

*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*

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### **1 - Stories from Iona**

Stories are woven into the fabric of Iona. Here are two to get you started: In AD563, St Columba and 12 of his followers established a monastic community on Iona. It was from there that they converted some of Scotland and northern England to Christianity. The centre of Celtic Christianity they established was abandoned in AD849 after a series of devastating Viking raids. Here's another: In 1938 George MacLeod, an aristocratic minister in the Church of Scotland, decided to rebuild the derelict buildings of the 13th century Benedictine abbey of St Mary, which had been built on the site of Columba's earlier monastery. The group of ministers and craftsmen who had been pulled together from the slums of Glasgow's Depression became the Iona Community. Today the dispersed ecumenical Community welcomes people of all faiths (and none) to its three centres on Iona and Mull to spend time living and worshipping together.

I was invited to start my own story last week, although a trip to Iona with my parents when I was younger was probably the first chapter. Regardless, the 12-hour trip there from my adopted home of Leeds (I'm from Stafford,

though...) with its increasingly erratic mobile phone signal lent the journey the sense of real pilgrimage. Finally the last bar of signal dropped off my phone and I was there, a windswept and treeless island 3 hours from the nearest supermarket. I think the fact that I had no phone signal is significant: it meant I was forced to be present to those around me while I was there – no sneaking off to call home.

Three Catholics had been asked to go, me among them, and the rest of the group for the week was made of an eclectic mix of young (and not-so-young) Anglicans (and Episcopalians), Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, United Reformed, Quakers, and United Church of Christ (look it up!) We'd been called together as part of a week entitled "Breaking Down Walls in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" which, given the make-up of the group and my past experiences I took to mean a conference on the part young adults have to play in ecumenism.

I was part right, but mostly wrong. The Iona Community is a working and worshipping community, borne of its collaboration between those ministers and craftsmen who refused the dichotomy of work and worship. We cleaned floors and peeled vegetables, served food and washed up, and we did it together. The conference-style presentations were limited to a couple of hours a day, although they established themes of individual conversations for the rest of the day. At first I was pretty hacked off, after all I had things to do in Leeds, but after a couple of days I got into it, and saw the fragments of conversations and small tasks as part of a greater whole – the gentle establishing of community.

If we'd prioritised the conference bit, we'd probably have focused on our differences, but we didn't – common goals were our ends, and if we found out someone's denomination it didn't really matter: Catholics are as good as Baptists at washing up, at serving food, at reading in church. We were united in our common purpose. It was more than that, though, we were all individuals with different talents and understandings who had come together. We were diverse but equal. Reflecting on the week, I came across a phrase of Teilhard

de Chardin, a Jesuit of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: 'unity differentiates'. It strikes me that this is an amazing couple of words. Unity isn't the same of uniformity – the work of ecumenism is not to try to become the same as one another, but we only know who we are in our belonging and being part of the whole. While that's true of the 'Amen' we say as Catholics at Communion, it's also the profound message of ecumenism. We are working to build the Kingdom of God, all of us – Catholics and Baptists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians and all the others, but we all contribute to the effort, we all do it in our own ways, and wherever we can we should do it together. None of us are better than another.

Here's another story, an analogy really, that I heard on Iona. It's from another religion, I think – I didn't write it down. Our understanding of God is like looking at an enormous and beautiful object, too big to be seen by one person, so we all have a small window that opens onto the object but we only see a small part. By talking to one another we get an understanding of what the other people see, and in that process we get more of an idea, always incomplete, of what the object is like. God's glory is revealed to all, but we need everyone to help us each work it out.

The week I spent on Iona, surrounded by the restless seas, the weathered hills, and the full wonder of the stars moved me in profound ways. The Celtic Christianity and creation theology that I began to think about is a whole other article, but the experience of working in small ways to common purposes was a lesson in ecumenism that no amount of buzz groups and inputs could have brought about. And we don't have to go to Iona to get it – we have to work for the Kingdom of God here, in our local mundane everyday lives. Our Christian witness isn't just for Sundays, the work goes on and on, and only by working together can we break down walls in our communities, the wider world, but most importantly, in ourselves.

## 2 - Reconciliation and Unity on Iona

At the front of our chapel at the Universities of Leeds Chaplaincy is the poster for this year's 'Come and See' theme: 'Repentance and Reconciliation'.

There's a figure depicted who stands at the foot of the cross, and I'd always taken its meaning to be a reflection on our need to recognise the price Jesus paid to redeem us from our sins and the call back to repentance at the confessional. It's all a bit heavy and I have to say that message normally falls on deaf ears.

Anyway, I've just got back from a week on Iona living with the ecumenical Iona Community on a week with the theme "Breaking Down Walls in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". My experience there has caused me to think again about the theme of 'Repentance and Reconciliation', and I thought I'd write about it here. First off, I have to come clean: my home diocese is the Birmingham Archdiocese which, along with the Bishops' Conference, paid for me to travel to Iona. I'm a student here which is the reason I'm in Leeds. Regardless, being sent to what seemed like an official conference as an official Catholic representative created a certain expectation before I went. You know the conference thing: facilitators, buzz groups, feeding back, flip charts...

My week on Iona wasn't like that at all. Part of the reason for that lies in the history of the place. In AD563, St Columba and 12 of his followers established a monastic community on Iona. It was from there that they converted some of Scotland and northern England to Christianity. The centre of Celtic Christianity they established was abandoned in AD849 after a series of devastating Viking raids. In 1938 George MacLeod, an aristocratic minister in the Church of Scotland, decided to rebuild the derelict buildings of the 13th century Cistercian abbey of St Mary, which had been built on the site of Columba's earlier monastery. The group of ministers and craftsmen who had been pulled together from the slums of Glasgow's Depression became the Iona Community. Today the dispersed ecumenical Community welcomes people of all faiths (and none) to its three centres on Iona and Mull to spend time living and worshipping together.

That early spirit of George MacLeod continues today as a community that works and worships together and doesn't create a dichotomy between those two sets of activities. Their work is their prayer and vice versa. In effect that meant in addition to worshipping in the Abbey church, we chipped in with chores: washing up and cleaning floors, that kind of thing. Importantly, we did it together. That we were at an 'ecumenical conference', however, seemed open to debate, I was hacked off at leaving my work behind in Leeds, for what I saw as a week peeling vegetables. But after a couple of days I got into it, and saw the fragments of conversations with others and the small tasks we had to do as part of a greater whole – the gentle establishing of community.

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So anyway, the Come and See theme. The week I spent in close proximity with people of every Christian confession caused me to think beyond the reconciliation and repentance which I'd imagined merely linked back to the confessional. It struck me that reconciliation for me is about right relationship: our relationship with God to be sure, but our relationships with our neighbours both known and unknown. That means racism, misogyny, homophobia, ageism, our abdication of responsibility towards people living in poverty at home and abroad, and all the other ways in which we create artificial divisions between ourselves and the world.

And for me reconciliation is deeply implicated in ecumenism too. We create divisions between the people of God all the time in tiny thoughts and small everyday practices – or I do anyway, and I hadn't noticed until I spent some time with other Christians on Iona. All of us were committed to the same engagement with the world that I am, work for Justice and Peace specifically but not simply. I realised that unity is about right relationship, being reconciled

with our own differences and coming together despite them – not trying to all be the same or denying our traditions or riches. I realised that to be reconciled to difference is vital if we are to respond to the imperative of Christian unity that Christ gave us, and if we are to make any headway in working to build the Kingdom of God.