

Williamson man writes to expose plight of Irish

Seeks to reveal abuses by rulers

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

WILLIAMSON — Recalling a visit to a tough, working-class Catholic community in Strabane, Northern Ireland, Michael F. Larson remembered that when as he sat in a pub, he noticed scars on the arms of middle-aged housewives whose sleeveless dresses revealed a dangerous past.

"The scars were as long as your finger, and were from bullet wounds," Larson said. "These women had gone out with their husbands at night and ambushed British patrols."

Larson — a United Methodist whose ancestors include mostly Irish Protestants — probably knows more about the strained life of Catholics in Northern Ireland than do many U.S. Irish Catholics.

A 40-year-old father and husband from Williamson, Larson has spent a great deal of his free time researching Northern Ireland and writing letters about the conflict to various newspapers here and abroad. He traveled to Northern Ireland for three-week stints in 1989 and 1990.

Civil strife has claimed more than 2,600 lives in Northern Ireland since 1969. Yet, just as many people still do in this country, Larson used to perceive Northern Ireland as a hotbed of religious warfare where "terrorists" made life miserable for everyone.

In particular, Larson knew little about why many Northern Irish Catholics supported violent means to achieve reunification of the country with the southern Irish Republic.

"The IRA was always 20 people in the back of the pub somewhere," Larson said of his former perception of the Irish Republican Army, one of several outlawed political/military groups in the British-ruled region.

The IRA supports unity with the republic, and is opposed by several "loyalist" organizations and paramilitary groups.

Loyalists, most of whom are Protestant, support continued British rule, whereas nationalists, mostly Catholics, support unity with the rest of Ireland. The allegiances of both factions are divided among groups that espouse positions ranging from support to condemnation of violence and/or use of political means to achieve their objectives.

A hunger strike that led to the death of such imprisoned IRA members as Bobby Sands in 1981 convinced Larson that there was more to what these various "terrorists" were doing than what was being reported by U.S. media.

"This was something different," he said of the strikes. "You don't expect criminals to be doing this."

One letter Larson circulated to about 30 newspapers here and in Ireland helped to resolve a perilous security situation in a nationalist Belfast neighborhood. Larson wrote that he had videotaped an unpatrolled road to prove that loyalist gunmen who used it could continue assassinating Catholics in the area as they had done in the months preceding his visit.

Eventually, the efforts of Larson and other letter writers resulted in increased security patrols on the road, he said, pointing out that the Division Two of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Rochester named him Man of the Year in 1991 for his campaign.

Those U.S. newspapers to which he writes often irritate Larson because they constantly portray the conflict in Northern Ireland as one rooted in religious differences. He asserted that political and economic suppression of working-class Catholics, not religious squabbles, fuels the bloodshed.

Lest readers get the impression that Larson now spouts pro-IRA propaganda, he refrains from voicing unqualified support for the reunification of Ireland. Indeed, he noted that he reviews each letter he writes about Northern Ireland by asking himself, "Is this something you'd say on Shankill Road?" a staunchly loyalist neighborhood in Belfast, Northern Ireland's capital.

And Larson makes an effort to understand the feelings and beliefs of



Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor
Michael F. Larson relaxes with his family (from left) Colleen, 7, Debbie, Kevin, 2, and Betsy, 4, in their Williamson home. Larson has spent a great deal of his free time researching the strained life of Catholics in Northern Ireland, writing letters about the conflict to various newspapers here and abroad.

the loyalist side. He recalled a conversation with an Irish Protestant who reluctantly joined the Ulster Defense Regiment, which has since reformed into the Royal Irish Regiment of the British forces.

"He said, 'I'm involved with the UDR because I have to be at work,'" Larson remembered, adding that before joining the group the man had repeatedly been passed over for promotions at his company in favor of UDR members.

Many of Larson's efforts to highlight the tragic situation in Northern Ireland are inspired by the monthly *Northern Ireland Human Rights Review*, published by the Philadelphia-based organization American Protestants for Truth about Ireland.

Founded by Rachel Hoffman, a Lutheran of German descent, APTI

spearheads the little-known work of a number of non-Catholic U.S. citizens to publicize the consequences of British rule in Northern Ireland.

In particular, APTI wants it known that the British regularly and systematically abuse the civil rights of both nationalists and loyalists in Northern Ireland, Hoffman said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Such human-rights organizations as Amnesty International have pointed out the lack of civil liberties in the region, only to be ignored by the U.S. press and government, she said.

"If you're concerned about human rights, you should be concerned about Northern Ireland," commented Hoffman, who likened her interest to that of U.S. citizens concerned about South Africa. "You don't have to be an Irish Catholic," she added.

Cincinnati archbishop to speak in Corning

CORNING — Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, Ohio, will be the guest speaker at the annual All Saints Academy Gala, which is scheduled for Saturday, March 27, at the Corning Hilton Inn.

The banquet will begin with cocktails at 6 p.m., followed by dinner at 7 p.m. The archbishop will speak immediately after the meal.

Archbishop Pilarczyk is former president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. According to Father William V. Spilly, pastor of the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, the Cincinnati archbishop was invited to speak at the All Saints affair because he is a vociferous proponent of Catholic-school education.

Ticket prices for the gala are \$40 each and may be ordered by calling 607/936-9234. All proceeds will go toward operating expenses at the academy, a Southern Tier cluster school for grades K-8, located at 158 State St.

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