

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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A group of about 30 people under the age of 40 gathered on Iona, from September 10 -16, to seek fresh inspiration and insight for our life together as Christians. We were there as those sent by our churches, and represented a wide range of traditions and backgrounds. The week was a joint venture of the Society for Ecumenical Studies and the Iona Community, and was some-thing of a new idea, an attempt to find a new energy for the ecumenical vision. As it turned out, what we discovered as if for the first time was the transformative power of community.

Our thinking and conversation throughout the week was led and guided by four speakers, who shared the week fully with us and each of whom offered a unique contribution. Alison Elliot, former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, reflected on the ecumenical models of the past, and their relevance for the future. Fr. Bill Henn, of the Gregorian University in Rome, took a wider view of the progress of the ecumenical movement to date, drawing on his great involvement in and experience of it. Garnett Parris, of the University of Birmingham, spoke of his commitment to black-white Christian partnership, and looked at the 'powers' which confront us as we seek to build bridges towards unity. Kathy Galloway, Leader of the Iona Community, asked us to reflect more widely, and to remember the true character and purpose of ecumenical encounter as being global. Hers was a powerful and timely

reminder to be a Church which engages prophetically with the world's injustice.

Excellent though their input was, it was in discussion, in group work and in our shared life together that we felt most powerfully stirred to renewed commitment to deepening unity. Even at the most mundane level, washing the dishes together after dinner, or cleaning the Abbey showers, we felt the Spirit's prompting to lose our Church's obsessions with what divides and to celebrate the gift of what we share. Beyond that, as we prayed, sang and worshipped together, ate together, went on pilgrimage together, as relationships deepened and friendships grew, we found an increasing depth and richness in our common humanity and our common faith. Even to us, committed to the ecumenical task, these were new and sometimes overwhelming experiences of the God who seeks unity, and of the Christ who prays for it.

As the week went on, this deepened into the sharing of some of the most precious and deeply-held treasures of our respective traditions. In this, too, in the re-discovery of the gifts we would share with our sisters and brothers in faith, there was a joy and wonder which few of us had experienced before.

We all have more work to do. After reflection, we shall need to work out how we 'offer' the wealth of this week to the wider Church. But none of us returned home as we had left it. Iona, again, turned out to be a 'thin' place, a place where the presence and purpose of God felt real and compelling.