# A Road Too Wide
# The Price of Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

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# 1: Explosion!

I was sitting at my desk writing a letter when the telephone rang. I answered on about the fifth or sixth ring, but the phone had gone dead. It must be important for someone to ring a minister at 11.45 p.m. on a Sunday. I waited by the phone for it to ring again.

I was the new Presbyterian minister at Limavady, a small town in Northern Ireland, where my family and I had moved in June 1981. Limavady is a town in north-west Ireland, not far from Londonderry (also known as Derry depending on whether you are Protestant or Catholic). It was now 11 October, and I had been away for the evening taking a Harvest Festival service at Gortnessy, a small village twelve miles away.

After ten minutes I decided that my mystery caller was not going to ring back. Perhaps something had happened during my absence in Gortnessy, something of enough importance to ring me about at this time of night. But obviously my caller had now decided it could wait until tomorrow. I moved back to my desk to finish my letter. Suddenly there was an almighty explosion – like a bomb going off very close by. At once I had an awful suspicion. I threw on my overcoat, and calling to my wife that I was going out I said, 'I've a dreadful feeling that was a bomb at the new Roman Catholic Church.'

As I left the house I ran the fifty yards along Bells Hill. Lights were coming on in the upstairs rooms of many of the nearby houses, as people woken by the blast got up to find out what had happened. I reached the corner and looked down towards my church, and I knew that my foreboding was all too true. In the gloom I saw my church, the First Presbyterian Church of Limavady, and just forty yards away

across the road, a pillar of white smoke rising from what had been the newly completed Roman Catholic church. I ran towards the churches. Already a crowd was gathering and the police had arrived on the scene, the coloured lights flashing from the police vehicles eerily revealing some of the damage done to the church and the nearby houses with their smashed front windows.

The police were keeping people back at a safe distance from the church in case there was another bomb in the building. It was a cold night, and as people talked their breath showed clearly in the dark, like miniature images of the smoke from the building. Apparently there had been a warning about the bomb – a phone call to the local Roe Valley Hospital – which was why the police had arrived at the scene so quickly. I wondered if whoever had made that warning phone call had tried me first, and when I hadn't answered straight away had phoned the hospital instead. It would certainly explain why my mystery caller had been too nervous to wait for me to answer, and hadn't called back.

Soon the fire brigade and the bomb disposal unit arrived with sniffer dogs. Although there was no sign of another bomb, nobody would be allowed into the church until daylight broke and they could make sure it was safe. I walked across the road to my own church, to try to see how much it had been damaged by the blast. I opened the side door and turned on the lights. There was glass everywhere – the great east end leaded glass windows had crashed inwards on to the pews. The windows of the hall were buckled and plaster had come down from the ceiling under the gallery. It was clear that a lot of work would need to be done.

And if that was so in my church, how much more so of the Catholic church! It was an entirely new building which, after eighteen months work, was now complete except for some paint-work. Built in red brick to a modern design to seat about 1200 people, it was a fairly plain structure but with an unusual tiered effect in the roof, which went up in steps from the south end to a very high ceiling at the north end, with simple coloured leaded windows. The effect inside was light

and spacious, with very little ornamentation. The church occupied a considerable plot of land with space around it for car parking and some people complained that it looked more like a library or health centre than a Catholic church. Personally I liked the church. I had been inside it once to speak to some workmen, and had admired the modern simplicity and beauty of the building.

I had also met the local Catholic priests, Father Donally and Father Campbell, soon after my arrival, and now I found that Father Campbell had followed me over to my church. He was deeply broken to see that our building was so badly damaged. I turned to him and said 'Only the morning will reveal how extensive the damage is to your new church. It must be dreadful for you, and as a Christian minister I deplore it.'

When daylight broke the full extent of the devastation was revealed for all to see. The experts arrived early: surveyors and government officials to assess the damage and to estimate how much it would cost to repair and how long the work would take. At 10.30 a.m. the Roman Catholic Bishop of Derry, Dr Edward Daly, arrived to inspect the damage. I went across the road from my church into the broken shell of the Roman Catholic building, and Father Donally and Father Campbell welcomed me. As I stood inside the blackened building I felt totally horrified. There was rubble and broken tiles everywhere, and the roof was shattered. Where there had been clean white paint-work it was now a mass of crumbled plaster – it looked ghastly. I went straight up to speak to the Bishop. 'Sir, I feel a very deep sense of shame that this act of devastation was carried out in this building, and I am so broken and disappointed for you.'

It was clear that the bomb had been planted against the main wall at the east end of the Roman Catholic church, carefully positioned to do as much damage as possible. The key north wall had a huge hole blown in it and was so badly buckled that it was unsafe, and would have to be removed. They said it would take most of a year to repair the damage. We also called in an architect to look at our own church

building, afraid that the explosion might have lifted the roof. He told us that although it had lifted, it was settling down all right, and the damage was relatively minor.

Limavady was not in the forefront of terrorist attacks; the people were preoccupied with violence but not occupied with it – they would talk about it in the streets, but not really get involved with it. No one claimed responsibility for the bomb. Yet the press had arrived in force to find out as much as possible about the story. The BBC had sent a camera crew along, with Diane Harran to make a report and to interview some of the people concerned. Diane heard me speak to the Bishop of Derry and asked me if I would be prepared to repeat my comments on television. The Bishop said quietly that he was grateful for what I had said, and would quite understand if I felt it was too much of a risk to make a public statement. But I said, 'No, Bishop, if I can say it privately to you I should also say publicly that I disassociate myself from those who perpetrated the bombing.' I knew that as the Presbyterian minister from across the road my views would be considered important. In Ireland the minister has a significant role; when he says something people listen and it means something. I knew it was important to let the Catholics in the town know that I thoroughly disapproved of the bomb; if I didn't speak out they might wonder what I really felt. I believe that it is the atmosphere of suspicion in Ireland that allows those groups who carry out acts of violence and destruction to thrive.

I didn't want to allow room for any suspicion to grow up about my attitudes. So I did the interview for the BBC, and explained that I felt that one of the principles of the Reformation was freedom of worship for all, and it seemed strange to me that those who would claim as Protestants to uphold the principles of the Reformation, should now refuse that same freedom of worship to others. 'I think it is diabolical that a building which was going to be used for worship should be treated in such a manner.'

Dr Daly asked if he could come to see the damage in my church. I was very pleased he should suggest this; it was

typical of the man, and it doesn't often happen in Ireland that a Catholic goes into a Protestant church or vice versa. We walked across the Scroggy Road together, with his train of attendants following. We went in through the side door, past some glass panelling where a team of church members were at work repairing the damage, and I noticed that some of those at work were members of the Orange and Black Protestant orders. I wondered how they would react to a Roman Catholic bishop coming into their church, and was pleased when they stopped work, and greeted him politely; one man came down his ladder to wish the Bishop good morning. Dr Daly stood in the empty building among all the broken glass and said, 'David, I too feel very shattered to see the damage your building has sustained.'

That evening after the television broadcast went out, I received a telephone call from the Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly, Dr John Girvin. He said he identified himself with my sentiments and was pleased that a Presbyterian minister had spoken out about the way the church had been attacked. At a local church meeting that night a number of my parishioners said that they were glad that I, as their minister, had expressed my anger at such an outrage. I knew that the majority of decent Protestants in the town would have opposed the action, but some would say nothing. Some had opposed the Roman Catholic church being built there in the first place and had signed a petition against it, but the land was owned by a Catholic developer so the plans had gone ahead. Few people would have wanted it stopped in this way.

But some obviously weren't sorry. My phone rang several times: 'What right had they to build there in the first place?' 'I'm delighted the place has been destroyed.' 'It's a pity they weren't worshipping in there at the time and the roof come down on them.' Each time I would reply, 'May I have your name and address please?' Silence. 'I'd like to know who I'm speaking to, or there really isn't much point in continuing this conversation.'

As I sat at home I wondered if some good could come out of this incident. Perhaps some Protestants who had been

antagonistic to the Catholic church being built there might now feel some measure of sympathy. Surely this will teach those who sit on the fence where suspicion and hatred will eventually lead. And I understood how they felt, for I used to sit on that fence myself.