

A Road Too Wide
The Price of Reconciliation in
Northern Ireland

by
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with Hilary Saunders
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12: A Happy New Year?

After the elders gave me the vote of confidence I hoped that things would settle down, the media would eventually leave us alone, and that relationships would begin to heal. But the new year was not going to be as peaceful as that. I suppose for all the apparent support that I now had from my elders there were still big differences in opinion between us over the issue of reconciliation with the local Catholics.

Things began to flare up again at the end of February when plans were being made for the local Women's World Day of Prayer service on the first Friday in March. This is an annual service when women from all denominations meet together in one church and this year the service for the Limavady area was to take place in Ballykelly Presbyterian Church. The trouble began when the committee organising the service chose a Roman Catholic, Marie Keown, to read the 23rd Psalm as a lesson and the minister and elders at Ballykelly banned her from taking part. It seemed to me quite ironic that Protestants should ban a Catholic from reading the Bible: one of the things that the Reformation fathers had longed to see.

I suppose that some of the members of my congregation who had opposed me took encouragement from this situation. They seemed to assume that if the minister and elders at Ballykelly reacted like this about a Catholic reading a lesson, then they were likely to support my opponents in their fight with me. At that same time there was a certain amount of publicity about Marie Keown and that brought the media back to north-west Ulster, and to my doorstep!

June and I had an important decision to make. We had been asked to go to join the staff of Millmead Baptist Church

in Guildford, Surrey, and it was a difficult decision to make. We knew the church quite well as we had been there several times while on family holidays and we liked the two pastors, Bob Roxburgh and Justin Denison. There was a large caring and prayerful congregation, and the services were always marked by a true sense of worship. It had been a lovely church for us to visit on our holidays and we had always found spiritual refreshment there. It would be a marvellous opportunity to go and minister there; we would be able to leave Ulster, to bring up our children away from the bitterness and hatred, get away from all the tension, and I would be able to preach the gospel without have to explain that true saints like Mother Theresa are Christians even though they are Roman Catholics—things that would be taken for granted in most places, but not in Ulster.

But mixed with these feelings were others. I had some reservations about becoming a Baptist for, as a Presbyterian, I was committed to the practice of child baptism. Above all I had a strong conviction that it was right to continue working quietly for reconciliation, particularly perhaps through my work in the prison, convincing both sides that violence is always terribly wrong. Perhaps I could also let the people of Ulster see that it is possible for a Presbyterian minister to have a friendly relationship with the local priest in a rural town. After all, it only meant crossing the road!

It was a difficult decision to make and I was grateful when Millmead gave us three weeks to make up our minds. I knew that they would welcome us warmly and I have the highest respect for both the pastors, but it was still hard to decide. In the end the person who forced me to come to a decision was David Jessel from the BBC.

David Jessel had contacted both Wesley McDowell and myself to ask if we would be willing to take part in a discussion for the 'Heart of the Matter' programme. The idea was to film a discussion between us about whether or not it was right to make contact with the Roman Catholics and then to have an interview with Father Mullan at the end. David

Jessel and his team spent a week in Limavady making their plans and trying to get the feel of the tensions in the town. They did not give me any indication about their own point of view, and I wasn't very sure whether or not to do the programme. The producers said that Mr McDowell had no hesitation about taking part and when they arrived he had greeted them, 'Thank God you've come; the Lord has sent you!' I realised that if I did not take part, the programme would be about Wesley McDowell and the Free Presbyterians and I felt that this would be a fairly poor witness for Christ and for reconciliation. So I asked Noble Boggs for his advice and together we decided that I should take part. The producers decided to do separate interviews giving both Wesley McDowell and myself a chance to put across our own perspective.

They interviewed Mr McDowell first and then filmed him preaching a sermon which seemed to be about me, and about how much he disliked my ministry. I think some of the film crew were rather bewildered to hear a sermon about another clergyman, not about God. When it came to my turn to be interviewed I did my best to explain my case rationally and clearly, saying how important it is to work for reconciliation, how we need to have the love of Christ in our lives, how all too often we Protestants assume we know what Catholics are saying without really listening to them. I explained that it wasn't a question of changing my doctrine to accept Catholics, but changing my attitude towards those who held different doctrines.

David Jessel asked me some hard questions, including whether I had signed the Westminster Confession of Faith when I became a minister, which says that the Pope is the Antichrist. I pointed out that what I had signed was that the Westminster Confession was the subordinate standard of the church, and I was to preach from the supreme standard, the Bible. I do not hold as a doctrine of the Presbyterian Church that the Pope is the Antichrist for this does not appear in the church catechism.

Towards the end of the interview I was caught completely

unawares. 'Do you think you will be leaving these shores to go to live in Guildford?' David Jessel asked. There was a pause for maybe five or ten seconds as I tried to clarify my thoughts. Having the question sprung on me like that in front of a TV camera certainly helped bring the issues into focus for me. My eyes filled with tears at the thought of leaving and at the same time the thought of not going to Millmead was hard. I tried to choke back the tears: 'No, I think I have to stay. It won't be easy, but I think I have to stay.'

When I had finished the interview I went to find June to tell her that I had made a decision. I explained that I had come to the conclusion that we should stay in Ireland and carry on the work we had started. I could tell how disappointed she was and as I looked into her tear-stained face it was hard not to go back on my decision. But she was as strong and supportive as ever. 'Fair enough, David, if that's what you feel God wants us to do then we'll stay. But to tell you the truth, I'm frightened at the thought of bringing up our children in this environment of hate.' Her voice cracked, and I think she went away to cry.

June had been having a difficult time in her own right. Not only had she had to cope with the pressure of the reporters sitting outside our home and ringing at all times of the day and night, but she found it hard to have her husband criticised so fiercely. Then she found that her activities with the women of the parish were the focus of the same negative attitudes. She had just taken over as leader of the Presbyterian Women's Association and found that the very people who had most wanted her to lead it were now out to make things difficult for her. They had really made her life a misery and I could not understand how anyone could be so unpleasant to such a warm and caring person as June. Perhaps only another minister's wife could understand how hard it is to watch as people attack your husband for doing what he believes is right and for trying to show God's love to others. I think it may be worse for the wife to watch her husband being hurt than for the man himself. Certainly it was a terribly traumatic experience for June.

When the 'Heart of the Matter' programme went out on the air, I realised that David Jessel had made the film with a very sympathetic slant towards my view. It was a compelling programme, with shots of the town and interviews with some of the elders who opposed me. That was certainly a scoop for David Jessel and his team, but it was sad viewing for me to see Connolly George and Ivan Bryne appearing on TV to take issue with me. I would never have guessed at the response to the programme; over the next few weeks I must have received about 2,000 letters and, although there were a few letters from Protestant fundamentalists calling me all sorts of names, ninety-eight per cent of them were full of support and encouragement for what I was trying to do. I was rather disappointed that out of all the letters only three were from fellow Presbyterian ministers, although one of those was a marvellous letter from Dr Barkley, my former teacher at theological college.

The programme brought me right back into the centre of media attention and I kept seeing myself 'quoted' by journalists I had never spoken to. There were times when I felt very isolated and wondered why on earth someone trying to do something so small in a rural Ulster town could possibly attract so much attention. I was very sorry that Ronnie Craig was now working in Malawi, as I felt in need of his friendship and wise counsel. One story which probably summed up the situation for me was of a colleague who told me he had written to the *Belfast Telegraph* in support of me. He told me what he had written so that I would recognise the letter when it appeared. 'I've just signed it "a Christian",' he said. 'I did not feel brave enough to put my name to it.'

It was marvellous to receive so many letters from Christians assuring me of their prayers and I knew how much I needed them. We had a letter from Lord Coggan, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, saying how he and his wife had watched the programme and at the end had switched off the television and prayed for us. Later they invited June and me to spend a few days with them and their kindness helped us to forget some of the hurts we had experienced. Their letter

was quite a contrast to the one we received from the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church who seemed put out and embarrassed that I had allowed the media to show any bigotry in the Presbyterian Church.

Things had just begun to settle down again after the furore of the programme when spring came along, and with it the marching season in Northern Ireland. Every year the men of the Orange and Black Orders march to a local church for a service, taken by the minister, but with most of the emphasis on the marchers. One day three men came to visit me, to tell me that the Apprentice Boys were going to march to Magilligan Church on a certain date, and although I was stated supply minister in charge of the church I was told that I was not to be there. I discovered that the leaders had banned me because I had visited the Catholic church at Christmas. I wondered if they were frightened that I would preach on loving your neighbour.

I was not going to allow the Apprentice Boys to dictate to me, and I made it clear that I would preach in my own church, and I wasn't prepared to let them bring in their own preacher. The three men were obviously getting very uncomfortable and kept telling me that they were only messengers but that some of the influential leaders would be very angry if I did not step down. I was determined not to give way, and in the end they had to march to another church for their service. I was quite pleased to see them go elsewhere. I do not really think it is good Christian witness to see these Orange and Black Orders marching to a Protestant church. Any Catholics seeing them would be justified in thinking that the bigoted attitudes that the Lodges stand for are shared by the minister and congregation of the church, and I certainly didn't want that.

The Apprentice Boys met to discuss their displeasure with me for refusing to obey their demands. There was one member of my congregation at Magilligan Church who must have been a member of the Lodge for nearly thirty years. But when he heard them criticising his minister he got up, gave

them his sash of membership, and told them that he wouldn't be back. Only someone living in rural Ulster would appreciate what a great sacrifice that was. Perhaps it shows something of the great loyalty and friendship I found among the church members at Magilligan, that they would not accept that the Lodge's deep loyalty to the Queen was compatible with disloyalty to the minister.

Some of the elders were still very cool towards me, and one of them refused to shake me by the hand for some time. But the congregation seemed firmly behind me since the elders had given me the vote of confidence. Most of the elders themselves were happy to work with me and for me and they would welcome me into their homes and let me pray with them and their families. But if the subject of Roman Catholics was raised it was as though a wall had come up between us and the conversation became very stilted and serious. But the church continued to grow and I was encouraged by the ways I could see God at work in different people. I suppose that if it had not been for the Catholic issue I would have been as comfortable and happy as any minister in Northern Ireland.