



Photo: Darren Wright / flickr CC.

Alastair McIntosh writes about Iona and the GalGael Trust

The GalGael Trust in Govan, the shipbuilding area of Glasgow, grew out of a 1990s' motorway protest camp. People found community around a campfire. Today, hundreds of long-term unemployed folk have been through our training programmes or sailed the wooden boats that we have made.

The *Gal* in Gaelic is 'the stranger', the *Gael* the heartland people. These days, there's a bit of the stranger and a bit of the native in most of us. Our search is for the things that give us life. You could call that 'spirituality'.

For the past three years, groups of around two dozen have reflected on these matters on the holy island of Iona. Funding has come mainly from special collections in Glasgow Meeting and the John Wigham (Enjoyment) Trust.

We stay in the island's lovely hostel. We study the Celtic art set in stone down at the Abbey. We go for walks, and we talk about what 'spirituality' may (or may not) mean for each of us. Last year, two of our people held a pagan-style 'hand-fasting' on the beach. This year, with the Iona Community's blessing, we held sacred space in the Michael Chapel with a Buddhist chant, a Christian hymn, reading the Beatitudes and remembering loved ones.

Dale said it was the first time he had ever seen clear water. Mark said he had found a depth of peace that he'd always sought, but never found, while sitting on a rock beside the ocean. Linda, who is deaf and blind, was thrilled to make it up the island's highest hill – helped by a couple of our skilled ex-army guys.

This year is a challenging time of redevelopment for the GalGael Trust and other charities. We have had to cut back most of our staff. There is so little funding out there. But Iona helps us to strengthen who we are.

People said things like:

Here there's peace. You're away from the scheme. No cars, no noisy neighbours, no barking dogs. I don't think people realise how quickly you can relax... when you come to Iona.

I have come to see that GalGael is not an organisation. GalGael is a practice, and the practice is in the making of beautiful things of wood, stone, metal and fabric... like the monks did long ago.

Spirituality is about us pulling together and making sure we're OK for the next batch of folks coming in.

Depression goes through every cell in the body. Fear does not want you to put out your hand. But put out your hand, and the way the universe works it comes and takes your hand.

I was against Christianity and avoided it, but I've now seen other ways of understanding it.

I was moved to tears. I had for so long fought compassion and gentleness.

Fear shouts. Love whispers. Love never shouts.

The true meaning of 'enjoyment' is a joy that rises up from sources deep within. We give thanks to the John Wigham trustees and to all the others who have made this possible.

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.