'There are some days I can't believe how well I actually feel when I look back on just what happened and how close I was to death.

It was always going to be emotional for Rev David McMillan when he stared into the eyes of the men who saved his life.

There followed a simple "thank-you" - two words David had been waiting more than a year to say, and two words which meant so much to him and to the Dublin Airport medics who kept him alive.

"What else do you say?" he told the Belfast Telegraph. "Without them I wouldn't be here and it's great to finally meet them all in person again."

Rev. McMillan, minister at Armagh Free Presbyterian Church, had been looking forward to travelling on a missionary trip to Uganda in April 2018, but had barely made it through the front door of the airport when disaster struck. As he retraced those steps earlier that month, finally heading back to Africa over a year into his recovery from the cardiac arrest which nearly ended his life, he was delighted to spend a little time catching up with the airport medics who had rushed to his aid.

It was on April 23, 2018 David and travelling companion Alastair Hamilton, CEO of Invest NI and treasurer of the mission board of the Free Presbyterian Church, had been looking forward to their trip to Uganda. But recalling the day, Rev. McMillan said he knew something wasn't quite right as he walked through the door of Terminal One, and four hours after taking unwell, the 52-year-old minister was undergoing a double bypass at the Mater Hospital in Dublin.

"I was carrying two suitcases and had a backpack. I remember I just didn't feel very well and I think holding the cases had put a lot of exertion on my heart, though looking back I hadn't been feeling too well for a good while before that. As I looked around, everything went out of focus and I collapsed. I don't remember hitting the floor. I went out very quickly."

His friend Alastair stepped in to provide immediate assistance by giving CPR and his quick thinking was followed by the swift reactions of paramedics at Dublin Airport who brought David back to life using a defibrillator.

"I remember we'd got separated from our other travelling companions, fellow Free Presbyterian ministers Rev Ian Harris and Rev John Gray. They both told me afterwards they thought I was gone when they caught up with us. My body was lifeless. They saw me at my worst and I know by the way they talked to me they really didn't think I would make it. I think I was out cold for about 20 minutes," said David. "I have no idea what was going on in that time. The next thing I remember was coming round in the back of an ambulance and hearing Brendan Conway, the paramedic, calling out my name and telling me not to close my eyes. It took a few minutes for me to realise what was happening. But after that I remember everything else, right up until they wheeled me into the operating theatre at the Mater Hospital for open heart surgery."

The operation lasted five hours. "I know Alastair stayed with me in the ambulance and at the hospital until I went to theatre. I spoke to him constantly throughout and he was a wonderful help," said David.

A week in hospital followed the emergency operation before Rev McMillan was able to return home to Armagh to start his long road to full recovery.

"I had to take four months off," he said. "In September I started back with a phased return, taking morning worship and nothing more than that, just to ease myself back in. I stepped up with some home visits in the community and by harvest time I was almost back at full steam and feeling great. Doctors told me to reduce stress levels, don't overdo things. They said my body had been through a traumatic experience, but my thoughts are with those who had to watch what was happening as well."

Now firing on all cylinders again, Rev McMillan was delighted to finally make his mission trip to Uganda, spending a week in Africa earlier this month.

"I thank the Lord that I've made such a good recovery," said David. "I'm feeling very well, in fact there are days I can't believe how well I actually feel when I look back on what happened and how close I was to death. The doctors and medical staff are all very pleased with the progress I've made and at my last check-up everything was first-class. A heart echo just before Christmas confirmed my heart was healthy and strong, and of course I'm indebted, and my family is indebted, to everyone who came to my aid that day."

Since returning home to Armagh last April, David has had two missions to fulfil. One was to finally make that journey to Uganda and the other to meet up with the people who saved his life. When he found himself back at Dublin Airport earlier this month, again in the company of Alastair Hamilton, he took time out ahead of his flight to meet the heroes.

"I'd tried a few times to set up a meeting, but it was difficult to get everyone in the same place at the same time. Work rotas and schedules made it impossible. But I'm delighted everything finally came together and I've now got to do it," he said. The meeting was arranged by Mr Hamilton and Gerry Keogh, chief fire officer at Dublin Airport, the man who was responsible for setting up the defibrillator programme in 2003.

"It was lovely to meet them all again in much better circumstances and I was able to hold the defibrillator used to save me. That was all a little emotional. I'm delighted it worked out that I got to thank the team personally for saving my life." Paramedic Brendan Conway was on hand for a chat and a coffee and David and Alastair presented him and the medical team with a small gift of appreciation.

"I'm told 28 lives have now been saved at the airport since they installed the defibrillator, and so far just three people have been back in person to say thank-you. But I felt it was something I had to do. We had a good long chat and they were able to fill in some of the details of the day I took ill."

After hearing the details, Rev McMillan is convinced God was on his side through the whole experience.

"As a Christian, I believe in the providence of God and the truth is, God's hand is in control of every detail of our lives. The story of what happened to me that day is a story of the Lord's providential care. The paramedics told me I couldn't have collapsed in a better place! Their medical station was nearby and when it arrived the ambulance could get right to the door of the airport, so no time was wasted. When I got to the hospital, the theatre was free, and even though consultant cardiologist Jonathan McGuinness was due to go on holiday that day, he stayed around to operate on me. He told my wife Roberta afterwards all the hard work had been done at the airport. Had the medics and Alastair not acted so quickly, he would have had nothing left to operate on."

Since the cardiac arrest almost claimed his life, Rev McMillan has been under doctor's orders to take things easy. "It's certainly opened my eyes to how precious life is," he said. "I've done a lot of soul-searching over the past year, a lot of praying. It's all emphasised the value of life, how precious time is and how we must all try to use it as wisely as we can. That's what I've tried to do. Take my time to enjoy my family, enjoy my life. The Lord still has work for me to do and has given me a bit longer on Earth to do His work. With God's help, strength and grace, I have been brought through a very dark and trying time. And of course I couldn't have got through everything this past year without the love and support of my wife Roberta, my children Ruth and Matthew and their spouses William and Emma. I'm just so pleased to be around to see their lives progress and be there for the precious moments still to come."

A mere 463 days late, Rev McMillan took his seat on the plane alongside Alastair to head to Uganda on July 3 so that he could complete his other mission, the trip to visit Emmanuel Christian School, which is run by the mission board of the Free Presbyterian Church. A trip it looked like he would never make.

"I owe so much to my friends Alastair Hamilton, Rev Ian Harris and Rev John Gray for all they did to look after me when I took ill. I will never forget what they did for me and my family. The love and support of my

congregation in Armagh was also such a blessing to us as a family, and also the support of the wider Free Presbyterian denomination. And not least, the medical care I received from the wonderful people at Dublin Airport and in the Mater Hospital."

. . . Gleaned from Belfast Telegraph
By Marl Bain - July 25, 2019