

Magee, Roy (Robert James)

by Patrick Maume

Magee, Roy (Robert James) (1930–2009), presbyterian minister and peacemaker, was born in the Ballysillan area of north Belfast on 3 January 1930, only son (he had one sister) of John Magee, fitter in Mackie's engineering firm, and his wife Margaret (née Quinn). He grew up in the Shankill area of west Belfast; Mackie's factory was located on the neighbouring Falls Road. Residential segregation was not as intense in Magee's youth as during the later troubles, and he had catholic friends. He was educated at Everton public elementary school and the Belfast Model School, which he left aged 14. He worked as a rent collector before becoming a messenger boy and apprentice fitter at Mackie's, then took classes at the Belfast technical institute to become a textile design draughtsman.

Presbyterian ministry Magee's family, though not fervent in their presbyterianism, had sent him to the Boys' Brigade and its associated Bible class regularly. The teenaged Magee was an enthusiastic footballer, and it occurred to him that while maintaining a 'box' – his body – he was neglecting the eternal jewel – his spirit – within. He underwent a conversion experience, and decided to become a presbyterian minister.

Magee studied divinity at Magee College, Derry city (where he played soccer with Clooney Rovers and Iona Swifts) and TCD, completing his theological studies at Union Theological College in Belfast; he later secured further degrees from institutions called the American School of Doctrine and the Lutheran Theological Seminary. He became a licentiate of Belfast presbytery, and on 11 September 1958 was ordained assistant minister in Megain Memorial, Belfast, with responsibility for Mersey Street (a mission serving a detached area of Ballymacarrett). In 1958 he married Maureen Reynolds; they had two sons and one daughter.

On 2 June 1960 Magee was installed as minister of Donacloney, Co. Down, where he remained till taking up a call to the Sinclair Seamen's congregation in the Sailortown area of Belfast (installed 20 May 1966). Despite uncertainties created in this working-class docklands congregation by urban redevelopment (a motorway was being driven through the district) and nascent divisions within unionism and presbyterianism in the late 1960s, Magee proved an energetic pastor who oversaw the construction of new church halls. He then became minister of First Saintfield, Co. Down (installed 29 October 1970), but resigned to take up the ministry in Dundonald congregation on the outskirts of east Belfast (installed 21 March 1975).

In Dundonald, Magee actively promoted evangelisation, founding weekly Bible study classes and chairing a May 1979 tent-preaching campaign undertaken by North American evangelists in Ormeau Park, directed at the working-class population of

east Belfast; he also promoted overseas missionary work, school refurbishment and the creation of a women's meeting (presided over by his wife).

Magee was an outspoken member of the conservative evangelical wing of the presbyterian church. In 1966 he told a general assembly debate that supporters of state aid to Belfast's Mater Infirmorum Hospital (run by the catholic church) were victims of 'nationalist brainwashing' (*Ir. Times*, 11 June 1966). At a protest meeting against the 1979 visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland, Magee accused presbyterian clergymen who met the pope of 'having abrogated the vows they've taken' (*Ir. Times*, 3 October 1979), though he disclaimed animosity to the pope as an individual as distinct from catholic doctrine (implying that, unlike Ian Paisley (1926–2014), Magee did not regard the pope as Antichrist). In 1981 Magee led a walkout from the general assembly in protest against its reception of Robert Runcie, archbishop of Canterbury, who had recently said he would pray for the soul of republican hunger striker Bobby Sands (qv).

Political activities, 1970–88 On the outbreak of the Northern Ireland troubles in August 1969, Magee interrupted his family holiday to return to Belfast, and witnessed extensive disturbances in the York Street area including the expulsion of families from their homes, which he later recalled as one of his three most traumatic experiences of the troubles. He tried to calm the area by persuading local vigilantes to stop patrolling on condition that he himself would walk the streets at night to guard against nationalist incursions. Some of these vigilantes later became prominent in the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which Magee initially regarded as a 'bona fide community organisation' before being repelled by its violence and internal feuding.

In 1972 Magee was a founding member of the Vanguard movement of William Craig (1924–2011), which he hoped would become a vehicle for unionist unity; in 1973 he was president of the Loyalist Association of Workers (a body of trade-union activists who later organised the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council strike) and was subsequently chairman (May 1973–June 1974) of Craig's Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party. In 1976 Magee was prominent in the hardline United Ulster Unionist Council. Through Vanguard, Magee made the acquaintance of unionist politicians later involved in the 1990s peace process, notably future UUP leaders David Trimble and Reg Empey. He also formed a close friendship with Revd Robert Bradford (qv), whom he described as 'the brother I never had' (*Independent* (London), 10 February 2009).

After the La Mon House bombing (17 February 1978) – in which twelve people, four of whom were members of his congregation, were burned alive when the IRA firebombed a hotel – was closely followed by the shooting of another member of his congregation by the IRA, Magee called for 'a reappraisal of the yellow card rules to soldiers', concerning circumstances under which they were allowed to open fire (*Ir. Times*, 8 March 1978). In the 1980s Magee was active on the Loyalist Committee for Prisoners' Rights, which lobbied on behalf of loyalist prisoners. After the 1981 murder by the IRA of Robert Bradford, Magee conducted the funeral service, calling

in his sermon for the reintroduction of the death penalty; Northern Ireland Secretary James Prior was attacked as he left the church. Magee subsequently defended Paisley's short-lived vigilante Third Force as a safety valve for popular feeling after Bradford's murder.

In April 1982 a BBC radio documentary on Dundonald juxtaposed intransigent statements by Magee and two prominent members of his congregation, Ernest Baird (qv) and UDA 'supreme commander' Andy Tyrie, with accounts of the expulsion of Dundonald catholics in 1972–4 and the burning of the local catholic church in 1981. On 23 November 1985, Magee joined the massive unionist protest rally against the recently signed Anglo–Irish agreement at Belfast City Hall, sharing a platform with Paisley and UUP leader James Molyneaux.

Peacemaker After a period of intense prayer and reflection following Bradford's death, Magee decided that 'revenge is not the answer' and that he had a moral duty to help end the violence. He was particularly moved by witnessing horrifically injured casualties and burnt bodies from La Mon. After the Anglo–Irish agreement, Magee associated himself with Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI), an evangelical peace group which maintained that 'covenantal' beliefs that equated political unionism with loyalty to God and compromise with apostasy were misguided and potentially idolatrous. This did not involve adopting a wider theological liberalism; Magee always remained a doctrinally conservative evangelical.

Magee also distanced himself from the view, associated in particular with Paisley, that true believers should separate themselves from the ungodly; he defended dialogue with catholics and nationalists by pointing out that Jesus met sinners to save them and arguing that it was necessary for the churches to encourage social contact and dialogue so that people could recognise each other's humanity, but this did not require changing one's own beliefs: 'I believe you've got to gain the right to tell people that they're wrong' (Little, 64).

This argument also had implications for Magee's ongoing interaction with loyalist paramilitaries, which many of his critics saw as amounting to complicity with them. This fed into a broader argument about whether a Northern Ireland peace settlement required an alliance of moderates and centrists against morally unacceptable extremists who must be isolated and defeated, or whether the extremists represented legitimate interests and viewpoints which must be accommodated. It also had a class dimension: loyalists stereotyped theological liberals as comfortable, overeducated middle-class types, ignorant of and contemptuous towards the protestant working classes – including the paramilitaries – to whom evangelicals appealed. The paramilitaries' willingness to tolerate Magee was influenced by awareness of his working-class origins and genuine social concern. (Magee was involved in community initiatives in Dundonald and west Belfast, and was a founder member of the Shankill-based Farset community development organisation, which

aimed to promote local economic development and keep young people from drifting into crime and paramilitarism.)

In the 1980s Magee frequently visited UDA headquarters in east Belfast at Tyrrie's request to provide members with spiritual advice; he was nicknamed 'the eighth brigadier'. (The UDA was run by a seven-member inner council.) Magee also had contacts with the UVF, but these were less intimate. As loyalist violence intensified in the years after the Anglo–Irish agreement, Magee became increasingly willing to challenge the loyalist leadership, telling them repeatedly that God forbade murder and urging them to seek a political settlement to the conflict. Magee's contacts with the UDA survived the downfall of Tyrrie in 1988, and he established a new relationship with the organisation's political strategist Ray Smallwoods (qv), using him as a 'sounding board'. He showed talent as a 'facilitator', his quiet, soft-spoken manner, sense of humour and ability to listen enabling him to draw out his interlocutors and get them to develop their ideas.

In the early 1990s, as the peace process developed through contacts between John Hume and Gerry Adams and between the British and Irish governments, and as the loyalists tried to coordinate their response through the creation of the Combined Loyalist Military Command, Magee stepped up his attempts to persuade the paramilitaries to become involved in negotiations. These contacts involved considerable time commitments and emotional and physical strain. As part of his developing web of personal contacts, Magee opened a channel to the British government by drawing in the Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh, Robin Eames, who eventually met loyalist representatives himself and was able to provide direct assurances that the British government was not doing a deal with the IRA behind unionists' backs. From 1992 Magee established regular contact with the newly elected Irish taoiseach, Albert Reynolds (1932–2014), mostly through Reynolds's adviser Martin Mansergh, eventually leading to direct meetings between Reynolds and loyalists. Magee frequently spoke with Reynolds in informal contexts, describing loyalist attitudes, concerns and expectations, and considerable trust and mutual respect developed between them. Paragraph 5 of the Downing Street declaration (15 December 1993), which stated that reunification would not come about without the consent of a majority of the inhabitants of Northern Ireland and listed rights guaranteed under the peace settlement, was drafted for Reynolds in response to Magee's account of loyalist demands. (Some loyalists expressed suspicion of Magee's contacts with Dublin to his face.)

From mid 1992, Magee made it public that he was negotiating with loyalists (though he did not disclose the content of their discussions). He used the media to promote the peace process, stating repeatedly that loyalists would consider a ceasefire if republicans declared one; this helped to reassure loyalists (and the wider protestant public) that their concerns were being addressed, to keep up a sense of momentum even when discussions had stalled, and thereby (Magee hoped) to make loyalists more responsive to his pleas to withdraw threats against the so-called 'pan-

nationalist front'. Magee's activities drew suspicion from many people (including sections of the presbyterian church), who complained that Magee was turning himself into a loyalist media spokesman and that his meetings with loyalists, and statements that loyalist violence would end if republican violence ended, gave them undeserved legitimacy. Magee later spoke of being ostracised by some churchmen, of feelings of extreme isolation and of fearing at times that he was indeed being used by the paramilitaries; after the Greysteel massacre of 30 October 1993 (when UDA gunmen killed eight patrons in a catholic-owned pub in Co. Londonderry) and the Loughinisland massacre of 18 June 1994 (when UVF members killed six patrons in a Co. Down pub), Magee seriously considered breaking off his paramilitary contacts. The IRA ceasefire (31 August 1994) was preceded by several attacks on loyalists, including the killing of Smallwoods; at this time Magee played a vital role in restraining loyalists and securing official assurances that a deal had not been done at their expense.

Recognition and last years After the loyalist ceasefire (13 October 1994), the full extent of Magee's activities became known, and he was widely hailed as a hero of the peace process, receiving the Tipperary Peace Prize award for 1995 jointly with Mansergh and Fr Alec Reid (1931–2013), a catholic priest who engaged in similar peace initiatives with republicans and to whom Magee is often compared. Some loyalists nicknamed Magee 'Reverend Ceasefire'. He addressed peace groups in the republic, and continued to call for action on prisoner releases and funds for the economic development of loyalist communities.

After retirement from the ministry in 1995, Magee became an Ireland Fund research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Conflict in the University of Ulster at Coleraine, a post which he retained until 2000. He continued to act as a mediator for loyalists, but had limited success both because of the intractability of some of the internal loyalist feuds involving Billy Wright (qv) and Johnny Adair, and because Magee's highly visible interaction with catholic and republican groups and his being fêted in the republic as a peacemaker led some loyalists to regard him with suspicion and subject him to virtual ostracism. In 1996 Magee complained that he was one of several individuals targeted in a black propaganda campaign by hardline unionists opposed to the peace process, who wanted loyalist paramilitaries 'to do their dirty work for them' (*Ir. Times*, 2 May 1996). He warned loyalists that returning to violence in response to IRA violence would allow the IRA to dictate their agenda.

Magee became involved in attempts to mediate controversies over Orange/loyalist parades through nationalist-majority areas. In 1997 he was one of the original members of the Northern Ireland Parades Commission, seen as representing loyalist concerns (though he stated that he spoke only as an individual). Magee resigned after eight months as he felt uncomfortable with enforcing decisions (he saw mediation as his forte) but rejoined the commission in March 2000, remaining a member until the beginning of 2006. He was created MBE in 1997 and OBE in 2004; in the latter year he received an ESB/Rehab People of the Year award.

Magee's last years were overshadowed by the deaths of his eldest son, Royston (June 2005), and his wife (March 2007), the latter being swiftly followed by his own diagnosis with Parkinson's disease. He died in Belfast on 31 January 2009, and was widely mourned as a key peacemaker. The sociologist John Brewer lists Magee as one of several examples of how peace initiatives by religious believers tend to come from maverick individuals rather than official church structures, and of a type of 'denominational' religious peacemaker (whose effectiveness rests on credibility with one's own side) which some commentators unduly neglect in favour of 'ecumenical' peacemakers (whose primary focus is on cross-denominational contact). Magee's own summary was: 'What I do is nothing more and nothing less than an extension of my pastoral work' (*Newsletter*, 7 February 2009).

Ir. Times, 11 June 1966; 10 Jan., 7, 22 Mar., 22 May, 22 Oct. 1973; 29 June 1974; 12 Jan., 13 July 1976; 25 Feb. 1978; 3 Oct. 1979; 3, 4 June, 2 Sept., 18 Nov., 12, 22 Dec. 1981; 20 Apr. 1982; 22 Sept. 1984; 24 June 1985; 23 June 1992; 21 Jan. 1993; 18 May, 10 June, 28 Sept., 27 Oct., 5 Nov., 13 Dec. 1993; 9 June, 15 July, 29, 31 Aug., 2 Sept., 14 Oct., 9 Nov., 1, 29 Dec. 1994; 16 Feb., 20, 30 Dec. 1995; 6 May, 19 July, 30 Aug., 12, 16 Oct. 1996; 24 Feb., 27 Mar., 17 June, 7 July, 28 Oct., 20 Dec. 1997; 21 Feb., 18, 20 July 1998; 4 Mar., 25 Aug. 2000; 12 June 2004; 3, 7 Feb. 2009; W. Desmond Bailie et al, *A history of congregations in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1610–1982* (1982); Alexander Hanna, *These three hundred and forty years of witness: an historical outline of Dundonald Presbyterian Congregation 1645–1985...* (1985) (with introduction by Revd Roy Magee); *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 Feb., 10 June, 2 Sept., 5 Oct. 1995; 4 Mar., 2 May 1996; 2, 3, 5, 7 Feb. 2009; Alwyn Thomson (ed.), *Faith in Ulster* (1996), 78–9; Peter Taylor, *Loyalists* (1999); Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland* (2001); Alf McCreary, *Nobody's fool: the life of Archbishop Robin Eames* (2004), 182–4; Henry McDonald and Jim Cusack, *UDA: inside the heart of loyalist terror* (2004); David Little (ed.), *Peacemakers in action: profiles of religion in conflict resolution* (2007) (includes interview material); *Belfast Newsletter*, 3, 5 Feb. 2009; *Ir. News*, 3, 5, 7 Feb. 2009; *Independent* (London), 10 Feb. 2009; *Sunday Independent*, 15 Feb. 2009; John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins and Francis Teeney, *Religion, civil society and peace in Northern Ireland* (2011); Tipperary Peace Convention, www.tipperarypeace.ie (accessed Oct. 2014)