

THE DIALOGUE OF LIFE: PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY

Introduction: What is community?

At the end of the 1970s, I was living in a small ecumenical Christian community in an inner-city housing scheme in Edinburgh. We were about a dozen adults and six small children inhabiting a six-flat tenement in the midst of some fairly serious urban dereliction and social deprivation. Every day, we met for worship in one of our homes. We had moved to live together (most of us were already living in the area) for a number of reasons; to find the support and nurture of a Christian community for the task of living and working in a variety of community-based projects and churches; as a sign of solidarity with the hard-pressed people of the area, involved with tenants groups, housing and school campaigns and the like; and to be a place where the practice of prayer and witness, Catholic and Protestant together, would go hand in hand. You can see that our objectives were modest! Well, we were mostly young, we were very committed, and we were full of enthusiasm. We wanted to change the world-or at least that part of it we were living in.

Two years on, here we were, sitting in one of our regular, interminable, and rather fractious meetings, with our great ideals crumbling around us. We were deeply divided about a number of things-boundary questions, about how available we should be for those round about us; our ways of organising ourselves as a community, and our forms of participation in the local community. For the past two hours, we had been bloodletting, and all of us had been forced to face some things about ourselves we would rather not have faced. Someone began to say what had previously been unthinkable to us-that we had failed, that our community was fated, that perhaps we should think about moving out, moving on.

Suddenly, one of our number who had been silent for a little while, broke in, earnestly and calmly, but quite firmly.

"But we love each other" he said. The room became quiet. Everyone sat very still. Each of us was recognising the truth of what he had just said.

Shortly afterwards, the meeting broke up. The community went on. But there was a qualitative difference to our going on. We discovered how much we had to learn, and how little to teach about endurance, resistance and hope from the people round about us. We had wanted to change the world, and discovered how hard it was even to change ourselves.

A talk about community immediately begs the question, what is meant by 'community'? One sociologist famously listed 94 definitions of the term and it is widely used to describe a variety of different realities. My dictionary gives five definitions:

1. A society of people living in proximity to one another, in one locality, under same conditions of life, and having some common bond of organization, political or religious, which makes them a more or less closely knit unit
2. A society of people with common interests or occupations, who live a common life
3. The public
4. Sharing by all alike, common possession or enjoyment (*as in, community of goods, wealth, etc*)

5. Possession of a common characteristic or nature (*as in, community of race or religion*)

To further complicate matters, 'community' is a term widely used **within** the church in the sense of fellowship; it is used to refer to particular bodies whose members are in some kind of vowed or committed relationship, most notably religious orders or congregations, and it is used as a description of the church itself. Clearly it will be helpful to try to be more precise about which of these many meanings I am referring to.

I will try to do this under three headings: **1. the framework of community 2. the experience of community 3. the purpose of community**

1. The Framework of Community

Some definitions are so broad as to be largely unhelpful. They are really being used as shorthand for 'neighbourhood' or 'civic society' or 'people who happen to show up with something in common.' So I want to think about **intentional community**, that is, communities where people have made a choice or decision to be part of it.

I think that **intentional communities** have three distinguishing characteristics that make them more than just a collection of people. I will try to illustrate these with reference to the Iona Community. But it applies to other intentional communities also, not only other religious communities but communities such as schools, colleges, societies, campaigns etc. You can all probably think of other examples from your own experience. Intentional communities have:

- **A common story**, (who people are together. This is what gives it its identity or self-understanding. (symbolised by name, rituals, badges, myths, etc)
- **A common task**, purpose or goal. (What people do together)
- **A common life**, contact, meeting, structures of support, etc (How people do it together, how they organise their life in order to carry out their task while remaining faithful to their story)

A neighbourhood may not have these distinguishing features; a workplace or campaign may well have them.

The Iona Community clearly fits within this framework. In fact, it could also be described as a 'community of communities', having several groupings within the overall one, which each also has its own story, task and life. So we have:

- The membership of the Community, some 270 people across seven countries, who are closely related by their common Rule, and by their own small communities, the family groups (about 30 of these) which meet regularly and locally. The bonds of community are built up over many years.
- The associate membership of the Community, about 1500 people worldwide, about 20% of whom also meet in small groups (also about 30 of these). Though more loosely connected, many of the associates are also very committed to being in 'community'. Many of both members and associates have also spent time as part of one of the other groupings within the Community, ie;
- The islands Resident Groups (Iona 25 and Camas 5), which each have their own distinctive story, task and life

- The Community's mainland staff, based in Glasgow (23)
- The Community's islands volunteers
- The Community that forms each week of the season with staff, volunteers and guests

2. The Experience of Community

This framework, however, though it is useful for understanding the structure or skeleton of community, does not really describe the **experience** of community, what it is that people hope to discover and feel in the common life. In communities, no matter how diverse, people hope to find a whole range of experiences that might include:

- Sharing
- Friendship and intimacy
- Kindness
- Mutual help
- Respect and tolerance
- Enjoyment and delight
- New ideas and ways
- Mutual support in difficulty and sorrow

The church has often used the term 'fellowship' as a covering term for all of these. At its best, it is described by the theological word *koinonia*, a Greek word to describe the membership of one another in Christ, originally used to describe those who share in Christ's sufferings. One theologian has described life in community as 'deepened life: deepened sorrows and deepened joys.' (HA Williams). It's also what Paul is describing when he says that 'when one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; when one part rejoices, all the other parts share its happiness.' (1 Cor.12). But it's also an important part of Christian theology that *koinonia* is not something that we can make happen through our own efforts; it is a gift from God that we experience as grace, often in the midst of the worst times.

People often experience many of the things listed above in their 'communities within a community.' Guests during a week on Iona may also experience them, and even experience the grace of community. That grace can occur within the context of months and years together; but it may also be experienced in a weekend residential with a youth group, or among strangers in a mountain bothy for a couple of days, or even on a long train journey with strangers. So what are the parameters that make it possible for fellowship, that deepened life, to be experienced, and even for grace to break in? There's a kind of spiritual nurture that goes along with the hospitality involved in sheltering, sharing and greeting people. I think it involves:

Creating safe space - accepting, non-judgemental, encouraging, disciplined -in which to know and be known. In so many people's lives, there is a real hunger for intimacy. Genuine intimacy is a precious gift. It is rare enough in our depersonalised society that we do not take it for granted. Intimacy is formed in a context with defined boundaries, within which it is safe to be vulnerable, open, to let the masks slip. It is a natural part of close relationship with a group of people either built up gradually over a period of time, or more quickly in an intensity of encounter, in which respect, listening, confidentiality, trustworthiness, contribute to the building up of trust. But these organic qualities are, I believe, protected and secured by the appropriate policies and structures. Child protection, the protection of vulnerable adults, fair disciplinary and grievance

procedures are all things we hope we never have to use. But even if we never need them, there is the added security of knowing that they are there.

That safe space is a prerequisite for another kind of spiritual nurture, which is **offering the freedom to ask questions**, to challenge, to disagree. In many people's lives, there is a real hunger for meaning. And it is in the struggle to name and articulate our truth that we learn to know ourselves.

There used to be a saying on Iona: "Don't lose your nerve on Tuesdays." This expression refers to the fact that in a programme that lasts a week, and begins on a Saturday, people will spend the weekend settling in, orienting themselves, showing their best face to others, and emphasising all the things they have in common, sharing in the consensus. By Monday, when the programme is really up and going, they will be feeling a bit more relaxed, a bit more at ease, will have a bit more confidence to look critically at what's going on, may discover things they don't like, or which don't meet their expectations, and will begin to discover not their similarities but their differences from other people on the programme. By Tuesday, these differences or disagreements or dissatisfactions may have become very vocal, very dominant. The temptation then, for programme leaders and staff, possibly under pressure from other people in the programme, is to abandon or change the programme, to try to regain the consensus, to stop the conflict. But if this happens, and the differences are either glossed over, or the questions are avoided, or the agenda of a few people is allowed to dictate the agenda for the whole group, then real learning and community is not possible. For real community, the differences have to be confronted and worked through without allowing anyone's agenda to subvert that. Hence, 'Don't lose your nerve on Tuesdays.' This process is simply a speeded-up one of what happens in all communities.

Of course, on one level, this is simply recognition of basic group dynamics. But more profoundly, it is a way of saying, 'trust the process. Trust the place, the structure, the gift of community, which you have found to be true to experience so often. Trust the spirit to be at work on both sides of the conflict. Learn to love the questions.

And a third kind of spiritual nurture is that of **encouraging the art of sharing** through a revaluing of the communal joys and a rebuilding of confidence in relationship. In many people's lives, there is a real hunger for belonging. Baldly put, fewer and fewer people have the experience of sharing as enjoyment in common with others. We have less experience of having to rely on others, of having a pleasure enhanced by doing it with others, of seeing ourselves as a part of others, dependent upon them, and them on us, and all our politics and all our economics are exacerbating this trend. Such is the competitive nature of the market now that it gets harder and harder to engage in a demanding common task in which co-operation is both a necessity and a joy. Skills, knowledge, information are increasingly commodities to be competitively traded and jealously guarded.

Because we have lost confidence in our capacity to make and sustain relationships, it's easier not to risk the attempt-and there are many substitutes now available to protect us behind our boundaries, to ensure that we need have less and less actual connection with actual people. And so we have fewer and fewer opportunities to experience common enjoyment. Even the efforts to ease loneliness can end up as two or more people being lonely together, and it's not at all rare for this to happen on Iona. In such a context,

sharing is perceived not as a pleasure but as a burden. Sharing as creativity is very hard when you've lost confidence in your capacity to create. Breaking one's isolation open, that it may be shared and enjoyed, is a risky thing to do with so little trust in the possibility of common joy-and perhaps I mean common not just in the sense of being with others, but in the sense of joy in the small, the ordinary, the everyday.

And perhaps there's a fourth kind of nurture, which is about **affirming the importance of solitude**, not as permanent or even frequent, but as a necessary part of being in community. Community is not a good way to escape from loneliness. If we find it very hard to be alone, to be with our own selves, then community will often just magnify that, because we can escape everything else, but we can never get away from ourselves! All the things we most fear or dislike about ourselves will become much more evident in community, and we can end up using other people just to avoid facing that. Making friends with oneself is an important part of fellowship.

And in all of this, it is crucial to heed the wise words of Bonhoeffer, that 'the person who loves his or her blueprint of community more than the actual community itself' is in danger of destroying that very community to which s/he has been called.'

3. The Purpose of Community

Different intentional communities have different purposes or tasks. The purpose of a school is to educate its students. For many secular communities, being a community is an end in itself. But for Christians, community is never an end in itself, no matter how nice the community. Christian community essentially exists to share in Christ's mission not only to its members but to those beyond its membership. It is '*to be the body of people which, through the grace of God, participates in the initiatives which God takes in the world.*' (Ann Morisy) We don't understand mission as being the same as it was in the past, as the attempt to make everyone in the world be like us. Two ideas in particular are consistent with how the Iona Community understands its purpose, on the islands, in Glasgow and wherever in the world its members are.

The first is the idea of **solidarity**. Taking the image of the *kenosis* or self-emptying of Jesus to take on our humanity, and to be in the midst or alongside his people, God-with-us, solidarity involves sharing the life of ordinary people, experiencing their daily struggle for survival, sharing their pain and their celebrations, being in touch with their experience of God and God in their own history. It was out of Jesus' experience of solidarity with the common people that he came to have a sense of his own mission, and this becomes an invitation to build our understanding of mission around the idea that it is a call to follow Jesus in being in solidarity with people everywhere and in every human condition, and particularly those at the margins. Our solidarity with others is the basis both for our openness to receive what **they** have to offer and for our desire to share with them the gift of faith in Jesus.

The second is the idea of **dialogue**. This acknowledges a two-way exchange of gifts. Furthermore, the notion of dialogue suggests that mission is not just a matter of doing things **for** people. It is first of all a matter of being **with** people, of listening and sharing with them.

Dialogue is one of the most powerfully effective ways in which Christians open themselves to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Those who take part in dialogue are

submitting themselves and their own religious traditions to the judgement of God. The Spirit works in part by enriching those who engage in dialogue. It also inspires partners in dialogue to allow themselves to be challenged at a deep religious level. Not only may they learn much from others; they may also see aspects of their own spirituality in a new light, and may see distortions or inadequacies in it.

The 1991 Vatican document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, distinguishes four kinds of dialogue:

- The dialogue of life, ie, the sharing of joys, sorrows and concerns
- The dialogue of action, ie, collaboration in furthering human development and liberation
- The dialogue of theological exchange
- The dialogue of religious experience, ie, the sharing of spiritual riches such as ways of praying

4. A Community of the Resurrection

To be a Christian community is ultimately to be part of the whole Christian community, that is, a community of the resurrection, and to share with it these three things:

A common story: we are people who, in an extraordinary variety of ways, have heard our name called by God, and have answered 'yes'

A common life: we are people whose life together, like the bread at communion, is constantly being broken open to be shared and enlarged, who will, sometimes painfully as the disciples had to do, break open our own intimacy in a closed community to welcome others into it, and to be welcomed into theirs.

A common task: we are people who bear witness to the triumph of life over death.

These, I believe, are the marks of Christian community, because they are the marks of Jesus. "*Look at the marks, Thomas-put your hands in my side.*"

Kathy Galloway
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