

BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21st CENTURY

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

A report by Christopher Woods, Church of Ireland

This report first appeared in the Church of Ireland Gazette in October 2006

There is a hymn, little-known in Ireland, by the Victorian Scottish hymn writer, George Matheson which encapsulates the overwhelming mood and atmosphere of the recent week-long Ecumenical Conference ‘*Breaking down dividing walls in the 21st Century*’, held at Iona Abbey:

*Gather us in, thou Love that fillest all
Gather our rival faiths within thy fold,
Rend each man's temple-veil and bid it fall,
That we may know that thou hast been of old*

It was highly appropriate, then, that this hymn was sung during the final (and very uplifting) Agape Communion on the evening before we all departed the confines of Iona to face our individual church communities, having been inspired by the week of discussions, bible-studies, lengthy conversations and deepening friendships.

The conference, jointly organised by the Iona Community and the Society for Ecumenical Studies was primarily intended to seek new methods of discovering what it is to be ecumenical in the twenty-first century and how such notions might continue to be applied practically in the future of the ministry and mission of the Church.

We were fortunate that the regular weekly pattern of Iona Abbey was in place to frame and structure our daily regimen of prayer, work tasks (cleaning etc), recreation (including pilgrimage) and social activity. Added to this were interspersed our conference papers and small group seminars. The keynote speakers included the Revd Kathy Galloway, Leader of the Iona Community, Dr Alison Elliot OBE, until recently, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Dr Garnet Parris from the Centre for Black Theology at the University of Birmingham, Fr William Henn, OFM Cap, from the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome and an additional paper from the Revd Dr Ian Bradley, Reader in Practical Theology at the University of St Andrews. Each one gave a stimulating talk on differing facets of the *ecumenical movement* or on matters which might bolster the future thereof. For the small group seminars, the hub of our discussions centred on verses from Ephesians, chapters 1,2,4 & 6. Scriptural reflection from a variety of perspectives added great depth to our understanding of what '*unity in Christ*' might mean for His followers of the future.

In his paper, Fr William Henn charted the strengths and weaknesses of the ecumenical movement to date, highlighting the fact that ecumenism necessarily involves shared discipleship and that the common desire for visible unity is a gospel value. John 17: 21 '*that they may all be one*' was quoted as a point of reference. Yet, in recent years, Fr Henn pointed out; the ecumenical cause had become a disappointment, perhaps lacking the zeal and commitment which it had contained initially. 'The production of documents does not create unity', Fr Henn stated, perhaps critically appraising the many ecumenical documents which gather dust on bookshelves; the fruits of their labours barely seen in the mission of the contemporary Church.

The Revd Kathy Galloway focussed her paper on Micah 6:8 '*what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God*'. She directed our attention to the voices of the marginalised and how any future ecumenical mission must take account of the full nature of the human community: to give a voice to the voiceless, to take responsibility for the poverty which has been inflicted upon people by dominant Western

capitalism, and the advantages and disadvantages of the globalisation of market economy. Her arguments were well thought-through and very pertinent.

Dr Bradley outlined four stages of gradual development for both inter-church and inter-faith activity: *dialogue, discovery, assimilation and integration*. He highlighted the fact that members of different church communities and faith groups face similar life issues and lead parallel existences but often do not grasp this truth about others because the chance for integration is rare. He also pointed to the fact that in British culture, members of the Islamic Faith are much more assiduous and devout in their religious practices, whereas Christians have become somewhat disaffected and disinterested. Dr Bradley's particular penchant is the spiritual vocation of the Monarchy and in this vein he asserted the very positive nature of the Monarchy in respect of the continued spiritual health of the British nation.

The conference papers and seminars gave each of us challenging food for thought. It was, however, at moments when people were willing to listen to each other and share honest experiences; to laugh together and shed tears of pain together, that gaps in the 'dividing walls' began to emerge, and the integrity and beauty of another tradition suddenly shone through. This was very much the case for just about all of the participants of the conference. To see members of the Salvation Army moved to tears at the celebration of a Roman Catholic Mass, to talk with members of the Religious Society of Friends about how powerful it was for them to be present at an Agape Communion, to witness people of all and every Christian denomination receive a cross of ash on their forehead from a Presbyterian Minister during a Liturgy of Penitence, was the proof of the success of the conference. Such experiences within the safe and sacred surroundings of the Isle of Iona were testimonies to the possibilities for the future of Christian unity. With continued prayer and hard practical work and witness, these possibilities could be realised within the confines of our own communities of faith and devotion. Barriers could be broken down and dividing walls smashed if we hold fast to the faith of Christ; for it is Christ who wished *'that they may all be one'*.