

Transfixed on Iona

My contact with the Iona Community began as a day tourist. I browsed the shop and returned with *Innkeepers and Light Sleepers*, a collection of new songs for Christmas. I was impressed with the sincerity and vernacular originality of the words and the singability of the music.

I returned a few years later as a guest for a week-long session centred on new music and liturgy developed by the *Wild Goose Resource Group*, an initiative of the Iona Community.

The experience of community as a guest is real, but temporary. To allow it to affect my behaviour and outlook, an extended stay would be necessary, and so I applied and was accepted as a volunteer for 11 weeks.

It is exciting to be staff member – you are now an insider, and the daily cycle of work and worship flowing together is as natural as morning and evening. You become familiar with the Community buildings and the wee village. Very quickly you are acquainted with the entire staff, and a particular closeness develops with the volunteers sharing your accommodation. Life is busy, but as the Reverend George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community in 1938, resolutely stated, “Only a demanding common task builds community.”

There are two categories of staff. *Residents* (“rezzies”) are thoroughly familiar with their responsibilities (many began as

volunteers) and nearly all hold posts for one to three years. One will be assigned to you as a *line manager*. The resident staff have obligations for programme, administration, and emergencies beyond their special competencies. *Volunteers* (“vollies”) regularly participate for six to 12 weeks. Their duties are quite carefully enumerated and will not be redefined after arrival, although cheerfulness and flexibility always receive gratitude. Volunteers and resident staff work along side each other many hours per day, most days of the week, and at roughly the same tasks. Whilst an easygoing informality exists on the job, social spheres are quite distinct and separate. I found that it was important to accept the situation, for it is crucial to community equilibrium. Your line manager will outline your duties, instruct you in them, and oversee your work, but is not expected to be a mentor or a provider of pastoral support.

For my line manager I had boundless admiration. She was unfailingly patient, considerate, and knowledgeable. That she was younger was of no account. I felt that our strengths complemented the other’s. I was unused to “just in time” decision-making but I understood why it occurred and I was eager to cooperate. I am grateful for the adaptability that I gained.

Iona is a marvellous place for a time of personal transition when one feels keenly alone in making sweeping choices. One is enfolded into the rhythm of one’s *rota*, of

expectations and commitments which supply a strong sense of purpose. Most volunteers have split shifts, so there is much time to explore the island's splendid tranquility, and to connect with other vollies. The emphasis upon group activity minimises hollow introspection and brooding. The island's history and ageless calm assist you in separating, often subconsciously, that which is truly meaningful and of lasting importance from passing infatuations of mind or spirit.

Iona is famously a "thin place", as George MacLeod observed, where the human and spiritual worlds are palpably close. His widely-quoted statement made acute sense to me only upon realising the ongoing *experience of immediacy* on Iona. Somehow one worries little about the past or thinks about the future but rather, concentrates upon the fullness of the present – of living "in the moment". In the language of the Jewish daily morning service, one senses how God "eternally renews every day with His goodness the work of creation."

I honestly believe that living as a staff member on Iona brings out the best in people. And vollies have so much fun, just being together! Many of us come from absurdly materialistic and competitive societies in which success does not mean a fair profit, but rather defines cleverness as gouging the unsuspecting and naive. Why in community am I motivated to feel (and I hope, show) tenderness towards people who in a few months will exist only in my memory? What has made "ulterior

motives" and "strings attached" immaterial?

Residents conduct "reflection sessions" on Thursday evenings before guests leave, in which the latter are asked to identify moments during their visit in which they felt most alive. These comments are reviewed the next morning by all staff. You may discover that you participated directly in forming an unforgettable impression, in some small way following St Matthew 5:16 – "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Even the most resolute sceptic might be given pause to observe how staff members live and work daily with one another; that *lumen Christi* might possibly be more than an opiate for pathetic losers. Many vollies do not profess Christian belief (it is not a requirement) but are visibly warmed by the spirit of community.

The vollie coordinator wisely counselled us to "hold each other lightly". The intensity of living and working together enkindles deep feelings and caring. Vollies arrive and depart weekly. *Leaving services* formalise farewells, and you come to recognise them as another natural cycle: individuals depart, community remains. Nothing subdues the sadness on a Wednesday morning of waving friends off at the jetty, but you sense they are moving on according to plan, as indeed will you.

And when you yourself have left, Iona becomes a state of mind to cherish forever.