had said had moved them to tears, and they felt they had learned more about Northern Ireland through their visit to our service than on the rest of their fact-finding mission.

At the Presbytery meeting, the letter from my elders was read out as expected. I had taken Noble Boggs along with me to speak on my behalf, but at the beginning of the meeting the clerk asked anyone who was not a member to leave, so I was left having to defend myself. As soon as the letter was read out, Rex Rutherford stood up and spoke in my defence, saying that he was convinced that the letter did not represent the views of the majority of my congregation. I explained that going across the road to the Catholic church did not mean I was changing my doctrine, just my attitude to people with different doctrines. I told the members of Presbytery that I was going to the States to take a message of peace and reconciliation, not to visit anti-Protestant people, despite what the letter said. Then I turned to my colleagues, my fellow Presbyterian ministers: 'Will any of you back me in my message of reconciliation to Roman Catholics?' No one responded. Then a lay member said he was glad to hear about our message of peace for the States, but my fellow ministers remained silent on the issue. I knew that some of them were members of Orange Lodges and, as such, would disapprove of what I was doing. But I did not expect everyone to share those bigoted views.

At the end of the meeting several colleagues gathered round me. 'I didn't want to get up and say it, but you know I'm for you.' Later at home there were several phone calls: 'I didn't want to get up and say it but I want to wish you all the best on your trip.' I felt so isolated and alone; no one seemed to have the courage to stand up with me. It was the loneliest time of my life.

As I started to prepare for the trip to America I wondered if my father would be so ill that I would have to cancel the visit. In the end my brother and I decided that I should go

and if Dad seemed to be deteriorating I would come back at once. We were due to go from 11-22 March. I was still getting nasty phone calls about the trip, people telling me that I was not to dare go to America with a priest, that I was not to say 'Happy Christmas' to Pope-heads, to Fenians. Someone else said that if I went my wife wouldn't be there when I got back, they would finish her off. I did not tell June about that phone call. Another claimed to be ringing on behalf of session members and said they would change the locks on the doors of the manse and the church so that when I got back I would be out on the streets.

On the Thursday after the Presbytery meeting I went to visit my father in hospital and when I got home I found June in tears. Through her tears she told me that Mervyn Douglas had been round to the house looking for me and when she said I was in Belfast visiting my father he turned on her, saying some things that really upset her. I did not know how to respond. I could not understand how anyone could cause my wife such pain and hurt. I went up to my study and stayed there a long time crying out to God in prayer. And it was then that I came to the firm conclusion that God did not want me to stay in Northern Ireland any longer. My faith in the Irish Presbyterian Church was shaken because I did not feel that I had been given proper support. I went to visit the local Church of Ireland rector, Canon Knowles, and poured my heart out to him. I told him I could not cope with the hatred directed towards me and my wife any longer. He thought it would be a good thing if I spoke to his bishop, but he was away in Dublin. I felt I was at the end of my tether that Thursday evening.

On the Friday I went to see the Anglican bishop, Dr Mehaffey. He showed me so much compassion that I felt quite overwhelmed, and advised me to give in my notice and go to the States with Father Kevin before I left. He felt that the message of peace that I could take to America was even more important than the end of my ministry in Ireland. Then I rang Michael Green and Teddy Saunders in Oxford and told them of my decision and we arranged that if June

and the children needed to come over ahead of me, or while I was in America, that would be all right. Feeling so isolated and alone in the Irish Presbyterian Church it was good to know that we would be welcomed over in England at St Aldate's.

I spent most of the next few days with my father in hospital, before Father Kevin and I set off for Boston, Massachusetts. When I told reporters that my plans were dependent on how my father was, I think some of them thought I was using him as an excuse to back out of the trip because of the pressure I was under. But when one reporter managed to get into the hospital and saw my father she realised that I was telling the truth. Father Kevin came with me to visit my father and prayed with him. We talked to the doctors and decided that I must take the message of peace and reconciliation to the States. I did not want to seem to give in to the people who said I had no right to go, but I wanted to be a good son and it would be an extra burden for my brother while I was away.

I did not preach at the church on the Sunday, but stayed in Belfast near the hospital. Rex Rutherford preached for me and there was a very big turn-out with reporters and television crews outside wanting to interview me. Everyone wanted to know whether I was going to go to America or use my father's illness as an excuse. My family and I went to church at Bangor West and it was good to sit in the congregation and ask God to give me all the strength I would need for the trip. I received great blessing at the service.

I said goodbye to my father on the Sunday evening, with every confidence that he would be all right while I was away. Then I sat down with June and wrote three letters of resignation; one to Henry Harbinson, the session clerk at Limavady, one to Mr Brewster the session clerk of Magilligan Presbyterian Church, and one to Noble Boggs the treasurer. I spoke to Rex Rutherford and told him of my decision to leave the country. I was going to post the letters on the Sunday night, but when I went out for a walk I

bumped into two members of the congregation coming to see me to wish me all the best in America. They did not know that I was holding my three letters of resignation, and when I went home I wept, asking June how on earth we could leave all the marvellous people in our congregation. I left the letters with June for the time being.

On the Monday morning Father Kevin called for me with a member of his congregation who was going to drive us to Aldersgrove airport in Belfast. When we went to check in our luggage we found a BBC camera crew waiting for us; they took some pictures and interviewed us about our message for the States. When they asked me about my future I hesitated and said I was leaving it in God's hands. When we arrived in Boston we were met by Michael O'Driscoll who was the chairman of the committee that had brought us over. He gave us a very warm welcome.

We were staying at Worcester, Massachusetts, about fifty miles from Boston. Michael O'Driscoll had planned a full programme for us. He apologised that we were going to be so busy, but if our message was going to be heard then we would have to work hard. That evening we spent two and a half hours at the local radio station, where a panel of nine people, mostly journalists, fired questions at us in a live programme. It took all our concentration, jet-lag or no jet-lag! I found it quite exhilarating, and we felt we had been able to put over a reasonably good and united perspective. We were able to stress how important it was for American firms to continue to invest in Northern Ireland and encouraged more of this.

The next few days were a whirl of meetings and interviews. On the Tuesday we went to a meeting of the local Presbytery and when we walked in everyone stood to applaud us. It was a very different reaction from the Presbytery meeting the previous week at home. Wednesday was very busy; we went to Boston to meet the Mayor, and went to the House of Representatives, where Father Mullan and I were asked to speak to members. It was wonderful to

have the opportunity to take our message to these people, who passed resolutions commending us for our work for peace. When we got back to Worcester we heard that Mrs O'Driscoll had been rushed into hospital for an operation and we were all very worried about her. But our busy schedule continued and we received very warm welcomes everywhere and were listened to with rapt attention. We spoke at old folks' homes, did a television interview for the religious affairs programme on the state channel, visited churches, and met the chief of police and his attorney.

On Friday I spoke to June on the phone and she told me that my father was holding his own. I told her that I was now convinced that we should leave Limavady and I asked her to post the three letters I had left behind. When I put down the phone I realised that this was the point of no return and it was a sad moment.

We spoke at services on Saturday evening and on Sunday both morning and evening. Each time we tried to speak about the love of Christ, asking for peace and reconciliation for Ireland. After church on Sunday we went to a huge St Patrick's Day Peace Parade; the whole emphasis was on peace and reconciliation. Father Kevin and I were driven at the front of the parade, protected by a burly policeman at our side and with slogans around us, reading 'Brotherhood without bloodshed'. The message was seen by 150,000 people at the rally.

On the Monday morning my brother phoned me to say that Dad was getting much weaker. Things didn't look good, and I spoke to Kevin Mullan and the committee who had arranged our meeting. There were still three days of lectures and meetings planned. Though it was sad to say goodbye to Father Kevin and my new friends in Massachusetts, we decided that I should go home to be with my father.

I was glad to see my father again, but he could barely talk. The members of his church, Mountpottinger, had been a great support to my mother, and I was so grateful for the concern they had showed. On the Wednesday Dad was



running a violent temperature. He looked so pathetic lying in bed and some friends who came to visit him could hardly recognise him. Each night I travelled back home to be with my children, who adored their grandfather. I realised that the members of the family were looking to me for support because I was a clergyman, but inside my heart was breaking.

I had to take a funeral service in Limavady and even though some members of session came to the service they didn't speak to me. I was hurt that they didn't even ask how my father was, and thought that some were trying to avoid me.

On the Sunday I had to preach at Magilligan and at the end I made an announcement. They knew that I had been under a great deal of pressure and that I was the object of a great deal of hatred and abuse. I said that I was sorry to have to say that I had decided to resign as minister of the church and after my month's notice I would be leaving Ireland for Oxford. I could see shock and grief in people's eyes. Then I had to go to Limavady to preach and at the end of the service I said that I had something to say. I told them that although I knew I had the support of the majority of the congregation, without the support of the session it was impossible to keep on preaching the gospel of Christ with sincerity and to do a work of reconciliation. I said that I would be leaving at the beginning of May so that the elders could conduct the May Communion with a minister who reflected their views. I heard gasps from the congregation and many people had tears in their eyes. I knew it would be difficult for many people to whom we had grown so close, but I don't think that many of them were terribly surprised. I explained that my father was desperately ill and I hurried away to Belfast to be with him.

I travelled home with June late on Sunday night. We were woken at 6.15 a.m. by a phone call from my brother, who had received a message from the hospital that Dad had become dangerously ill. Forty minutes later he rang me from the hospital and told me that he had arrived in the ward and

sat down by Dad's bed, thinking that he was asleep. A nurse walked in and told him that Dad had just died. June and I cried together, and then we had to go and break the news to the children. It was one of the hardest explanations I had ever had to make. Several friends came to bid us farewell as we set off to be with my mother.

On Monday night the newspapers and radio were full of the story of my resignation. Reporters tried to get a comment from me, but again I was most impressed by the *Belfast Telegraph* who understood that I would not want to say anything so soon after my father's death. The funeral was on Wednesday and Mr Heaney preached a marvellous sermon. I was very touched that the entire session from Magilligan church came to my father's funeral, but only Noble Boggs and Henry Harbinson came from the Limavady session, with other members of the congregation.

My last month in Limavady was spent trying to dodge the press as much as possible. We had to take the telephone off the hook, and I still found newspapers inventing 'quoted' comments that were supposed to have come from me. I tried to continue quietly to work my month out.

During the last month I was offered a job as minister in a Presbyterian Church in Bangor West. Although it was a marvellous offer I had to turn it down: we had made our decision to move to Oxford, and all the plans were under way for our arrival there. Above all I was convinced that this was where God wanted us to be. I remembered an elderly Englishman, an ex-soldier who had settled in Limavady, saying to me shortly before his death that he thought that one day I would have to leave Ireland and go to work near his old home. When I remembered that he had been a member of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry regiment, drawn from the Oxford area, I thought that his words had something of a prophetic quality.

The week before we were due to leave, June and I went over to Oxford to make arrangements for schools and to see the house that had been found for us to live in. We knew it was going to be a terrible wrench to leave Ireland, but we

were looking forward to the peace and freedom of a new life.

On our final Thursday the church gave a farewell party for us, arranged by Henry Harbinson and Noble Boggs. Members of the congregation made speeches about our ministry and I replied. There were a lot of tears that evening. June and I received a presentation from an elderly lady in her nineties, on behalf of the congregation. The elders who had opposed me were not there, but that was not really a surprise. On the Friday I reluctantly agreed to give a farewell interview to Burt Tosh for BBC radio. I did a fairly lengthy interview for the 'Sunday Sequence' programme, talking about some of the significant events in my life.

My last Sunday, at the end of April, was an emotional occasion. I preached at Magilligan, and then drove up to Limavady to find the church packed to the doors. I remembered the first Sunday that I had preached there and the small congregation I had found. Now there were five times as many people in the church. I preached that I believe that man needs to encounter God and come to make Jesus Christ his Lord. In Northern Ireland we had a great deal of religion, but we were bound, and we need freedom through Jesus Christ. 'There are members of the congregation who don't agree with me, and they are entitled to their views, but I want to repudiate the idea that it's impossible for a Roman Catholic to be a Christian! I would state my case before Jesus Christ who is the judge of all our hearts.' I made my way to the door and there must have been fifteen photographers and film crews outside the door. Many of the congregation were in tears when they said goodbye to me. As one of the elders came out of the door I held out my hand to him and he turned his back on me in front of the reporters.

It was pouring with rain but no one seemed to be in a hurry to go home. When I had said goodbye to all my people I made my way across the road to the Catholic church. As I turned round I could see that some thirty members of my congregation were following me with the camera crews. The church was so crowded that it was hard to get in through the

door. Father Mullan met me at the door, and led me down to the front of the church, while the whole congregation got to their feet. The applause was almost deafening. Father Mullan paid tribute to me, and then asked Marie Keown to read a passage from the Bible. Significantly enough, she was the woman who was not allowed to read at the Women's World Day of Prayer service the year before. Then I was asked to address the congregation and they listened with rapt expressions. As we left June and I were almost overwhelmed with the gifts and expressions of sympathy and love given to us.

In the evening I preached a farewell sermon to the people at Magilligan church, and that was not easy. After the service they served a supper for the congregation, and presented me with a very generous gift. I really appreciated this because I knew that financially things might be quite hard as I went back to being a student again at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford. It was certainly going to be a financial sacrifice for us, but at least we would be able to live with our consciences.

When the following Thursday came and we set off for the Larne boat, we found the BBC camera crew waiting for us. Mark, aged two, was full of impishness and it must have made a delightful picture as he played with the puppy on the deck. Philomena Dickson, the church caretaker and a family friend, came with us to help us settle into our new home.

I settled in quickly at Wycliffe Hall and found a warm welcome at the college and at St Aldate's. At first it was strange not to have the telephone ringing constantly, but both June and I are so relieved to be away from all the pressures of the last year.

After we arrived in Oxford we were sent a copy of an official statement made by the Roman Catholic Cardinal of all Ireland, Cardinal Thomas O'Faiach. He said that he viewed our departure with extreme sadness, and that he was speaking on behalf of many Roman Catholics throughout Northern Ireland to say how sorry he was to see us go. 'Let

us work to the best of our ability to see that Northern Ireland can be made into a fit place for the Reverend David Armstrong and his wife to return to.' I was very moved by his statement. Eighteen leaders of the Irish Presbyterian Church had sent a signed statement to the press saying that they supported what I had done, and were working for reconciliation in their churches. I was tremendously pleased to know that there were ministers like this in the Presbyterian Church.

June and I have had more Irish Presbyterian ministers calling on us in Oxford in these last four months than in the last four years in Limavady. I wish they had been more keen to visit us there, rather than leaving us to feel so isolated and alone. Two young students came to speak to me in Oxford bringing messages of glowing support and tribute from their minister in Northern Ireland. But when I asked them the name of their minister they had to say they had promised not to disclose his name. He evidently did not want it to be known by his congregation that he had sympathy with me.

June misses her friends from Limavady, but she is smiling in a way I haven't seen her smile for several years. She does not miss the hate phone calls, the ridicule and the insults, and hearing her husband called names. We believe that we have made our witness in Northern Ireland, trying to bring Christ to the people there. I was very sad to hear that the members of session have asked that, during the vacancy, the leader of the Orange Lodge, Rev. David Brown should look after the church. They are obviously determined to have a loyalist minister in First Limavady to keep a good distance from the Catholic church across the road.

I found in the north-west of Ulster that the Orange Lodge was a force to be reckoned with. When, at Limavady, I tried to stand and work for reconciliation between Christians of every sort, I encountered more vehement opposition to my ministry from the Orange direction even than from the Free Presbyterian Church. To teach Christians to love one another as Jesus commanded is to undermine the political struggle to maintain the separation of the two communities,

and therefore the whole weight of the Orange influence was thrown against me. The clergyman in up-country Ulster who wants a successful but quiet life will either join them or make sure he does what they expect him to do. Even to enter a Roman Catholic Church for the funeral of a neighbour may invoke the wrath of the Order. Yet Christian ministers must ask themselves whether they truly fulfil their calling if they neglect the great commandments of Christ in favour of human policies and prejudices.

I do not think there is any place for our family in Northern Ireland at the moment, and I am looking forward to working in the Church of England. It is so good to have taken the children away from all the hatred and bigotry. I think it is time to be a responsible father and husband; June has had to put up with the long hours I worked and the terrible pressures that we were both under, and she has loved me through it all. As for the children, I think it will take a long time for Julie to forget the events of last Christmas Day, or for Paul to forget the taunting comments about me, but it has been wonderful to see them beginning to relax and settle into a new home and new schools. One day when they are old enough I hope they will understand the stand I have made and I pray that they will share my attitudes towards other people.

When I was trying to hang up a picture in our new house in Oxford I put down the hammer until I was sure I was ready to put in the nail. But by the time I knew that the nail was in the right place the hammer had disappeared—Sarah Jane had wandered off with it! So I took the next best thing, and used my shoe to bang in the nail. I think that is what God did through my ministry in Northern Ireland. The ministry of reconciliation through the love of God is probably the most obvious ministry for any minister in Northern Ireland, yet amazingly some just do not see it, and some do not even think there is a problem. God was wanting to use the right instruments for the job but when they weren't available he took the next best thing. That's what I think I was: someone who was just the next best thing to do

a work that is close to God's heart, bringing people to love his Son, and to love those for whom Jesus died.

For the moment I can only make some appeals. One appeal to the members of the IRA who are still involved in violence: please stop this murder and bloodshed! The more bombs that you explode the more votes you are giving to Ian Paisley and his DUP party. And ironically, the more spiteful speeches Ian Paisley makes, the more supporters he gives to the IRA. My prayer is that one day we have again a land that is famous for its saints and its scholars! I hope that there will never again be a road between Protestant and Catholic churches that is too wide to cross.