

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

A report by Paul Campbell, Roman Catholic Church in Scotland

For the first few days that I was on Iona I felt like I was the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time. I felt out of my depth, surrounded by experts in theology and the history of the ecumenical movement, ministers with responsibility for large numbers of people and with complex ecclesiastical issues on their mind. As the days past, however, I noticed that I felt more and more at home in the various sessions which punctuated the programme. I realised that each of us was trying, in a very simple yet profound way, to love our neighbour as ourselves. This provided an atmosphere of trust within which it was not only possible to share our personal spiritual experiences, but enter into a common spiritual experience and build a sense of genuine community. In fact, I had the impression that many subsequent discussions about scripture, theology, ecclesiology, ministry, sacraments, and so on, were all the more fruitful precisely because of the relationship we established among ourselves. I even discovered that I was not the only one with doubts about whether they were the right person for the job.

As the week progressed and the depth of my experience of this new kind of unity grew, I had the impression that we made many personal discoveries and had moments of common insight. In the many metaphors which peppered our discussions, we seemed alight upon a shared understanding of the kind of work we had undertaken together and to develop a grammar of unity with which we could do it. Although this experience of a profound unity in diversity gave us hope for the future unity of the Church, it also highlighted the challenges that still exist and

brought home the difficulty of the ecumenical project. For some of us the joy in a new experience of unity brought with it a new suffering at our division. Acknowledging that the unity of the Church is not our project but God's will, we grew in our commitment to *living* dialogue by being the best Christians we could be in each of our traditions. The ardent belief that unity will be achieved because Jesus prayed for it (John 17, 21) gave us a sense of both responsibility to love one another, in all our differences, as He commands us, and confidence that this relationship reveals the Father's will for His Church.

I learned many things on Iona. It was a deeply personal journey, an encounter with God. In many ways it is impossible to separate that personal journey from the conference and the 'training' that we undertook together. Perhaps this is exactly the sort of renewal in our relationships with one another and with God that true and fruitful dialogue requires: dialogue within our traditions, dialogue among different traditions in the Church, even dialogue between Christians and others. And perhaps the 'next generation' is not a question of age or experience, but of outlook and attitude. The commitment we made to stay in touch with one another and to bear witness to what we lived on Iona is only a small step. But I am convinced that it is a step in the right direction and an answer to how 'they may all be one'.