

# **BREAKING DOWN DIVIDING WALLS IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

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

***Building Walled Gardens in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - a response to the Conference by Richard Hainsworth, the Church in Wales***

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The CfES conference on Iona, entitled Breaking Down Dividing Walls in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, provided a good opportunity for 'taking the temperature' of the future of the ecumenical movement. Here I want to draw attention to what I see as being the 'mind' of the conference, not necessarily any statements on which it could agree or the points it wished formally to make, but more the underlying assumptions and priorities and the manner in which the conference was conducted informally in and through the relationships formed during it.

## **Participants**

The participants represented a wide range of Denominations, representing a large proportion of the traditions of Western Christianity. Those who came were drawn from all the nations of Britain and Ireland and a few from further afield. The age range was 20-40. Some were in the paid employment of the churches, some of ecumenical bodies, some held voluntary or lay positions of authority or ministry and some were members of congregations. Thus a good cross-section of current and future church life in our context was present.

## Guiding metaphors

Images are important in shaping thinking, especially in new areas of interest and 'formal' ecumenism was new to many of us (this is significant in much of what follows). The conference title provided a central image of 'dividing walls' but this was quickly modified by the first speaker, Alison Elliot. Her address was crucial in setting the terms of much of what followed.

She spoke not only of the danger of walls but also their necessity, saying:

“Talking about this on Iona adds a different twist... We are in the Abbey, lovingly put together again by clergy and masons, jointly constructing, jointly repairing a beautiful building, a solid building. I remember being on Iona twenty years ago on a stormy July evening and watching people streaming to the Abbey to worship and to shelter from the summer hailstones. A sheltering space, a safe space, creative space. More and more, this picture of ecumenical space is shaping our thinking, space where we can come together and learn about each other. Space where the hostility can be quietened. And, for the space to be safe, it needs boundaries.”<sup>1</sup>

She offered the image of the walled garden and this image was returned to frequently, either explicitly or implicitly by various participants.

On this understanding a denomination, tradition or individual religious experience is understood as a garden which needs its walls to give it protection and definition but whose walls are low enough to allow others to look in, or better, to walk within it for a time.

As I will return to, this was the vision of ecumenism shared by most of the participants, a vision of the sharing of traditions and their mutual enriching which did not seek to eradicate the differences or dismantle all the walls that shape identities.

Ian Bradley, who gave perhaps the most controversial and provocative talk of the week, was right to point out the importance of the relationship between religious faith and personal and communal identity. Although I and most of the participants would disagree that a diverse group needs a common, overarching composite identity (as, he argued, Britain 'needs' the Queen, the Union Jack and the Commonwealth), his observations on

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<sup>1</sup>Elliot address p6

the nature of identity in the post-modern West appeared sound. These were that, more and more, people are adopting composite identities to locate themselves within a pluralistic society, for example, “British Asian Muslim” or “Black Welsh Pentecostal”. The key point here is that religious faith is an important aspect of personal and communal identity but it is only one aspect and an aspect held in dialogue with other identity-defining factors.

Rather than Bradley's composite identities, I would rather talk of 'networked identities'. Diverse communities cohere into a series of networks linked by commonalities such as race, geographic location, shared beliefs, values or experiences. Crucially, no *one* identity marker needs to be shared by all individuals for them to function effectively as a community. It is sufficient that they are linked to their nearest neighbours who are in turn linked to others and so on. Although not articulated in these terms, this, I would argue, was the underlying assumption on which the conference based its emerging vision of the ecumenical movement.

This was certainly embodied in the experience of those who took part. It is probably safe to say that there was no one theological question of any depth, even among the most basic ones, that all members and all sending denominations would have agreed on universally, but at the same time each had enough in common with some others for the whole group to bond and share in a powerful fashion.

The conference ended without any agreement on any of the said theological matters. To attempt to have reached such would have been quite against the spirit of the week. However it ended with each of us feeling enriched by our encounter with others' traditions, not only in our understanding and appreciation of each other but significantly in our understanding and appreciation of *our own* tradition. Thus the title 'Breaking Down Dividing Walls' proved to be somewhat inaccurate. In many ways we each rediscovered why we practise our faith as we do (and not as we don't), and in this sense became more aware of our 'walls', of the importance and value of our religious identities, but simultaneously we were made aware of the value of each other's identities, the significance of our differences and the points of connection between the two.

This process appeared to follow the following path.

## **Encountering difference**

Our differences were evident immediately, with the natural starting points being someone's nationality and denomination. This process was for some initially threatening or even wounding, however this did not translate to hostility because of the 'safe space' of the community. It was also enriching, as evidenced particularly in the response of many to the Quaker participants. This encounter was, for most of us, our first with this tradition, a tradition that is radically different in certain ways, from most others present. Much of Quaker thought and practise in relation to sharing and decision-making was spontaneously adopted by the group, showing the way in which traditions may 'cross-pollenate' each other and use each other's insights and gifts.

## **Fellowship**

Our common experience of sharing both our lives together on the island and sharing our own identities, journeys and backgrounds quickly created an unusual level of fellowship, openness and trust that is vital if one is to leave the safe space of one's own 'walled garden' and enter another's, or indeed is one is to be comfortable returning the favour. In this we embodied the fact that a group can unite through its experience of sharing difference without needing a universal statement or vision around which to rally as long as all are willing to share in each others identities with openness and respect. Furthermore this sense of uniting had nothing to do with a discovery that 'we all believe the same thing underneath' because if anything it was becoming clearer that we did not.

## **Diversity in unity**

'Diversity in unity' would be a better summary of what we were experiencing than the more common phrase 'unity in diversity'. As a result of all this, 'Faith and Order Ecumenism' and 'Visible Unity' in the sense of 'Organisational' or 'Institutional Unity' was much lower on the agenda for the large majority (though not all) of those present. Shared, personal experience, common life and common projects, especially in response to Cathy Galloway's call for social justice, were much higher on the horizon for most of us, as may be expected in a post-modern culture that gives priority to the personal, local and concrete and seeks to affirm the 'dignity of difference'.

## **A grass roots emphasis**

As a result, the energy for ecumenism in the future, at least on the basis of this conference, will be drawn from and directed to the grass roots, that is a personal, local and congregational level. While the denominational, national and international aspects of ecumenism were not denigrated or thought insignificant it was felt that frequently decisions taken at such a level were far removed from the concerns and issues of the local level or simply never filtered down to them. One example of this was the failure of the joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement on the atonement to effect much significant strengthening of grass-roots ecumenical relationships, in part at least due to the fact that this process paid little attention to the questions of identity posed by being either Lutheran or Catholic. This is the other side of the coin of our earlier observations about faith and identity. Not only is common belief not required for unity, common belief at the institutional level does not entail unity either.

But most importantly, even members of the more hierarchically ordered ecclesiastical institutions felt that transformation was most likely to occur and to be most valued when it emerged through the experience of personal encounter with difference in a process of mutual sharing and cooperation without the need for formal agreement to be reached.

In short the 'mind of the conference' seemed to be that the role of denominational hierarchies should be to assist in creating the 'safe space' for this local sharing to occur. Ecumenism should not be seen as something that denominations, and their representatives or conference delegates, 'do'. Rather ecumenism is something that denominations need to enable amongst their members.