

## HOPE IS STRONGER THAN VIOLENCE

by Michael Bryson

It's been three years since my last visit to Northern Ireland, when I met Joe Campbell in Belfast, and he gave me and my father a tour of that famous city and its infamous conflict. Joe was working part-time for a couple of Mennonite organizations, teaching conflict resolution skills to community groups and trying to build bridges between the besieged Protestant and Catholic communities.

Those connections paid off recently when Joe received an urgent call from the police in Portadown, a small town outside of Belfast. Summer is marching season in Northern Ireland, and a group of Protestant loyalists were preparing to march through the Catholic community, beating drums to remind everyone within earshot of a 300-year-old battle in which a Protestant army defeated a Catholic one.

These marches take place every year. In Canada, the equivalent would be marching through Montreal every year to remember the defeat of the French at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.

"Come quick," the police said. "The Catholics are preparing to riot."

So Joe called a friend and off they went, reviewing their mediation training in the car as they approached the site of the conflict. For hours they shuttled between the Catholic homeowners, the Protestant marchers and the police, but eventually a solution emerged. The marchers would march, but they had to do so in silence.

"Everyone was relieved," said Joe. Better yet, everyone felt that they had won. The mediation had worked! Hope had proved itself stronger than violence.

It's been more than a year since the Irish Republican Army declared a cease fire in its pursuit of a united Ireland. In a show of good faith, Protestant paramilitary groups -- who want the six northern counties of the island to remain part of the United Kingdom -- followed suit a few weeks later. The British government even withdrew a handful of its troops, the first time it had done since the latest (and longest) round of the Troubles began over 25 years ago.

Though violence has erupted on a few occasions, negotiations -- on the future of one of the world's seemingly irreparable conflicts -- are now suspended, but the parties are still talking about talking.

Joe Campbell and his friend were praised in the Irish media for their role in helping to build a better future. One is possible -- even in places where the darkness seems greatest.

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