

## **IONA COMMUNITY BOARD ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2019 WE MUST BE HUMAN**

Thank you, Moderator.

Many people first encounter the Iona Community through the resources of prayer and song which we have sought to share with the wider church. We share them in the Abbey on Iona, where worship begins and ends each day, and the benediction is not said until the end of the evening service, reminding us that all our work and play is encompassed by prayer. And though the Abbey has been closed to residential guests while an exciting renovation is carried out, the small Iona Community resident group has faithfully maintained the daily rhythm of worship, joined by many thousands of people from all over the world.

But it is important to stress that these resources have been shaped out of engagement, and not just for a historic sacred site. They have been written for demonstrations and blockades, in anti-poverty and anti-racism campaigns, in industrial disputes and in prisons, for pastoral crises and situations of deep tragedy. These places are as much our holy ground as Iona is. The songs and prayers thread through our lives, not just our services. And whenever members gather in their local groups or plenary meetings, we pray together. We believe that worship (offering God what God is worth) encompasses all of our lives. Our spirituality begins in prayer, and ends in the public square.

Since 1987, the Wild Goose Resource Group has worked ecumenically in the areas of Christian liturgy and worship, song and music, prayer, politics, diversity, devotion, participation, perception, curiosity and creativity, with a particular emphasis towards the training of lay people. Its resources, and the creativity of many others, have been disseminated through the work of Wild Goose Publications and its two passionate and excellent editors. The three resource workers of the Wild Goose Resource Group have made an extraordinary contribution to the life of the church at home and abroad; in this particular setting, I hope that commissioners today will recognise how much the group has given to the Church of Scotland.

As a musician, hymnwriter and liturgist, in his important convening role for our church's Book of Common Order and Hymnbook, as a theologian and speaker, as a popular communicator through Thought for the Day and in many contexts across the world, John Bell has been widely recognised, respected and honoured, not least for his ability to listen and speak directly and with great pastoral sensitivity to individuals and groups.

His colleague and collaborator in song, Graham Maule, originally trained as an architect, and then as a sculptor with a PhD in art practice in liturgy, has enabled many people and churches to think creatively about the architecture of worship;

about the importance of space and movement, about our use of silence and symbol in a world weary of words, and about the ways we meet God in the most unlikely urban contexts.

And many in the congregations and committees of the Church of Scotland have been grateful for the enabling work of Jo Love, an outstanding facilitator and encourager of creativity in the arts and in approaches to the Bible. In all her work, Jo models the serving and empowering qualities that have always been a hallmark of the Diaconate.

From 2020, John, who is not as young as he once was, is planning to work part-time; the work of the group, which has been supported for many years by its administrator, Gail Ulrich, will continue. It does so with the profound and heartfelt thanks of the Iona Community and the Iona Community Board for over 30 years of groundbreaking service to the church.

In its work, the Wild Goose Resource has identified its purpose and ethos. It exists

- to agitate, educate, organise
- to resource and train
- to practise a nonexclusive bias towards the laity
- to affirm the potential and trustworthiness of the laity
- to work in ways not predicated on the clerical model
  
- with a belief that people have within them something worth encouraging
- that the laity should not imitate the professionals
- that the laity are not second best
  
- we seek to enable an empowered, competent, intelligent laity
- people should do what they *can*...
  - speak with more confidence about faith
  - develop new initiatives, so the church becomes more creative
  - not be shy about the Bible

If these capabilities are encouraged, alternatives to the old ways will be found which may enable the survival of the church in the future.

### **Why is this work needed?**

- because the old model is broken, and not faithful to its historical tradition
- because it is increasingly, and unsustainably, bound to clericalism
- because renewal comes from experiments on the periphery
- because we are not waiting for a masterplan from the centre
- because the work is not about product but about *process* – which is not well understood

- because if this work does not happen, there will be thoughtless replication
- because there are too many stilted situations
- because of the crucial importance of *reflecting* on what is done and *critiquing* practice – this is time consuming, which is one of the reasons it is so rare
- because the Christian faith is incarnate – rooted in people's lives

In 1954, George MacLeod, the Founder of the Iona Community, wrote: *Our congregations miss the zest of the early Christian church because we have forgotten the glorious emancipation of our true humanity that was the Incarnation. Jesus the carpenter, the friend of shepherds and fishermen, showed us God by being human – and in three days set at naught the complex temple that was forty years in building. He made risen humanity his temple. We must be human.*

In his poem 'On Being a Human Being', written for the Israeli peace activist Mordechai Vanunu, the Glasgow writer Tom Leonard explores what that might mean today:

*not to be complicit  
not to accept everyone else is silent it must be alright*

*not to keep one's mouth shut to hold onto one's job  
not to accept public language as cover and decoy*

*not to put friends and family before the rest of the world  
not to say I am wrong when you know the government is wrong*

*not to be just a bought behaviour pattern  
to accept the moment and fact of choice*

*I am a human being  
and I exist*

*a human being  
and a citizen of the world*

*responsible to that world  
-and responsible for that world*

Inside history, where we live and move and have our being, Jesus does not belong to us. The best we can say is that we belong to Jesus, who is our freedom, and who will not be contained by our fears. It is a freedom that presents us with many choices, both political and spiritual.

*We shared Communion at the gates of Faslane:  
one of the places in a broken world*

*where breaking bread and drinking bitter wine  
is most relevant.*

*We shared it to remember  
security – not of barbed wire and missiles –  
but of God's love  
that risks all and gives life.*

*We shared, in a warm circle of believers.  
But later, when we sat down on the cold road,  
we found that the bread and the cup  
had escaped, and were still out there in the crowd,  
being shared, carefully, among people of all kinds:  
this paradox  
of pain and promise  
being passed from hand to hand  
in a broken world.*

*(Jan Sutch Pickard)*