

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

Ecumenism is far from dead – a report from Alan Miller, the Church of Scotland
This report first appeared in CORACLE, the magazine of the Iona community, in December 2005

For many of us who have been involved with ecumenical work and discussions, recent years have been hard going – the Ecumenical Movement which achieved so much in the 1950s, 60s and 70s seemed to be running out of steam and for many churches a time of great and challenging changes saw the whole issue of ecumenical dialogue and endeavour relegated to the back burner, sidelined by an increasing tendency for the churches to become more inward-looking. Many have compared this recent experience to a winter in which there is little sign of life.

What a privilege, then, and what a great opportunity, to be able to take part in September in a conference in the Abbey organised by the Society for Ecumenical Studies, and hosted by the Iona Community, which brought together thirty-plus representatives from the member churches of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, URC, Prebyterians, Quakers and the Salvation Army) to engage in enthusiastic debate and bible study together while sharing in the work and worship of the Abbey for a week. What was even more amazing was that most of those taking part were under the age of forty and many were in their twenties – all working together, listening and learning from one another, trying to discern new ways to engage ecumenically in the 21st century.

Key-note speakers included Alison Elliot from the Church of Scotland, Fr Bill Henn from the Pontifical Council for Ecumenical Relations, Garnet Parris of Birmingham University, and Kathy Galloway, Leader of our own community. Each of these gave inspiring lectures, addressing the issues facing the ecumenical movement and challenging those taking part to commit themselves to continuing dialogue and partnership in seeking Christian solidarity and 'unity in diversity' – a theme which was taken up in the Bible studies during the week on texts from the letter to the Ephesians.

At the end of the week, the 'Iona Experience' had transformed a group of strangers, for many of whom this would also be their first experience of encountering and sharing with Christians of other traditions than their own, into a group united and enthused by the prospect of building bridges between the churches and tearing down the walls that still divide us.