

Comhradh – Argyll Faith and Culture Conversation

Glencruitten House, 5-6 October 2012

Summary of Proceedings

Friday 5th October

Introduction – Kenneth Ross

Welcome. Glad you have come. I guess there is a certain sense of trepidation as we come together. Yet something in the profile of the comhradh made each of us feel that we should invest some time to be part of it. What is it really all about? How did it originate?

It began in conversation. A few of us who are based in Argyll, and inspired by Argyll, are people who deeply value the Christian faith but notice that a great many of our contemporaries seem to find that they can do fine without it. So they live their lives in ways which often are rich and fulfilling in many respects but which apparently have no real place for faith in God or Christian discipleship. So we ask ourselves: how could this disconnect be overcome? How could a renewed connection be formed between the world of our contemporaries and the realities to which Christian faith bears witness?

With this kind of question in mind, six of us got together one winter evening and the idea of an Argyll faith and culture conversation was born. It would explore points of engagement between contemporary culture and Christian faith. It would do this in a specifically Argyll context. In fact, it would even take its name from Argyll's historic language – hence the title *comhradh*, the Gaelic word for conversation (which, we have to admit, we did not even manage to spell correctly the first time round but we feel it gives an important signal). We aim to be rooted in the life of Argyll but the last thing we wanted it to be is parochial. It would work on a very big canvas. It would seek to dig deep into Argyll's history. It would be extensive geographically too, taking account of the worldwide extent of Christian faith today. And it would be engaged with the prevailing culture of the Western world today in all its aspects.

Among the six that winter evening was David James who very kindly agreed to make Glencruitten House available to host the *comhradh*. Not only did this provide very comfortable and suitable accommodation but it allowed the *comhradh* to situate itself at some distance from any particular institution. There is no official organization that is responsible for it. It is a freelance initiative. It stands or falls simply on the strength of its ability to offer something worthwhile. Who knows what the future may bring but we thought it would be good for it to start in this way – operating in an open space which has its risks and drawbacks but which means that it is free of the inhibitions which come with institutional interests and constraints.

The disconnect between faith and culture with which we are concerned can be addressed in a number of ways. You can pray, knowing that it is God who, through the Holy Spirit, is the one who can make the breakthrough. You can demonstrate the love of Christ by taking practical action in service of the community in his name. You can arrange evangelistic events which deliver the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who have not had a meaningful opportunity to hear it. Our event this weekend does not seek to do any of the above. This does not mean it is against them or in competition with them. Quite the contrary.

But we are offering an opportunity simply to deepen our conversation through taking time together to see how far we can get in attaining clarity in understanding where our contemporary culture is going and what it means for faith; as well as where contemporary faith is going and what it means for culture. It is a chance to step back from the action for a little while, to reflect upon it with a view to returning to it with sharper understanding and renewed motivation – what has sometimes been called the action-reflection cycle.

Emerson once said that he would walk a hundred miles through a snowstorm for one good conversation. I don't think any of us walked through a snowstorm and I doubt if any of us came as far as 100 miles? But we have all made a significant effort to show the high value that we place on conversation so we might agree with Emerson on this point.

Perhaps the distinctive thing about a conversation is that it enables us to draw out of each other thoughts and ideas which we scarcely knew were there. The poet Adrienne Rich says that a good conversation is where you “hear each other into speech”. This means that it is not a matter of me coming along with my favourite speech and waiting for the chance to deliver it. Rather it is about listening to each other so that we come to form understanding and voice thoughts which had not been clear to us before.

So we do have a structure and we will have some input from time to time to inform the conversation. But, for the most part, there is no prior script. We will go where the conversation takes us, possibly surprised by what happens when we “hear each other into speech”.

One other thing which is worth emphasizing is that everything about the *comhradh* is at an embryonic stage. Nothing set in stone. The six of us who got the ball rolling agreed that it was important for us not to do too much since it would be up to the group to shape it as the conversation develops. We have kept the organization to a minimum. No attempt has been made to achieve slick organization or glossy communications. We thought it is better to begin on a low-key basis and let the quality of the conversation drive any organizational development that is required.

Worship

Important to frame our conversation with worship times. At the end of the day in a faith and culture conversation you are talking **about** God and it is difficult to do

justice to this if you are not talking **to** God and being aware of the presence **of** God.

Since we are going to be talking a lot, we plan to use rather few words in our worship – just a little scripture, prayer and song and hopefully plenty of space to process at a spiritual level what we have been discussing.

Conversation: Session 1

Find someone you don't know well. Introduce yourself and mention one thing which makes you feel afraid in today's world. Listen carefully because your next assignment will be to introduce your new friend to someone else.

Groups of four – each introduce your new friend to the others and explain the thing that makes them feel afraid.

What are the main features of today's culture? What are the forces which shape it? What are the motivations which drive it?

Here we are talking about what has been called “deep culture”. It is not just a matter of social customs. We are not talking about things like tartan or bagpipes or dancing the Gay Gordons which might often be presented as Scottish culture, though sometimes what is happening on the surface can express realities that lie at a deeper level. What we are aiming to get at is the underlying worldview which people use as their map to navigate life. We are looking at the implicit assumptions which lie behind the decisions people take and the priorities they set. We are looking for the axioms – the points which are taken for granted. We are looking for paradigms – the frameworks people have in mind which enable them to make sense of what they experience. This is what we mean by “deep culture”.

Slides with stick-men diagrams demonstrated the differences between German and Chinese culture on fundamental life-questions.

When we consider “the way we live now”, what is the underlying understanding of the world which guides and motivates us? Obviously everyone is slightly different but we are being deliberately general at this point. We are aiming to look at the mainstream of the culture around us. What are the underlying assumptions and starting points which shape it?

Working in our groups of four, we are invited to talk around this question. As we talk could we try to capture our conclusions in a word or a phrase which we can write on a post-it note. As we post our notes we hope we might start to get some clues as to the culture which is shaping people's lives today.

Main points from Post-it Notes

Relationships: Fragmentation and Connection

Connected
Extended Family
Valuing friendship
Greed
Individualism – the “me me” society
Insular
Materialism
People’s Identity tied to work
Celebrity culture
Social media – global community
24/7 pressure pressure
Openness, honesty
Friendliness valued
Generosity of spirit
Mobile communities
Declining community spirit – reduced volunteering
Changing place of church in community
Is the church still “doing community”?

Questions of Morality and Accountability

Individual freedom prized
Authority resented
Changing sense of right and wrong
“Do what you like as long as you don’t hurt anyone”
No concept of sin
Loss of ability to make moral judgments
The law has become a tyrant
Worried about security
Looking for quick-fix
Entitlement culture
Feudalism
Entrenched in tradition
Science supreme
Rise of secular spirituality

Saturday 6th October

Conversation: Session 2

David James introduced the session with a reflection on the life of Columba, with emphasis on aspects which might have particular relevance for our context today – see Appendix 1.

Conversation on the life of Columba: Main points

- Be open to the Spirit
- Step out of our comfort zone; be prepared to be personal
- Be prepared for the discomfort of “the edge”; Geography still places Argyll on the edge, just as Columba perceived it; the “edge” between faith and secularism is also apparent in Argyll
- Hopelessness often underlies revival – are we in the West too complacent?
- Don’t be afraid to be insecure – time to take risks

Reflecting on Christianity worldwide - a translatable faith

- It is difficult to learn today’s language/culture
- We need to recognize that what “has been” may have limited relevance
- Where to start? – sensitivity, expectation, prayer
- Story-telling may have much to offer
- Walk the talk – demonstrating the good news
- Come – join the family!

Reflecting on “the times they are a’changing”

- Are we too apologetic? What about the gospel confronting culture?
- Questions of identity and relationships are decisive today.
- It is time to be thinking out of the box.
- Humility and vulnerability are keynotes – being confident in our faith yet aware that we still have much to learn.
- “Heart speaks to heart” – time to be open to the emotional.

Evaluation and Way Forward

- The event was much appreciated and represents something which most participants do not find elsewhere.
- The diversity of participants was appreciated and the mutual respect with which everyone interacted.
- The group is generally happy for now to work in a “low-key” way, quietly building up the strength of the comhradh.
- The group is keen to have further events similar to this one and happy with the suggestion of twice per year.
- A presence on the internet, in one form or another, may be something to develop in future.
- Attention could be given to practicalities e.g. publicity, provision of transport from Oban for those using public transport.
- In terms of thematic focus, most favour attempting to define more specific topics for future comhradh.

Appendix 1: The Life of Columba and Our Context Today – David James

Columba was born into a royal family in Donegal and Tyrone. He enjoyed a privileged upbringing, attending the best schools. Ireland by this time was a Christian nation as a result of the explosive growth of Christianity during the 5th century when Patrick was active.

A crisis point in Columba's life came when there was a great battle between the northern O'Neills and the southern O'Neills. When the former were victorious Columba was accused of aiding their victory. As a result he was excommunicated and required to leave his position of power. He departed for Dalriada and made his base on Iona.

On Iona he set about giving expression to the values of the kingdom of God. It was said that the presence of God was palpable. Columba came to be regarded as Christ's representative. The presence of God was evident in healing, in study of the Scriptures and in awareness of nature.

Though in those days the sea was a highway, nonetheless Iona appeared to be a place "on the edge" of the known world. It carried something of the sense of standing on a cliff edge with the known behind us and the unknown beyond. In this context he was less constrained than he might have been in a centre of power and was able to follow his calling.

His life raises four questions for us today:

- 1) What do we need to repent of?
- 2) How can we cultivate a palpable sense of the presence of God?
- 3) What is life like on the edge? What are the "edges" which we need to explore today?
- 4) What kind of community life is needed today to recapture what Columba discovered in community?

Appendix 2: A Faith Which Translates: Christianity Worldwide – Kenneth Ross

From its inception Christianity has been in principle a worldwide faith, always with its eyes fixed on "the ends of the earth". During the twentieth century the worldwide character of the faith has become a practical reality. Instead of three out of four Christians being Europeans as was the case 100 years ago, today three out of four Christians are Asians, Africans or Latin Americans.

Someone living in western Europe could easily think that we are living through an age of decline in Christian faith. Looking at the world as a whole it is a very different story. It has been one of the great ages of Christian growth.

Slides – Christianity worldwide 1910 and 2010 – pie charts and maps

An Adventurous Faith

A moment of reflection on this history alerts us to one of the outstanding characteristics of the Christian faith – it is able to travel to a new place, to cross boundaries of geography and culture and language, and to make itself at home in a new context.

This, in fact, is something that is evident in the very origins of Christianity, revealed in the pages of the New Testament itself. Jesus' disciples, one and all, were Jews and the movement of faith in Jesus as Messiah at first appeared to be a movement within the Jewish faith, a special form of Judaism which recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah. Its members were circumcised, observed the Jewish Sabbath, kept the Mosaic law, worshipped at the temple and were outwardly indistinguishable from their fellow Jews. Their message, however, was new and exciting, and gripped the imagination of devout Jewish people not only in Galilee and Jerusalem but in the wide diaspora which had spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

Antioch, the third largest city in the world at that time, was one place where there was a large Jewish community. In this cosmopolitan context people were coming and going all the time. The news about Jesus had spread within the Jewish community, as was happening in many other places. Then, one day, something happened which was to have momentous implications both for the Jesus movement and for the future of Europe. Men of Cyprus and Cyrene spoke about Jesus to Greek-speaking non-Jews. We are told that a great number of them believed and turned to the Lord.

Here was a turning point. Before long, Gentile followers of Jesus would vastly outnumber Jewish but it all began on this particular day when people realised that the news about Jesus would be good not only for Jews but also for Gentiles. We don't know in any detail what was said. But we can notice immediately a change of vocabulary. If you said to a first century Jew that Jesus is the Messiah, he might agree or disagree but he would know exactly what you meant. If you said that Jesus is the Messiah to the average Gentile and you would almost certainly get a blank look. So new language was coined – *kyrios* = Lord and *soter* = Saviour were among the first terms to be applied to Jesus as his followers attempted to explain his significance in terms which would make sense in the Greek framework of thought. By now these terms are so familiar when we speak about Jesus we might easily forget that they once were a radical new departure. But there was a day in Antioch when men from Cyprus and Cyrene used this language for the first time as they explained the significance of Jesus in terms which would make sense to people who had no background in the Jewish faith or the scriptures of the Old Testament.

That story, told in the Book of Acts, is one that has been repeated time and again as Christianity has spread worldwide. It seems to be a faith which comes alive when it is in the process of crossing boundaries, whether of geography, ethnicity, language or culture. It is an adventurous faith – it likes to be going somewhere new. It is a faith which thrives not so much when it remains on familiar territory but when it has to go somewhere new. It is ever ready to go out and meet new people and new situations.

A translatable faith

Inherent in this adventurous, boundary-crossing character is the confidence of Christianity that it is a translatable faith. When it crosses a cultural boundary and reaches a new context it is ready to explain itself in the terms which are familiar to the people with whom it is now engaged. In the literal sense of translating from one language to another, this has been a major enterprise in the history of Christianity. The Bible, or large parts of it, have been translated into some 2,400 languages. The process continues as it is translated into new languages and as languages change and there is need for modern versions to be prepared.

But there is more to it than simply language. "Translation is not merely a matter of language, for language is only the outer skin of a much larger body of the shared mental, moral and societal processes that we call culture." (Andrew Walls) Faith too has many dimensions to it but Christianity has worked on the basis that faith can find true expression in a new cultural context.

It has the confidence that it will not be corrupted in the translation process but will be able to be received in the terms of those to whom it is addressed. Never has this been more evident than in our lifetime as the good news of Jesus has been received among so many people and in so many different contexts around the world. Sometimes the language which communicates the good news has just needed small adjustments, fine-tuning. At other times a quantum leap has been required – as occurred that day in Antioch when the gospel was first expressed in the terms familiar to the Greeks.

The last century has been a time of quantum leaps as the good news of Jesus Christ has been introduced to so many new languages, peoples and contexts. In each context people have brought their history, their culture, their language to the process of receiving Jesus Christ. Each has asked different questions. Each has formed their own interpretation. In place after place, as occurred in Antioch, when the good news of Jesus is explained in terms familiar to the people, many have believed and the church has grown strong. In the process, our understanding of Jesus has grown - as he has been considered and understood in so many different interpretative frameworks. Christ understood from so many angles of interpretation that we come to know more of who he is and what he means for our life and destiny.

"Something new is brought into the language, but that new element can only be comprehended by means of and in terms of the pre-existing language and its conventions. In the process that language and its system is effectively expanded, put to new use; but the translated element from the source language has also, in a sense, been expanded by translation; the receptor language has a dynamic of its own and takes the new material to realms it never touched in the source language. Similarly, conversion implies the use of existing structures, the 'turning' of those structures to new directions, the application of new material and standards to a system of thought and conduct already in place and functioning. It is not about substitution, the replacement of something old by something new, but about transformation, the turning of the already existing to new account." (Andrew Walls)

The West Today: Time for Adventure

An adventurous faith. A faith not afraid to meet a new context and to be understood in new terms. Just as missionaries of earlier times had to learn, often the hard way, that the societies in which they found themselves were not all bad and that indeed they often had much to teach the missionary, so it will be a surprise if the post-modern Western societies do not possess, besides their apparent secularity and indifference, those features which will make possible a new, revealing and energising appropriation of the gospel of Christ. Is not such a new cultural frontier one which excites the Christian imagination?

If there is one thing which the Christian church should have learnt from its long history, and particularly from the great age of expansion over the last two centuries, it is how to engage with a new cultural context. As David Smith has pointed out: "It should be possible for churches possessing two centuries of accumulated experience and expertise in cross-cultural missionary endeavour to discover faithful and creative ways of ensuring that Christ becomes a living option for a generation shaped by postmodern culture." Amongst the lessons learnt from this experience would be the confidence that Christ is translatable, that new language is not threat but opportunity, that there is need to take risks, to be ready for the gospel to be seen in a new light, to be willing to let the terms be set by the "receptor" community.

In the missionary's experience of learning a new language and seeking to communicate the gospel in that new language, there were invariably two stages. The first was one of frustration where the missionary was painfully aware of his or her inability to communicate the gospel message in the terms to which she is accustomed. The second stage was the gloriously liberating one when the missionary realised that the new language was opening up all kinds of new insights into the meaning of the gospel, sometimes turning upside down the received understanding. To reach that second stage it was necessary for the missionary to enter deeply into the language and culture, to esteem it, to come to love it. Perhaps it is only through such experience that the faith will be commended to the peoples of the West in the new cultural context into which they have entered. But you reach that stage only when you have the missionary sense of adventure that takes you to the vulnerability of a new place with the confidence that the gospel of Christ can be translated into the native idiom.

There may be little future for the Christian faith in the Western world if it remains anchored in the language and frame of thought of a world that is past. But what if its messengers have the sense of adventure which rises to the challenge of a new frontier, which takes the risk of making the message understood in terms familiar to those to whom it is addressed today, which embarks on the uncomfortable and difficult journey of answering new questions and thinking in new ways about the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ, which is ready for the quantum leap that is required?

Appendix 3: The Christian Church and its Future – Bridgid Hess

Changing times

As Bob Dylan once prophetically said 'The times they are a changing'.

Times are forever changing and curiously not changing.

1. Smoothly on a linear line where the world, along with creation, slowly and surely moves on and evolves. (read Eckhard Tolle 'A New Earth').
2. In dramatic ways appearing quite suddenly. An example of this is a collapse of an empire, or the fall of the Berlin Wall.
3. Time does not change and humankind keeps repeating the same things over and over again. For example the world has always had to face abuse of power, poverty, injustice, bigotry, hierarchies of power and selective knowledge that excludes, as well as beliefs that support our pre-conceived ideas. The church has had its own crumbling empires and times of disillusionment. There is nothing new in this.

This paper focuses on the second idea about time. It would appear that we are living on a time fault line where the world and church, as we have known it for many hundreds of years, is crumbling. It is as if a new era is dawning, or a paradigm shift is happening all through society, similar to the reformation. Hans Kuhn was famous for his concepts of paradigm shifts, dividing the last thousand years in the West into three eras:

- Pre-modern times - when the church was ruled by the priest who represented God. He dictated to a passive people what was 'truth'. It was very much ruled by a masculine energy.
- Modern times – which emerged from the Reformation, the printing press and the philosophy that we are individuals – as in Descartes saying ' I think therefore I am'. It was seen as an age of great certainty and progress, of science and industrialisation (in the West). Modern medicine and technology are vast benefits of this age. It was also an age of reductionism where words in the written text became 'the word of God'. In its most extreme form people were seen as bits of a machine that worked towards 'productivity'. This age too has been ruled by a masculine form of power. It has been an age in which people wanted and needed to gather knowledge and information.
- Post-modern times - This is considered to be the Age that we are now embracing where people ask 'who AM I' if I am not just my thinking mind? Information is freely available and society is somewhat disillusioned by the 'machine' metaphor and reductionist thought. People are also disillusioned by modernism's blindness to the environment and people's greed for individual wealth.
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The second focus of this paper concerns this third era, and the ways the church can negotiate its way into the new opportunities that this offers and at the same time face the hazards and fears of the future.

On such shaky ground it is important as Christians, to know how to move without losing the essence of our Christian faith. We need to be in a place where we are strong enough to say 'come all you who are thirsty, come and drink of the everlasting wells of salvation found within your souls'. We need to both reap the jewels from the past and also re-employ them for the times that we are living in.

We know we are experiencing a huge paradigmatic shift in our understanding and experience of the world, challenging so much of what we have taken-for-granted as 'truth'. That which we believed to be cast in stone is now to be seen floating on the winds of change. This is frightening and the tendency is to return to the old pastures that served us so well in the past. We all tend to defend that which has brought us life in the past and this is so often supported with certain selected scripture, kept alive in 'holy huddles' of like-minded people.

An important question to ask is 'What then are we certain about?' It is important to ask this question, because the church has often been caught in debates concerning 'small truths' that change over time. These truths tend to privilege one group over another (eg protestants over Catholics, men over women, straight over gay). In an unpublished talk about Francis of Assisi in May 2012 Richard Rhor wrote concerning mystics:

A mystic doesn't say "I believe." A mystic says "I know." A true mystic ironically speaks with an almost arrogant self-confidence and, at the same time, with a kind of humility. When you see this combination of calm self-confidence, certitude, and patient humility, all at the same time, you can trust you are in the presence of a person who has had an actual "encounter" with God or the Holy.

The church and the modern world

When Thomas Hardy wrote 'God's funeral' he was prophetically demonstrating how we have killed God in the smoke of our minds, whose highest thoughts are lower than God's lowest. This may have taken a century to work out, but from the ashes something new is emerging.

As far back as the 1960's we have seen resistance to this in the 'hippy movement' and 'flower power' which rode on the disillusionment in North America of the Vietnam war. The god of consumerism and the individual remain an enormous challenge.

Bringing back the ancient mystical Celtic ways in a new way

The word in the mystic beliefs was experienced in the 'vibration' rather than in the thinking mind. There is a move back towards this, a knowledge that animals know as they follow vibrations of the earth. We are witnessing it in churches that are meeting in a 'mosaic' form in homes, bringing back to the centre relationship and community as a focal point.

If you go back to the earliest church in these parts, they built on old pagan cultures and merged ancient beliefs in God with new revelations. Sometimes these changes were gradual and at other times violent and disruptive (eg the reformation). The old church of St Columbus has also however been romanticised. There were many powers at play and yet again religion was not some pure form of worship. What we do know is that change happens when old structures no longer seem to serve the people. These old wise saints were not faultless but also caught up in the beliefs and wars of their times.

The bottom line in a Christian faith is to FOLLOW Jesus not worship him. He leads us to the FATHER who is LIGHT. One of the challenges in today's fragmented world is that we have believed that God is 'out there' as a 'father in the sky'. We have, as Jung said, 'separated ourselves and the whole of creation from God' and from LOVE. We have taught (both in the reformed traditions as well as the Catholic traditions) a theology of 'original Sin' rather than 'original blessing'. Matthew Fox and Teilhard de Chardin were outlawed for exposing this. I see a great need to return to some of the great truths held by both Celtic and Gnostic theologies – that we are one with creation. Take Francis of Assisi's famous prayer to creation – to brother Sun and Sister Moon. We have forgotten to celebrate who we really are in the cycles of the moon and sun. As Jesus prayed 'I long for you to know who you are as I know who I am'. Thomas Merton prophetically knew this when he once said 'if only the people of Massachusetts could see who they really are as created in the image of God'. This is not to say that their theology was perfect, for they too centralised certain aspects within their own cultural context by pushing other things to the outskirts of belief.

There is a great hunger in today's Western world for God – God who is the light of our souls. There can be nothing else but this hunger as Augustine put it. This secular world seeks God but worships the look-alike gods of money, sex, the individual and the ego. The hunger is there. The hunger is seeking its own transformation. There is no such thing as a godless society.

It is a God that cannot be grasped fully through the reasoning mind because the reasoning mind can only think in contrasts, opposites, either/or metaphors, black and white. The soul knows differently. There is no Gentile or Jew, male or female in the realm of light and heaven (which is here). Ancient people knew this but we seem to have forgotten this. Mary knew it in her hymn of praise to her maker, Simeon and Anna knew this in their hymn of praise at the temple, Teilhard de Chardin knew this in his hymn of praise to the universe. Rumi and Kabir knew this and celebrated it in their poetry. Walt Whitman knew it when he said 'I believe in you oh my soul'.

The challenge in the West is partly to return to this ancient knowing. Africa knows this move beyond duality. Their traditional beliefs do not pit one God against another. India knows this – the mystery of our incarnation on earth and the many facets of God. But they also do not know it, for the image also gets corrupted. CS Lewis was cognisant of this in the book 'Voyage to Venus'.

The church in Africa is growing, merging Liberation theologies with the 'God who rescues us from our suffering' the miracle God who rescues us from AIDS. They too have learnt to separate God from themselves and in some ways wear Him as a lucky charm. This holds its limitations and its romantic ideals of an external God who has answered their own fragmentation from colonisation. People may flock to church and the structures in themselves serve a marvellous purpose, but are also limited. The structures, like a plaster on a broken arm, serve their purposes, but the arms need to heal themselves and grow beyond the rigid structure of the plaster. We are living in such times.

Argyll

Where does this leave us in Argyll? To look beyond the old paradigms and practice church in our love and respect of all people, being aware of how we have been constructed historically. To ask questions that invite people in the street to entertain their thirst for meaning and love and light demonstrated in Christ Jesus. To know that this is not diluting the gospel, it IS the gospel. Yogi Bhanjan said 'If you can't see God in ALL you can't see God at all'.

This is a great challenge and it challenges so many of our beliefs and ideas. Jesus just simply asks us to follow him. He took us to the outsiders, the unbelievers – but still we hold onto our smallness. He shook the world and it took a while for it to wake up. He inserted vast amounts of consciousness in death on the Cross. He offered us freedom from slavery to Sin (the small self or small god). But we have turned these into old worn out phrases saturated with our own contamination of 'us and them' 'the ones who are saved and the ones who are pagan', the 'believer and the unbeliever'. We are living in exciting times where these fault-lines are exposed. It is not the Roman Army that challenges us but individualism, consumerism, the thinking mind – all these we have worshipped.

Perhaps the challenge of the church today in Argyll is to revisit some of these ancient wisdom traditions and learn from the East without our minds turning it into a dualism of threatened identity.

Let us learn WITH the ordinary people on the streets how they experience God and Love and Light personified in Christ Jesus. Let us not be afraid of their answers.

Appendix 4 Personal Reflections - the Comhradh Oct 5-6 2012 Bridgid Hess

I wrote this without any notes and 10 days after meeting. Therefore it is the residue of the perfume that I am left with in these reflections

It was the warmth and the welcome that first I noticed (even though I was part of the welcoming group!!!). David James set such a welcoming atmosphere. More and more people arrived until I was anxious, as there were many more people than were on my list. 24 people in all turned up. My anxiety was ill-founded as there was space for everyone, even poor Maura (who I asked to not take a room

until we found out what space was left – even though she had booked early). She was so gracious and accommodating on this. My next anxiety was the food... would there be enough? David just smiled and said he had asked the ladies to cater for 20. The food was just perfect – simple but delicious and made more special because David had set up the tables in the meeting room as if we were a big family. This structure continued over the 21 hours of sitting around the table in ‘conversation’.

The first evening was skilfully led by Ken in a way that allowed us to open up to one another without feeling exposed. I will always remember the saying ‘I would walk 100 miles through a snow storm for a good conversation’. Introducing each other in two’s and then introducing each other to another two created a natural and seamless way to feel comfortable. I was mesmerised by Rosanne’s story of her childhood during World War 2 and her father’s role as a pioneer of adventure beyond any known horizon. She exuded this love of life and of God and of trust in the adventure of life. This was a great gift to me – she was perhaps the oldest among us but was so young in spirit and life and enthusiasm for the spirit of God.

Ewen’s presentation on social media was a great eye-opener for me. As a group we had been busy writing post-its on the challenges of society today. None of us had come up with the power and immensity of the influence of social media today. It was so good for me to be challenged to see my own ‘blind spots’. The visual impact of the symbols of a German family and a Chinese family were also immensely powerful and challenged so much of my own taken-for-granted beliefs within my own cultural assumptions. Roughly 8 people came only for the Friday evening.

Saturday morning began with seeing Rosanne skipping around in the cold morning outside – age no obstacle, she was curious and amazed at the beauty of Glencruitten House. We had a leisurely breakfast with David making toast for us all in front of the fire. Another four people came on Saturday that did not attend on Friday evening.

I was deeply moved by the variety of people who came on Saturday as well as Friday, in particular that physically challenged people came. I dumbly asked David (who arrived at the door hobbling on two crutches) ‘did you walk here?’ Meggie is challenged by her failing sight and this was her first public outing for a long time. She brought me some flowers the next day and said ‘Thank you for inviting me – I felt so welcomed and really was challenged by others who face such difficulties in living with illness’. Cathy Cameron came from Glasgow and is also challenged with her health. It reminded me of Jesus calling people to ‘come to the feast’ – not many high and mighty, but those who are humble.

David led a very challenging discussion on three attributes of St Columba that struck him- 1. his repentance 2. his calling 3. living on the edge. This led to an interesting discussion in our small groups.

I led a provocative discussion on the changing world and yet that which does not change. I asked the question 'what has surprised you or is newsworthy to bring home from this? David James said 'I was so anxious when I woke up and found there was no water in the house. Rosanne simply said – then let us pray.... And there was water'. Ken said that it was the fellowship and friendship (not sure if I remember this correctly). Someone else said that they were left with a great experience of meeting so many people who would not otherwise meet one another.

I left with a great feeling of an embryonic group that is emerging in an organic way in order to feel its way into the future of faith in Argyll and the Islands. It all seemed to be about RELATIONSHIPS and fellowship as key words.