

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 Martin Conway, President of the Society

This week, arranged by the Iona Community and the Society for Ecumenical Studies for 35 younger people, mostly nominated by their churches as member bodies of Christians Together in Britain & Ireland, proved a remarkably creative and rewarding experience. I feel confident in starting with this generalization in the light of the articles in which 9 of them – so far – have written their impressions and which will be found below. But it was and is no less true for those of us who were responsible for organising it, chiefly Murdoch MacKenzie for the Iona Community and myself for the SfES, and for helping with it, i.e. other members of the Iona Community and their staff.

Alongside the sheer excitement, eagerness and energy that the participants brought to this week, what struck me particularly was the amazing variety of people we were.

Nominations had been invited of persons up to the age of 40. Of the resulting nominees one had recently had his 40th birthday, but we also included two people, in replacement of two nominees dropping out at a late stage, who had themselves applied to Iona and who both brought quite distinctive gifts and skills to the shared adventure. As you will see in the personal articles, it became clear that an intensive week like this, where participants shared in the everyday tasks of washing up and cleaning the bathrooms and toilets, as well as in an all-day pilgrimage round the rain-sodden island, in the three acts of worship open to all comers in Iona's magnificent Abbey each day, let alone the programme of addresses, working groups and plenary discussions that formed the essential heart of the week, allowed for a much deeper exploration alike of our differences as well as of the promise of our essential unity in Christ.. Several of them said that while they had had much experience of meeting people from other churches, they had never had a chance really to get to know other Christians at comparable depth, with much time spent in listening to how each saw a given question or difference 'from inside' his or her own experience and tradition. So there was in the final stages much encouragement to

consider how such a week could be more frequently offered to people of a new generation.

This became all the more unusual and creative in that, out of long discussions in the SfES about the sensitive area of eucharistic discipline, we had finally arranged that the week on Iona should allow for different churches to offer what is distinctive in their tradition in their own preferred way. Thus there were several celebrations of the Catholic Mass - thanks especially to Fr Bill Henn (one of our speakers whose address is below) and a visiting Dutch priest (since we had no Catholic priest among the nominees) - which others could attend, as well as a service of Holy Communion in the Abbey on the Thursday evening as the final event of the week, celebrated by a Church of Scotland minister. One of the Quaker participants paradoxically took grateful note that at the Catholic Masses it had been possible for those not receiving the bread and wine to be given a blessing by the celebrant, whereas in the Church of Scotland service we were all invited to receive the bread and wine from our neighbour on one side, and then pass it on to the neighbour on the other after consuming our share if each of us so chose – but there was nothing for the non-consumers to receive personally apart from the general blessing of the whole congregation at the end !

You will find below the addresses delivered by Dr Alison Elliot, Moderator of the Church of Scotland for 2004-5, and the first lay woman ever to hold that post; by Fr Bill Henn, of the Gregorian University in Rome and a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; and by the Revd Kathy Galloway, Leader at present of the Iona Community. The fourth, no less interesting and helpful at the time, came from the Revd Garnet Parris, Director of the Centre for Black Theology in the University of Birmingham, and a native of Trinidad, whose address developed during the week and is not yet electronically available. After one of the working groups had asked for a brief resume of the history of the ecumenical movement, I tried my hand at one, and later wrote it out as the 'Outline History' you will find below.

In a letter written after she had reported to the Council of the Iona Community, Kathy Galloway tells us that 'it was a pleasure to share in welcoming the event to the Abbey; it was an even greater pleasure to share in the honest and stimulating conversations that were going on everywhere I looked. To have such youthful energy and vision was very inspiring, and made me more hopeful about our ecumenical journeying that I have been for quite a while.'

So we commend these addresses and articles to the wider readership of our SfES website, and look forward to working with the Iona Community again on a – no, not similar, since there will always be an unpredictable variety of actual persons taking part – but a comparable, and hopefully no less exciting and worthwhile week in a year or two's time. Watch this space !