“I really feel that John Brown University is one of the best kept secrets in the whole world, and I wanted to take that message to the world.” –Bill Stevenson.

With these words, Bill Stevenson, John Brown University’s Director of International Admissions and Student Services, forged the beginnings of a vibrant relationship between John Brown University and Northern Ireland, a vision that has provided many JBU students the opportunity to both study and minister to his homeland. A native Irishman, Stevenson endeavored to establish a connection between John Brown University and homeland in the early ‘90s. In 1994, Stevenson took a JBU missions team to the Emerald Isle. Since that maiden voyage, John Brown University has sent a missions team to Ireland every year but one, the year in which they focused on establishing an Irish study abroad experience. By 1998, the opportunity arose for John Brown University to expand its connection with Ireland through the establishment of a unique study abroad experience. The first study abroad opportunity in Ireland was a summer study trip during which JBU students studied six weeks for a total of nine credit hours.

As both the Irish missions trip and Summer Studies programs continued to mature, Stevenson began to lay the foundation for a semester-long study abroad opportunity for the students of JBU. In the fall of 2005, this dream became reality as the first semester-long trip to Ireland brought students to Dundrum, a sea-side village in County Down. They chose this location largely for its contemplative setting and its familiarity, having been the location for the Irish missions team for several summers. As the Irish studies program developed, great importance was placed on creating an “authentic Irish experience” for the students. For this reason, Irish professors were sought to teach the students in an Irish setting so that the taught subjects would carry a distinct Irish flavor. As the program became more established over time, the course options expanded to include topics such as Irish Politics and Society, Introduction to Philosophy, and Evangelical Theology, among others. In 2008, the Irish studies program moved its base from Dundrum to Belfast and settled into Lakeside Manor, the current campus for the studies trips. Lakeside Manor sits on five beautiful acres with a lake to the back of the property, and is conveniently placed between two bus stops, one of which can transport students into the heart of Belfast within 10-15 minutes.

Since the start of John Brown University’s programs in Ireland, the International Office has ushered approximately 1,500 JBU students into Ireland, including choir members, sports teams, mission teams, undergraduates and graduate students. Stevenson’s wife, Melissa believes that “God is blessing the work of our hands, and doing so before our eyes”. The now flourishing program is giving JBU students a vision of the Kingdom in ways consistent with the heart of Christ and modeled by the dream of the University’s founder.

Cathedral Choir in Ireland, late 2000s
Side by side with the fact of a great Saviour and a salvation wrought out for us at the cost of a bloodstained cross, Saint Paul repeatedly drove home to the hearts of men the fact that there was a government over us, and to that government we owed the obligation of absolute allegiance, and that there was a world around us, and in the fertile harvest fields of that world, we all were everyday sowing wheat and tares. Saint Paul warned against the traditions of men and science falsely so-called, and begged us to remember that false prophets would arise, and that Satan’s kingdom would seek by manifestation or personalities real enough and apparent enough to, if possible, deceive the angels—that by these manifestations and individualities and personalities seek to seduce us and destroy us.

A famous painting reveals Christ as standing in the carpenter shop to stretch his arms—seeking a moment of relaxation from the toil of the carpenters shop, and the outstretched arms by the light which flooded through the window made a cross on the wall behind him. Over all life there is the Cross! To turn to run from the Cross is to run from life.

Excerpt from “Sharks, Gulls, and Little Fishes”