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SAIDIE PATTERSON

Saidie Patterson, one of the great women of Ireland, a staunch Methodist and fighter for Moral Re-Armament and a friend of our family for 35 years, has just died. When I interviewed Irish Nobel Peace Prize winner Betty Williams and asked her if she knew Saidie Patterson, she responded, "You mean 'our Saidie'". For Saidie was regarded as the mother of the women's peace movement in Northern Ireland. As Chairman of the Women Together movement she led a march of 50,000 women through the Protestant and Catholic areas of the city. Saidie, a Protestant, said on that occasion, "The last time I walked up the Shankill, the Catholic area, with Catholics was in the early 30s when we were marching to the workhouse for bread and some of us were in our bare feet. Today we walked up the Shankill not as Protestants or Catholics but as children of the King of Kings."

She was referring to her lifelong battle for the women textile workers. Born in a working class family in Belfast in 1906 in a house she lived in all her life, Saidie had to go to work in the local linen mills at the age of 12 when her mother died and she was left to look after her sick father and six brothers and sisters. She helped organize the women textile workers and led some of their historic strikes, became the first woman official in the Transport and General Workers Union and later the first woman chairman of the Northern Ireland Labour Party.

Receiving an honorary degree in 1977 she reminded her audience what life was like in those early days when textiles was one of the main industries employing 100,000, mostly women. "We were plentiful and cheap, she said. "The working week was one of 55 hours and many a time we worked 60; and no overtime was paid. A holiday was regarded as a lay-off without pay." Women, she told the university audience, worked until 6 at night, babies were often born perhaps two hours later the same evening and the women had to be back at work within 48 hours or lose their jobs. Children of 11 went three days to school and three to work. "We who produced the finest linen in the world had to be content with the newspapers on our tables, too poor to buy what we produced. Often we slept on sheets made from flour bags."

Out of such injustice a passion was born in Saidie which was never extinguished. A visit to the Moral Re-Armament conference center in Switzerland, however, transformed her militant but bitter fight for the workers into an all-embracing commitment to bridge the differences between all people and answer hatred everywhere.

For her subsequent work to bring Catholics and Protestants together she was given five international awards. But she was also attacked. During one rally, when she was already in her seventies, she was beaten

up but saved by Catholic women. She was in hospital for months with an injured spine, but all the time enlisting, as she put it, converts for the cause. "Isn't it amazing," she observed, "how Protestants and Catholics share one another's blood on the transfusion table." She wrote me from hospital, "My daily experience is that the Holy Spirit is uniting humanity through men and women who listen and obey. I believe Ireland will be used to take God's answer to the world."

When Saidie was given the first World Methodist Peace Award, the citation stated, "She has sat with the men of violence and dissuaded them from bombing and shooting." At the very moment the TV cameras were filming her reaction to the award the news came in that her great-nephew had been gunned down in an IRA ambush. "The news made my blood run cold," she said, "but I prayed that bitterness would not enter my heart. I was more determined than ever to continue the work for peace." Later that night she said on television, "Young man, you who killed someone dear to me today have done a terrible thing. But there is no bitterness, only sadness in my heart. Nor do I want anyone in Northern Ireland to react with bitterness. We have enough of that."

When the Pope visited Ireland, Saidie was one of those who helped collect half a million Protestant signatures urging him to visit the North. When she took the signatures to the Papal Nuncio she was invited to speak at the International Vigil for Peace and Reconciliation to be held in the Pope's honor in Dublin's St. Patrick's Cathedral. She said at the Vigil, "Which one of you here tonight picked your parents? Why then do we battle about our origins?" Describing the occasion later, she said, "I had a long talk with the Good Lord. He told me what to say. I started by asking if everybody there that night were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you and me. I told them it was one thing to pray during a crisis but it is another thing so to live that it does not happen again." She received 800 letters after her address.

Even in her late seventies, crippled with arthritis, hampered by her injuries, and walking on crutches, she would be out touring the countryside, attending four or five meetings a week, particularly with young people. "I'm all right from the neck up," she would joke. Indeed, her pithy remarks, Saidieisms as they were called, were her trademark. To the male trade unionists she would say, "If the men would pass more pubs and fewer resolutions we'd be a good deal better off." One of her last pieces of advice, on bigotry, "Leave it aside. It went out with hobble skirts and button boots."

Mother Teresa said that Saidie had kept her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as irrevocably as any nun. David Bleakley, a former cabinet

minister in Northern Ireland and Saidie's biographer, said at her funeral, "An Ireland full of Saidie Patterson's would be an island at peace."

For KBOO Public Affairs, this is Michael Henderson