

## 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

***Walled Gardens and Suitcases - a report by John Sanderson, United Reformed Church in Scotland***

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Put over 30 people from 14 different denominations on to an island for a week and what do you get? The answer is – an ecumenical experience to savour! The conference, held on Iona from 10<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> September 2005, was entitled ‘Breaking down dividing walls in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘ and through the course of the week the delegates spent a lot of time thinking and talking about ecumenism. For me what came out of the conference, arranged jointly by the Iona Community and the Society for Ecumenical Studies, was an enhanced appreciation of the traditions, beliefs and practices of the other denominations present and at the same time a cementing of the sense of unity that is shared amongst those within the body of Christ.

Stimulation for our thinking was provided by four key speakers – Dr Alison Elliot of the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at New College in Edinburgh, Revd Dr Bill Henn of the Colegio San Lorenzo in Rome, Revd Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community and Revd Garnet Parris of the Centre for Black Theology at Birmingham University – and through their insights, humorous observations and questions there was much to ponder.

Spiritual nourishment was provided through the daily cycle of worship within Iona Abbey that included opportunities to attend Roman Catholic Mass and a Protestant communion service. For some of the group – their inability to share in the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Mass was a painful experience – for me, and perhaps for others, it was a liberating one. Going forward and being blessed in Christ’s name by Fr. Bill made me aware, as never before, how Christian unity transcends all the barriers that we as human beings place between us. As a protestant it was challenging to hear those of the group who came from ‘non-sacramental’ denominations (please

excuse the over-simplification) speak of how they felt included in the Roman Catholic Mass – due to the blessing – whereas they felt excluded from the protestant communion. There was they said nothing for those who did not wish to, or felt unable to, take the bread and wine.

Walled Gardens and Suitcases – just in case you were beginning to wonder – were two images that summed up the thoughts of many as we reflected on the ecumenical scene in the United Kingdom. It was suggested denominations could be thought of as walled gardens – containing within them many beautiful flowers – but what are the walls for – to divide or differentiate? Do walls prevent others from appreciating what is in the garden – do they prevent others from coming into the garden, to admire, to cross-pollinate, to work? It depends on the height of the wall – whether there are gates and if so are they open or closed and so on ..... there's perhaps something there about appreciating walls rather than always seeing them in a negative way.

And then again perhaps denominations could be seen as suitcases – full of one's personal treasures. Perhaps now is the time for opening the suitcases wide and letting everyone see all that is within each suitcase? One delegate pointed out that care has to be taken as one person's treasure is another person's clutter – I'll leave you to ponder whether there is any clutter masquerading as treasure in your suitcase!

In addition to thinking about ecumenism there were, thanks to Cathy Galloway and Ian Bradley (a lecturer in theology at St Andrews University) a number of opportunities to think about other walls that exist in the world. We were challenged to think about the walls that protect the wealth of the minority, the walls of sexism and nationalism, and the walls that appear to be growing between people of different races and different religions.

A feeling I was left with at the end of the conference was that although we had talked about the walls between churches we had not really spoken of the walls that seem to be most dominant at this time – the very diverse views that exist about the role of women within the church or about issues of human sexuality. It seemed to me, on reflection, that perhaps we took the easy route and dealt with those walls which were easiest to deal with – the one's which didn't threaten the unity we were experiencing on our island retreat. But having said that it was a wonderful event to have been a part of, and I'm grateful to the United Reformed Church for giving me that opportunity.

But what, you might ask do we have to show for it? If you're looking for some 'Ecumenical Statement' which says where we hope the churches will be on their ecumenical journey in 10 or 20 years time then the answer is nothing. If you're looking for a 'Guide to Ecumenism' then you will be disappointed. This conference was not about drafting statements, that often end up read once and then forgotten, or producing documents but was about 'experiencing unity'. Our 'Iona experience' will remain with us a long time – it will influence, in many different ways, the way we exercise our respective ministries (lay and ordained) in the years to come – that's what we will have to show for it. Hopefully that's more than enough!