

BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21st CENTURY

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

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The best ecumenists are perhaps the most cheeky ones. What happens when a couple of stalwarts of the ecumenical movement decide they want to gather a future generation of ecumenists for a week on a remote Island to see what would happen? Well...in the best tradition of ecumenism they persuade the gullible denominations of Britain and Ireland to send such people, *and pay for them*. Thank God we are sometimes gullible. Without pretence of producing grand documents or schemes, 30 young(ish!) folk from the whole spectrum of denominations were sent to Iona to be together. To listen, to talk, to do the washing-up, to cry, to argue.

This grand scam was plotted jointly between the Society for Ecumenical Studies and the Iona community. That tiny island of Iona, of dramatic vistas, ancient memories and horizontal rain provided the back-drop along with the regular rhythm of worship from the Iona community: owned by everybody and nobody, strange and familiar alike.

The ecumenical movement seems stuck. From the troubles of the World Council of Churches, to local Churches together who have now done the same things for years, where are we going and what are we doing? What does it now mean to be 'Breaking down dividing walls in the 21st Century' – the title of our week? Fr. Bill Henn, of the Gregorian University in Rome, reflected on this stuck-ness, reminding us of some of the great strengths of the ecumenical movement: that it is a search for the will of God, that it goes on in so many different ways in many different levels of Church life and the fact that it can root out and overcome false oppositions we generally take for granted. But equally, it has its weaknesses: its reliance on human effort alone, that different bits of the ecumenical movement compete with one another, that it excludes many larger and more growing

communities, that agreements on paper often don't filter through into our lived realities and the fact that new divisions emerge as fast as old ones are removed (as doctrinal differences from the Reformation are overcome, we now argue about issues of gender and sexuality).

So many of the things which divide us, seem actually to be nothing much to do with theology. Alison Eliot OBE, former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, reflected on her experiences travelling the world in her moderatorial year. It seems amusing to think that in South Africa the new, post-apartheid Uniting Church struggled to come to terms with issues such as what the appropriate uniform for women in the church should be. We might laugh, but our own petty foibles must seem just as odd to those outside, I'm sure. Alison also reminded us that we all have treasures in our walled gardens to share with one another: how do we overcome the walls that we might truly see those treasures? And of course, one person's treasure, is another person's clutter.

Ecumenism is not simply about churches and their petty disagreements. Rather, God's judgement is of the whole world, and we are called to "act justly, to love tenderly", something in our world of violence and economic oppression we fail in and something Kathy Galloway of the Iona community powerfully reminded us of. Our market led systems are based on a total misunderstanding of what are our *needs* and what are our *wants*. These dividing walls are the concern of God – indeed, when movements such as Make Poverty History arise, they perhaps show the movement of God's Spirit more vitally than any agreed ecumenical text can.

Classical ecumenism frequently does not touch a whole range of vibrant churches, particularly the black majority churches. Garnett Parris of the University of Birmingham spoke vividly of his commitment to black-white Christian fellowship. The rejection of black people from traditional church life in Britain led to the emergence of vibrant new church communities, which now rightly regard many of us with great suspicion. Garnett amused and moved us all, with tales of what happens when groups of black and white Christians experience each other, and each others worship, and are challenged and changed by the experience.

Perhaps it is being challenged and changed that is the real gift of ecumenism, and was the real gift of our week on Iona. Traditional ecumenical problems received a new perspective. To see folk from traditions that do not traditionally celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, moved to tears in a Catholic Mass is poignant indeed. Equally, to face the anger of those felt excluded by our Reformed practice of sharing the bread and wine with

the congregation remaining seated comes as a shock. Why, you might wonder? To gather around an altar and receive a blessing as part of the worshipping community is a powerful sign of both our unity and our brokenness. To be asked simply to pass the bread and wine on to the person sitting next to you if you don't want it, in comparison, rather lacks a sense of hospitality.

It is in the intangible 'something' of community, that we are met and transformed by Christ. It is perhaps easy to forget in the excitement of a week away with new and stimulating people that ecumenism has always worked that way. I wish someone would write a history of the ecumenical movement based on the friendships that developed and empowered it. We have more ecumenical texts and agreed statements than I will ever probably get around to reading, but behind each and every one of them lies real and living relationships; friendships lived in joy and sorrow. It is that which has always, and will always, be the vehicle by which we more closely become the Body of Christ.

So did we, in the course of our week, find a new vision for the ecumenical movement? No, I can't say that we did. But it did give us indications of where it might be going. The trouble is, I'm not entirely sure I like where it might be going. I have been brought up and immersed in the URC and the ecumenical movement for so long it is probably unhealthy. But I do believe passionately in visible, organic unity. I do believe that such a vision corresponds to Christ's great prayer for unity amongst his disciples. But yet, perhaps in our ecumenical journey, that vision will turn out to be only a temporary one, perhaps that which we consider our treasure in the URC actually contains more clutter than we are willing to admit. For many on our Iona week, the joy, the excitement, the challenge and the change was about sharing our treasures with one another. For some, this was a new experience. But there was a very strong sense that those treasures must not be lost by trying to create something bigger and better, that would be only a pale reflection of the treasures that had existed before.

Equally, traditional tensions showed themselves real and present. What is more important, the search for unity among the churches, or the search for unity justice and peace among the nations of the world? Do we have to choose I wonder? Are the two not in reality actually the same? The ecumenical movement has for too long become split between the 'faith and order' folk worrying over seemingly esoteric matters of doctrine, and the 'life and witness' folk working on more practical matters. Why on earth, we wondered at the end of our week together, are the two so often seen as an either/or?

The ecumenical vision is being, and must be, 're-formed'. We in our tradition should know a thing or two about being 're-formed', discerning God's will for us today and tomorrow, and allowing that to shape who and what we are and do. And yet, being re-formed is painful and troubling. There were moments in our community together on Iona in which I was hurting, and hurting hugely, as things I consider treasures given to me by the ecumenical movement itself seemed to be being shattered in front of my eyes. And yet, this was happening in the midst of a week deeply moving where real love and friendship was a lived experience. Equally, unity too, in the midst of that which was painful, was embodied amongst us. Ecumenism is at times a disorientating and confusing experience. When God is leading us on into new and strange places, when God is calling us to new and re-formed visions of unity, it is perhaps not surprising that it is both painful and disorientating. God has this habit, you see...

It is a good thing that ecumenists are still cheeky. It is a good thing that denominations are still gullible. For what emerges is profound, challenging and of God, when we allow ourselves to be formed more truly into the body of Christ, a true community of joy and pain, excitement and fear. We are and will always be called to walk the way of unity. Let us thank God that we will always be called to re-form ourselves and our visions in the process.