

MAGGIE BIRLEY

The whole Iona Community, in sadness but with great gratitude for her life, mourns the death of one of its members, Maggie Birley, who died in late June at the age of 52. Maggie, who described herself as 'an accidental sawmiller', was the Co-ordinator of a small team running a sawmill in Fife. Scottish Wood is a social enterprise; a proportion of the profits from its trading arm are covenanted to Dynamic Woods, a charity set up to revitalise local woodland culture, and to develop sustainable uses for Scottish hardwood. The rest is reinvested into the business. It supplies Scottish homegrown timber and promotes ethical Scottish timber as a renewable resource.

Along with her husband (and fellow-member) Jim, Maggie worked in El Salvador in 1992, during the peace process at the end of the civil war. Alongside returning refugees they set up community-based social enterprises to take over sugar-cane plantations. Previously, sugar-cane had been an unreliable industry which offered only badly-paid seasonal employment. But, after the war, local people began planting and growing trees to serve the community. Maggie was particularly inspired by women community organisers who set up local shops geared to people's needs.

Since their return to Scotland 20 years ago, Maggie and Jim have raised awareness about sustainable planting and community organising. As a woman in a traditionally very male work environment, Maggie found that initially the large industry insiders were patronising and dismissive, and not inclined to take her seriously. However, they now pay attention, because they have seen that Scottish Wood is able to be not only sustainable and local, but also efficient and profitable. Maggie didn't want the business to get bigger and lose its local rootedness. Rather, she said she would love to see 'a sawmill in every parish', and for people to see the potential in Scottish hardwood and in forest radicalism.

This commitment to forest radicalism and to environmental sustainability was also clear in Maggie's commitment to Camas, the outdoor centre of the Iona Community, whose committee she chaired for several years, and where her children, Kitty, Jo and Douglas, all subsequently worked as volunteers.

In El Salvador, sent by Scottish Churches World Exchange, and working with a Baptist church motivated by liberation theology, Maggie found that, freed from western cultural expectations, the Bible came alive in Spanish, and gave a voice to people who had been silenced and oppressed. This experience was then and remained a huge inspiration to her. In turn, Maggie herself, a warm, vital and endlessly hospitable woman, was a source of inspiration and encouragement to countless people, both within and beyond the Iona Community.

Our thoughts and prayers are with Jim, Kitty, Jo and Douglas, and the rest of Maggie's family. 'Tell her we love her and miss her.'