The GalGael Trust

The GalGael Trust in Govan was founded 20 years ago. It grew out of the M77 “Pollok Free State” motorway protest, when the late Colin Macleod said, “We’ve shown them what we’re against, now let’s show them what we’re for.”

Right from the outset Iona was an inspiration. During the Protest, Colin and his wife Gehan (who leads the GalGael) spent a weekend on Iona, soaking in the ancient stones and history of the place. If you walk round the GalGael workshop, you’ll see many of our people carving Celtic knotwork – the symbol of eternity and interconnection – as well as some fine Celtic crosses. Also, there is a strong appreciation of nature in the totem wolves, eagles, salmon and other creatures that are a frequent feature of GalGael art.

There is also pride that George MacLeod, who was substantially responsible for rebuilding Iona Abbey, had his church in Govan. We have his secretary’s old desk on our premises. It is not uncommon to hear people repeating phrases like “work is worship” or, as a current GalGael banner has it carved in wood, “Work is the therapy.”

Many of our people were referred to, or found out about GalGael, as a part of wrestling with multiple issues such as addictions, mental health, trouble with the police, homelessness and long term unemployment. The factor that connects all these is poverty. Through its training programme, Journey On, GalGael uses boats and boat building and sailing as a metaphor for life’s wider journey, the pilgrimage of life.

Because of benefit restrictions and requirements, it is difficult for some of our people to leave Govan for long, so we plan most of our trips at weekends. John Maclean, the owner of Iona Hostel, was keen to have his place benefit us during the off-peak winter season, and for two years running now has given us exclusive use of the hostel at a most generous rate for which it was within our means to fundraise. This year’s visit was sponsored by two private benefactors, the cost of the visit being just over £2,000 once ferries, meals en route, food for the weekend, minibus hire and all the rest has been factored in. This year we had 28 people in total, 22 in the hostel, 2 in the Shepherd’s Bothy and 4 camping. All of them were GalGael volunteers, Journey On participants or staff/board. A little overlap with last year was provided, but most of them had never been to Iona before.

Purpose of the Visit

While the GalGael is not a religious organisation, and is made up of people of many faiths and none, I have organised and sought sponsorship for this trip because we realise that for many of our people the spiritual journey is a vital part of their coming into a better relationship with life. This goes not
just for folks who have a presenting symptom such as an addiction, but it is true of all of us. Religion is important to some of our people, but most find it difficult to approach or unhelpful. There is, however, an openness to spirituality, but what does spirituality mean? The purpose of the Iona trip is to explore that question. We do so in a very open way, always mindful of Thomas Merton’s emphasis on the importance of protecting “the sanctuary of another’s subjectivity”.

We travelled up to Iona by 2 minibuses and 2 ferry trips. Blair again volunteered to be our cook with his partner Illy, and as they wanted to hold a hand-fasting while on Iona we put them in the Shepherd’s Bothy as a working honeymoon.

Our Main Discussion Points

After dinner on the Saturday evening I introduced the theme of spirituality. I was in the middle of suggesting that many of the problems in the world and within ourselves derive from an inner emptiness, when the outside door burst open, and standing there with beaming smiles were John, the hostel owner, and his partner Rachael. “We just dropped in to tell you,” he said, “that we’re so pleased to have you here on Iona.”

They left as quickly as they’d come, but their visit magically set the stage for what followed. Yes, the inner emptiness that so many of our people know is devastating, but there can be times in life when the door bursts open. Fresh avenues of welcome open up. People then divided up into groups of 2 or 3 and shared about times when they might have experienced such openings of the door in life.

After half an hour, we all got back around the table. Those who felt comfortable so to do shared from their experience. It was a very powerful session. One or two people found it a little too intense. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it made me aware that another time it would be wise to convene such a session jointly with one of our more experienced GalGael staff, especially given my poor hearing. Themes that emerged, both in this session and later in the weekend, included:

- Coming to GalGael was the door that opened in my life.
- The clear air and water of Iona.
- Seeing people helping each other without anyone asking.
- The GalGael faeries at play, catching things that need to be done.
- I was frightened to give a hand, and too proud to ask for help. But now …
- I was against Christianity and avoided it, but I’ve now seen other ways of understanding it.
- The opposite of love is not hate. You can still enjoy yourself while hating. The opposite of love is fear.
- I’m not yet ready to speak about what weighs me down.
- My burden has been lifted.

After drafting this report I circulated it to as many of people as I had contact details for, seeking their approval and any further comments. Two were texted back. I have edited these slightly and made them anonymous, as follows. They give added insight into the depth of our sharing on Iona and the way that an implicit spirituality arose. These sentiments were shared by many of those present.
I saw in the report that the opposite of love is fear. You might like to add that the reason is that Love in the true sense of the word gives you the freedom to be yourself in the way that the Universe created you to be. The Universe made you for a purpose! To love yourself so that you can give love to others and create a harmony not just on Earth but throughout the whole Universe. That is the power of Love that gives such freedom. As for depression the bottom line is fear. Fear can come in any shape or form however small. All you need is a trigger. It can happen out of blue. If you imagine a clear glass of water and an ink drop goes in the glass of water, that ink drop bursts out and spreads throughout the glass of water therefore becomes contaminated. That ink drop is fear. With fear there is no freedom. That is what depression feels like, it leaves no room for love in the glass of water because it is contaminated. True Love cannot be contaminated because Love and fear cannot coexist with each other. That is what depression does, it leaves no room for love in your whole being. That ink drop of fear goes into every cell in your body and mind. That's what makes everyday living with depression hard to bear. You feel don't want to live. Love dispels fear by not bottling it up. Get medical help from a psychiatrist and family or friends that you can trust because you can't do it on your own, nobody can, however strong you think you are. I know that from experience and I got help when I did not think it was possible. The truth is it is always possible. All you have to do is give out your hand and ask for help which is what I did. Difficult though it may be because there is no other way to ask for help. So don't let the ink drop rule your life because you are bigger than that.

I was thinking about what xxx had said about hate and fear. Fear tends to leave us feeling helpless and paralysed. Now I found myself thinking about hate. And I find this a more difficult issue to get to grips with. Hate can allows us to have a sense of power and control. We can dehumanise as a means to distance ourselves and to destroy that which we are more fearful of and threatened by. Hate and the sense of power that can come with it is very intoxicifying. It becomes easy to find reasons to justify our thinking and actions. Extreme situations tend to generate extreme emotions. We see this in war and the after effects in PTSD. What a heaven it is to be human and a hell it is as well. Wishing you all a Happy Easter.

What Else We Did

On the Saturday, we all went down to the Abbey to look around and see the stones in the Infirmary Museum. Historic Environment Scotland had provided us with free educational passes. In the Oran Chapel, Gehan sang powerfully in Gaelic from the Céile Dé tradition. While folks were looking around the Abbey, I dropped in to the Iona Community offices to have a chat with Rosie, the Islands’ Director. When I came out everybody was laughing. It was clear some joke had been played at my expense. Only after we got home did I see the photograph taken at the Abbey altar. It’s the GalGael version of Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper. It had been Mac McKechnie who staged it. He’s one of our long-term volunteers and formerly SODP Operating Dept Practitioner in the army (RAMC).

On the Saturday afternoon some of us walked down to St Columba’s Bay. That evening, Alan Torrance presided over a hand-fasting on the beach where Blair and Illy made commitments to each other for the following year and a day. As the sun set in the west, the full moon rose in the east and
a skein of wild geese flew overhead. As one of our people later said, “The presences were out in force – the sunset, the moon, the geese ... and it was dry.” One of the hostel staff, Collette, who came with us drew an evocative picture by way of a card to mark the occasion for them. Beautiful!

On the Sunday we climbed Dun I, and Linda who is both blind and deaf insisted giving it a go. She made it up to the top with surprising ease thanks to Richard her carer, and to others who gathered round her for safety. We made it back to Govan late on Sunday evening. Since then, a number of people have commented to me how the experience was uplifting not just for them as individuals, but also, for the atmosphere in our workshop as a whole. That’s why this kind of experience matters. We are hugely grateful to our anonymous sponsors, and if anybody reading this would like to help us make another such visit next year, I’d be grateful to hear from them on mail@alastairmcintosh.com.

Pictures

Ferry to Iona, Friday 10 – Sunday 12 March 2017
Leaving the Oran Chapel, the Abbey behind

Mealtime at the beautifully equipped and well-held space of Iona Hostel
Last Supper of the GalGael in Iona Abbey (the “last”, because we’ll all be banned now)

A guy called Leonardo also had a go at the same picture
The hand-fasting of Blair & Illy
Linda with Richard and some of the rest of us at the top of Dun I.

Thanks in the Abbey to our sponsors: two known, plus the unknowable.