

*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*

**James Milne**

*Breaking down walls in Iona*

Early in September I attended, on behalf of the Scottish Episcopal Church, an ecumenical conference at Iona Abbey that had as its theme: "Breaking down walls in the 21st Century". I was grateful for the opportunity to visit the historic island of Iona. Having attained the age of 34 without having seen this ancient seat of Christianity was becoming something of an embarrassment in ecclesiastical circles.

The conference was attended by people of many different traditions from throughout the British Isles. Though the conference was aimed primarily at young adults there were people of all ages present. Indeed, typically of the church today, retired people outnumbered the target audience!

The conference was facilitated by Murdoch MacKenzie, the former Ecumenical Moderator in Milton Keynes. Speakers included Keith Clements, a Baptist minister and former General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches; Freda Lambert a retired teacher and lecturer and former President of the National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales; and Cathy Galloway, the leader of the Iona Community. Through a series of enlightening presentations we explored the call to break down barriers embodied in our sacred scriptures, the historic formularies of our faith, the Christian community and our recent European history.

As is so often the case, however, the true work was done, not in the seminar room, but around the dinner table, during the sharing of chores, on long walks around the island,

in the offering of worship and down the pub. My own thought as I grappled with the mighty topic before us was of the need to rediscover the role of God in the breaking down the walls that divide the people of our world.

Such conversations often highlight the things that we must do to break down barriers. The worship of the Iona Community certainly reminded us of the need for positive action, calling us to repent of our inactivity and urging us to do better. My own experience as a parish priest, however, and as a Mental Health Care Chaplain, caring for some very vulnerable and broken people, suggests to me that the walls that exclude and enclose will only ultimately be destroyed by a decisive act of God. If barriers are to be broken down in the 21st century then our prayers for grace to do God's will must be accompanied by prayers for the coming of the kingdom.

The conversations that began on Iona did not end when we left the Island. We have remained in touch through a variety of electronic means and plans are already afoot for an informal meeting in January to think of ways of supporting young Christian adults. From the chipping away of these walls may God destroy the barriers that so divide us.