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the magazine of the iona community

coracle



Work and worship, Prayer and politics, Sacred and secular ...

The Iona Community is:

- An ecumenical community of men and women from different walks of life and different traditions in the Christian church
- Committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to following where that leads, even into the unknown
- Engaged together, and with people of goodwill across the world, in acting, reflecting and praying for justice, peace and the integrity of creation
- Convinced that the inclusive community we seek must be embodied in the community we practise

So we share a common discipline of:

- Daily prayer and bible study
- Mutual accountability for our use of time and money
- Spending time together
- Action for justice and peace

And are, together with our staff, responsible for:

- Our islands residential centres of Iona Abbey, the MacLeod Centre on Iona, and Camas Adventure Centre on the Ross of Mull. And in Glasgow
- The administration of the Community
- Our work with young people
- Our publishing house, Wild Goose Publications
- Our association in the revitalising of worship with the Wild Goose Resource Group

The Iona Community was founded in Glasgow in 1938 by George MacLeod, minister, visionary and prophetic witness for peace, in the context of the poverty and despair of the Depression. Its original task of rebuilding the monastic ruins of Iona Abbey became a sign of hopeful rebuilding of community in Scotland and beyond. Today, we are almost 250 Members, mostly in Britain, and 1500 Associate Members, with 1400 Friends worldwide. Together and apart, 'we follow the light we have, and pray for more light'.

Coracle is the quarterly magazine of the Iona Community. Views expressed in it are not necessarily the policy of the Iona Community, but the Community seeks the exchange of thoughts and ideas as a basis for finding common ground.

Letters are welcome, but may be edited because of space restrictions. For **advertising** or **photography** specifications, please contact the Editor. **Unsolicited material** is welcome (by email or on disk) but cannot always be included.

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Peter Macdonald

From the holy city: the better way

'Who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and their families and no Government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.' (Margaret Thatcher, Woman's Own magazine, Oct 1987)

Having once denied that there was any such thing as 'society', Conservative politicians today now seek to define for the rest of us what 'society' actually is. Apparently, it is big. In the 'Big Society' we will all do our bit in the national interest during a time of austerity.

'We are all in this together' after all – you, me, the school leaver, the accountant, the carer and her disabled daughter, the unemployed bricklayer, the social worker, the engineer, and the eighteen millionaires currently serving in the British Cabinet. We are all in this together.

In the Coalition Government's 'Big Society' the talk is not of justice but of fairness, a term oozing public school reasonableness and benevolence with no suggestion that those responsible should be held to account, made to pay for the impact of their folly on the real economy and on the most vulnerable who depend on public services. Indeed as usual it is the poorest who will pay the price of tackling the deficit. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the recent Comprehensive Spending Review failed even the 'fairness' measure; it reported that:

The tax and benefit changes are regressive rather than progressive. The poorest 30% of households are feeling more of the pain than the top 2%.

A crisis caused by a catastrophic failure of private financial institutions is being transformed into an ideological attack on the public sector. The benefits system, once believed to provide a strong social safety net, is claimed to cause dependency, trapping people in poverty. And whilst there is cross-party agreement on the need for welfare reform, there is little debate about the human and environmental cost of unsustainable, global capitalism. It is business as usual.

Yet the crisis did not come out of nowhere. There were people who knew that the self-proclaimed 'Masters of the Universe' had polluted the global financial system with their arrogance and greed, having been indulged by politicians who advocated the liberalising of markets and self-regulation. Today our governments face massive deficits, having bailed out the banks to prevent a total collapse of the world economy. The sums involved are beyond our imagining but the cost will be all too real. For those of us who struggle to understand our own bank statements, the explanations of Chancellors and financial experts leave us bamboozled. So we nod, agree that the deficit must be reduced; we need to take our medicine. We then leave the field to the same financial players and systems that created this mess.

In her excellent little book *It Doesn't Have To Be Like This* (Wild Goose Publications) Margaret Legum, an economist and member of the Iona Community who died in 2007, explains:

Economics is about how people relate to each other around resources and work. Essentially it is about the needs of people in relation to those things.

Economics is not about the logic of a system ... immutable laws which, whether we like it or not, determine how the world of goods and services,

money and people interact. Economics [is] ... a branch, and a servant, of politics and the welfare of people. (Legum p.17)

We are not, therefore, the helpless, inevitable victims of economic laws that are forever fixed or commanded by unforgiving markets. Economics is about people, our values and our choices. Economics should be about justice.

A few weeks ago I attended the launch of the Scottish Trades Union Congress campaign There Is A Better Way. The Iona Community has signed up to this broad-based campaign that seeks to speak out against Government spending cuts which have greatest impact on the poor and which will damage the economy. The campaign also seeks to defend the welfare system as a lifeline for many rather than a 'lifestyle choice', and to put forward alternative proposals for welfare reform and economic recovery.

As Christians we must not be seduced by Government rhetoric about fairness, family or 'rewarding work and supporting the vulnerable'. Those of us who remember the 1980s already see the familiar descent into stigmatisation, growing inequality and misery for those most affected. Those hardest hit will not be 'the workshy' or the fraudsters but will be those in work. Over the past decade in-work poverty has risen and incomes will be driven down further by welfare for work schemes and by the reduction in child tax credits, disability payments, housing benefit, legal aid, working tax credits, etc.

This is not opposition for the sake of it nor a denial of the need for radical reform of the benefits system. It is about our obedience to the Gospel and the search for a better way, a more just and equitable way for us to relate to one another and to share resources.

I will end with another quotation:

A Gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society around it, what Gospel is that?

Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone; yet does such a Gospel light the world we live in? The Gospel of Christ is courageous; it is the 'good news' of him who came to transform and take away the world's sins. (Oscar Romero, El Salvador)

God bless,

Peter ●

www.thereisabetterway.org

www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk



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Tricia McConalogue

A long time to recover

Tricia McConalogue, Co-ordinator of Bridging the Gap, a community development organisation the Gorbals, gives a grassroots view of the recent Government cuts. 'It feels as though this is being done to us and not with us,' she writes ...

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:11)

The Government's recent Spending Review has been on everyone's lips. We have heard of the billions and billions of pounds of cuts in the public sector, in services, in jobs, in university funding and about welfare reform. This is the Coalition Government's solution on how to deal with the country's debt crisis. Apparently this will put us on the road to recovery and boost our economy. But what does this mean in real terms for the people who are going to be affected by these cuts?

I feel angry about these cuts – when David Cameron made these short-sighted decisions he didn't make connections, connections to people and the devastating impact that this will have on millions of them. Thousands of people will lose their jobs and even their homes and there will be an increase in family breakdowns. Also, there will be no safety nets for the already vulnerable people who experience poverty.

I feel there's a lot of finger-pointing at people on benefits and that they're being used as scapegoats to whip up support for the cuts to welfare. This is being exacerbated by the media, with headlines such as 'The Workshy'. Recently, whilst I was watching a Sunday morning debate show, people on benefits were being referred to as 'Unemployment Junkies'. The reality is that it's a minority of people who abuse the system but everyone else is tarred with the same brush.

I was unemployed for many years and at times was made to feel I counted for nothing. At that time I was an activist for a poverty organisation and when paid employment came up I was encouraged to go for the post and was successful. However, it took others to believe in me for me to believe in myself, and back then (10 years ago) it wasn't easy to get a job – and now it's even more difficult. There's this notion that there are plenty of jobs readily available. I recently attended a meeting where the Head of Glasgow City Council, Gordon Matheson, was announcing the 3,000 job cuts that the Council will have to make over the next three years, and he said that for every one job in Glasgow there are twenty-seven Job Seekers. Yet Iain Duncan Smith, Minister for Welfare Reform, is saying that there will be around 350,000 jobs created with these proposals. I don't know how this weighs up when there are tens of thousands of workers facing the prospect of losing their jobs next year.

I live in a housing scheme in Castlemilk in Glasgow and work for Bridging the Gap, a voluntary organisation in the Gorbals. Castlemilk and the Gorbals are included in The Church of Scotland Priority Area Parishes as the most economically deprived parishes in Scotland. So I am uniquely placed within both of these areas to hear first-hand about people's outlook for their future.

During my lunch break I sometimes go a local cafe, and over the years have got to know the lady, Ann, who works there. Last year I noticed Ann was looking a bit down and asked her if she was okay. She told me that her husband had lost his job six months previous and she was extremely worried about him. He'd informed his advisor at the Job Centre that he'd

be willing to do anything. In these six months he hadn't been sent for any job. Ann said that he had lost two stone in weight, slipped into depression, wasn't speaking and was attending the doctor. He is a joiner to trade and in his early 50s, and the prospect of not working again was devastating for him. Four months ago Ann told me that her husband had found employment. He had been allocated with a new advisor at the Job Centre, who took a personal interest in his qualifications and within three weeks found him suitable employment to apply for. I spoke to Ann last week and the contract for that job has finished and her husband is now back on benefits ...

Joan has a young son, aged two years, and was due to give birth to her second child last week. Her husband is a furniture restorer to trade and has also worked as a labourer. Joan worked as a community development worker for a few years but gave it up to look after her young son. She told me last week that her husband was being sent by the Job Centre for a job that would last one week with minimum wage. Joan quickly added that she had nothing against the minimum wage, however the difficulty of coming off benefits for a week was daunting. She said her husband had been unemployed for a couple of years and was desperate to work, but with her just about to give birth they felt it wouldn't be worth the hassle to take up employment for one week. (If you have ever had to go through the process of coming off and on benefits then you'll understand their dilemma.) He's applied to various furniture restorers to see if he could volunteer but hasn't had any luck. Joan said that when he comes home from the Job Centre with application forms she ends up filling them in as this isn't one of his strengths. She keeps a note of places he's applied to and finds that halfway through some application forms he's already applied for these

Brian Quail

The unkindest cut of all ...

Among all the CONDEM cuts, the ultimate expression of British power and status, Trident – which costs UK taxpayers £1 billion a year – is left unthreatened. Brian Quail of Scottish Ploughshares explains why, and urges those of us in Scotland to use our vote in the Scottish election next May to choose life ...

positions. There are times when the Job Centre has no jobs for him.

Recently at Bridging the Gap we had our first 'forced' volunteer under the Government's new scheme. I ask myself how this constitutes as volunteering. If this is the way the Government intends to go, then I believe the invaluable volunteering that goes on may be ruined: people will begin to resent being forced.

For all the good intentions this Government has to get people off benefits and into employment, they need to come down into the real world and realise there aren't enough jobs out there for everyone. So let's stop this stigmatisation and demoralising of people on benefits.

I am under no delusion and realise that as a nation we shouldn't be living beyond our means. And, like David Cameron, I believe that we should be looking for solutions; we should all be contributing to the solutions – and that means consulting with the relevant people, groups, organisations.

Mr Cameron has said 'we are all in this together' – can I add that for thousands and thousands of people this is simply not the case? It feels as though this is being done to us and not *with* us. These cuts go against the morals, values and principles that I hold dear. The quote I started off with from Deuteronomy seems to be ringing in my ear when I hear about the havoc this Government is reaping. In a couple of years, when the decisions of this Government come crashing down, it's going to take a long time to recover. ●

Bridging the Gap is an ecumenical organisation in the Gorbals. The purpose of Bridging the Gap is to build positive relationships across the divides with particular reference to black, minority and ethnic members of the community, and to ease the transition from primary to secondary school. These are the two main strands of our work.
www.bridging-the-gap.org

I'm afraid that, in one respect at least, I am a follower of the late Sir Alec Douglas-Home. This Tory grandee and former Prime Minister once confessed that he did economics with matchsticks. I am, in truth, a complete ignoramus regarding the dark and intricate art of money-managing. I tend to operate on the *cui bono?* principle – who stands to gain from this? – and let ethical or political principles be my deciding considerations when trying to solve economic conundrums.

So, when I look at the recent swathes of cuts announced by the Government, I ask myself some very elementary questions. Elementary – and obvious. Such as: why is it when we are struggling to escape the biggest economic meltdown since the Depression, those responsible for the mess – the financial racketeers, the wheelers and dealers in the highest ranks of the banking plutocracy – will suffer the least, whereas their victims – the poor and the indebted – will be left to pay the price of the greed and corruption of these Masters of the Universe? Does it always have to be like this? Is it not time for a radical rethink of the whole business of profits, bonuses and wages?

The nexus of power and money is the heart of the Beast, and to survive, and continue to dominate, is its only driving impulse. Mammon knows no mercy, no compassion, no humanity. It thrives on militarism; and violence – spiritual and physical – is its inevitable accompaniment. So, among all the various cuts, the ultimate expression of power and status – Trident – is left undamaged and unthreatened.

The moral nihilism of this fact speaks volumes. No consideration of the utter immorality of our WMD (the so-called 'British deterrent') is taken. There is no awareness of what it actually does, when it does the one and only thing it was designed to do.

The Coalition Government's decision to postpone the final vote on a replacement is a mere body swerve, and a cop-out. A cynical piece of posturing.

If I may explain: Ministry of Defence projects go through two hurdles, the Initial Gate and the Main Gate. For Trident replacement the Initial Gate (due 2010) will authorise billions of pounds on design work and the procurement of long-lead items over the next 4-5 years. The Main Gate (2015) will authorise the full contracts for submarine construction.

There is every likelihood that in 2015 the Government will argue that so much money has already been spent that it would be foolish not to continue with the new submarines – just as they recently did with the two new aircraft carriers being built on the Clyde.

The recent Defence deal between Sarkozy and Cameron promises, inter

because they are many, and in atom bombs because they are very strong, and have not sought after the Holy One of Israel, and have not sought the Lord ...'

alia, nuclear co-operation between the UK and France over the next 50 years. It is simply taken for granted that we will remain a nuclear-armed state in perpetuity. But both countries are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, Article VI of which commits the states to '*negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament*'. This UK/France agreement is a clear violation of this Article.

At Aldermaston, in Berkshire, where all the UK's atom bombs are made, the work for Trident replacement is going full steam ahead. The planned 'Project Hydrus' is the latest development in an ongoing £1-billion-a-year modernisation programme there, which includes the Orion laser, an enriched uranium-handling facility, and three new supercomputers. This will enable the UK to develop a new generation of nuclear warheads, circumventing its obligations under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and undermining its disarmament commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The fact that Aldermaston is working flat out shows that, essentially, the Trident replacement project is a done deal. For all the parliamentary manoeuvring, the real decision-makers are committed to producing a replacement for Trident when it reaches its 'use by' date in 2025.

Stopping Trident is one cut the British state is not prepared to make. We will forever cling blindly to our nuclear juju. The Great British national fetish will remain eternally sacrosanct and inviolable. However, to make this Act of Nuclear Faith, we must first stifle our own sense of human sympathy or compassion. Only when we have killed the humanity in ourselves, can we then countenance the mass killing of

other human beings. Thus – morally – we are our first nuclear victims.

And we have already committed this sin. We have already signed the nuclear blank cheque, and wait now in the vague hope that – somehow – it will never actually be cashed. The faint hope that our government will not do that which we have already agreed to.

The prestigious Canberra Commission affirmed in 1996: '*The proposition that nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never used – accidentally or by decision – defies credibility. The only complete defence is the elimination of nuclear weapons and assurance that they will never be used.*'

But Britain pays no heed to these words. We continue to delude ourselves that the atom bomb is our White Man's burden, an Ark of the Covenant entrusted to us but forever denied lesser breeds. So we press on with our nuclear fantasies, as if we can forever say to the rest of the world: 'Don't do as I do, do as I say.'

Nuclear deterrence is a contradictory and self-destructive delusion. In order that an enemy should be deterred, he must perceive our threat as being real, actual and imminent. In order to create this fear in the enemy, we must develop these characteristics in our weaponry; they must be made real and usable, with a stealth delivery system. So ultimately, the never-to-be-used Bomb becomes usable. And if it is usable, then we are more and more likely to use it.

This is the huge fallacy behind the Lib Dems talk of replacing Trident with a smaller, cheaper Cruise-launched nuclear missile. It makes nuclear war more likely, not less.

Politically, we see that nuclear deterrence is a self-destructive deception; from a Christian perspective, we are back where we started. In Deut 30:19 we are told: '*I call heaven and earth to witness*

this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Choose therefore life, that both thou and thy seed may live.'

To continue on the Old Testament theme, in Isaiah 31:1 we read: '*Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, trusting in horses, and putting their confidence in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong; and have not trusted in the Holy One of Israel, and have not sought after the Lord.*'

Which I have updated for the present situation, thus: '*Woe to them that go down to the Deep for help, trusting in Trident missiles, and putting their confidence in submarines because they are many, and in atom bombs because they are very strong, and have not sought after the Holy One of Israel, and have not sought the Lord.*'

Our great present ongoing sin is our violation of the first commandment – idolatry. Our hope for safety (salvation) lies in our gods of metal. These are our idols, in these we place our trust, and to these we are prepared to sacrifice our own children, and the children of our enemy. So, our nuclear addiction is, in the lovely Americanism used by the US Pax Christi bishops, a 'sin situation'.

The decision is ours.

Next May there will be the election to the Scottish Parliament. A vote for any of the British Nationalist (Unionist) parties means a vote for Trident. How many people in Scotland will on that occasion unthinkingly support the sin of Trident through their vote?

For me, Archbishop Hunthausen of Seattle says it all: '*Our nuclear war preparations are the global crucifixion of Jesus. What we do to the least of these, including our nuclear planning, we do to Jesus. This is his teaching. We cannot avoid it, and we should not try. Our nuclear weapons are the final crucifixion of Jesus, the extermination of the human family, with whom he is one.*' ●

Brian Quail is a member of the Iona Community.

www.tridentploughshares.org

There is another way

Martin Johnstone is the Church of Scotland's Priority Areas Secretary and voluntary Chief Executive of Faith in Community, Scotland ...

Did you hear the one about the Scotsman, the Englishman and the Irishman who walked into a pub? The Scotsman asked: 'Can I have a whisky?' The Englishman asked: 'Can I have a pint?' And the Irishman asked: 'Can I have a fiver?'

I hope that you will forgive the latest somewhat politically incorrect and poor taste joke stereotyping the drinking habits of the Scots and the English and the appalling financial predicament facing our closest European neighbours which is currently doing the rounds in my sons' school. My suspicion, based on my own school years, is that it is probably one of the more printable classroom jokes.

There are three things which are currently (and constantly) infuriating me about the £83 billion of cuts announced by the UK Coalition Government in October's Comprehensive Spending Review:

- The first of these is that, masquerading under the pretence of 'fairness' and the completely inaccurate claim that 'we are all in this together', the price of paying for the financial recklessness of the greedy has been laid disproportionately at the door of the poorest. This has been possible, in part, because of the toxic combination of politicians and populist press co-operating to vilify and scapegoat people with next to nothing rather than genuinely choosing to face up to our collective responsibility for what has gone wrong.

I do not recognise the workshy man who would prefer to live on benefits than get a real job. Or the single mother who can't be bothered looking after her kids. Or the asylum seeker arriving in our cities and villages with the sole intention of stealing our jobs. Of course, I am not naive enough to suggest that no such people exist but they are most certainly the exception and not the norm. The greatest proportion of people I know who are unemployed would love to be in paid work. Many indeed work unpaid day in and day out. Virtually all the single mothers I know are spectacular parents who love their kids to bits. I know very few asylum seekers who did not come here because they were forced to flee their own homeland. What I do recognise is that in the city in which I live (Glasgow) there is currently one job for every ten people claiming unemployment benefit. So please let us get real. People are not avoiding work. There isn't any, particularly if, for a whole variety of very legitimate reasons, you haven't been in a job for a while.

- The second thing which really gets to me is that not only are the victims being blamed, the vast, untapped wisdom and potential of people living in poverty remains unused. It was Albert Einstein who defined insanity as 'doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'. It seems to me that, despite a change of government, we are overwhelmingly asking the same group of people to get us out of the mess who got us into it in the first place. And we are trying to do it by following the same blind adherence to the power of the market that has failed so many thus far. Only now, we are following that mirage of unsustainable economic growth, having removed much of the safety net which existed for the most vulnerable.

I would like to suggest an alternative. Living and working in the privileged position that I do, I am regularly struck by the wisdom (and good common sense) of people who face poverty on a day-to-day basis.

In particular, over the last couple of years, I have been incredibly fortunate to be a small part of Scotland's first Poverty Truth Commission. Through the work of that Commission, I have heard some very practical, very sensible and very honest solutions being put forward to the predicaments that we are facing. I have come to the conclusion that until the people who know about poverty from the inside are deeply involved in the development, delivery and evaluation of policy, then we will continue to make bad decisions. The mantra of the Commission is: *Nothing about us without us is for us*. It was for that reason that in November we invited the Chancellor of the Exchequer to meet with the Commission – that gut feeling that there might just be a little bit of common sense that the best economic and social policy brains in Britain are currently missing. And he would be welcome anytime, as would any of his colleagues. After all, Mr Cameron, Mr Clegg and Mr Osborne, we are in this together.

- My third complaint is the idea that there isn't any alternative and that the medicine, although painful (for some), just has to be taken. I was reminded recently that the last time Britain had a higher level of national debt (and it was much higher) was at the end of the Second World War. What was our response at that time? It was investment in the National Health Service, the creation of the modern welfare state and the building of hundreds of thousands of decent new homes for people to live in. I understand that the world order and the global interconnectedness of the economy may be different now, as is the national mood, but we should not pretend that cuts, cuts and more cuts is the only economic option at our disposal. Nor should we pretend that such a fiscal policy will automatically work, that it is worth enduring pain

today for joy tomorrow. Just look at our sisters and brothers in Ireland who, having gone through one round of savage public sector cuts, are now enduring a second, even deeper, one.

We don't need to go as far, however, as suggesting that it might even make sense, in the short term, to increase, rather than cut, the deficit. Such a policy is unlikely to gain much credence in the world that we are currently living in and I believe that we need to be proposing achievable alternatives rather than simply being armchair radicals. But there are alternatives out there. These include: a tax on financial transactions (the so-called Robin Hood Tax); maintaining the current levels of public spending in capital projects in an effort to maintain jobs; taxing universal benefits; reducing the threshold at which a 50% level of income tax kicks in; and, above all, taking the necessary steps to deliberately close the gap between the richest and the poorest. It seems to me that the growing chasm between the richest and the poorest – a gap that has grown wider and wider in the last generation and which reverses the trend of the previous five hundred years – is one of the principal reasons for our current dis-ease.

The level, scale and impact of the cuts are no laughing matter and we must advocate and campaign for alternative ways of righting our economy. The victimisation of the poorest so that they can be made to suffer the brunt of the pain is a disgrace. And I want to suggest that listening to people who understand the problems from their daily lived experience must be a critical part of the way forward. ●

Martin Johnstone is an associate member of the Iona Community.

www.povertytruthcommission.org

www.churchofscotland.org.uk/priorityareas.htm

www.faithincommunityscotland.org

Neil Paynter

Creatively surviving

When I was employed as a mental health support worker, I used to visit a young man who lived in a tower block in a rough area of Edinburgh. I'd visit and see how his week went, find out if he had enough groceries, what bills needed to be paid ... and we'd just sit and drink tea and talk. His flat had been broken into three times. He'd been jumped down at the shops and beaten up by a gang who said he was a gay ... Every day was hard for him.

He'd had a job long ago, 'in another life', in a museum, but had a nervous breakdown, and with no support – no family or friends – ended up homeless; then 'trapped in the social work system'.

He did a lot (on top of the list of all the plain, everyday things) just to survive. One thing he'd do was to go to charity shops like Oxfam and Save the Children, and buy cheap reproductions of paintings with a portion of his giro money. His flat was full of masterpieces – Monets, Van Goghs, Michelangelos, Seurats, Chagalls, Vermeers, Rembrandts ... Underneath, the walls were peeling and water-marked; punched and kicked in by previous tenants. The walls out in the corridor were all graffitied, and echoed when you walked in them: like the building was vacant of soul; there were needles and syringes and empty bottles lying in corners. He'd burn incense in winter to cover up the mouldy-damp smell in his flat. The smell of incense helped 'put him in a better place', he said.

Another thing he'd do to survive was go to the Hermitage, a woods nearby. He explained that some days he felt 'too surrounded by concrete and greyness'. He'd go sit under the trees for a few hours. Walk the quiet paths. Look at the wild flowers.

When I asked him why he collected paintings, and took walks in the Hermitage, he thought a moment, and said: '... It's the way I keep hope alive.'

He was always waiting: waiting to get money from social work to get his broken glasses fixed; waiting for Council Tax to forgive him; waiting to get to the top of the housing list; waiting to win the lottery. Waiting ...

One day, in passing, he mentioned that he used to go to church once, years ago. He didn't now. 'Church is for rich people,' he said. His church was his paintings, and walking in the woods at the Hermitage.

He was an artist in creative survival. That's what I loved and appreciated about him – the way he could creatively survive.

PRAYER

*God of the cathedral of trees;
Creative Christ of the tower block;
help us to give support and to bring some understanding and gentleness
to people living in areas where life is hard:*

*People waiting to be delivered,
from poor housing, intimidation, violence, Council tax bills, loan sharks,
depression ... Amen ●*

From Light of the World: Daily Readings for Advent, Neil Paynter & Peter Millar, Wild Goose Publications
www.ionabooks.com

Donald Eadie

The return of Godflesh Barking back

24.10.10. Sunday-morning thoughts following an extraordinary Saturday night: a first visit to the Supersonic Festival ...

I've known Ben for over 10 years, grown to love him but not understand the supersonic world of music that has partially shaped him. Brought up on the Beatles and the Beach Boys I wonder what drew Ben into hard rock, into 'the world of extreme music, apocalyptic sounds and images, steeped in a Birmingham setting'. His music emerged, he says, as a sound of protest in the late 1980s, the end of the Thatcher years, a protest from working-class east Birmingham youth, 'a barking back', 'an act of cleansing and purifying' from so much that poisoned the air, dehumanised political and social systems, holding down the people.

I have grown to know something of the Ben who, after years of touring the world with the influential band Godflesh, chose to withdraw from everything associated with the almost deafening noise, into a whole year alone, hidden away in the silent folds of the Cambrian Mountains in Wales, a small and simple cottage his solitary home. This Ben, I begin to know. What I can't understand is how Ben, and other gentle, sensitive, thoughtful men, are drawn into supersonic hard rock music. All this exploding noise and within it these gentle human beings.

And last night?

Late last night we went to 'The Custard Factory' under the large railway arches near the bus station in the centre of Birmingham. Why? It was an opportunity to enter Ben's world and to attempt to

understand more. I was really glad to share the middle of the night with Nicola and Joe (our daughter and grandson), Jenny and Ken (Ben's mother and stepfather), Sarah and Harris, and Jane and Adrian (friends).

It was freezing cold when we passed through the entrance gate for performers' guests, walking into the open-air corridors lit up by strong spot lights, watched by large, vigilant, yellow-vested security men, past halls already pulsating with music, and on into a building resembling a large empty aircraft hanger. No heating, no chairs, only a cold concrete floor.

Godflesh was headlining the Supersonic Festival. And men, lots and lots of them, between 35-45 years of age, wrapped up warm, some with woolly hats, flooded in just before the band took to the stage, filling the hall, waiting. And when the crashing interlude music faded, Ben and Justin appeared amidst rising, swelling cheers, and then an explosion – swirling red, yellow, green and white lights, a rhythmic bludgeoning, primal pounding within an almost overwhelming sound and billowing white clouds enveloping the stage and hanging over us as a hovering evening mist. (Incense filling a temple?) And then the waves of chanting, the lifting up of hands and arms, the punching of the air, the gentle slow movement of heads, the swaying of bodies.

Godflesh travelled the world until the late 1990s and had not returned to Birmingham, their home city, since 1991. The reuniting fans, including some who had travelled from other countries especially for this performance, sang – sang along with the songs as if they had never left their hearts. And the chanting? 'G.C. Green' – the rhythmic repeating of our Ben's name.

And the paradox?

Such an erupting explosion of noise, such tortured images,

including a yellow cross, flashed across the blue screens, and the gentle swaying, relaxed, content, benign movement of young men and a few young women. It was much more than I had expected. I hesitate to articulate my wondering: is there, somewhere within all this, a public ritual, an exorcising of what some experience as their demons? 'An act of cleansing, a purifying'?

And then the lights went up, the volume of the noise went down and people hung around, well-pleased. A group of them, recognising my age and culture, asked if I had enjoyed it. My explanation for being there was that I had followed Ben to the Festival to try to understand the world he had once inhabited. 'Tell him: He's a mean bass. Tell him – congratulations.'

Sounds re-emerging from 20 years ago. What new throbbing rhythms, what protesting lyrics, what 'barking back', what stark restorative images, what form of social exorcism waits to emerge in Coalition Britain now? ●

From the Supersonic Festival programme: 'It's quite a year for Supersonic. Swans and Godflesh, two of the most influential bands in the world of extreme music, headlining the festival. While Swans took inspiration from their New York backdrop; across the pond Godflesh's sound was steeped in its Birmingham setting. Justin Broadrick claimed he wanted to create the sound of the 'scum' that surrounded him. Drawing as much from acts like Throbbing Gristle and Whitehouse as Black Sabbath, they created industrial metal, an apocalyptic noise of the starkest kind. Supersonic is proud to host the original line-up performing a homecoming show.'

Donald Eadie is a Methodist minister and retreat leader. He is the author of *Grain in Winter: Reflections for Saturday People* (Epworth Press).

www.godflesh.com

'Grey machines, dying oceans, Slateman With your hand on my heart, I need air. With your hand on my heart, I'll still survive, Slateman ...'

From 'Slateman' by Godflesh

The Bhopal gas disaster

It's been over 25 years since the gas disaster in Bhopal – and still survivors are fighting for justice ... Eurig Scandrett is Coordinator of the Bhopal Survivors' Movement Study and editor of 'Bhopal Survivors Speak: Emergent Voices from a People's Movement' (Word Power Books). He wrote the following reflection for the recent Wild Goose Publications Christmas book, Good News of Great Joy ...

A little after midnight, early on 3rd December, 1984, toxic gas leaked from the Union Carbide insecticide factory in Bhopal, central India, killing an estimated 8000 people.

But the angel said to them: *'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, who is Messiah, the Lord ...'*

I am suspicious of anyone claiming to bring good news of great joy for all the people. All the people? It is a trick of the powerful to claim that something is good for all people, but which turns out to be good for themselves and those like them. The Green Revolution in the 1970s, in which high-yielding crops were introduced to India to feed all the people, turned out to be good for the big landowning farmers and the agrochemical companies.

The poor are still hungry and many have suffered at the hands of the chemical industry on the way – none more than the people of Bhopal.

Angels are a useful literary device for delivering such a message, since they have the appearance of being classless: neither rich nor poor, floating timelessly above history (although not entirely, since the angel is clearly male). In the strongly class-divided society of first-century Palestine, how would the shepherds recognise the angel? Does he have the calloused hands of a worker or craftsman, the grubby hands of a retainer, or the smooth hands of the elite? On whose behalf does he speak of good news for 'all people'?

This is the third time that Luke has used the angel to present the tension between fear and joy. The first, to Zachariah, an elderly priest, whose infertile wife will give birth to John; the second, to Mary, a teenaged girl, pregnant with Jesus; and now the third, to shepherds, workers, to explain the significance of Jesus as Messiah. Fear and joy.

The people of Bhopal were visited by an anti-angel, who brought fear where there might have been joy. Many women who were pregnant then miscarried, their children stillborn or born deformed. Ever since, teenaged girls have suffered gynaecological irregularities. Workers and the elderly have been left destitute.

Fear was the emotion which the survivors recall from the night the gas leaked. As the panic spread, people fled in all directions; sleeping children were bundled up and pushed onto the backs of lorries going anywhere; women who would never leave home without a burqa, ran in their underclothes; quick decisions were made about whether to save babies first or the sick, whether to wait for those out late to return. Come daylight: the hospitals overflowing, the streets littered with the dead – people and livestock, the Muslims' goats, the Hindus' sacred cows – people searching for their children, their parents, their loved ones.

26 years later, great joy is still elusive. The people of Bhopal still await justice. For them, there has been no saviour. In 1989, Union Carbide 'settled' with the Indian Government, without consultation with the survivors, for the equivalent of \$500 per affected person: the value of Indian lives to the

US corporation. Senior executives have avoided trial and the company chairman, Warren Anderson, now enjoys his retirement as the US refuses to extradite him. Dow Chemicals, who acquired Union Carbide in 2001, refuses to accept liability, whilst profiting from India's 'economic miracle', splashing corporate sponsorship around to disinfect its past. The Indian Government doesn't want to discourage major investors by making them accountable for their crimes. This year saw the first convictions, of some managers of the Indian subsidiary company, on a minimal charge: far too little and targeting the wrong people.

Fear and joy. The survivors have had no joy but they have been fearless.

For 26 years they have confronted multinational companies, government politicians, corporate lawyers and brutal police in their demands for justice: for adequate health care; economic rehabilitation and employment; access to clean, uncontaminated water; proper environmental remediation of the factory site; commensurate compensation; and to bring those responsible to account.

The anti-angel – the gas – was the messenger of fear and devastation. There was no evil in the gas, but rather in the economic decisions of the company.

The gas leak was a direct result of cutting back on 'unprofitable' maintenance and safety features at a factory. The cause of death and destruction was the logic of putting profits before people.

There is no easy saviour, just as Jesus is no easy saviour. Bhopal survivors say that even if they got their demands, there would be no justice, no joy, if the same logic is putting others at risk.

There are smaller Bhopals occurring throughout the world, wherever workers die or are made ill through exposure to hazards at work, wherever the ever-increasing cocktail of chemicals in the environment damages people's health, wherever children are made sick because it is cheaper to pollute the air with factories, roads, incinerators.

The most vulnerable – children, the elderly, pregnant women, marginal workers: to whom the angel announced great joy – are those most at risk of chemical hazards.

Bhopal is a negation of the saviour. In an exact reversal of the angel's speech, the 'great joy' which was promised by the Green Revolution was experienced by the poor of Bhopal as fear. It continues today: the poor are the acceptable price for that great joy of the rich: economic growth. This is the negation of the Messiah, the false messiah. On the contrary, the Messiah heralded in the angel's speech is the one in Mary's reflection: 'He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.' That is how to recognise the Messiah, the one who comes to the young girl, the old man, the workers.

Allahu Akbar

The Muezzin calls the Muslims to prayer in Bhopal

God is Great ...

But still the people wait.

Hari Ram, the Hindus chant, and the people wait for justice.

A few ring bells and pray to Christ, waiting.

Waiting for God.

Where on earth is he?

In the beginning:

The gas has cleared, day broken, Sunita coughs and, through stinging eyes, looks and looks for her children amongst the sick, for signs from survivors returning, amongst the

dead.

Where is God? Why has he abandoned us?

She slumps, filthy, against the factory wall. A young boy brings her water, some cooked rice. The boy's mother, across the street, sitting in her burqa, encourages her to eat. It is the first time she's eaten food from a Muslim.

She goes to the boy's mother and they share their grief, all they have.

Where on earth is God?

One day, Samira goes looking. She speaks to her workmates. If God was here he'd give us wages enough to feed our children, he wouldn't let our bosses humiliate us. Let's form a union whilst we're waiting for God.

Three days into their hunger strike, two women hold hands, sitting under a tarpaulin in Delhi to which they had returned when released from police cells they'd been taken to for lying down in a shroud in front of the office of their enemies. Behind them the placard reads, in Hindi, Urdu and English: Bhopal Still Waits For Justice. Where Is God? ●

FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH HAJRA BEE, from 'Bhopal Survivors Speak'

'I used to make beedis, my husband was a daily wage labourer, his union was in Jumnerati (in Bhopal). He was part of the Communist Party and we led a very decent life ...

'When the gas leaked it poisoned the area close to Union Carbide, all the places where the poor live. There is certainly a reason why only the poor were allotted land near a dangerous factory like Union Carbide. The direction of the gas was on this side, the gas spread to all these places and people died here. They were all poor people: why? Maybe because the educated and well-off people knew about Union Carbide and understood what MIC was so they never came here. Only the poor came so close to seek shelter and they built huts to live in and then the gas disaster took place. The upper classes never came here, they went to far-off places, the VIP areas, the educated

areas: this was through cunning.

'I started being active after the disaster but before that I was a housewife and had no knowledge about the outside world. I discovered the power of standing up and fighting for rights when I fought for compensation for my son. My second son, Mansoor Ali, was left behind in the house on the night of the disaster and he was severely exposed and is suffering from gas-related ailments.

'At the hearing to decide compensation I told the judge in the courtroom: "I do not want the money, or my son! I want my four-year-old son like he was before the gas leak. I do not want a gas-exposed kid. I do not want a sick son. This is the Government's mistake that in the 1970s the Government of India permitted the foreign companies. They came here, inflicted pain and suffering, killed us and left."

'My son's childhood was lost, he could not read, write or play, was bedridden all the time and a bottle was attached to him. How far can a mother take this? This was not the question of Hajra Bee's son but a lot of other mothers who went through the same thing ...

'Many people come to fight for the rights of gas victims, to share their pain and grief, to participate in their fight, this is their sympathy. They take the fight of Bhopal forward, amplify the voice of the victims, want to get justice for gas and water victims so these are the people who sympathise who come among us. If they are well educated they can make their money in some way, when they have so many degrees then they will not find it difficult to get a job. They have the sympathy and they want Bhopal to get justice. If Bhopal gets justice then the whole world will get justice. Then Dow will not dare to repeat another Bhopal-like tragedy elsewhere or even start a company elsewhere. It is scared now, I feel its fear and it will be scared ...'

Eurig Scandrett teaches sociology at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh and carries out research into environmental justice movements. He is an educator and activist in environmental, peace, gender and trade union issues, and is a member of the Iona Community. 'Bhopal Survivors Speak' is available from: www.word-power.co.uk

Travelling folk ... Ghana, Brazil

Member Iain Whyte travels to Ghana, where he once worked as Youth minister with the Presbyterian Church of Ghana; and friend of the Community Callum Macdonald travels to Rio to experience and report on the Homeless World Cup

'NO CONDITION IS PERMANENT': GHANA 40 YEARS ON, by Iain Whyte

When we worked in Ghana in the early 1970s, one of the most familiar slogans on the 'mammy lorries', the wooden firetraps that used to transport people, was 'No condition is permanent'. A prophetic observation as we waited then for the military coup that was to replace the civilian government, which in turn had replaced the military government after the fall of Ghana's most famous son and first President, Kwame Nkrumah. (At the time I bought two of Nkrumah's books in the university bookshop at giveaway prices, because, the shop staff explained: 'No one wants these any more.')

The mammy lorries have long since been replaced by mini-buses, and the Nkrumah Mausoleum and Museum was filled with awestruck Ghanaian schoolchildren when we visited it on a Saturday afternoon.

In 1982, on a Church visit, I discovered that the items in the only supermarket could be counted on one hand. Today, shopping malls are going up in almost every residential district. Then, a car journey to the city centre from the port of Tema took, at most, half an hour – Ghanaian

friends told us to allow at least two and a half hours now to get through the traffic. Such was the density of housing, formal and informal, that, although we located the clinic where our daughter had been born, we were unable to locate the house where we had spent two years.

Malawi may be 'the warm heart of Africa', but most commentators agree that Ghanaian welcome, friendship and hospitality are hard to match anywhere else on the continent. We could never have managed the huge numbers of reunions and other visits without the assistance of old friends Dr Sam and Adelaide Prempeh, and the generous provision of church transport by the Principal Clerk, Rev. Herbert Opong. We even managed to track down the one associate of the Iona Community in Ghana, Mr Charles Baah, who, in the midst of a crowded work schedule out of town, visited us with his wife and small daughter.

In recent years, Ghana's political and economic stability has allowed a great deal of 'development' to take place but we were acutely aware that there was a huge income gap between those who enjoyed pizza and ice cream at the shopping centres, as we did, and the numerous vendors of small items at every traffic light. We saw few beggars and were

rarely asked for money, but homelessness, a phenomenon almost unknown 40 years ago, given the extended family structure, was now glaringly obvious. With that in mind it was inspiring to see what was happening in the Ghana Homeless World Cup project in the high-density suburb of Ashaley Botwe. Martin Asamoah, the organiser and manager of the team, still in his twenties, told us over a meal in his house how much he had appreciated the help, two years ago, of two sons of Community members, Paul Gibson and Matthew McDonald. Martin had organised a match for us between the second squad and a local team. (The first team, bound for the tournament in Rio at the end of the week, were resting.) David Duke, Manager of the Scotland Homeless World Cup team, had given me strips to present to his opposite number, and for that match the guys donned Scottish colours.

From the dusty pitches of crowded Accra we travelled by State Transport buses several hundred miles to the rural north. Tools for Self Reliance (www.tfsr.org) have for several years supported small training and income-generating projects, providing incentives to avoid the familiar drain of young people to



the south. NORSAAC (Northern Action on Awareness Centre) offer premises, tools and skills-training for bicycle repairers, and this has had a spectacular success in countryside where the roads take their toll on the cheapest and most convenient form of short-distance transport. NORSAAC had much to tell us about their gender equality programme and gave a positive report on Christian-Muslim relations. Their own staff reflects this – our guide and mentor was Hafsa Sey Sumani, a young Muslim graduate from the Development University of the North.

A quick visit to Cape Coast, and the slaving fort there, convinced us that Ghana is realistically grappling with its past to a greater extent than we are doing – the school curriculum has this built in. Apart from during some of the darkest days of military rule, Ghanaians have never lost their appetite for robust debate, especially in the areas of religion and politics. Two old friends invited us to join a group of retired academics at a little Italian restaurant. The food was good but the real delight was in the uninhibited analysis of African politics – from the military governments in Ghana to the real Robert Mugabe behind the mask. One of our companions was a member of the Council of State which advises the President, but I wouldn't have been surprised if Professor Sawyerr held the same discussion with his driver on the way home.

We were a bit apprehensive about being classified by the Church as on an 'official visit' but despite a Sunday start at 5:00am to speak at three services, the warm welcome by old friends more than compensated. Rev. Peter Kodjo, whom we knew as a 'radical' young minister, now presides over the citadel of Presbyterianism – Osu Congregation. There were around a thousand people at the English service at 7.00, and the same

number at the 9.30 (the service in Ga, the Accra-area language), and at least 500 at a youth service in another venue at 10.00. Peter swept in and out of each service like a benevolent company chief executive with us in his wake – drumming and dancing were interspersed with choral pieces that would not be out of place in Edinburgh's Usher Hall, and in the midst of it all we had a second and sumptuous breakfast at the manse. It made us realise our age, when the son of the pastor for whom I had worked, then a young teenager in the youth group, told us that next year he would retire from his senior post in local government. I asked his 10-year-old daughters if they knew what they wanted to do after school. One said she would become a surgeon, the other, a lawyer. 'What interested you in law?' I asked. 'Well,' she said, 'I want to fight corruption and defend human rights.' Out of the mouths ...

Ghana has had, and continues to have, huge problems of inequality, corruption, political gerrymandering, and waste of resources, just like so many of our Western nations. Oil has been discovered and there is real concern that the 'black gold' will benefit few and destroy much. They have seen what it has done to their eastern near neighbour, Nigeria. But the rich culture, deep faith, the friendship and care of people at all levels of society, and the humour, have remained over the years. Hopefully these are conditions that *are* permanent. ●

Iain Whyte is the author of 'Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838', Edinburgh University Press, 2006, www.eupublishing.com

THE HOMELESS WORLD CUP, RIO DE JANEIRO, 2010, by Callum Macdonald

In September I spent two incredible weeks volunteering at the Homeless World Cup in Rio de Janeiro. Forty-eight men's teams and twelve women's teams competed at the 8th annual

football tournament, situated this year on the beautiful and frenzied Copacabana Beach.

During the competition itself, my main task was to write match reports for the website www.homelessworldcup.org (and my report on the final was put up on the FourFourTwo website).

Each day of the event produced a joyous carnival atmosphere, with a unique intermingling of different cultures and backgrounds creating a wash of colour all around the arena. Every direction you turned there was something different happening – whether it was Brazil players being interviewed by the local media, kids working frantically at the scoreboard to keep up with the goal-rush, coaches chatting with tournament officials, volunteers shipping water to and from the pitch, or teams singing and dancing; the place was always a hub of activity.

With such a fantastic buzz surrounding the whole tournament, at this most glorious and iconic setting for football, it is hard to imagine how the week could not have left a big impression on all those who were involved in it. Several of the players I spoke to confirmed how amazing their experience had been, and many expressed their gratitude towards those who had come up with the idea of the Homeless World Cup.

Everything about the event is geared towards making it most beneficial for the homeless players involved, and I think ultimately its most valuable asset lies in providing for its participants a renewed motivation for life and a fixed goal to pursue with friends and teammates. The players can tell their friends and family that they won the World Cup on home soil; that they scored the winning goal for Scotland against England; that they were able to share their stories of personal or political struggle and achievement; or simply that they have found a new hobby through

which they have met some amazing people.

Amid all the fun and camaraderie of the tournament, it was sobering to speak to some of the players in between games and be reminded of the extremely tough situations they have come from; particularly some of the younger players whose experiences seem alien to one's immediate associations having just met them. They seem like carefree young teenagers just enjoying the game they love, disguising a past that is often rife with drugs, alcohol and abuse.

Surveys are frequently conducted revealing the lasting impact the Homeless World Cup has on the players' lives, including statistics on improvements to their housing situation, employment and overall morale. After being in Rio this year, I have no doubt about the tournament's life-changing potential; however, in the next year I am keen to investigate the particular areas of players' lives that have been enhanced since Brazil, and also the areas where they may still face the same problems and societal misrepresentations.

It goes without saying that I met lots of new interesting people (including some Brazilian contacts whom I will be tracking down come the 2014 FIFA World Cup) and it gave me a small insight into the workings of sports journalism and the media. I want to say a massive thank you to everyone who sponsored me this summer – and also for helping to secure a place in Rio for one of the homeless players – and for all the messages of support I received. I'd encourage anyone who gets the chance to attend a Homeless World Cup in future to take it without hesitation. On that note, roll on Paris 2011! ●

www.homelessworldcup.org

<http://fourfourtwo.com/news/southamerica/64252/default.aspx>

Callum Macdonald is in his final year at Glasgow University.

David Coleman

Meeting Jesus on Facebook

Facebook, the social networking site, now claims 500,000,000 active members. You may be one. Or not.

Iona Abbey: I am in the MacNeil Library, balcony bolt-hole for generations of Iona volunteers. I am typing this on a laptop. Books have made way on the shelves for more such devices, on charge, waiting for their owners. Around me are five volunteers from two continents, each of them engaged one way or another with a computer. Age range – from twenties to sixties.

Superficially, it is amazingly quiet, but there are chuckles and wincing, as well as one fixed, rabbit-in-headlights stare. As an example of community life, it reminds me of a comment made – I now realise, without contextual understanding – by an African delegate at a European Christian conference, that 'the Spirit cannot move at three degrees centigrade'. The Europeans, full of post-colonial apologies, sat there and noddingly took it, rather than challenge the spirit of frustration and outrage at their dour spirituality that gave rise to the comment. The Spirit, I believe we need to assert, is indeed at work, really present, even in less obvious ways. And so too this almost disconcertingly peaceful gathering in the midst of a damp pilgrimage day is community life – extending out from this glorified bookcase above the Abbey refectory all over the world. It doesn't just *feel* real. It *is* real. A real presence, of sorts. Even if we aren't out playing football and swearing at each other on the muddy grass (back when I was a volunteer) ...

Back in the days of Jubilee 2000 someone incinerated a laptop on a beach in protest against what was seen as a 'let them eat cake' comment about supplying computers to developing countries. This is beginning to look more than a little crass, as the improvement in communication that information technologies can bring does enrich lives, build and connect communities in ways we might not have expected just a couple of years ago. Westerners/the North world can't smugly expect computers to be a symbol of their dominance. Most of all, IT enables a real, if virtual, experience of community at a far greater speed and level of sensory appreciation than previous media. There is no doubt that, having experienced living immersed in virtual community, people might be more inclined to suffer near-medical symptoms of withdrawal. And this is no longer just the teenagers with their phones. This is the nature of our humanity: integrated with technology, but no less in the image of God.

One of the volunteers is *not* on Facebook. He sees this as making a stand, being different. I respect that: I don't wear jeans. Facebook, for him, is 'an unhealthy easy way to stay in touch with people: perhaps we need to be out of touch, to struggle to get through'.

An interesting objection, but I might set it against the benefit of being able to receive encouragement in an otherwise desperately isolated situation at work, in church or elsewhere. And the joy of distant grandparents who now take part in children's lives.

I am becoming aware of all the objections. These are real: that Google and Facebook gather statistics, and all the stuff which, in the wrong hands, could be, and is, abused. That, though there may be mentoring, there is also 'grooming'. That electronic media can be addictive, and take the place of more healthy interaction. ('Get a life!'). And that, unless people take conscious care with what they are posting, what may seem like an intimate exchange between close friends becomes all too public. Teachers and

pastors are discovering how much care they need to take, even given a sometimes prudish policing of the network. (A user group promoting positive images of breastfeeding found much of its material had been taken off!)

Almost none of this is peculiar to electronic media. Untold harm and offence has been caused by handwritten letters, and by printed media – blackmail, fraud, identity theft, intimidation, smear campaigns ...

And I wonder sometimes if some criticism of electronic media represent the persistence of the clichéd, elite common sense that for so long insisted that worthy books and articles had to be presented in an aesthetically unstimulating manner. The tedious ‘improving’ story of the wee girl who preferred books to television because the pictures were better. (What child will believe that one today?) What is true is that electronic media have immersed us, in less than a generation, and we will only discover later whether we are swimming or drowning.

These media really really are *not* in themselves the message, even if they do colour the reception of both good and bad news. There is no ‘analogue premium’ of holiness for those who fight to keep their faith free of technology.

But then the evangelical fact that the Christian scriptures, rather than one big Bible-black book, are, simply, software (‘be upstanding at the beginning of worship whilst the “pen-drive” is brought forward!’) has yet to sink in everywhere. Paper is a medium. Dots on a screen are a medium. Why should one be privileged over the other?

Of course, there are real differences. As a cyclist, I know I am doing something other than driving an inferior car. I see more, smell more, and can get away faster, as well as being more vulnerable to the waywardness of

other road users. So with words and non-verbal communications.

The spoken word trips people up with the prejudices associated with accent and intonation. The telephone is immediate and interactive, but highly intrusive (nuisance calls). Mobiles are far worse: some folk seem endlessly hounded by the microwave source in their pocket. E-mail can pile up endlessly (with spam, inheritance scams and Viagra adverts). Facebook, though it probably needs slightly more skill to use effectively, is, like a live conversation, usefully ephemeral: if you have missed out, you have missed out. But it also exposes you to the adverts that keep the thing going, which you ‘read’, demonstrably more subconsciously than in a newspaper.

Face-to-face is, of course, the gold standard. It will remain so. Obviously the Iona Community believes this, since we spend – and encourage others to spend – tens of thousands of pounds a year trotting around the UK and even the world to meet face-to-face: the strenuousness of the New Members’ programmes, bringing people into such close proximity, so that they have to learn to love each other or bomb out. Our carbon footprint testifies to the value of meeting and accounting to one another in as incarnate a manner as possible. Yes!

And quite rightly, day by day, to supplement this, we are asked to pray for each other, following the wee list that used to define us as Soldiers of Christ (*Miles Christi*), but now bears the less challenging title ‘Prayer List’.

There was a time when, because that was all there was, it would have been seen as sufficient. That each day, we would gather virtually in our dispersed existence, and hold hands in prayer. Is that not real? Are we limited to a level of technology for sharing our life, made available to us thanks to the likes of Columba

(for writing) and Gutenberg (for printing). Maybe, back then, the Community was so small that pretty well everyone would have met everyone, eventually. The strength we do have is, that thanks to plenaries and Family Groups, it does not take long to have met someone who has met everyone. A virtual family, mediated by human contact.

Chris Polhill’s most welcome project to compile a photographic Rogues’ Gallery of Community members (enlisting, at last, Fox Talbot and Daguerre) has greatly enriched appreciation of sisters and brothers in the movement. To insist that others do without such crutches is altogether too ‘Calvinist’ in the awful old sense that saw faith as for the strong and the elect. Though to do without them yourself remains a valid choice.

And yes, in the support we offer one another, the encouragement we receive, both Jesus and the devil inhabit Facebook. Because it is where human beings live.

A woman volunteer, from Germany, has arrived. She plugs in her smartphone. Another e-mails her grandchildren ... Then it’s time to set up for the evening meal. ●

David Coleman is a URC minister, a photographer and a member of the Iona Community.



John Shelby Spong

Stephen Hawking and the death of theism

In this reflection sent to Coracle, John Selby Spong welcomes Stephen Hawking's latest book (which concludes that one does not need the God hypothesis to explain the origin of the universe) as 'one more nail in the coffin of theistic thinking' ...

Stephen Hawking, probably the best known and best read scientist of this century, has just published, with his co-author Leonard Mlodinof of Stanford University, a book entitled *The Grand Design*. This book has achieved headlines in newspapers around the world because Hawking's conclusion is that one does not need the God hypothesis to explain the origin of the universe. *The Grand Design* has been hailed by such popular atheist authors as Richard Dawkins of Oxford and the author of the best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, who described Hawking's book as 'Darwinism for the very fabric of nature, not just for the creatures living within it.' It has been attacked by the standard defenders of the theistic God of yesterday such as the Vatican and Canterbury as well as a wide variety of fundamentalist spokespersons. Catholic News Service in Vatican City, in a display of enormous egocentricity, actually speculated that the book was published intentionally one week before the scheduled visit of Benedict XVI to Great Britain. I'm sure the publisher checked the papal schedule before starting the book on its long journey toward publication. Rowan Williams of Canterbury was content simply to dismiss Hawking's conclusion without much commentary. The fundamentalists give abundant evidence that they don't understand what Hawking is saying, but they do know that they are against it. I suspect that most of Hawking's supporters as well as his religious critics have not read the book and probably never will.

The reason that this deep-seated misunderstanding abounds in both the press and in current religious voices is that both the religious and the popular mind are still infected with the theistic definition of God. By this I mean that theologians and average citizens alike continue to conceptualise God as a being, who exists in some place external to the world and who is equipped with supernatural power. This deity uses this supernatural power to intervene in history to guide life toward a particular conclusion or down a particular path. This theistic understanding of God, however, died in academic circles as long ago as the 19th century, but its shadow or its echo is still present and is reinforced constantly by the liturgies, hymns, sermons and prayers in the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples of the world. Theistic theology is not unlike the daily report of the weatherman, who informs us that the sun will rise and set at a particular moment each day, though we have known since the time of Copernicus in the 16th century that it is the Earth's rotation on its axis as it journeys around the sun each year that creates the illusion of the sun itself rising and setting.

I welcome Stephen Hawking's latest book as well as his religious insight as driving one more nail into the coffin of theistic thinking and forcing the religious world to begin the hard process of rethinking what it is that we mean when we say the word God. Maybe the word itself has become so corrupted that we cannot continue to use it, but I would argue that the experience of transcendence, otherness and even heightened

consciousness is real and that this experience has pointed to and been part of what we have historically meant by the word God. We need to remember that despite all of our God assumptions, we have only a human language to use and it is by means of that language that we have always sought to translate our deepest yearnings.

What Stephen Hawking is saying is, that no matter how sophisticated our theological understanding is, the idea of God as a supernatural being, who started the universe and who from time to time has intervened in miraculous ways in the affairs of the universe in general or of this world in particular, is no longer viable. Since most people have no other frame of reference in which to think about God, they hear this as a denial of any divine reality. If one is not a theist, at least according to the limitations of the English language, the only alternative is to be an atheist. Theism, however, is not a name for God or even a name for one who believes in God. Theism is the name of a human definition of God that is no longer believable. Atheism does not mean that there is no God. Atheism means that the theistic understanding of God no longer translates into the world of our experience.

Can God turn the path of a hurricane as evangelist Pat Robertson has so often argued? Can God intervene in history to stop something as evil as slavery or the Holocaust? Can God actually act to prevent such things

as war and prejudice? If God has that power and does not use it, can we not state without equivocation that God is both malevolent and immoral? If God does not have this power, then does this not make God impotent? In either event such a view of God will have a very short shelf life in the world of human ideas. In each of these illustrations, however, it is clear that we have done little more than to create God in our human image, but with all of our human limitations removed. Why do we continue to envision God after the analogy of a limitless human being? Perhaps the reality is that we are not capable of transcending these boundaries. An insect could never describe a bird in any way other than in terms of the experience and world view of an insect, since the insect has no ability to transcend its limits. A horse cannot describe a human being in any other way except in terms of the experience and world view of a horse, since a horse has no capacity to transcend its limits. Human beings, however, even though limited to the experience and world view of a human being, still pretend to act as if the God we worship can and must be understood after the analogy of a limitless human being. That is the extent of our human capability. We human beings then insist, it seems, on going one dreadful step further, and that comes when we turn our God definition into creeds, doctrines and dogmas and immediately invest these ideas with the claim of infallibility or inerrancy. That is why we persecute those who disagree with our definitions or try to convert those who are amenable to our persuasion, both of which are acts of religious imperialism. Self-conscious human beings can escape our human limits, but only by analogy and pointers. There is clearly more to the idea of God than the human mind can ever understand, but we should have learned this by now, since this fact

has been clear for centuries. Even St Paul warned us that we now see only through 'a glass darkly'. The Fourth Gospel tells us that the Holy Spirit 'will lead us into all truth', which seems to me to imply that none of us now possesses all truth. Yet in our pathetic human insecurity we still talk about an 'inerrant Bible' and an 'infallible Pope'. If we recognise that ultimate truth is beyond our limits, how can we continue to describe anyone anywhere as either a 'heretic' or an 'infidel', to say nothing of proclaiming one to be an atheist?

I open my eyes every day to the wonder of life, the power of love, the mystery of being and I call that experience God.

The God question will not be solved by postulating a supernatural invasion of a human-like deity at the moment of the 'big bang', or at any other moment in the unfolding of the universe or in the evolution of life. Intelligent design is just as foreign to the biologist as the God who inaugurated the universe is now to the astrophysicist. That does not mean, however, that there is no transcendent reality, no 'other' that we can sense or discern as we seek to understand life.

When I was working on my book *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, I became deeply moved by the wholeness of life. I saw a universe born in a physical explosion of matter that ultimately produced life, consciousness and self-consciousness; I am now convinced that matter carries within it the seeds of life. I see no dualism any longer between matter and life or between matter and spirit. I have also ceased to think of God theistically, that is, as a being – even a supernatural being. I think of God as the Source of life calling me to live, the Source of love, calling me to love, the ground of being calling me to be all that I can be. I think of God as the universal consciousness of

which I am a part. All of these concepts are analogies, descriptions of our experience. They are not descriptions of God! I now see worship as the commitment to live fully, to love wastefully and to be all that I can be. I see the mission of my faith not to be winning converts, but to be that of expanding life for all, enhancing love for all, increasing the being of all that renders every human prejudice as a violation of all that God means. I see the divine as the depth dimension of the human and thus as part of the human, not as the invasion of life by a being external to life. I see the symbols of my Christian faith story, trapped as they are inside a theistic belief system, struggling to cast that system aside so that they can be transformed and live again in dramatic new ways.

The claim by Stephen Hawking that God is not necessary to account for the universe as we now understand it is a step in freeing our minds from the clutches of yesterday's world view. I find the religious voices attacking Hawking in the name of preserving yesterday's theistic system to be engaged in little more than the activity of institutional religion's rigor mortis. As I learn more about the universe and life itself, I find myself called into an increasing sense of awe and wonder. Whatever God is, I believe that I am a part of that and whatever I am or can be God is present within it.

The human being lives in the wonder of self-consciousness and perceives thereby the wonder of life itself. God is not external to that. I open my eyes every day to the wonder of life, the power of love, the mystery of being and I call that experience God. ●

John Shelby Spong is the author of *Jesus for the Non-religious; Why Christianity Must Change or Die; and Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, among many other titles. He will be speaking in Glasgow in June 2011: www.johnshelbyspong.com

Tim Gorringe

The Transition Town movement

The Transition Town movement started four years ago in Totnes and has spread throughout the UK, including twelve initiatives in Scotland, and to Continental Europe, North America, Australasia and Asia. The transition in question is from an oil-dependent to a non-oil-dependent society. The premise is that, as the Pentagon too believes, 'Peak Oil' will occur soon. Peak Oil does not mean that oil will simply run out: it does mean that the age of cheap and easily available oil is over. We are down to tar sands and deep-sea beds. Since virtually our entire lifestyle, and especially our farming, depends on oil, and there is no substitute yet in sight, it is wise to ask what we are going to do when that happens. What work are people going to do when commuting is no longer an option? Even more important, what are they going to eat? 97% of our food is dependent on oil for all the operations of agriculture (ploughing, disking, sowing, milking, etc), for fertilisers, for processing and for transport. Take any item you like, and just ask how much oil is involved in it. As Rebecca Hoskins remarks in *Farm for the Future*, that any supermarket sandwich is 'dripping in oil'. When we have tanker drivers' strikes, or seamen's strikes, we have panic buying, and the supermarkets empty quickly. It looks as if these events are warnings of what we might come to expect on a regular basis.

Transition addresses this prospect, taking it not as a threat but a promise. Rob Hopkins, its founder, talks not only of energy descent (becoming less dependent on oil) but of energy ascent, as the community mobilises, finds its creativity and learns to work together and for the common good. The movement does not describe itself as political, but in my view it is so in two ways. First, politics is about the shaping of our communities and our future, making decisions about how resources are used and for whom. Transition assumes that it is no good complaining about how awful our leaders are or simply lobbying MPs. Get on and do something! That is a political act. Second, the ethos of Transition is profoundly democratic, committed to the 'open space' way of running meetings and trusting the creative potential of ordinary people. It understands its task as addressing the oil shock through the community. It is not a campaigning movement but a community-building movement. Equally it is not a hair shirt, tighten your belts, 'let's do without' movement, but more an attempt to find a more satisfying, creative and community-oriented way of life. It does this by taking up long-standing initiatives like community-supported agriculture, shared gardens and allotments, seeks to further interest and knowledge in all the varieties of alternative energy, campaigns for better public transport, and common-sense schemes like bike carriers on buses.

I have often heard Transition described as 'a bit fluffy', but I am struck by its resemblance to Ulrich Duchrow's latest call to action (in *Solidarisch Mensch Werden*). He calls for a new order which will grow from below, supported by the direct participation of all sorts of people and groups; which will starve the capitalist system through, first, demythologising its ideology, and then through direct action such as strikes, boycotts of banks and cheap consumer goods. Secondly he calls for the development of local regional alternatives to the banking system, alternative energies, local food production and fair trade. Much of this is

part of the Transition agenda. Transition communities like Brixton, Lewes and Totnes have their own currency. Exeter has community-supported agriculture. Every Transition community is committed to alternative energy, and to alternative patterns of transport and work. It should be obvious that the implications of all this are extremely radical. One of the beauties of the movement is that it is building a new society without mentioning the 'S' word. No one mentions common ownership of the means of production but this is in fact the agenda (Shh!) – understood in localised, regionalised senses rather than through nationalisation. My own view is that it meets the widespread longing for a new politics beyond what I take to be the bankruptcy of the present party system.

'Resilience' is one of Transition's key words, and therefore I pricked up my ears when, at this year's Catholic Peace and Justice Conference, Alastair McIntosh spoke of three levels of resilience: of ecosystems, of knowledge and of spirit. Transition has its origins in permaculture and is thus committed to the first; it seeks (somewhat romantically, in my view) to learn skills from the 'elders' who remember living in a pre-oil age (not many of them about nowadays); and it recognises the need for 'inner transition'. Transition groups have 'heart and soul' groups which ask where communities might find the resources to meet the challenges ahead, and how people are to be weaned off their present addiction to consumption. The Transition movement is not a Christian initiative, and all the many spiritualities of our culture make a contribution, but Christianity is an important part of our culture, and has huge resources for dealing both

with cultural trauma and for a more sustainable pattern of life. As Paul sets it out in Romans 5 and 6, baptism is all about transition from an old and corrupt way of life to a new one in the one Body of Christ. To come to Transition as a Christian is to be challenged to think what that Pauline transition means for us today, and what the idea of one body means in our pluralistic (and materialistic) society. It might mean, for example, a transition from a consumer-oriented society which takes cheap energy for granted to a more equal, more community-based society in which resources are fairly distributed. Paul goes on from this account of transition to a discussion of the overcoming of addiction (Rom 7) and on to an account of creation understood as a total ecosystem (Rom 8), where the risen Christ is the first fruits of the renewal of all reality, currently remorselessly bound to the second law of thermodynamics (which he calls *pthora*).

One person at the Conference spoke of the Transition movement as 'a great movement of the Spirit'. I agree that we need to be cautious about such identifications, but at the same time the need to think soberly about feeding seven or nine billion people when we can no longer take oil for granted is imperative. We cannot presume that some boffin will come up with the wonder invention which will allow us to carry on regardless, which will generalise our lifestyle for all humans on earth. Much more realistic to turn to the resources we have in community, to learn to care for the earth that we have, and vigorously to cultivate the spiritual disciplines our ancestors have committed to us. Now where have we come across that agenda before? ●

Tim Gorrige is Professor of Theology at Exeter University and a member of the Iona Community.

www.transitionnetwork.org

A tribute to Iona Community member Betty White, who died in November (a fuller tribute to Betty will appear in a future Coracle):

REMEMBERING BETTY

*'The children could run up the stairs
and push balloons through the windows
into the Cloisters
as the congregation comes out
of the Abbey.'*

They could, Betty, and they did.

Planning worship with you
was always full of suggestions
as to how people could be included
and you were never short of ideas!

You fiercely defended and encouraged
God's little ones – of all ages.
You could guise naive
but beneath your gentility
you were astute and alert and determined
and full of loving-justice and kindness.

You have been missed for a long time now, Betty.
I am sad at your going
but glad that you are away home.

You lived and died in Jesus name.
Having known you
I am not the same,*
and I am grateful.

Ruth Burgess

* The song No One Will Ever Be the Same was written for Betty by John Bell and Graham Maule (Enemy of Apathy). The tune of the song is called 'Roystonhill', one of the places Betty worked.



Rejoice in hope ... Romans 12:12

19 coracle
winter 2010
signs of hope

Rachel Mica McCann

SIGNS OF HOPE: COVENTRY PEACE HOUSE

Signs of Hope is a series of interviews celebrating projects and people who are creating change in local and global ways. Coventry Peace House offers a practical and inspiring example of a local project responding to the challenges of our times. Here, resident of the house Beth Ash talks with associate member of the Iona Community Rachel Mica McCann

Rachel: Can you tell us a little about the history of Coventry Peace House?

Beth: The Peace House was the brainchild of a group of peace campaigners who had been protesting outside the Alvis tank factory, specifically making a stand against the export of tanks to Indonesia, between 1997-8. After the government placed a temporary arms embargo on Indonesia, they left the camp, and three of the protesters – Penny, John and Becqke – decided to make a more permanent base for peace campaigners in the city. The aim was to base a community on the principles and practice of non-violence.

They found and renovated six derelict houses in a multicultural area close to the city centre. The first members moved in in January 1999 and continued the development of the buildings and community. Principally the house was intended to offer secure, autonomous housing for campaigners and to act as a peace and environmental centre for the people of Coventry.

Rachel: You are engaged with issues of justice and peace in your local community. What are some of the projects you run?

Beth: Over the years our focus has manifested in different ways, depending on the energy, experience and skills of the residents of the house. Currently we are working most prominently with refugee issues, and in promoting cycling. The area around the house is varied, with many migrants and newly arrived people, so we seek to offer and support integration and acceptance. You can read more about this work in our free online book *I Came Here for Safety*, which tells of the reality of the detention and destitution of asylum seekers. This was published during Refugee Week 2006. We also published a book in 2008 called *Statelessness: The Quiet Torture of Belonging Nowhere*. Globally there are 15 million stateless people, and in Britain thousands are denied basic human rights and told to return to countries where they are unable to go. This book looks at some of these issues, and costs £5. Both books are available from www.covpeacehouse.org.uk

We also have a bike workshop and a team of a dozen volunteers who renovate second-hand bikes. Coventry is quite flat, and also economically deprived, so this project is valued by the local community and reflects our concern to care for the earth.

Rachel: What are the values of the work; is there a spiritual focus?

Beth: Sometimes we have people living and working with us for whom spirituality, in its many and varied forms, is their personal focus, but, no, there is not a spiritual focus to the house as a whole.

Although we draw a lot of inspiration from the world, we also try to challenge aspects of it we believe to be unjust, cruel or exploitative. We do this through campaigning and action, as well as the way we try to live

with one another. People face many prejudices in life, and we try not only to be tolerant of others, but to proactively challenge ingrained prejudice.

Rachel: The house is run as a co-operative, with a group of people living together. Can you tell us how this works?

Beth: We are a member of Radical Routes, a national network of co-operatives working for social change and based on consensus and co-operation. We offer affordable and secure housing in order to enable members to evaluate their lives and contribute without being trapped in a capitalist hamster wheel!

There is room in the house for up to nine people as well as room to offer some support to people who are destitute. We regularly try to think about our own dynamics in the house – seeking to address when we are excluding people, creating hierarchies or burning out. We use consensus decision-making, as this is the most equal method we have so far come across, though this has challenges.

We hold activity weekends for volunteers on the first weekend of every month – this is a great opportunity for people to come and experience Coventry Peace House for themselves!

Rachel: What drew you to live and work in the house, Beth?

Beth: I became involved after moving to the area and wanting to live in a supportive way with like-minded people. I really value the support and inspiration that I can draw from all the people who are involved. I also gain a great sense of fulfilment from being part of what, I feel, is an organised and productive project. ●

www.covpeacehouse.org.uk

www.radicalroutes.org.uk

The Growing Hope Appeal closes Final words and a big thank you to everyone who contributed

When the Growing Hope Funding Appeal for alterations and refurbishment at Camas was launched in March 2003 hopes were high. A fundraising steering group was formed then with representatives from the Camas, Iona, and Finance committees, Graham Boyle (then Support Services Manager) as a key player and Kathy Galloway (then Leader) as an interested party! I am sure that we had no idea what we had taken on – but at that time very few people anticipated the economic, social and political changes to come, all of which could have affected our ability to access the funds needed.

We appointed Malcolm May as part-time fundraiser on a year's contract and confidently expected the funds to come in. Grant applications were made to trusts, statutory bodies and the Lottery. Some generous donations were received, most prominently from the Myers Foundation in the USA, but in most cases we met disappointment. Together with many others in the voluntary sector we were experiencing a cultural shift. Lottery funds were shifted to cover lost statutory funding and, later, the Olympics, and the remainder was spread thinly over the shifting sands of changing social targets. Malcolm and Graham applied to every blessed fund. Malcolm's contract came to an end after the year but you'd never have known, as he continued the work as a member of the group.

Then came the recession – it has not been the best of times to be trying to raise £1 million.

Still, we got more ambitious and the Camas Appeal morphed into a three-stage appeal: for Camas, the Welcome Centre on Iona, and, finally, Dunsmeorach. The first two projects have been completed on time and on budget, thanks in no small measure to the expert project management of Graham Boyle and the islands teams. The builders at Camas showed incredible flexibility and Lizz and David Paterson lived on a building site for a year to be on hand.

We have been inspired right from the beginning by the logo produced for us by Laurie Jackson, and by the enthusiasm and commitment of everyone in the Iona Community constituency we approached. None of this would have been possible without you – members, associate members and Friends. Your generosity has been magnificent. Many of you have donated repeatedly and some sacrificially. Thank you. Without your commitment none of this could have happened.

Now we are on the last stage: the extension and refurbishment of Dunsmeorach, which is used as staff accommodation. The building work should be completed at the beginning of next season. Currently we are about £120K short of the target of £420K and we would like that to be a lot less by the completion of the building. It can be done. So far we have raised over £1 million! Though there will be no more appeals, arm-twisting or pushy e-mails, the nearer we can get to the target the more satisfied we will feel.

We have agreed with the Communications and Fundraising Committee that the Growing Hope Appeal Steering Group will cease to exist at the

end of 2010 and so the tying up of loose ends will fall to them. We have every confidence they will be up to the task!

We are retiring with a sense of satisfaction, a job well done and firm foundations laid for the next stage of our common task.

By the time you read this, our final big events will have happened – so all that remains to say is thank you and goodbye! ●

*O God, help my unbelief.
Help me to believe in hope,
friends
love, trust,
freedom:*

*Hope in the future,
friends who affirm and challenge and
inspire us,
love as the guiding force of the universe,
trust between people and nations,
freedom for the world's oppressed and
marginalised people.
O God, make me your child.*

Neil Paynter

Margaret Stewart is a Community member and was part of the Growing Hope Steering Group.



NEW PUBLICATIONS

WILD GOOSE PUBLICATIONS

A Storehouse of Kingdom Things: Resources for the Faith Journey, Ian M Fraser (book), £10.00 (plus post and packing)

Ian Fraser has been a prophet in our land – and far beyond – for the lifetimes of most of us. Now, nearing the end of his life journey, he offers A Storehouse of Kingdom Things: Resources for the Faith Journey.

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Ian Fraser has been a pastor-labourer in heavy industry, a parish minister, Warden of Scottish Churches House, an Executive Secretary of the World Council of Churches, and Dean and Head of the Department of Mission at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham. He is the author of numerous books, including Strange Fire, The Way Ahead: Grown-up Christians, and Reinventing Theology, which is used as a standard theological sourcebook throughout the world.

Ian is one of the original members of the Iona Community who helped George MacLeod to rebuild 'the common life' and the Abbey buildings on the isle of Iona. Throughout his life Ian has travelled the world, alone and with his wife, Margaret, visiting basic Christian communities. He has walked alongside slum dwellers in India and Haiti; Nicaraguan and Cuban revolutionaries; priests, nuns and catechists facing arrest and/or death in Central and South America; and small farming and fishing communities in the Philippines.

A Heart for Creation: Worship Resources and Reflections on the Environment, Chris Polhill (book), £14.99 (plus post and packing)

Every day we learn more about the environment and our interaction with it. The science and details are complex and wonderful – but what is clear is that our relationship with the environment is out of balance and that human behaviour must change. We need to learn to live gently and more in harmony with God's creation.

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reviews

Eyes in Gaza, by Dr Mads Gilbert and Dr Erik Fosse, translated by Guy Puzey and Frank Stewart, Quartet Books, www.quartetbooks.co.uk

I wept my way through this book, tears of sorrow and anger.

I read it over a 24-hour period but couldn't cope with more than half an hour at a time. The eyes are those of Mads Gilbert and Erik Fosse, two Norwegian doctors who spent three weeks in Gaza and were the only internationals to witness at first-hand the horrific carnage of the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip titled 'Operation Cast Lead', during the last week of December 2008 and the first two weeks of January 2009.

They represent NORWAC, a Norwegian medical aid committee formed in 1983. The authors' story is deeply shocking and truly heroic.

Part of the power of their eye-witness accounts is that you have a vivid sense of being there; of being present in the operating theatre as wave after wave of horribly injured Palestinians, many of them children, are brought into Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City; of the overflowing wards and corridors, the terrible choices which they and their Palestinian colleagues were forced to make, between those they had a chance of saving, and those whose injuries would almost certainly prove fatal. These choices became more frequent as the merciless bombardment intensified, supplies diminished, and medical staff were forced to function on minimal sleep and decreasing amounts of food. Injuries and surgical procedures are described in vivid detail by words and explicit colour photographs. There is despair when death comes, and joyful relief when a life is saved. By the end of the slaughter, 1400 Palestinians lost their lives and 5400 were injured, many seriously, of whom one-third were children.

The vast majority were civilians. On the Israeli side, eleven were killed, seven of whom were soldiers (two by friendly fire).

There are stories of individuals and families. The al-Daya family's four-storey house was hit by a huge bomb at six o'clock one evening. The grandfather had gathered all his children and grandchildren there, thinking they would be safe. Thirty members of the family were killed, most of them children. Many of the survivors came to Al-Shifa for treatment. But there was not only the bombing: once the land forces moved in, eyewitnesses testified to whole families being rounded up by members of the IDF (Israel Defence Force) and being shot. Gilbert and Fosse have no doubt that these killings were all part of a deliberate policy by the Israeli military, a policy of collective punishment and, ultimately, ethnic cleansing.

In the midst of this chaos and destruction, the Norwegians gave interviews with the world's press and media by satellite link, telling the truth and pleading with international leaders to stop the madness. It is scarcely believable that a clearly marked medical convoy, taking seriously ill children to Egypt for treatment which Al-Shifa couldn't provide, was shot at by the IDF and forced to turn back.

It should not be forgotten that in the weeks and months leading up to this Operation, one and a half million people in the Strip (the most densely populated area on earth) had been living in a virtual prison, where only supplies of the most basic foodstuffs and medical supplies were allowed in by the military, apart from items smuggled through tunnels at the Egyptian border. Water and electricity were rationed and the sanitation situation was critical. So here was a population already severely weakened, with hardly any means to defend itself against one of the most powerful armies on earth.

Towards the end of the book, Gilbert and Fosse express baffled outrage at the seeming indifference of the world; at weapons used (white phosphorus, flechettes) which are banned under international law; at the drones which can be operated from a room hundreds of miles away, by someone pressing a button on command, who then goes home to his wife and children in an air-conditioned Tel Aviv suburb. But they record something even more sinister: *'We realised that the people who pulled the trigger, the people who sat safely in the tank, no longer saw Palestinians as human beings. All Palestinians were terrorists in their eyes and the children were defined as " Hamas children", children that it was all right – like vermin – just to eradicate.'* What is this doing to both the victims and the perpetrators?

The last chapter is called 'War Criminals', and by the time you get to that point, there will be no doubt in your mind that serious crimes against humanity were committed during 'Operation Cast Lead'. At least three independent reports have come to that conclusion, including the most comprehensive by Judge Richard Goldstone, a South African Jew.

The suffering is ongoing as the siege continues and thousands of homes destroyed in the bombardment have yet to be rebuilt. Apart from the deep physical wounds, Gaza needs an army of psychiatrists. It is a stain on the conscience of the world.

I am grateful to Frank Stewart (one of the translators) for asking me to review this book. *Eyes in Gaza* is a harrowing read. But it must be read. Followed by resolve to be silent no longer. Everyone can do something, say the authors. As I re-read the book, the words of a song by the Manic Street Preachers kept coming into my mind: *'... and if you tolerate this, then your children will be next.'*

Warren Bardsley

Letters from Jerusalem: Reflections of an Ecumenical Accompanier,

by Warren Bardsley,
Church in the Marketplace Publications,
w.bardsley39@btinternet.com

Warren has produced an informative account of his three months with the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). He squeezes a great deal of material into this slim volume, which comes in the form of 'reports from the field' – stories of the humiliations and indignities suffered by Palestinians as a result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

And he doesn't pull his punches, describing the system of occupation as 'evil ... racist and exclusivist both in intention and practice', and quoting those concerned Israelis who are not happy with what is happening in Palestine as saying that 'The only friends of Israel at the moment are critical friends.'

In a series of letters, each accompanied by its own reflection, the reader is introduced to those who are at the sharp end of this conflict. Rami is a Israeli Jerusalemite and Mazzen a Palestinian from Bethlehem who both belong to an organisation called the Bereaved Families' Circle. Rami says: 'We have spoken to thousands of people ... we believe we are changing minds and hearts.' Fawzieh Al Kurd is a Palestinian in her fifties who came from a well-off family in West Jerusalem. Some years ago she and her husband added an extension with its own adjacent front door to their home to accommodate their growing family. Seven years ago, while they were on a hospital visit in Jordan, Israeli settlers broke into the extension, changed the locks and have been there ever since. Although the family battled with the Israeli authorities, the eventual outcome is that they have been evicted from their home of 52

years.

One letter describes the control and processing of human beings – a daily occurrence at the huge Qualandia terminal just fifteen minutes' journey from Jerusalem. This is where thousands of Palestinians queue up each morning seeking work in Israel – a process 'more suitable for cattle than people'. Another letter, 'A Galilean Interlude', introduces the reader to Samuel and Susan Barhoum, who live in the Palestinian town of Raineh just outside Nazareth. They talk about their life and work – Samuel serves as an Anglican priest in the town – and speak of the discrimination that all Arab Palestinians living in Israel, essentially as second-class citizens, experience daily in the fields of education, employment and the distribution of essential services.

I am a former Ecumenical Accompanier and am familiar with the situation in Palestine but I still found my grasp of the issues enhanced through a close study of Warren's reflections. He guides the reader through all the complexities of this conflict, and is a passionate advocate for an end to the Occupation. His hope is that this account will encourage more of us to engage with the issues raised. I'm sure it will.

Colin Douglas

Keir Hardie, by Bob Holman, Lion Hudson,
www.lionhudson.com

Before I read this book I knew very little about Keir Hardie (1856-1915), not even that in 2008 the Labour Party Conference declared him Labour's greatest hero. I knew a little more about Bob Holman: that he had given up the Chair of Social Administration at Bath University to live in Easterhouse in Glasgow as a community worker alongside the poor and the unemployed. I have been a member of the Labour Party for over fifty years, yet this biography has been a revelation to me of the astonishing pioneering socialism

of Hardie. It is quickly self-evident why he is a hero and inspiration for Bob Holman, and why he is a pointer to what the Party needs to recover after its election defeat.

I began by reading Bob Holman's Epilogue. It shows how much he shares the views of Keir Hardie: 'I believe that the attitude and teaching of the churches towards money and wealth are not consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus ... The church rarely if ever admonishes affluent members who enjoy luxuries while others, even in Britain, are in dire poverty.' ... 'MPs should never lose physical and social touch with those whose lives the Labour Party was created to transform.' Both Hardie and Holman see the church and the Party as existing for the world. Hardie pleaded against chemical works polluting the air and poisoning the rivers. Over a hundred years ago he wanted an eight-hour working day and votes for women. Holman shares his passion for the teaching of Jesus and for the principles of equality in the Labour Party – and that's why he writes so vividly about him. Helena Kennedy writes about this book: 'Two of my cherished heroes are Keir Hardie and Bob Holman and here they come together in uplifting affirmation of the values and verities that should be at the heart of progressive politics.' I too loved the book because I desperately want these values to be reinstated in the Labour Party.

Hardie was born in a one-roomed cottage near Holytown in Lanarkshire. At seven, he went to work as a message boy, so that formal schooling became impossible, but he was taught to read and write by his parents in the evenings. He worked in the shipyards heating rivets, and later as a message boy for a baker. He lost this job for being late twice. He had to wait outside his rich boss's sitting room while his boss finished family prayers, and then was sacked and fined a week's wages. Hardie never forgot the hypocrisy of wealthy Christians who employed hundreds in poor conditions, especially in the

mines in which he had worked, until his increasing union activities made him unacceptable to the owners.

Excessive consumption of alcohol was common in industrial areas and made conditions even worse. When he was only 17, Hardie joined the local branch of the Good Templars, who were committed to total abstinence. He kept his vows for the rest of his life and on his extensive travels he always sought out temperance hotels. Among the Good Templars he must have met other socially concerned people and many Christians. When he was 22, he wrote in his diary: *'Brought up an atheist – converted to Christianity in 1878.'* He belonged mostly to evangelical churches, but he was not dogmatic, believing in the example of Jesus as the impetus in creating brotherhood and compassion for the least of the brethren. This pushed Hardie towards trying to organise trade unions; when he was only 22, he was secretary of the Hamilton branch of the mine workers. Union posts led to his producing workers' newspapers and to political activism with much public speaking to have workers' needs enshrined in law.

All of this inevitably led to Parliament and to his share in setting up a developing series of socialist parties. Hardie quickly lost faith in the Liberal Party to offer radical reform for the workers – their MPs were too closely connected with the owners in industry. In 1888 Hardie stood for Parliament in mid-Lanark; he finished last! He was successful in 1892 in being elected for West Ham South, the Liberals not fielding a candidate against him. Then began his notoriety as an MP because he refused to wear a black frock coat. Instead he wore a plain tweed suit, a red tie and a deerstalker hat, and he became known as 'the MP for the unemployed'. His fame spread when he tried to attach a message

of condolence on the deaths of 251 miners in a pit accident to a loyal address on the birth of the future Edward VIII. The request was refused, and he made a speech attacking the monarchy. He lost his seat the next year. But five years later he was back as MP for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, which he represented till his death in 1915.

His share in setting up a socialist party is complicated, but well explained in Holman's book. It begins in 1888 when he had lost faith in the Liberal Party and helped to create the Scottish Labour Party. Next, his area of influence is Britain-wide, and in 1893 the Independent Labour Party (the ILP) was born. The next move was to get all socialist MPs together to form the Labour Representative Committee, which in 1906 became the Labour Party, with Hardie as its leader. The process was complete after nearly twenty years.

Then, in 1908, Hardie suddenly resigned as leader and devoted the next seven years, till his death in 1915, to campaigning for votes for women, for self-rule for India and against segregation in South Africa. As a pacifist he was appalled by the First World War and tried to organise protests against it. This was highly unpopular, but not untypical of his willingness to stand up for his beliefs. Holman's excellent biography is urgently relevant in making us ask what political stances we should be taking today.

Ronald Speirs

Crying in the Wilderness: Giving Voice to Older People in the Church, by Graham Hawley and Albert Jewell, MHA Care Group, 2009, www.mha.org.uk

It is a pleasure to commend unreservedly a book of less than 100 pages in which there is hardly a superfluous word or sentence. In an age when the cult of youth celebrity is rampant, it is a timely,

prophetic word to the church in Britain today. Both authors are Methodist ministers who have long and varied experience of pastoral ministry in both church and community, and whose work is backed up by careful academic research into the issues surrounding faith and the ageing process. The scholarship is, however, carried lightly. The book's overriding merit is its linking of theology and practice. Each chapter begins with a case study, followed by perceptive comment, leading to a well-chosen Bible reflection and suggestions for 'pastoral action strategy'. Parts of the book make uncomfortable reading. None of the big issues are avoided. Throughout, we are listening to the voices and experience of elderly people: *we have a story; we have questions; we feel abandoned (older people and dementia); we have a ministry.* Along the way, a number of myths are exposed, e.g. that most elderly members of the church are passive, are always against change and that their continued loyalty can be taken for granted. Throughout the book Hawley and Jewell powerfully demonstrate that the later stages of life can reveal gifts, insights, questions and a distinctive ministry, which, if properly prized, can benefit and enrich the church.

This book is an invaluable resource for churches and ministers seeking to engage with a society in which people are living much longer and where, in most congregations, over half are 60+. Any house group would benefit greatly by using it as a basis for reflection and action over a nine- or ten-week session. There are two useful appendices: one, the outline of a workshop which the authors have led in local churches, and the other, a list of books and resources for further reading. For the sake of the well-being of older people and the church, it is hoped that these voices in the wilderness will be truly heard and heeded.

Warren Bardsley

A touching place: news and letters

NEWS FROM 'IONA CONTINENTALS' IN SWITZERLAND AND AUSTRIA

From member Reinhild Traitler:

The Swiss Iona Group met September 11-12, 2010. Presently the group is planning a prayer vigil at the meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF), 2011 in Davos. In the framework of an action by the Christian Churches in Davos, called 'Prayers and Silence', the Swiss Iona Group plans a prayer vigil upholding the great biblical visions of peace with justice and care for creation; praying for all those left out, impoverished and destroyed by economic processes. The Swiss group invites all Community folk who are interested, to come and take part. (Registration is absolutely necessary! Please contact: anselmburr@vtxmail.ch or rtraitler@hispeed.ch) Upon registration you will receive information about housing, meeting places and the programme. The vigil will take place on Saturday, January 29, 2011.

The Austrian Iona Group met on September 17, 2011. It has been active for some three years now around common projects: organising group travels to Iona, worship services with Iona liturgies, and the participation of the Iona Community in the well-known 'Long Night of Religions' in Vienna.

The members (13 in all) are geographically dispersed, with some living in Carinthia or Upper Austria, many hours away from Vienna. One person had even taken the trouble to travel all the way from the south of Austria, spending many hours on the train.

As several of the group members are employed in diaconical work, the group decided to work on some underlying political

questions, for example, helping to stem the right-wing tide of xenophobia very much present in public life. And, of course, it will cultivate all the practical matters that make the 'Iona difference': providing hospitality, eating and praying together and developing a spirituality that supports and nourishes political action!

NEWS FROM MEMBERS AND ASSOCIATES IN GERMANY

From member Rolf Bielefeld:

The Iona Community in Germany held their 17th regional meeting of members, associates and friends on the last weekend of October in Bielefeld-Bethel. Our theme was 'Iona-inspired Networks in Europe'.

Anni Benjamin-Ede from the Netherlands, Barbro Turesson from Sweden, Tony Phelan from England, and Reinhild Traitler from Switzerland gave us some very interesting views into their Iona networks or groups. We discovered similarities in activities we share, e.g. translating and writing liturgies and prayers, meeting regularly, discussing the Rule ...

Common action is felt to be very difficult as distance to one another is quite significant, but knowing, listening to and supporting each other is of great value.

All of us felt very strongly that Continental meetings and exchange are of vital importance for the whole Community and will lead to 'new ways to touch the hearts of all'.

HOLY CITY: THE WILD GOOSE RESOURCE GROUP

WGRG have announced a new series of Holy City events for 2010-2011: 'ACTING UP ... from faith to lifestyle in challenging times'. For more information and dates: www.iona.org.uk/wgrg_home.php

SOME NEW AND INTERESTING PUBLICATIONS FROM COMMUNITY FOLK:

*Worship and Liturgy in Context:
Studies and Case Studies in*

Theology and Practice, by Duncan B. Forrester and Doug Gay, with contributions by members John L. Bell and Norman Shanks: www.scm-canterbury.co.uk

Rising to the Challenge: 100 Years of the Ladies Scottish Climbing Club, by Helen Steven, Scottish Mountaineering Club: www.smc.org.uk

Meeting the Pilgrimage Halfway (a collection of poems), by Martin Hayden (former Iona volunteer), The Garlic Press, Goldings, Goldings Lane, Leiston, Suffolk, IP16 4EB, £5 (post free)

In Praise of Darkness (a collection of poems, including an 'Iona suite'), by Beryl Baigent, Cranberry Tree Press: www.cranberrytreepress.com

Bread for the road

The Christian and Jewish scriptures would be virtually non-existent if we were to cut all references to the imperative to income equality and distribution. From the prophets – notably Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah – to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the constant refrain is the requirement for human beings to treat one another as though each represents the deity on earth. 'In as much as you did it to the least of these my brethren you did it unto me' implies that poverty in the midst of plenty is a sin against God.

Margaret Legum, from *It Doesn't Have To Be Like This: Global Economics, A New Way Forward*, Wild Goose Publications, www.ionabooks.com

Prayer of the Iona Community

O God, who gave to your servant Columba the gifts of courage, faith and cheerfulness, and sent people forth from Iona to carry the word of your gospel to every creature: grant, we pray, a like spirit to your church, even at this present time. Further in all things the purpose of our community, that hidden things may be revealed to us, and new ways found to touch the lives of all. May we preserve with each other sincere charity and peace, and, if it be your holy will, grant that this place of your abiding be continued still to be a sanctuary and a light. Through Jesus Christ. Amen

A song among the stones

Kenneth Steven

During the 6th century, Celtic Christian hermits – whose hub was Iona – travelled out to all manner of remote islets to set up tiny cells. North Rona, St Kilda, the Flannan Isles – all of these were colonised by what the later Norse settlers came to call the Papar. But it's likely that the Papar travelled even further, to Iceland and the Faeroes. In fact archaeologists in both locations are still hunting for carved crosses that will prove conclusively that the Papar made these extraordinary sea journeys from Iona in the 6th century.

BBC Radio 3 commissioned me to write a sequence of poems telling the story of the Papar voyage to Iceland. I have done this, trying to create the sense of fragments of a lost manuscript that give moments of the story, not more. The 'pieces' that follow come from that sequence.

(1)

they thirsted, water all around them
mouths grew ugly, black and bulged
they muttered darkness in their sleep
and woke with ash in their mouths
they leered out over the sea
starving for land, nothing but hills of ripples
silence huge in their heads
and on the third morning
it grew out of the fronds of mist
like some broken bird, ungreened and gaunt
a rock in the bare sea
they went ashore like ghosts
feet bashed and bruised, and then
water spoke in tongues, burst
up from the stone floor, they fell
like beasts to lap their fill
it was God who sent us here, one said
reverently closing his eyes
no, said another, it was the island
that was sent by God to find us

(2)

another dreamed they were following a strange cloud
that they left everything behind
even their own names
the eyes of those they met
were scattered and empty
they clutched children to themselves
like hunger, stared like strange moons
whose dead seas tide no longer
at night they dreamed of who they were
and wakened wondering
longing for a land that loved them

(3)

they build somewhere out of burnt stone
a beehive that let in pieces of sky
all day they bore stones
boulders heavy as themselves
inside it felt like a child's secret
dark and soft and warm
and after day came a strangeness
night that was not night at all
the sky deepened blue and pure
the hills stared white and still
the air filled with an evensong of birds
a sorrowing of voices, seen and unseen
a melding of many things
and they lay there listening
they called it the house of peace
wove songs and prayers into the walls
until it became a safeness, a sanctuary

(4)

two of them crouched
by a silver dance of river
sometimes faith is elusive
hard to catch as a fish
God is distant and brittle
as a star on the night's edge
sometimes everything seems
desolate as a winter land
so what is left then
asked the youngest, turning
to remember this
said the one who brought them
a golden crook of lightning
fluttered from the sky
and lit a stable

(5)

they held the monastery in their eyes
beloved, the most beautiful gift
between the broken fragments
of sea and sky and land
a song among the stones

Kenneth Steven is the author of *Iona: Poems*; and *Making the Known World New*, among many other books. www.kennethsteven.co.uk



**Lord, where are you
in this unholy mess?
Muslim, Christian, Jew,
still reaping the
centuries-old harvest
of bitter enmity:
Sowing new seeds of hate
for generations yet unborn.**

Where are you?

**When I begin to lose
much of my trust
in any kind of purpose,
remind me again
that it was here;
here on this ground
we call holy,
that you became
part of the mess.
Born, nurtured,
living, loving, dying,
in this place.
Not to sanitise it
but to redeem and transform.**

**Lord, in the mess we have made
of your world
recruit us
in the holy work of
redeeming and transforming
our places.**

Warren Bardsley, from Letters from Jerusalem:
Reflections of an Ecumenical Accompanier

Cover: Edinburgh demo © Neil Paynter

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