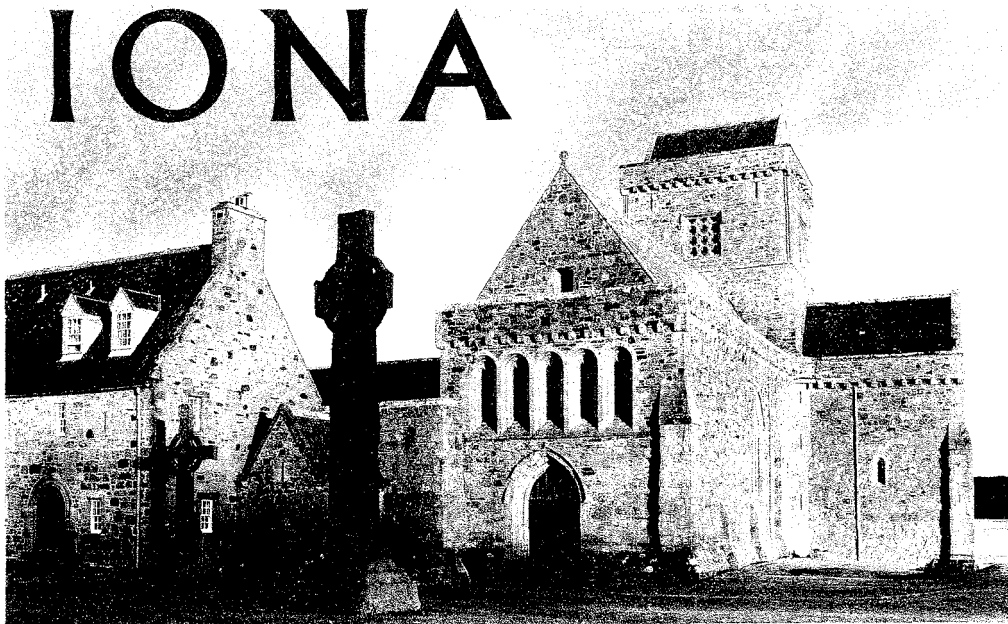


*The Society for Ecumenical Studies
in association with the Iona Community*

Breaking Down Barriers in the Twenty-First Century

*Second Ecumenical Week of Study and Prayer with the Iona
Community, 8-14 September 2007*

Gill Ferguson



If you are an early bird, you would have seen a small group of people with bags and ruck sacks creeping around the village at 4.00 am on a Friday morning. Twelve of us were off to visit the small island at Iona.

Iona is an island only three miles long part of the inner Hebrides situated off the west coast of Scotland across the Sound of Iona from the island of Mull. We were going to stay at the Abbey community for one week together with others from many different churches from both the U.K and abroad. Iona is a

very important place in the history of the Christian church in this country. [It was here that St Columba visited in AD 563 from Ireland and from where he sent out his monks to form the early Celtic church.

Our journey took us from Bristol air-port at 7.00am. to Glasgow where we had time to have a good breakfast before we caught our train to Oban. This is a superb trip travelling along the Clyde estuary, then Loch Lomond enjoying the beautiful scenery of the west highlands. We stayed in Oban over-night, enjoying an evening meal together; and in the morning we climbed up 'Pulpit Hill', which over-looks the harbour at Oban, not to preach a sermon but to take in the panoramic views of the islands: In the foreground Kerrara and Lismore, with Mull in the distance.

The next stage of our journey was on the large Caledonian Macbrayne ferry from Oban to Mull arriving at Craignure after a smooth crossing of about 45 minutes. Local coaches were waiting for passengers off the ferry and after bundling our cases onto the coach we were taken across Mull to Fionnphort to board another smaller ferry for the short crossing to Iona. It presented itself to us as a friendly, green little island with the Abbey standing out prominently.

Our rooms in the Abbey were small and simply furnished, but the beds were comfortable. An extra special touch was a hot water bottle on every bed! I wonder if the monks with St. Columba had them too?

We were part of a mixed group of people mostly younger than us, which spanned many different church traditions. The title for the week was 'Breaking down barriers' and brought before us the challenge of accepting people, and certainly each other for this week, with all our many differences.

Living in the Abbey is to live in 'community'. We ate together, sitting at long tables in the splendid refectory. We did chores together, These varied from washing up to making hundreds of pieces of toast for breakfast to mopping the floors and other things. It was all good fun and there was lots and lots of laughter. There are permanent staff at the Abbey and volunteers also, and

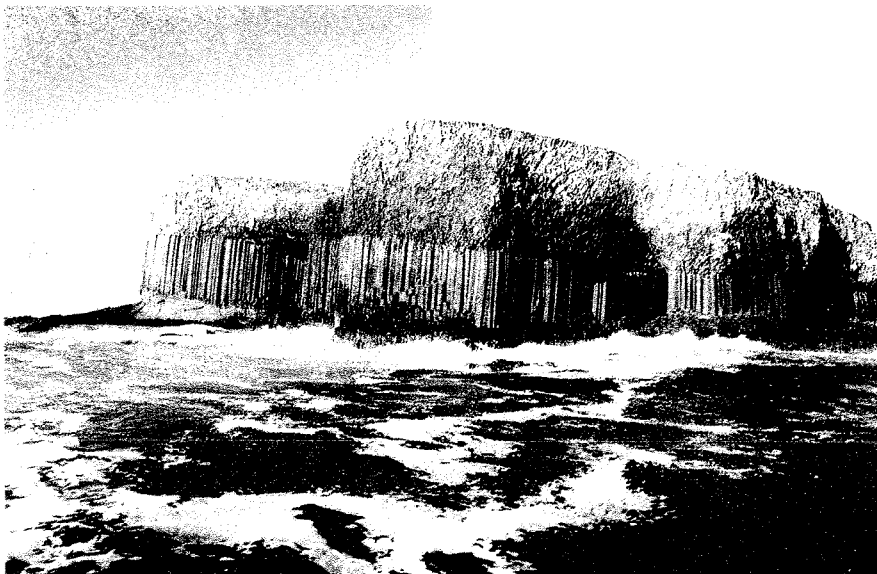
they all joined in the daily fun 'chore' routine.

Worshipping together in the Abbey was the highlight of each day. The services were totally memorable: quite simple and very moving. The music was fresh and lively and followed us through the doors after the services emphasizing the oneness of worship and work. There were also special times during the week such as the service for justice and peace, which is a great emphasis of the community, and a service for healing. This was a particularly lovely time where the churches represented by the group were drawn into the circle of prayer and names were invited for special mention. It was at this time that we were able to share the special need of Amelia, Ros, Craig and Ella.

In our exploring of how we could 'Break down the barriers' in the world, our communities and in our churches, we were looked after attentively by the coordinator of the week, Murdoch MacKenzie resplendent in tartan kilt. There were speakers who led our thoughts and gave food for thought in discussion. 'The challenge of the week remained throughout and is carried with us daily, 'Who is brave enough to remove the first stone of the barrier! Whatever that barrier might be?

An important part of the week was the exploration of the island. A whole day was spent on 'pilgrimage' walking and discovering the points of historical interest. St Columba's Bay where he arrived from Ireland with his monks and the long Mound which is said to be the burial place of their coracle; the old quarry where the striking green and white Iona marble was cut and shipped around the world; Martyr's Bay where many monks were killed by the Viking invaders in 806; Port Ban a lovely white beach made up entirely of shell fragments; Dun I, 'Fortress Hill', the highest point on the island from where springs a well in which a wash can recover lost youth. (Look out for evidence of this around the village?) The graveyard next to the Abbey is of great historical importance to Scotland and many ancient leaders and kings are buried there. There is so much to see and enjoy in this very beautiful part of the Hebrides.

Another time we had a boat trip to the island of Staffa passing lazing seals, porpoise and sea birds such as gannet, guillemot, fulmar, great skua and rnanx shearwater. Staffa is known because of the great cave named after the giant Fingal who threw rocks across the Irish Sea. The cave is a cathedral-like opening into the steep cliffs into which the sea roars past giant geometric columns of ancient volcanic origin. The other end of this amazing wonder is across the sea on the Antrim coast. Because the sea was calm we were able to walk into the cave on the narrow walkway. Quite a breathtaking walk! It was the sight of this of course that inspired Mendelssohn to compose his famous concert overture 'Fingal's Cave' after his visit as a young man in 1832.



Fingals Cave

Two of our group had the privilege of staying a little way from the Abbey at the 'Catholic House of Prayer' where they experienced a very kind welcome and more 'creature comforts' than the Abbey folk. However we were all together in the Abbey for worship and greatly enjoyed the sense of 'oneness' with the whole group that set aside traditional barriers of denomination.

The week came to an end only too quickly and as we stood on the ferry leaving Iona we looked back and waved goodbye to all the 'Community' staff who had come down to the harbour to see us safely on our way.

For my part I would love to return one day. In the meanwhile I find myself singing one of the songs they taught us:

'Somebody prayed for me,
Had me on their mind,
Took the time to pray for me.
I'm so very glad;
I'm so glad they prayed;
I'm so glad they prayed for me.

