



Outreach and In-reach: Living Mission According to the Iona Community Rule of Life

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A piece of public art (pictured above) recently resurfaced in Glasgow. The 30-foot-long mural, 'Christ Feeding the people' by Fyffe Christie [1] had been lost to public view for decades. Now recovered, it is clear that this is a piece of art bursting with the light, the glory of Christ in the midst of ordinariness.

In the season of the Transfiguration in which I write, this piece of lost-found art speaks to me of in-reach and out-reach: of mission. It depicts both solo prayer and focussed care along with a hard-working, hungry community who find solace around the table. Prayer and action, in-reach and out-reach are brought together in one 8-panelled painting.

There's something about light, about the glory of Christ, in this piece that intrigues me. The pattern of light invites the viewer to clusters of people in community, offering one another radical hospitality, sanctuary, challenge. Starting in the top left corner, with the threshold of jostling workers, the eye is drawn to the small children reaching upwards, with the focus then sweeping round to the sharing table at the centre, on to the cityscape, the smoke and grime of industry, then back to the child-bather, resting finally on the table of the baking women.

Christ, off-centre, feeds those caught up in the stuff of life, each one falling within the beam of the Christ light. And yet, there is also darkness, as in life – deep darkness, corners of shadow.

Within the Iona Community today we share with the Religious Society of Friends the belief that 'there is that of God in everyone'. Each of us, centred, prayerful, reflective, is a fulcrum for God's hands and heart, eyes and ears in the world. We are a starting point for God's mission.

Noticing the light of Christ in one another and in ourselves – the in-reach –, our task then is to speak and act out of that light – the out-reach. At its simplest, this is mission. This is what it means to be committed to peace and justice.

Commissioned in the 1940s by George MacLeod, the mural of Christ feeding the people hung for many years on the walls of the city-centre hub, Community House, run by the Iona Community in Glasgow.

Community House was a place where homeless people were fed, and from where an advocacy project for homelessness was born. This was a place from where campaigns against apartheid and the arms race were coordinated and launched, where young people found people with the time and curiosity to listen, and where prayer was welcomed and practised.

Two other things were happening at the time when this mural, freshly painted, hung as a backdrop to the life in Community House. Firstly, in establishing this experiment in living in community, the Iona Community trustees submitted a bold set of aims to the Charity Commission. The first goal calls the Iona Community to establish 'new forms of Christian worship, witness, prophecy, mission and service particularly, but not exclusively, for urban situations' [2]. These aims hold true for the Iona Community Trustees and Members today.

Secondly, throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s, George MacLeod and other Members of the newly formed Iona Community were publishing prolifically about pacifism [3], politics [4], preaching [5], healing [6], ministry [7], youth work [8] and racial justice [9]. They wrote, spoke and

preached across Scotland, travelling globally (prices for the pamphlets were given on the back cover in sterling and in dollars) and speaking to thousands of people at large gatherings and retreats. The Iona Community was a laboratory of learning, where the rhythm of work and worship was the outworking of the 'worship, witness, prophecy, mission and service' of the church. The rebuilding of the living quarters of Iona Abbey and of the common life of shared work and worship was the backdrop to MacLeod's ministry as much as the mural was the backdrop to the daily life at Community House.

For MacLeod and the early Iona Community Members, mission was about taking the Gospel 'outside holiness, out to where thieves curse and nations clash at the cross-roads of the world.' [10] MacLeod's early prayers and articles are testament to mission focussed on out-reach, fuelled by prayer. The community encouraged a 'commitment of one's whole self to the service of others' [11]. This embodied commitment was not always easy. New members 'tended to see themselves as pioneers, rebuilding communities in the most difficult urban parishes, and creating communities from scratch in the new housing schemes to which inner-city dwellers were being decanted' [12].

This same vision drives and sustains Iona Community members today. The Iona Community is an international, ecumenical Christian movement working for justice and peace, the rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship.

Inspired by Benedictine communities and the Columban tradition, our Members (280 Members and 2,000 Associate Members) commit to a common Rule. The Rule is central to the life and witness of the Iona Community and binds us to mutual accountability in our local Family Groups. The action-

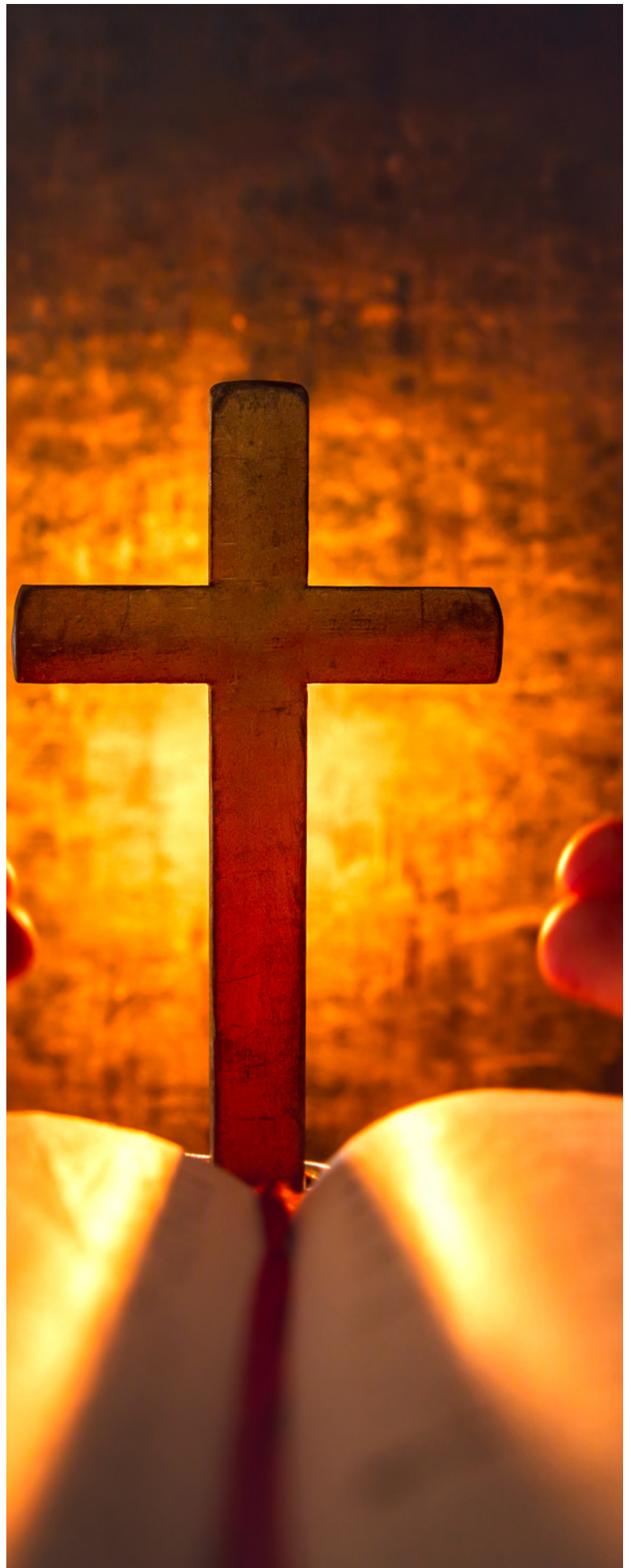
reflection dynamic is core to the four disciplines of this Rule of Life, namely daily prayer; working for justice and peace; accountability in our use of gifts, money and resources; and sharing together in community life. Each strand compels us to deepen our in-reach in order to strengthen our out-reach. It is our vision that, in the living of the Rule, we in our flawed and fragile lives may be 'patterns, examples' letting our lives speak [13].

We invite our Members to live according to the Rule in an intricate, weaving pattern more akin to a Celtic knot than a linear checklist. In this way, we follow the light of the Holy Spirit, connecting life with faith, action for peace with action for justice, weaving all of this through the radical hospitality of welcoming one another, even those with whom we disagree. So our Rule, and perhaps also the Marks of Mission, might better be shared as a knotted pattern, reflecting the complexity and delight of a life lived to the fullest complexity [14].

Recently, I participated in a panel discussion at ColumbaFest, the annual urban festival co-ordinated by the Iona Community's Wild Goose Resource Group. Three generations of participants considered the question, 'what did, or does mission mean to you in your 20s?' Alongside me were older and younger contributors for whom life's landscape is very different. Mission meant something unique to each of us: social justice, protest songs, and a turning away from commodified religiosity. Despite the differences, a golden thread bound us together – a thread which shines with a passion for justice for the most marginalised, and reminds us to reclaim the radical language of faith for today.

The Five Marks of Mission are evident in the preaching and teaching of the Iona Community from our early days to the present. The marks evidence themselves in multiples, rarely in a linear pattern, weaving their way, as the light across the mural, in and through the lives of ordinary folk. These marks are evident in our history when attending a 'War on Want' campaign meeting while washing the feet of the homeless exemplified the essence of 'to tell and to tend' [15]. Where the recent 'Just Stop Oil' protests in London, Inverness and Berlin attended by Members are rooted in our commitment to social and political action leading to justice for all people and encouraged by prayer and discussion. This social engagement is 'vital work of the Church', a manifestation of how we 'transform, teach and treasure'.

Christie's mural of 'Christ Feeding the People' is both relentlessly busy and deeply stilling. The story of its discovery is a story of faith and tenacity. A small group of our Members, over the last two decades, tracked down, negotiated for, and reclaimed the mural. It was gifted to the Govan





Heritage Trust and will now be on display in Govan, Glasgow. You can read online about the mural (cf. [iona.org.uk](http://www.iona.org.uk)).

The passion for work and worship, for action and contemplation, continued and grows today in the flourishing of our Membership, in the growth of our publications, in the renewal of our island's centres and of our engagement in actions for justice and peace through our Common Concern Networks. We don't need a piece of art to remind us of our purpose. And yet like all good public art, this mural - a bold piece of public art by and for the people - speaks as loudly as pamphlets or preaching.

When the mural was re-presented to the Iona Community Members in June this year, we were reminded that it is in the way we follow Christ today that will be the true mark of our witness, mission and service. It is in the way that we answer Christ's call to feed his people that our true ministry and mission will be visible. And it is in following Christ that we will be inspired by our faith to pursue justice and peace in and through community.

To find out more about the Iona Community, including membership, visit www.iona.org.uk.

End Notes

- [1] 'Christ Feeding the People' by Fyffe Christie image accessed 29/07/22; <http://www.artnet.com/artists/fyffe-christie/christ-feeding-the-people-zqwbFRILISSNJqtzIC0uOg2>.
- [2] The second of our four charitable aims, accessible online at OSCR.org.uk.
- [3] *Bombs and Bishops* by George MacLeod (Iona Community pamphlet, 1957) and *Peace at a Price* by Andrew Morton, the first articulation of the Iona Community's peace commitment in the 1960s.
- [4] *The Christian and Politics* by John Harvey (Iona Community pamphlet, 1971).
- [5] *Speaking the Truth in Love* by George MacLeod (SCM Press, 1936).
- [6] *The Healing Christ* by Ian Cowie (Iona Community pamphlet, 1955).
- [7] *The Eldership Today* by George Wilkie (Iona Community pamphlet, 1958).
- [8] *The Christian Workers' League* by George Wilkie (Iona Community pamphlet, 1962).
- [9] *Racial Justice in Britain?* by Robert Moore (Iona Community pamphlets, 1962).

[10] *The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory* by George MacLeod (Wild Goose Publications, 1985).

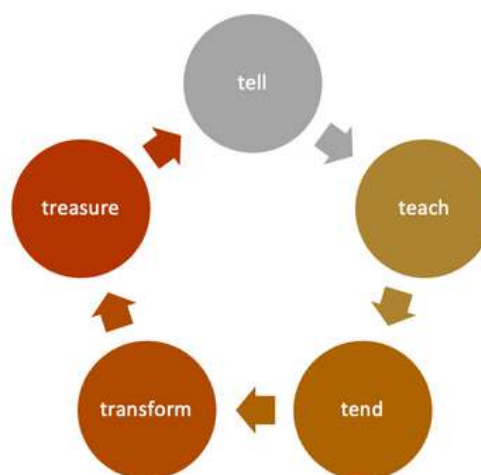
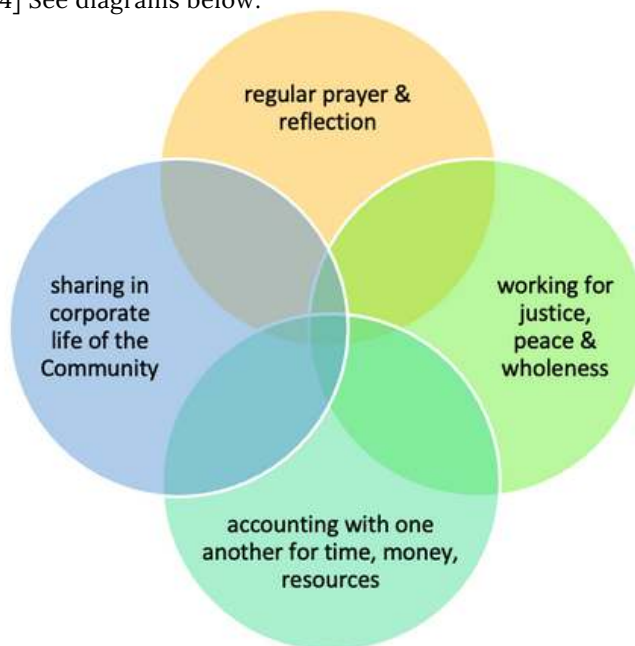
[11] *Outside the Safe Place: An oral history of the Iona Community* by Anne Muir (Wild Goose Publications, 2011).

[12] *Outside the Safe Place*, p.242.

[13] Quoted in *Advices and Queries, The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 2008.

George Fox, founder of the RSF, spoke passionately about letting the light that is in each one of us shine directly into the injustices in the world.

[14] See diagrams below:



[15] <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.