

# Tell them we love them...

**Douglas Alexander**

**8/4/1935 - 16/11/2024**



I first met Douglas in the 1960s when he was Warden of Community House, the Glasgow base of the Iona Community. I was a student and had been invited to lead the Village Youth Camp in Iona. I was impressed by the bustle in the cafeteria, the range of people passing through its doors, the numerous meetings, the mural on the wall, and the quiet but confident public worship in the side chapel while people were having their lunch. This was all new to me, and it captured my imagination; and that, along with the recent experience of worship in Iona Abbey, the atmosphere, the people, and the beauty of the island changed for ever my understanding of the Christian life. And as I was to come to realise, that was what Douglas Alexander's ministry was all about. Helping people to a new, exciting, challenging, down to earth, practical grasp of the Christian life, of the purpose of the church, of the eternal God of love; addressing simultaneously, the issues of our inner life, and the issues of living together in community.

I did not know at the time that Douglas had been brought up in a manse, that he had studied for the ministry in Glasgow University, where he had been President of the Student Representative Council, and had represented student interests in conference all over Europe and Africa; and then with a scholarship to Union Theological Seminary in New York he had been exposed to the urban mission and the radical witness of the East Harlem Protestant Parish. He found himself involved in all that was happening among students, and with Martin Luther King, in the campaign for Civil Rights, and racial justice.

Douglas was ordained by Greenock Presbytery, and worked at St Ninian's Parish Church there for two years. He, like myself later, and like so many over the generations, had been inspired by the great George McLeod, founder and leader of the Iona Community. Later Douglas served on the University Court as Rector's assessor to Lord Macleod, and in retirement Douglas was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Glasgow.

Douglas was employed by the Iona Community first as a Youth Worker, then staff member, then Warden of Community House, with summer duties in the Abbey on Iona. All the while he was endeavouring to implement the Community's emphasis on building community, renewing worship and mission, engaging politically, with a robust concern for peacemaking. Religion and politics are inextricably linked, as anyone who has read the Magnificat knows. Douglas would remind us that our Lord in his birth identified with the poor and homeless, and in his death identified with criminals and revolutionaries.

In 1970 Douglas responded to a call to the parish church in Bishopton, a community that was to expand all the 27 years of Douglas's ministry. There the hallmarks of his ministry continued, and to the people there he devoted all his care and attention.

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The Church grew, with its Centre and Youth Centre, with his faithful visiting, with family worship in packed churches, with house groups, and adult education; in all this Douglas was ahead of the game. Douglas made changes, he was never afraid to undertake new ventures. But he was also thirled to the traditions of the Church of Scotland, indeed he specified that this service should be in that tradition.

When I think of Douglas I think of his broad smile, his welcoming, affirming smile; and the way he would say 'Yes', and repeat 'yes'; even though he might eventually want to disagree with you. Douglas was always relational, he could hit it off with anyone, neither deferential to the rich and powerful, nor condescending to the poor nor vulnerable. He loved people, and the love was returned. The whole Christian enterprise is about how we become loving people. It was from Douglas that I learned - and he may have coined the phrase or heard it somewhere - 'The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of right relationships; where you're in the right relationship with God, and in the right relationship with people.' That's it in a nutshell. That's not always easy, but that's how Douglas lived.

With care and compassion is how we live out that command at a personal level, and at the level of society, community and internationally, love is expressed as justice. And that's not always easy either, and in that seeking of justice, Douglas was always a member of the Labour Party striving for a more equitable distribution of resources and wealth and reward. And all his family adopted the values he espoused his values.

In his pursuit of the better spreading of the word, and his seeking new ways to touch the hearts of men and women, Douglas undertook a lot of broadcasting, radio and television, he was the National Church's Convener of the Assembly Communications Committee, and on the Board of Channel Four's religious broadcasting council. What we communicate is important, but so is how we communicate, and Douglas was a master of the craft. In everything he said or wrote or preached, it was meticulously prepared. He treasured words, and we will treasure his. Douglas treasured that love of God, and he preached the word of God boldly and lovingly; he was a family man, he was a churchman, he was a man for others, he was a man of God.

And as he learned himself to glorify God, and taught us to glorify God, may Douglas now enjoy him for ever.

Tribute from David Lunan