

A Road Too Wide  
The Price of Reconciliation in  
Northern Ireland

by  
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with Hilary Saunders  
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## 14: Christmas 1984

Having my name constantly in the news was quite a pressure on us all, and 1984 had not been an easy year for us. In the autumn my father started to complain of stomach pains when he was visiting us and June encouraged me to contact his doctor when he returned home. Before long, cancer of the liver was diagnosed and my brother and I were told that our father would not be likely to live far beyond Christmas. It was a devastating blow to us all, and I tried to visit my parents as regularly as possible without making Dad wonder why I was coming so often. Then our eldest son Paul fell out of a tree and broke his arm in the middle of his first term at a new school. We had been so proud when he passed the eleven-plus and got a scholarship to the Coleraine Institute, and were concerned that now he would miss out on valuable school time.

But whatever worries I had at home I knew that I had to give all my attention to my work, and there was plenty to keep me busy. At First Limavady Presbyterian Church there is only Communion twice a year, which I do not think is nearly often enough, but it does mean that when it comes it is a big occasion. I was very pleased at the turn-out at our November Communion, and all the elders seemed to gather round supporting me.

On the first Sunday in December a party of eighteen Roman Catholics from Michael Buckley's fellowship in England came to our evening service. They had been visiting Derry and had come to sit in the congregation for my service. I noticed that some of my elders looked quite tense about them being there and wondered if they were worried that I would ask them to speak. I was a little sad to see their attitude.

About ten days before Christmas I went to preach at a Taizé service at St Eugene's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Derry. I felt very honoured to be asked to preach and I was probably the first Presbyterian minister to preach in the Catholic cathedral. It was a very cold night and I was delighted that such a good number of people came to the service. Later than evening Father Mullan preached in the Church of Ireland Cathedral and it was good to hear him speak so clearly and positively to all those present.

Father Mullan and I had received an invitation from some Christians in Massachusetts to visit them in America for ten days in March 1985. They had invited us to attend a series of peace rallies, that would give us the opportunity to appeal together to American Irishmen not to support terrorist organisations in Ireland, and I decided that if I went I would try to go with the slogan 'Send work not weapons'. The idea was still in the planning stage so we were a little embarrassed when a local newspaper heard about the possible trip and printed a story about it. Father Mullan and I also decided to repeat our Christmas greetings of the previous year to each other's congregations. I felt that it would be all right to go ahead with this because at the end of all the discussion and arguments my elders had finally given me a vote of approval last year. It seemed an appropriate and positive action to take at Christmas.

On the Sunday two days before Christmas we had a very big congregation in church and a happy festive service. In the evening I took a group carol-singing round some of the old people's homes where church members lived. When we were leaving the hospital at the end of the evening one of the group drew me aside. 'Mr Armstrong, we've heard that there may be a picket outside church on Christmas morning by the Free Presbyterians to stop the Catholic priest coming across the road.' It was the first I had heard about this and I was not sure whether to take the idea seriously. I could not believe that anyone would form a picket line on Christmas morning to stop a priest saying 'Happy Christmas'.

I went to the prison on Christmas Eve for a carol service and it was tremendous to watch some of the Christian prisoners obviously enjoying this time of worship. Then just before midnight I slipped in at the back of Christ the King Church and waited for Father Mullan to call me up to the front. Then, early on Christmas morning, I stood up and addressed a capacity congregation. I brought them my greetings in the name of Christ at Christmas, not saying that I was speaking on behalf of my church, in case I upset anyone. Then I talked to them about peace on earth and the birth of the Prince of Peace. At the end I received a very warm response and many people told me how pleased they were that I had come across the road again to greet them at Christmas.

Christmas morning started bright and early with the sounds of excited children. My parents were staying with us, and we made a happy party as we exchanged gifts and good wishes. It was sad to see my Dad so weak and in some pain despite good medical care, but he was obviously enjoying spending Christmas with his grandchildren. As I was getting ready to go to Magilligan for their service, I had a phone call from Sergeant McGregor at the local police station. 'Mr Armstrong, I've just had a phone call from the Reverend Wesley McDowell of the Free Presbyterians saying that they're going to picket your church this morning.' He said he would have to bring some men and keep an eye on things in the church grounds. I thanked him for informing me but I was stunned by the news. Apart from anything else I was so sorry for the policemen who would have to be called back from their families to deal with the Church picketing.

I felt as if I was in some sort of dream while I took the service at Magilligan and I was very glad that Rex Rutherford, the retired minister, was there to support me. I got back to Limavady about fifteen minutes before our service was due to begin. As I turned the corner near the church I could hardly believe my eyes. There were men with placards, men handing out leaflets, pickets everywhere. It was a very sad sight. I noticed that many families with children

were trying to get into church and I was glad to see that very few of them were taking the leaflets they were offered.

As I got out of the car Mr McDowell shouted something at me, but I could not make out what he was saying. I didn't want to stop and argue with him so I made my way inside through a side door. I noticed that not many of the pickets were Limavady people and certainly there appeared to be far more pickets than there were members from Limavady Free Presbyterian Church. One of my congregation came up to me and said, 'They say they're Limavady Free Presbyterians, but they don't look Presbyterian, they're not free and they don't come from Limavady so I don't know who they are!' We discovered that the ministers of Free Presbyterians churches in Londonderry and Coleraine had come with some of their congregations.

I started our family service with some carols to try to bring people's attention back to God. As I stood at the front I noticed that Father Mullan had managed to make his way through the pickets and was waiting at the back. I noticed that none of the elders who had objected to Father Mullan's visit last year had come to the service and was very disappointed. Noble Boggs was standing at the door welcoming people and seemed to be managing. But as soon as Father Mullan came to stand beside me at the front to give his Christian greeting, three young men stood up in the middle of the church and started shouting at us. They were obviously part of the picket and they were abusing us, calling me a traitor and ridiculing the Roman Catholic church. Father Mullan looked shocked and I felt shaken inside but folded my arms and tried to stay calm. When the disturbance started, some members of the congregation leapt across the pews, grabbed the men and started dragging them out. These members were big strong men, and I could tell how angry they were, so I was worried about the three hecklers and shouted after them, 'Don't harm any of those men.' After all, Jesus told us to love our enemies.

I heard afterwards that they carried them out and dumped them down in front of the police. It turned out that the three

men were already known to the police for a demonstration in Londonderry Guild Hall, so they disappeared as fast as they could!

After Kevin gave his Christmas message I closed the service and warned the congregation not to get involved in any arguments with the men outside. I was so upset that these men had tried to disturb our service of worship, but I knew that arguing with them would not do any good. What shattered me most was the effect it had on my eight-year-old daughter Julie. She had been scared coming into church through the pickets and June and the children had been sitting quite near the three men. When they got up and started shouting at me Julie was very frightened for me, and screamed and screamed. It will take me a long time to forget the sound of her screams on Christmas Day.

Of course the newspapers picked up the story of the picket line on Christmas Day, and I was upset to see several articles that were very sympathetic to the Free Presbyterians. I felt slightly intimidated on the next three Sundays when five of my elders refused to come to church. It looked as if they did not want to have anything to do with me. But the rest of the congregation stayed loyal and I was very glad to welcome some new members. Sergeant McGregor who had been keeping an eye on things on Christmas Day told me that he had been completely neutral then, but he had listened to what the pickets were saying and how I reacted and now he and his wife wanted to join our church. I was tremendously encouraged to have a man join us who had seen the terrible aftermath of IRA attacks and yet would support me in my attempts to work for reconciliation.

It was hard to see my father growing so weak and ill. Noble Boggs came to visit him one day, which we all appreciated very much, though I was sad that none of the other elders would come. A week after Christmas my brother came to collect my parents and as my father left the house he burst into tears. 'David, I don't think I'll have the strength to come back to your manse again.' I could see that it was breaking

his heart to see the problems in my church, as if he was remembering the days when I had got up at four in the morning to study for the ministry. There were tears running down my cheeks too as I watched the car drive away.

There was a session meeting called for the last week in January. For a week before the meeting I knew I was in deep trouble with the elders. It was clear that they were prepared once and for all to put a stop to my dealings with the Catholics, and I think that some of the elders had been under extreme pressure from the people outside to do something about it. Some of the elders told me that the meeting would be stormy, and I felt intimidated.

I found I could not eat much on the day of the session meeting. It was awful to think that I had to face a meeting like this when the vast majority of the congregation were obviously supporting me. I knew that the previous year there had been a sixteen per cent increase in financial giving, which is heartening for any clergyman. But I was very anxious as I set out for the session meeting and it was good to be able to pray about it with June first and to know that she was fully supporting me.

I opened the meeting with a prayer and then Henry Harbinson prayed that we would all be careful in what we said, and the meeting began. I can only describe it as hellish. Most of the elders were critical of me and when Henry Harbinson tried to defend me no one would listen to him. Noble Boggs announced that he believed that the majority of the congregation supported me and immediately the others turned on him and started attacking him too. I held my head in my hands for two and a half hours and said little or nothing. Even that seemed to make them angry: 'You're not answering, maybe you can't answer!' 'Will you give us a guarantee that you won't do it again?' 'Will you cut your ties with Rome?' 'Are you intending to go to America with the priest?' In the end they decided to report me to Presbytery. I was horrified at the thought of defending myself at Presbytery, but it was obvious that they were not going to back down. So I closed the meeting and went home in a daze to see if June was all right.

I drove to Noble Bogg's house and sat like a zombie while

he tried to comfort me. I was beginning to realise that despite all the good things happening in the church I would not be able to stay at First Limavady much longer if I did not have the support of most of my elders. It was ironic that the present session members had rejected my suggestion a couple of years previously to elect more members to session. If we had done this I was sure that I would have had some members of the session who would have supported me now, giving me the majority I needed.

I realised that if I had to leave Limavady it would be very difficult to move to another Presbyterian church without all the publicity and problems following me, and that wouldn't be fair on another congregation. The Westminster Confession of Faith, the constitutional document of the Presbyterian Church, states that the Pope is the Antichrist. One understands the historical reasons why this should have been written in the bitter fires of yesteryear, but no theologian worth his salt would subscribe to it today. It is abhorrent to me. I am as convinced an evangelical as ever, but I have long rejected the narrow rigidity of Ulster fundamentalism. Yet on the basis of the Westminster Confession the elders could, I recognised, expect more support from Presbytery than I could. My future in the Presbyterian Church could be very doubtful.

I went to talk to Cecil Kerr at Rostrevor Renewal Centre to see if there was any possibility of joining the staff there, but although he greeted me very warmly he told me that they had just had a new couple arrive, and I felt that it did not seem very practical for me to join them as well.

It was sad even to think about the possibility of leaving so many friends and supporters at Limavady and Magilligan churches, let alone the prisoners at Magilligan, but things were getting more and more unpleasant for us. We received numerous filthy letters, most of which I did not want June to see, and anonymous phone calls, and then the threats started. 'We are going to kill your wife!' 'We know where to find you and we will finish you off.' 'Are your children still playing with those Roman Catholic children?' 'We will blast you like

the Catholic church was blasted.' I knew that it wasn't fair on June and the children to live under those sorts of pressures for much longer. Paul in particular was finding things difficult, and it was especially painful to see him upset by what other boys were saying about me.

I found myself retreating more and more into my study to think and pray about what I should do. Although it was a great comfort and encouragement to be able to talk and pray with June I did not want to tell her about all the threats and difficulties because I did not want to worry her any more than was necessary. It was to God alone that I could pour out my troubles.

Eventually I remembered a conversation I had had in London nearly a year earlier. My friend and mentor David Watson had died of cancer in February 1984, and in the April I had been asked to go to London to take part in a TV programme being made as a tribute to him. While I was there I met one of the other people taking part in the programme, Rev. Teddy Saunders, who had been one of David's close friends and advisors over the last years of his life. While the camera crew were filming Anne Watson and her children walking their dog in a local park, Teddy Saunders and I went for a walk together and I told him my story. Teddy was very concerned for us as a family, and he had made a bold suggestion. 'Look David, if things get so tough that you have to leave Northern Ireland, come over here and join the Church of England.' At the time I hadn't taken the idea very seriously, but when June and I visited Lord Coggan he had made the same suggestion. I knew that Teddy Saunders had now moved to Oxford, and he had suggested that he could introduce me to his friend Michael Green, Rector of St Aldate's Church there. In September 1984 I had received a very warm letter from Michael Green, whose books I had read and appreciated, although I had never met the man. As I wondered what to do now, nearly six months later, I opened a drawer in my desk and saw Michael Green's letter.

I decided to phone him at St Aldate's Church in Oxford,

and was thrilled by the friendly way Michael talked to me, suggesting that I should visit him in Oxford to see what could be done. I phoned Teddy Saunders to tell him of these plans, and was able to arrange to see him as well. By the time I went over to Oxford I had reached the stage where I realised that I would almost certainly have to leave Limavady. I was welcomed very warmly by Michael and Teddy, and we spent a great deal of time trying to decide what would be the best thing for me to do. They had arranged for me to meet the Bishop of Oxford, and I was a little nervous about this, but as soon as I arrived the Bishop put me at my ease. He knew all about me and my ministry, and said that he would be happy to welcome me to his diocese. He suggested that I should come to spend some months at Wycliffe Hall Theological College, to learn about the Anglican church, and prepare for my new ministry. I could be attached to Michael Green's church, St Aldate's, during my training at Wycliffe Hall and I knew that this would be a marvellous experience for me. After a while the Bishop would reordain me as a Church of England clergyman, and I could start a new ministry.

As I left Oxford and went home to Limavady it was as though a lifeline had been offered to me. If my elders were still prepared to take the matter to Presbytery, and unless Presbytery was prepared to back me, I knew that my ministry in Limavady was over.