

Join us.

The church was empty when I pulled open the heavy two-way vestibule door one evening in late summer. The sun beamed obliquely through the tall plain frosted glass windows, casting long shafts of sunlight across the empty pews, the front of the church in shadow. The raised central pulpit was set in a stage of blue deep-pile carpet, its only decoration, carved in a wooden relief, the Old Testament's burning bush. It was six years since I had been there yet the place resonated strongly with me. The deep shuffling groan as the Sunday morning worshippers stood to sing. Not an empty seat. Rows of chairs brought in along the ground floor aisles. A bold choir swamped by the congregation's massed voices, swelling in praise.



To the right of the pulpit, a solid oak door stood ajar; the Committee Room where I had arranged to meet the Reverend G.

I had left Ballymena not long after my twenty birthday. Spent three years as a student in London before going to the Solomon Islands in the tropical Western Pacific as a UNA volunteer. For most of that later three years I lived and worked in a Melanesian culture, learning the Pidgin language, making long-lasting friendships and contributing in a small way to an island country on the verge of independence. Taking cash instead of a return air ticket I travelled home by a long and complex overland route through Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and across Europe. The Troubles continued to rage when I was away. If I thought I was more aware and knowledgeable on my return, I was still confused by it all in equal measure.

Living back home while I figured out my next steps, it wasn't too long before I got a phone call from the Reverend G. I was surprised - my church experience then seemed so distant, I wasn't part of it, or any organised religion anymore. Yet I wasn't really surprised - the church needed new blood and given my family background, I was an obvious candidate. My mother had often told me that I would make a good Minister. But I never had any passion for the role or the message.

I agreed to meet the Reverend G in the church the following week. And as I put the phone down, I could hear myself agreeing to his further requests. I needed a plan. Maybe this was how my father had become to be a church elder: don't fight the inevitable, take the easy route. And so, I thought about how I would respond. Turned it over in my head a few times. And wrote it down. I knew I wouldn't be taking up his offer. But I had to do this face-to-face.

The Reverend G was an authority figure to my father. And to the family. Like in most Irish homes the Minister or Priest's visit brought out the good china and plates. As we grew older, we knew to clear out of the house on these occasions. If caught there you were expected, at least, to pray with him before he left. At the time we saw it as adult's business.

"When Tom retired and went over to the other side ..." The Reverend G said years later, when leading my father's funeral service in Coleraine, before the long journey to his burial in Dromahair, County Leitrim. In Northern Ireland the term 'the other side' is redolent with meaning – often inferring threat or danger.

My parents had moved from Ballymena to Dromahair, near my mother's home, after they retired. There, daddy could enjoy a cigarette and a drink beyond the judging eyes of his religious and family peers. In his Ballymena community and church, partaking in tobacco and alcohol was considered sinful and would bring its opprobrium, particularly so for a church elder. ('Let me smell yurr breath!' Ian Paisley was often heard to roar at journalists, sniffing for signs of the 'Devil's Buttermilk')

When I went to meet the Reverend G I was tanned with a head of curly sun-bleached hair and a tight beard. I drove a couple of miles to meet him in a casual top and jeans. I was confident and prepared. That was, until my soft shoes squeaked on the aisle's shiny linoleum. I should have met him somewhere different, a neutral venue. I looked at the upper gallery and the seats where I used to sit with friends, Sunday after Sunday. I'm a teenager again, standing beside my father on a Sunday evening. The church half full. His rich tenor voice filling the space around us, never seeming happier.

I knocked and pushed open the heavy door. He was sitting one leg across the other reading his Bible, my chair beside him. Behind him a large oval boardroom table.

The Reverend G was a physically impressive man, particularly when preaching from the pulpit in his ermine-collared gown. He had a mop of dark curly hair atop his round open friendly face. The wealthy congregation looked after its minister well, and he had no 'calling' to go elsewhere. His sermons tended to reflect his more liberal, socially aware version of Presbyterianism. Yet he saw the trickle of church members starting to drift off to Ian Paisley's fierier and more evangelical Free Presbyterian Church.

"Hello. Good to see you again!" He said rising from the chair, smiling, extending an open hand. Not like the village preachers in the Solomon Islands in their colourful T-shirts and shorts, I thought, his sombre grey suit and collar. "I heard that you were back and wanted to have a chat. How are you? Have you settled?"

"Thanks. I'm very well, but I can't say I'm settled. 'Not even sure I want to either, you get a great buzz from travelling," I replied, and we exchanged some conversation about my volunteer work and the experience of being abroad. He talked about the challenges of being a church leader amid The Troubles, of trying to keep everyone onside.

"But I didn't ask you here to talk about that. You have probably guessed. We need new blood in the Church. You were very involved when you were last here; a leader in the BB and the youth club. And your Dad is a stalwart elder. We need young people like you for a thriving church community. Have you given any thought to becoming a full member? Of getting fully involved? We have prayed for it. The elders too. I think it is God's will that you give your life to Jesus in this way."

"Yes, I thought you would ask me that." I said hiding my unease best I could. "Since I've left I've made many friend's. Some of different religions, some of none. Some are Buddhists, some Animists. Yet they are as 'Christian' as we are - in the way they live their lives. In the way they treat each other. Treated me. Where do they fit into this Church? Are they welcome as they are? Can they become church members without giving up who they are? I want to be part of something that includes them, doesn't put them on the outside. They live rich and full lives. They are good people. If I can't bring them with me, then I'm not really interested." There I'd said it, unsure if it came out right or coherently, but it was done.

"I understand completely. I do." He replied. And I believed him. "But ..."

I don't recall the rest of the conversation. A few minutes later he wound up with a prayer. Nor do I remember exactly how we left it. But a few minutes later I was on the street, breathing deeply into the warm air of a summer evening and making plans.

Shortly afterwards I moved to Belfast to take up voluntary community work. But before leaving I had heard of a job coming up in development education in Derry. To my surprise, the originators of this new project had supported my UNA work in the Solomon Islands and knew I was back home. I was bound for Derry and the North West.

End

Work in maybe:

I thought that was the end of it. How naive tithing that 20 years of immersion in a church culture could be turned over in a short conversation. But it was another watershed

Hymns sung amid a multitude of voices would stay with me. Particularly standing beside my father one Sunday evening in a thin congregation. We were in a pew by ourselves half way down the church. I guess I was late teens. The oldest who answered the question that Who's going tonight? Was it perhaps a turning sense that my father needed the support. His bronzed tenor voice singing beyond doubt into the empty church, while I mumble the words beside him.

Afterwards I thought that's it now.. Now naive. I was moving to a flat share in Belfast to do some volunteering with CSV, while looking for a job. I had just been contacted by Colm in Derry telling me, to my surprise, that the UNA group there had been fundraising for my volunteer effort in the SI and that there might be a job coming up there in Development Education.=

. My teen years were immersed in the Wellington Street Presbyterian Church. On a Sunday morning I was off to bible school and then morning church services, on Wednesday evenings to the church youth club and on Friday nights to the Boys Brigade. While much of this was healthy active sport and games it too was infused with a good dash religion. Throughout the 1960's the Troubles in Ireland grew in intensity and were the back drop to my adolescence. However, they were less of a concern to me than my growing need to shake off the religious straightjacket and discover life as a non-believer.

"When Tom retired and went over to the other side." The Reverend G said years later as part of his short funeral service for my father in Coleraine, before the long journey to his burial in Dromahair, Co Leitrim. Daddy and Mammy had moved to Dromahair, near my mother's home, after Daddy retired. There he could enjoy a cigarette and a drink beyond the all-seeing eyes of his religious community. Partaking of tobacco and alcohol was considered sinful and would bring opprobrium, particularly so for a church elder. ("Let me smell yurr breath!" Ian Paisley had often roared, sniffing for signs of the Devil's Buttermilk; and in doing so attracting many of our church members to his new church.)

earlier in my late teens our four-piece garage band played at the front of the Church at a Sunday morning service. I had been uneasy about it, embarrassed to be playing rock to a full church in my Sunday suit. But we practiced and delivered a good rendition of the "House of the Rising Sun". A hit by The Animals, the song is about a life lost to sin, misery, drink and casual sex with little sign of redemption; I never felt the audience fully appreciated the song and particularly the irony of it being played there.

Our Church's teachings are what holds this congregation together and I can't water that down. It provides direction; the words to strengthen our faith, to give us comfort and to provide guidance in troubled times; like our symbol the burning bush, a light that cannot be put out, showing us the way in the darkness, and more importantly leading us to the foot of the Cross, and to Jesus."

"I understand your what you say," he continued.

"Our world is changing, becoming smaller more integrated, but our truth remains that we must be Saved to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, all of us; and without acknowledging our individual sin we are all lost. That is our teaching, I wouldn't preach otherwise...."

