

Living by the Rule

The Rule of the Iona Community

Kathy Galloway



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Contents

- I. Introduction 7
- II. Living by the Rule 17
- III. Daily prayer 25
- IV. Reading the Bible 35
- V. Sharing and mutual accountability for our use of resources, including money 45
- VI. Planning and mutual accountability for our use of time 55
- VII. Action for justice, peace and the integrity of creation 65
- VIII. Meeting with and accounting to each other 81
- IX. The work of the Iona Community 91
- X. Camas – a faith reflection 101
- XI. Unity in diversity 115
- XII. Of witnesses, wives and wise women: women in the life of the Iona Community 127
- XIII. Our working principles 145

Standing on the shoulders of giants

Remembering the men and women of the 31st day.

'Tell them we love them and miss them.'

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the members of the Iona Community, past and present, who live by its Rule. I hope they will forgive me for any liberties they feel I have taken, because I love them dearly. I am grateful to George MacLeod, Ron Ferguson and Alison Swinfen for their inspirational writings about the Rule. My father, who was a member of the Community for fifty years, lived the Rule in a way that was both disciplined and utterly transparent to his children at least. And I wish to thank colleagues on the staff of the Iona Community, in particular Neil Paynter, who is the politest, most perceptive and most persistent editor anyone could hope for.

I. Introduction

A few years ago, a Radio 4 play *An Island Between Heaven and Earth* by Alistair Rutherford dramatised the beginnings of the Iona Community in 1938 and the years immediately following. It's a stirring story, which had its genesis in Glasgow during the bleak years of the depression of the 1930s. There, the Community's founder, George MacLeod, a minister of the Church of Scotland, seeing the unemployment, insecurity and deep poverty in his working-class parish, discovered that people there felt the church was far removed from their daily struggles. They felt that there was one set of rules for Sundays – going to church, saying your prayers, being 'respectable' – and another set for the rest of the week, in which poverty, oppression and injustice was simply ignored. They did not feel they belonged! The life of the church and the life of the world had drifted dangerously far apart. The common life of church and community had become fragmented and broken. So he sought ways that might help to bridge that gap.

George believed that part of the problem lay in the way that the clergy were trained. They were removed into theological colleges and seminaries, educated into a language and way of life that was far removed from that of the people they would return to minister to, and which was also far removed from the direct and vivid teaching of Jesus through parable, story and images drawn from the daily life and work of farmers, fishermen, housekeeping and husbandry. He saw a way in which two very different needs might be addressed –

the needs of the unemployed skilled joiners, masons, welders of the shipyards for a job, and the need for clergy to find new ways of communicating and living the gospel. He recruited a group of young ministers who had just finished their theological training, and unemployed workers from Glasgow, to travel together to the remote Hebridean island of Iona, place of the Irish Christian mission of St Columba or Columkille, which had Christianised Scotland in the 6th century. There, they would work together on rebuilding the ruined monastic buildings around the ancient cathedral. The ministers would work as the labourers for the craftsmen, the craftsmen would bring their perspective to theological and scriptural discussion, and all would live a common life of daily prayer, work and recreation. After the summer together, the craftsmen would either continue the rebuilding or return to the cities, while the ministers would go in teams to the poor urban parishes of central Scotland with this experience of community to assist them.

It was an imaginative scheme, and indeed the Iona Community did rebuild the Abbey, and a common life. The play dramatised these early events vividly – the physical rigours (they lived in huts and had no electricity), the awkward conversations, the growing bonds of *koinonia*, communion. The original task of rebuilding the monastic ruins of Iona Abbey became a sign of hopeful rebuilding of community in Scotland and beyond.

Today, 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 Rule of:

- Daily prayer and reading the Bible
- Sharing and accounting for the use of our resources, including money and time
- Spending time together in community
- Action for justice, peace and the integrity of creation

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
- We are about 270 Members, mostly in Britain, and 1600 Associate Members, with 1400 Friends worldwide.

When it started in 1938, and for about the first 30 years of its existence, the members of the Iona Community were all white, all male, almost all Scottish, almost all from the Church of Scotland, and the majority of them were clergy, with a smaller number of unemployed working-class tradesmen, joiners, masons, builders and the like. They were also mostly in their twenties and thirties. A less inclusive community it would be hard to imagine. The early description of the Community as a Presbyterian brotherhood is very apt.

The Community had its genesis in the vision and imagination of one remarkable and prophetic individual, as indeed I guess many religious movements and communities begin, and for thirty years, the leadership of the Community was invested in this man. He was charismatic and autocratic in equal measure, hugely compassionate and yet capable of being dismissive and offhand. He attracted

enormous love and loyalty, and also fierce opposition and hostility. Asked early on how members should address him, he replied, ‘the boss’, and so he was known. This was a man from an aristocratic Scottish family, with an establishment training in leadership acquired at public school, Oxford and in the army. There is little doubt that without his personal and social authority and drive, the Iona Community would never have survived past the first few years.

But by 1967, when the rebuilding of the Abbey had been completed, and George had decided to retire, the Community was ready for a different kind of leadership, because it was becoming a different kind of community. Today, the Community has equal numbers of men and women, only slightly more Scots than people from elsewhere in the UK, and now Europe, people of all ages, a majority of lay people, and members from a dozen Christian traditions, Protestant and Catholic. Clearly, it is a significantly more inclusive community than it used to be.

Much of this change came about organically; not because the members one day said, ‘we must become more inclusive’, but because others outside lobbied to be included. You could say that they were people who simply showed up wanting to belong to this community for some reason or other. And because the original members were concerned about the task of rebuilding community, and because they were committed to peacemaking and social justice, eventually the logic of that position led to the recognition that they

had to become more inclusive, not just in the work they were doing with others on Iona and on the mainland, but in their own make-up. Part of the drive for this greater inclusion came as a result of the major social changes and liberation movements happening in the latter part of the 20th century – the women’s movement, the anti-apartheid, anti-racist movements and so on. Although churches can often seem very reactionary to those outside them, in practice, these movements have had a huge effect within churches too. The Iona Community had an original commitment to the inclusion of working-class men. And in the 50s and 60s, some of its members working in Africa were deeply involved in the anti-colonialist struggles there. Its original instincts were already towards inclusion. It just became increasingly aware of *all* the people who were excluded.

Many of the great democratic social movements of the 20th century were about the people on the margins, the people written out of history, saying, ‘We are here too. Stop overlooking us. We will no longer be invisible. Include us in.’ So part of rebuilding the common life involves recognising that the historically dominant voice in both the church and the world, that of heterosexual, able-bodied, successful white men, is not the only voice, and about listening to the voices from the margins. One of the consequences of this listening is the need for different forms of leadership.

The Iona Community is a dispersed community, bound by adherence to a common Rule and prayer life, but living in many places, and

meeting locally in small groups, which are the primary place of our accountability and support. The Council is the governing body of the Community, elected from within the membership, with staff representation. The Council then devolves authority to a number of operational committees who oversee the work of the Community; in our islands centres, in communications, on the mainland in youth work, worship, education and justice and peace programming, and in managing our business. Each of these parts of our work have their own dedicated staff and leadership, and priorities and policies are shaped by staff and members working together. These structures allow us to operate a strong principle of subsidiarity in leadership throughout the Community. And finally, we have a Convener of Council, a voluntary position elected from the membership for a three-year term, and the Leader, which is a full-time job, also elected from among the membership, but for a seven-year term. The nearest equivalent might be Chairperson of the Board and Chief Executive.

The Iona Community started off as a movement, a religious community. But somehow it got to a point where it discovered that it was also an organisation with an annual turnover of nearly £2 million, fifty staff and hundreds of volunteers. In order to be true to itself as a movement, it has had to sit down and work out what it means to operate justly and with integrity as an employer, as a limited company, as a business. The common life is then worked out in lengthy deliberations about holiday pay and grievance procedures, in decisions about what kind of coffee to buy and how best to recycle the rubbish.

Sometimes it feels as if we have written policies about *everything!* We have, as any socially responsible organisation must, comprehensive policies on child protection, health and safety, employment procedures. We also have a youth policy, an environmental policy, an inclusive language policy. We conduct risk assessments, and increasingly conduct various kinds of audits, measuring our policies with regard to their impact on equality, inclusion, the environment, and so on.

All of this is a huge amount of work, much of it done on a voluntary basis. But we think it is absolutely a fundamental of good practice because it's about creating the conditions of safety, justice and opportunity in which everyone can be nurtured and flourish. It's not enough to depend on the personal goodwill, or patronage, of a few influential individuals, or even on the good intentions of a community. Nice people don't guarantee good practice, only appropriate structures do that.

I am not fond of the language of human resource management, and find it depersonalising. But we have other gifts God has given us: gifts from the **past** of language, story, sacrament, knowledge, art, music, the built environment; gifts from the **present** of people's time, talents, money, commitment, prayer, goodwill – we have all of these in the Iona Community. How we order them in the service of Jesus and in solidarity with God's purposes of justice and love is central to our common life.

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