



## Travel Journal: Northern Ireland 2007

In September of 2007, I spent two weeks in Northern Ireland at the invitation of the Quakers of Northern Ireland. I performed in churches, concert halls, schools, prisons and community centers. This was my third visit to Northern Ireland beginning in 2003. I was delighted to return there as I have developed abiding friendships and have come to have a deep appreciation for the Celtic culture of Northern Ireland. I am always pleased to meet other local musicians who perform Irish folk music and I am always honored to make at least one appearance in an Irish pub.

One of the highlights of this visit was appearing with acclaimed folk singer Tommy Sands. Tommy is a singer song writer whose music is known and appreciated in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the world. His work with Pete Seeger and Joan Baez has won him international acclaim.

Tommy and I performed in three prisons in the Belfast area. There we met many inmates who were so thrilled to see us and to participate in singing with us. One inmate asked Tommy if he could play a song for us. He played on Tommy's guitar and sang, "Black is the Color of My True Loves Hair." It was a moving moment.

What was clear as we sang together and spoke with the inmates was that they were deeply touched by our visit. Some reported that they would be locked in their cells had we not visited. We also learned some of the stories of the inmates. When we left, we could see many of them waving at us as our car drove away. These three visits to prisons touched us as we were inspired by the inmates and their enthusiasm to join us in singing. Here I saw once again the healing power of music.

Tommy and I made another important appearance. We met with the leaders of the major Para-military groups and their families. They are the Ulster Defense Association and the Irish Republican Army. They have been involved in the killing of each other over the past 40 years and it was amazing that they were in the same room with us.

Music however speaks a universal language of the heart and makes a soulful connection in ways that nothing else can. It was interesting to witness a softening of tension in the room as Tommy and I engaged them in singing and story telling. I was struck when watching these hardened leaders as they were moved by the music.

By the end of the evening one of the leaders stood and as he was speaking his voice broke. It was an emotional evening where the two sides sang together and heard stories of reconciliation and hope. It was the first meeting of its kind in Northern Ireland. This group of leaders is continuing to meet.

I was also invited to the Parliament and met with Jeffrey Donaldson. Jeffrey Mark Donaldson is a Member of Parliament for Lagan Valley. We discussed the activities that led up to the Northern Peace Accords of 1998. He talked about the "moving of the spirit" where a miracle seemed to happen in the room that touched the hearts of the legislators. It was an historic moment. We also talked my peace building activities on this visit and to other parts of the world. There is hope that I will return again.

It was a very meaningful visit there and I am thankful to the Quakers of Northern Ireland and to Alan Bell who arranged my visit there.