

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 Wesley Johnston, Methodist Church in Ireland

For me the experience of Iona was both for me on a personal level and for my denomination on a wider level. On a personal level I will count the week as one of great value in my Christian walk as it provided a unique opportunity to live with and talk to people of similar and very different backgrounds. This has led me to be less parochial and less likely to judge other denominations because of differences in their style of worship and witness. It was useful also to see other denominations relating to each other with myself a passive observer: it is not just "Irish Methodism" and "everyone else"!

Church attendance in Northern Ireland is amongst the highest in Western Europe, not necessarily for good reasons. I therefore found it very eye-opening to hear stories from churches in places where it does not at least have the sympathy of a large slice of society. In particular I recall Kerry Coke's experience of the Salvation Army in a society that is majority Islamic. There are issues, such as homosexuality, that the church in Ireland has chosen not to tackle and one thing I committed to do before I left was not to let such issues remain buried.

Martin Conway asked why young people are not getting involved in ecumenical movement. I can only speak for Irish Methodism and so my answer is purely from this perspective. In Northern Ireland there is a deep suspicion of the ecumenical movement because there is a feeling that there is a hidden agenda to unite all

churches in a single denomination. From my experience on Iona I have to say that I feel there is at least some truth to this fear. While I am content to engage with ecumenism to the point of co-operation between different denominations, those in the movement do seem to have an underlying desire to see institutional unity.

My other major observation is that at least some in the movement seem to have adopted a post-modern attitude towards truth. This was evident everywhere, but most of all in the final worship service where we sang a worship song that hinted that all faiths were equally valid, before going on to adopt the diametrically opposite viewpoint by celebrating Holy Communion. As an Evangelical Christian I believe that Christ is the only way to the Father, that all faiths are not equally valid and that salvation is both necessary and is found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I believe that unity is important, but not at the expense of truth. This is why evangelical churches such as the Methodist Church in Ireland will find it very difficult to be involved in the ecumenical movement beyond the level of inter-denominational co-operation. I cannot see this situation changing with the movement in its current liberal form.

In summary therefore, I have learned so much from the Iona conference. I have learned much about other denominations, learned a lot about diversity, been challenged with new issues. I have also learned a lot about the ecumenical movement and, by being affirmed in my beliefs, have been able to discern the level to which I will and will not be able to engage in the work of the movement. All told, it was an extremely valuable and life-shaping week. Thank you to everyone, particularly Martin and Murdoch.