

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

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Previous to my week on Iona I had always been happy to take part in 'ecumenism' - and had helped 180 parishes in our Diocese to invite people from other Christian traditions to join faith-sharing groups in Lent - but I now realise that I had been a spectator, not a participant. The week on Iona taught me the difference. And now I realise there is a real challenge for the Churches in that difference.

The answer is community. Within the Abbey walls we forged it: an unfamiliar place where we gelled together sharing a common life, doing chores together, eating together, praying and worshipping together, relaxing and working together. It was within this context that we invited each other to experience something of our own customs, traditions and faith. It was a safe environment, true; but our exchange required a painful vulnerability, exposing to others what we hold most precious.

Christians sometimes regard the gifts of each other's Churches as something that are "good for others". At Iona, I realised that the sharing of gifts between Christians has to be more intimate than this: we need to experience the true value of what each has. I saw so much of value for my own faith but perhaps my most memorable discovery was the great gift of simplicity and silence from the Quakers. Several Quaker participants invited the group to use their way of worship to help us reflect upon the week. Sitting in silence with friends

from other traditions, inviting the Holy Spirit to inspire us, taught me a lot about prayer and about humility. As each of us felt it appropriate we shared what we felt we were invited to say as a reflection on the week. The depth of sharing was immense. It was, perhaps, the most poignant moment of the week: a sharing of joy and of pain.

Reflecting on Dr Alison Elliot's metaphor of our traditions being like walled gardens, I think of how we are occasionally spectators of each other's gardens; but only rarely do we step inside and experience their beauty. Worse: we usually leave our most precious treasures hidden, while putting on display something less than true to ourselves in "ecumenical services" and the like. We need to move beyond these pleasantries for when we hide our most precious possessions, we miss the opportunity to inspire others through the beauty of our traditions. If we were serious about promoting Christian unity we would be constantly drawn to the traditions of others, seeking further glimpses of the gardens behind the walls.

We will only begin to restore our visible unity when we begin to show our treasures, our most valued gifts. From this will develop an imitation of one another: what has been called a "spiritual emulation". If we share as far as is possible in each other's gifts, we will reach the point where we emulate one another naturally. It is the only real way of drawing closer to the God-given unity we have already been given in Christ.

Churches need to develop the habit of inviting others into their life of faith. Faith-sharing groups - small gatherings of Christians who share the experience of their faith - are the primary agents of this coming together. Communities such as this, with dedication, can achieve what we discovered on Iona; an understanding which goes beyond a mutual respect to the stage where Christians of different traditions emulate one another's gifts.

On Iona there was a sunken walled garden, a metaphor for me of what our denominations can become. Sharing faith and worship together, will sustain each other in mission. If we walk together in our world, and use our gifts together, the beauty we possess will raise up the ground around us. The

treasures we take from within each other's walls will sow their seeds as we take them to our own traditions. The unfamiliar world around us will be beautified by the gifts we possess. As the ground rises our gardens will no longer be walled in; the world can look in and see our beauty and rejoice in our delight.