

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21st CENTURY

A week for seeking new ecumenical inspiration on Iona, September 10-16, 2005

A report by Chris McCartney, Religious Society of Friends

I arrived on the island of Iona saying “Isn’t it great that I experience God in silence, in my Quaker tradition and that others can experience Him in their ways,” thinking myself so open-minded, so generous, so ecumenical. How wrong I was, because the implication is that those other ways were only for other people and that they had nothing to reveal to me about the majesty of God.

I shared with some at the time how it felt difficult to be in the unfamiliar forms of worship used at the Abbey. Perhaps I was less experienced than most, but I was not content to be an observer in worship, because to hold back is to not worship. To one used to quiet worship, led by the Holy Spirit, the very basic forms were a barrier – song, prayers that were not spontaneous, responsive psalms, communion. Yet, somewhere in the intimate, vulnerable act of worship, God invited me to go beyond to the unfamiliar, the difficult, the troubling, to meet Him in new ways. The small, familiar God I had been content to experience up to that point was magnified before my eyes in those Abbey services and I still can’t get enough of it.

And it was through these changed eyes that I learned about you and your traditions and listened to the honesty of our speakers as they described the highs and lows of the ecumenical movement and their own part in it. I heard the call to unity in our sessions and our conversations, and as we lived in community, but also and more powerfully from the still small voice which whispered that it was the route of my own journey with God not just a pleasant detour.

It sounds too simplistic, too childish to say that God is so much vaster than any liturgy, any theology, any tradition, any label, any culture, any difference or division, important as all those are. God doesn't diminish them; He illuminates them with a new sacred Light which allows us to see more clearly what they are and how to respond.

I think back to our experiment with the Quaker tradition of worship sharing. In offering this as a potential gift to the group, to help us find another way of sharing, I learned something very important about the gifts being God's, not mine. At first I was possessive, wanting *our* practice to be in keeping with *my* tradition, and I was upset at seeing it being distorted. But the experience of God prompting me to speak from the silence, just as He does sometimes in Quaker Meeting for Worship, taught me so much about not limiting Him or expecting Him to dance to our tune.

I encountered again and for the first time a God who bigger than my reticence, my personal tastes in worship, even my unbelief. I only scratched the surface of this bit of the journey on Iona, as our group did in its ecumenical journey.

Perhaps a better metaphor is that we only opened the door. And away from that safe, sheltered island, it can be more difficult to remember that we are welcome to cross the thresholds of each other's traditions. No, we are beckoned in by God, invited to meet Him in other places and people, in new and rich ways which deepen our experience of our own traditions and of Him. Who can afford to refuse such an invitation?