Còmhraidhean:
Doing local theology in Argyll

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Over the five years from 2012 to 2017, every Spring and Autumn, a group of people gathered overnight at Glencruitten House, near Oban, to engage theologically with our contemporary context. The initiative was prompted by a concern shared among a very loosely connected network of people based in Argyll. Their common concern is that they deeply value the Christian faith but notice that many contemporaries seem to find that they can 'do fine' without it. They choose, instead, to live their lives in ways which often are rich and fulfilling in many respects, but which apparently have no place for traditional understandings of faith in God or Christian discipleship. They themselves also, in varying degrees, share in the sense of disconnect between inherited understandings of faith and 'the way we live now'. So, the question is: How could this disconnect be overcome? How could a renewed connection be formed between our contemporary world and the realities to which Christian faith bears witness?

This question brought six people together one winter evening early in 2012 and the idea of an Argyll 'faith and culture conversation' was born. It would explore points of engagement between contemporary culture and Christian faith and would do this in a specifically Argyll context. In fact, it would even take its name from Argyll's historic language – hence the title *còmhradh*, the Gaelic word for conversation. It would aim to be rooted in the life of Argyll but at the same time to be far from parochial. It would work on a large 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.

The reference to culture is intended to indicate what Harold Turner described as 'deep culture'.[1] This looks beyond social customs. It aims to uncover the underlying worldview which people use as their map

to navigate life. It is concerned with the implicit assumptions that lie behind the decisions people take and the priorities they set. It aims to identify the axioms – the points that are taken for granted. It seeks to trace paradigms – the frameworks people have in mind which enable them to make sense of what they experience. This is what is intended by 'deep culture'.

Among the six on that winter evening was David James who very kindly agreed to make Glencruitten House, a private house near Oban with an ethos of Christian community, available to host the *còmhradh*. Not only did this provide very comfortable and suitable accommodation but it allowed the *còmhradh* 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. It operates in an open space, which has its risks and drawbacks, but which means that it is free of the inhibitions that often come with institutional interests and constraints.

At the outset it was recognised that the disconnect between faith and culture can be addressed in many different ways, including, e.g., prayer, service or evangelism. The particular calling taken up by the *còmhradh*, however, is to deepen the conversation through taking time together to attain 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 – somewhat along the lines of the action-reflection cycle.

The group has sensed that its shared concerns call for conversation and that this is something that requires intentional investment of time and energy. It has also been responding to a sense that quality conversation is at a premium in a world awash with information but often lacking in analytical depth. To find people who know and trust one another, who share at depth their thoughts and experiences, is increasingly rare. In the assessment of Jonathan Sacks, 'Conversation, the heartbeat of democratic politics, is dying and with it our chances of civic, let alone global, peace.'[2] Sacks goes on to argue that:

> […] the question is real and urgent: how do we live with moral difference and yet sustain an overarching community? The answer […] is *conversation* – not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own).[3]

The *còmhradh* has been inspired by this kind of vision.

Emerson once remarked that he would walk a hundred miles through a snowstorm for one good conversation.[4] The same motivation has brought people from different parts of Argyll (not necessarily through snowstorms!) to show the high value that they place on conversation. The poet Adrienne Rich observes that a good conversation is one where, rather than saying what you have formulated ahead of time, you 'hear each other into speech'.[5] Rather than participants coming along with their favourite speech and waiting for the chance to deliver it, this is about listening to each other in order to draw out from each other thoughts and ideas which we scarcely knew were there, to form understanding and voice thoughts which had not been clear to us before. A recurrent source of joy at the *còmhradh* has been the experience of surprise it has brought as new and unexpected understanding has been formed.

In order to remain focussed on its core purpose, the *còmhradh* has resisted becoming like a regular conference with a series of prepared presentations. Rather, brief thought-pieces are pitched as discussion starters. For the most part, there is no prior script. Participants go where the conversation takes them, often surprised by what happens when we 'hear each other into speech'. The group has also kept administration to a minimum. Planning is delegated to a small group, which, usually through one meeting, lays plans for the next *còmhradh*. No attempt has been made to achieve slick organization or glossy communications. A low-key web presence is maintained at www.faithinargyll.co.uk

A distinctive feature of each conversation is that it is framed by worship. Since much of the talk is about God it seems appropriate to offer space to acknowledge the presence of God. Since the

conversation necessarily involves a lot of talking, rather few words tend to be used in the worship – often a little scripture, prayer and song with plenty of silence and space to process at a spiritual level what has been under discussion.

By spring of 2017, ten *còmhraidhean* have taken place. A brief review of each will reveal the main concerns that have animated the *còmhradh* and indicate how these have been addressed.

Identifying culture and context

The first *còmhradh* began with an intentionally open agenda, inviting participants to identify our contemporary cultural context. Under two encompassing headings the following points were offered as characterising contemporary relationships, morality and accountability.

Relationships: fragmentation and connection

- 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-fixes
- Entitlement culture
- Feudalism
- Entrenched in tradition
- Science supreme
- Rise of secular spirituality

In turning to the Argyll context, conversation revolved around the life of Columba, finding focus on his willingness to be on the 'edge'. Iona in his time 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 and the unknown beyond. What might it mean to be located at the edge between faith and the secular vision? This may be a time to step out of our comfort zone, to face insecurity, to take risks. Was Bob Dylan a prophet for our time when he told us that 'the times they are a-changin''? Our cultural context is rapidly changing and it is time to think out of the 'box' to which we have been accustomed.

Nonetheless, reflection on the global scene suggested that the Christian faith is translatable and therefore its advocates can meet a new cultural context with confidence. This, however, may involve a recognition that what 'has been' may have limited relevance and there is need to step into a new situation with sensitivity, expectation and prayer. Sharing stories and 'walking the talk' may be ways to engage an apparently uninterested community. Humility and vulnerability may be keynotes – being confident in our faith yet aware that we still have much to learn. Being ready to connect at an emotional level may also be important for the future.

Faith and friendship

After the first general, scene-setting *còmhradh* it was agreed that each should concentrate on a particular theme. The next, held in spring 2013, took up the relational note that had been struck by the first and addressed the question of 'faith and friendship'. In opening worship it was noted that the word 'friend', like the word 'free', comes from the Anglo-Saxon *Freo*, the root of which means *to love*. You can only be really free if you love.

It was observed that in the contemporary world many live without friends. Surveys have revealed that many people believe that they have very few friends, or none at all. Admittedly many can count hundreds of Facebook 'friends' but these are, in most cases, self-evidently shallow relationships. Connections made through social media can easily hollow out the meaning of friendship leaving a very cheap substitute. Real friendship is more elusive and thinner on the ground than might be suggested by the self-image we have of our society. The growth of loneliness in modern Western societies is widely acknowledged. It seems that our society has lost its way in regard to friendship.

A glance at our modern history shows that the Industrial Revolution broke up small communities where all knew each other and where lifelong friendships through shared living and working proliferated. In post-industrial times this trend has been taken still further. The level of mobility demanded in modern society easily and casually breaks up families, communities and often friendships too. We are also a more individualistic society. We are encouraged to think first and foremost of ourselves. We use other people in an instrumental way – what benefits are there for me in getting to know that other person? Young professionals are told to take care to cultivate their networks – rather than their friendships. The power of the market is far-reaching but its effect on the value placed on friendship calls for re-examination.

The wholesale sexualisation of our culture has also had a debilitating effect upon friendship. The assumptions that surround a large swathe of our social contacts involve sex. The public mind or our social culture steers us in this direction. It becomes more

difficult to nurture good friendship when those around you assume a sexual relationship or at least the desire for such is omnipresent. One of the reasons for the rise of single person households is that sharing accommodation with another carries unwanted assumptions in modern society. The statement 'We are just friends' implies a second-class relationship. 'He/she just wants to be friends' is often an expression of disappointment.

Could we develop a culture in which true friendship will flourish? Could the church be a pilot for this, modelling true friendship? Could we consciously recover the Celtic tradition of the soul friend – *anam chara*? The church needs to seek to make the soil of society around us more conducive to the nurturing and valuing of genuine friendship. We need to be ready to make time and space for the cultivation of friendship. This can also be a pathway to faith. While it is important that friendship should be for the sake of friendship and not something exercised with ulterior motives, experience shows that faith very often springs from friendship. We are challenged to live in such a way that we make space for others, cultivating soil in which true friendship can grow.

Faith in community

The next *còmhradh* took a natural further step by turning its attention to the question of community. Community is a very big part of human reality – something that is universally recognized. Communities have often been organized around faith. But they can be organized on other ways. How do people see community today? What place, if any, does faith have in community? What can we learn from past history? What can we learn from elsewhere in the world? What is a Christian understanding of community? These were the questions with which the conversation began.

A primary point of reference was Argyll's history and, in particular, Columba's vision of the community of faith. The context in which Columba's vision was formed was that of clan life, but nevertheless it grew beyond the confines of clan life into a vision of a universal community of the children of God. His vision of the Christian community was of a godly clan with the Almighty as its chief. Many

of the good things about clan life – faithful loving relationships, loyalty, sacrifice for the common good – were in accord with the characteristics of God's kingdom. At the same time, the rivalries, self-seeking and brutality of clan life were superseded by Christian values. In God's clan, those who had been enemies became friends in Christ.

Columba emphasized that membership of God's clan was not exclusive, the invitation extended to all people and nations. So, although Columba founded his monastery on Iona along with close family members, Iona attracted people from all the neighbouring kingdoms. The Iona community attracted members from the land of the Picts and Welsh speakers from the kingdom of Strathclyde, all adopted into God's clan on Iona. Columba brought the gospel message of membership of God's kingdom to the people of his day in a way that fitted with people's experience and expectation of being clan members. They understood what it meant to be children of God through their experience of being children of the clan.

Another aspect of the clan system that was incorporated into Columba's vision of the Christian community was that of inheritance. This was expressed in the Gaelic term *dùthchas*, related to the word *dùthaich* meaning land, country or nation. *Dùthchas* has to do with belonging to one's native land, identifying with its people, its land and history. It refers to that special mystical relationship many indigenous people have with their native land, a land peopled by ancestors and legend. The *dùthchas* is the collective inheritance of the clan members, their inherited right to belong to their land and be numbered amongst its people. Here a parallel can be drawn with biblical thought about our inheritance as adopted children of God – 'if children, then heirs […] joint heirs with Christ' (Romans 8:17).

After a period of experiencing community together by working outdoors to build a picnic table, the conversation turned to contemporary experience of community. It was recognised that community is widely perceived to be under threat. Underlying factors include atomization of human life, commodification – everyone reduced to a unit in the marketplace, a market-driven world where the workplace demands ever more of our life and which is limited in the extent to which it provides satisfying community – and digitization – people living in a virtual world.

Factors that make community today were identified: shared interest; technology; civic pride, local loyalties; workplace, institutions; positive human qualities – compassion, kindness, hospitality, generosity of spirit; powerful ideas that bring people together; coming together to tackle a shared problem or issue; and shared political awareness, sometimes related to particular issues. Factors that break community today were likewise identified: technology can be an isolating influence; emphasis on human rights without corresponding responsibilities can lead to egocentricity, selfishness, excessive self-interest and greed; pursuit of material wealth at all costs; migration can lead to homogenization, dispersion, breaking of community links and loyalties; the welfare state has taken over responsibilities previously exercised at community level; family breakdown has led to isolation and loneliness; addictions result in people becoming lonely and isolated.

A final question concerned what distinctive qualities might characterise communities of faith. Suggestions included:

- a community characterized by love will always be distinctive, demonstrating qualities such as acceptance, forgiveness, care and compassion
- a community which has a focus beyond materialism is always going to be distinctive
- a community which is outward-looking with wide horizons and an outgoing orientation is also going to stand out
- an exemplary level of mutual support – openness to sharing the joys and sorrows of one another
- strength of conviction
- connecting – a community which connects people with God and with one another.

The search for community and the place of faith in building true community were found to be crucial questions for both church and society in our time.

Faith and the environment

Adrian Shaw, Argyll resident and Church of Scotland Climate Change Officer, set the scene for discussion of faith and the environment by contrasting two 'stories'. The first is about the economy. This story says that we need economic growth to resolve our big problems such as poverty and unemployment and that economic growth will make us richer. Half a century of sustained economic growth faltered in Britain in 2007, nominally because of some bad behaviour by the banks and the housing bubble and now, the story goes, the country needs to get back on track to return to prosperity and full employment. The big political parties may differ in how to achieve this and how the spoils of economic growth should be divided up, but they both repeat the message that economic growth is essential for our future wellbeing.

The second story is about the environment. Evidence of warming in the climate system is unequivocal. Since 1950 many unprecedented changes have been observed. Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth's surface than any preceding decade since 1850. It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-twentieth century. Climate change is happening and we are causing it by burning fossil fuels in prodigious amounts: coal, oil and gas. In Scotland we produce over 40 million tonnes of emissions of carbon dioxide each year, the UK produces ten times that amount, and the USA about 5 billion tonnes. As a consequence, the amount of CO_2 in the atmosphere has risen from under 300 ppm to over 400 ppm. The consequences are profound. In the twenty-first century, climate change will change lives.

What is the relationship between these two stories: one that insists we must have more economic growth and one that says if we carry on like this we are creating huge problems both for ourselves and the other species with which we share the planet? How do these stories relate to the Christian story and the demands made of us that we love our neighbour and care for creation?

Discussion of faith and environment raised the following points:

- We need to accept that Christianity played a part in the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism and repent for the part which the churches have played in damaging the earth.
- Jesus has subverted ideas of 'dominion' and introduced a new kind of authority, a new kind of power.
- The church needs to be counter-cultural, fostering more environmentally-conscious living – something which may not sit easily with approaches to church growth that aim to fit comfortably in contemporary culture.
- The church may need to be a 'site of struggle' – a place where the tensions in relation to faith and the environment are worked out.
- There is need for awareness-raising and education at all levels in relation to climate change and the environmental crisis.
- We must be prepared to be political and to challenge the prevailing system.
- We need to let money talk – investing in initiatives which are geared to sustain the environment.
- Churches can be a force for change, e.g. through the 300 eco-congregations found throughout Scotland.

Practical steps that can be taken include:

- create networks of interdependence
- support local businesses – buy from the farm gate
- grow as much of your own food as possible and have a bartering network
- timebanking – exchanging skills and time
- advocacy for change
- credit unions
- car pools
- more use of bikes, including electric bikes
- promote local slaughterhouses
- plant trees
- community building.

Whither Scotland?

The *còmhradh* took a new turn in autumn 2014 when it gathered just a few weeks after the Scottish independence referendum. All present shared a sense of having been part of a momentous occasion. The conversation began with people recalling the feelings they had experienced as they participated in the referendum. These included: a sense of disappointment in having a postal vote because it meant not having the experience of actually walking into the polling station to cast a vote; pride that Scotland was succeeding in completing this huge democratic exercise in a peaceful manner; conflicted feelings about the outcome, e.g. voting 'No' but hoping that the outcome would be 'Yes'; a sense of surprise that, given the magnitude of the occasion, in Argyll you could easily be the only person at the polling station at the time you went to vote; deep concern to have an empathetic understanding of the other side, especially of the losing side – their feelings of disappointment and sorrow.

Alan Reid MP shared his reflections on how the referendum had been a vote for or against an idea – as opposed to a normal election when it is a matter of parties and individuals standing for office. There is alienation from the democratic process because people are distrustful towards the fallible human beings who are their elected representatives. In the case of the referendum, this element of distrust was set aside and people engaged in greater numbers and with greater passion. He reflected on his experience as an MP where he has observed that people become highly engaged with 'single issues', such as school closures in Argyll or Israeli bombing of Gaza, but have very limited interest in the entirety of the political process, much of which is necessarily routine and 'boring'. People tend to be reactive in their response to the political process, e.g., they don't engage with a local plan when it is at the proposal stage but then protest loudly when some aspect of it is about to be implemented that they don't like. How could we foster an ongoing popular engagement with the entirety of the political process?

Among points raised in discussion were:

- How can we promote more local democracy, i.e., enabling more decisions to be taken at a more local level and mobilizing a high level of participation in such a process?
- How can the passion of the 45% who voted for independence be captured for the task of taking the nation forward after the 'No' vote in the Referendum?
- How can the whole nation move forward as a unit, rather than half being disillusioned or left behind?
- How will the Scottish Parliament make use of the greater powers devolved from Westminster? Will it use them to create a fairer society and a more participatory democracy?
- How will a shared public discourse take shape, given loss of confidence in the BBC due to a perceived lack of impartiality in the referendum and the rapid decline of the Scottish broadsheet newspapers?
- How can the hope engendered by the referendum process be sustained and directed? Can politics once again be a channel for hope, rather than disempowering itself in favour of the free market?
- The referendum created a sense of empowerment – can we as individuals and communities sustain that sense of empowerment in the way we live our lives and make our decisions?
- Where is God in the stirring of national consciousness taking place in Scotland? Absent? Present? If we believe that the Spirit of God is active in the world at large and in the unfolding of history, how do we make sense of what has been happening in that perspective?

Believing in business

To talk of faith and business might seem strange to some. In our Western compartmentalized view of the world, the economy is often seen as something that runs according to its own dynamics, while faith, if it is given a place at all, is concerned with a totally different aspect of life. If you are in business you run the business on business principles and if, in your down time, you choose to go the opera or

the football or the church, that is fine but it is not expected to have any bearing on the way you do business. In spring 2015 the *còmhradh* set about probing such assumptions. Can, should, faith have a place in inspiring and operating business? Should the economic sphere be an active concern of people of faith? Should business be open to what might be offered by the practice of faith?

Three specific questions were posed:

1. What is the role of faith in creating livelihoods and sustaining business in Argyll?
2. How does faith find expression in business?
3. What difference does faith make to the operation of business?

Robert Pollock, former Head of Economic Development at Argyll and Bute Council, argued that far from being irrelevant, faith is the beating heart of the economy. Adam Smith's work on the market economy indicated that all was predicated on human virtue. If there are no sound values, no good person at the heart of it, then the market system will become rapacious and therefore unable to fulfil the ennobling and enriching role that Smith envisaged. He identified a number of macro-economic issues that have a bearing on the economy of Argyll:

- Energy – oil supply is beset by periodic crises but at the end of the day it is a finite resource. Yet the economy, particularly in rural areas, is driven by oil. Currently the Government has moved away from the off-shore wind farms which would have been significant for Argyll in favour of nuclear power and fracking. However, there is likely to be a return, sooner or later, to renewable forms of energy.
- Demography – people are the barometer that indicates the strength of the economy (Rousseau). The population of Argyll (2% of Scottish population) is ageing. It is expected that by 2035 there will be a 20% growth in retired people, with a 14% decline in the working population. Who will pay for the welfare state?
- Information Technology – this is a wonderful resource for tourism, for education, for retail. Yet it brings change to

the economy – it is expected that 40% of current jobs will disappear.
- Climate change – as this poses challenges worldwide, Argyll remains a beautiful environment, a prized environment.

Pollock also identified a number of micro perspectives that may help Argyll to navigate the macro issues:

- Argyll is close to major centres of population but feels very remote.
- Argyll is perfectly placed to be a centre of renewable energy and projects like the Argyll array and the Islay array may well be revived.
- The tourism product is fantastic – 25 inhabited islands. Food and drink are world class.
- The history and heritage of Argyll, built on Christianity, is a significant asset.

These local assets can be applied to the global context. Faith has an important role to play in the economy of the future. We have uncoupled morality from the economy and there is need to re-couple them. Faith is key to this.

Four people shared their own experience of working at the intersection of faith and business. Based at the Mo Dhachaigh croft at Lochdon on the Isle of Mull, Liz Gibson aims to reclaim Christianity as an alternative to the establishment, rather than being part of it. She and her husband Martin aim to live a simple life, running their croft, growing as much of their own food as possible, and developing arts and crafts. They are inspired by Wordsworth's lines:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon![6]

They suggest that we need to hear again the teaching of Jesus about seeking first the kingdom of God, about where your treasure is your

heart will be also, about if you have two coats, give away one.

Oban businessman Neil Matheson urged that in a situation where many are hopeless, it is essential to rebuild confidence – we were made to thrive. Neil has seen this philosophy working in his retail business, in the social enterprise Atlantis Leisure and in the Christian charity H_2O (Hope to Oban). Faith and good business practice are much closer than is often imagined. Faith guides business decisions, often tacitly, simply by underlying the decision to do something or not to do something.

Richard Hess reflected on his experience of setting up Imani, an Oban-based economic development consultancy working primarily in Africa but also in Scotland. Key to his business vision was to offer a service that was ethical and trustworthy. Imani hired staff who shared its ethics, whether Christians or not. Imani is active today helping large companies to source materials from small-holders in Africa, e.g. pods from baobab trees provide the main ingredient for cream of tartar. This is a model that can be very relevant to Argyll's economy, e.g. biscuits baked on Mull are served on British Airways. Big businesses today are interested not only in their profits but also in contributing to the community. The model of the social enterprise has much to commend it both in the developing world and in Argyll.

Calum Macfarlane-Barrow reflected on the development of Craig Lodge in Dalmally since 1977 when he began running it, initially as a sporting lodge. Through visits to Medjugorje where appearances of the Mother of God were having a transforming effect in terms of healing and holiness, the Macfarlane-Barrow family formed a vision to take the Lodge in a different direction. They became convinced that people were suffering through being hooked on materialism and that there was a widely felt need to return to God and discover the power of prayer. Craig Lodge opened as a house of prayer in 1990. A community of young people began to form and over the years 130 young people have spent a year at Craig Lodge. The inspirational Scottish charity Mary's Meals, now feeding more than a million children every day, has been one fruit of this work.

In summary, it was felt that human beings are reaching out for more than the material. Business has lost its way by becoming exclusively concerned with maximization of profits. Going back to

Adam Smith reminds us that ethics lie at the heart of the running of the economy and faith has a pivotal role to play. All four local businesses had gone 'off the grid', taking risks and being prepared for adventure. Confidence is key to success. There is nothing like the sense of being God's special child to instil confidence. In this way, faith makes for an entrepreneurial approach and good business. Enterprise needs faith and faith needs enterprise.

Faith and national identity

By the time the *còmhradh* convened in autumn 2015 it was apparent that Argyll, and the whole of Scotland, was in an extraordinary political moment. The Scottish National Party, having previously held just six seats, won 56 out of 59 Scottish seats at the 2015 General Election. In the aftermath of the independence referendum it was apparent that the political landscape had been transformed out of all recognition, with the previously dominant Labour Party retaining only one seat. It was agreed that the *còmhradh* would dedicate its autumn meeting to taking account from a faith perspective of this unfolding political transformation.

Political scientist Donald Shell provided an analytical framework, with the following pointers:

- Ideology has given way to identity in much contemporary politics.
- Each of us has multiple identities, e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, national allegiance.
- Patriotism is love or devotion to one's country. Nationalism, by contrast, involves a policy programme.
- Nationalism is an ideological 'empty bottle' which can be filled with ideologies of left or right.
- Some see national identity as 'in our genes'; others as historical and circumstantial; others as manufactured through myths, flags, anthems, indoctrination.

A Christian theology of national identity begins with the doctrine of creation, with diversity an expression of humanity made in God's

image and a vision of many nations worshipping in heaven and bringing treasures into the heavenly city. However, there is also a darker side associated with human pride and rebellion, and seen in the Tower of Babel – confusion of language, mutual incomprehension and providential judgment. Between these two contrasting theological strands we must work out our theology of the state. We also take our direction from the kingdom of God established through Jesus Christ – God's rule embracing in principle the whole public realm including our politics.

Argyll-based Conservative MSP Jamie McGrigor admitted that he was astonished that anyone would not want to be a part of the United Kingdom, given its success across 300 years. Yet, during the referendum campaign, those not of the Nationalist view were made to feel in some way unScottish. This, he suggested, was unfair because why would a wish to safeguard the best for Scotland and the Scottish people be in any way subversive or unpatriotic and why should patriotism just be linked to being an SNP supporter? Scottish people who want to preserve the Union are just as patriotic Scots as those who bid for separation. National identity in Scotland that respects us all is a different matter from nationalist identity in Scotland. He was concerned that there is a dark side to nationalism – identified by Albert Einstein as the measles of mankind and by George Orwell as power hunger, tempered by self-deception. Scotland, in his view, has flourished under the Union which has provided ample outlets for the expression of national identity.

Scottish National Party MP for Argyll and Bute, Brendan O'Hara, recalled that in the 1950s and 1960s it felt natural for Scotland to be part of the Union. Independence was not even on the agenda. British-Scottish identity appeared to be an exclusive club – which excluded Catholics. The Catholic community in the west of Scotland, for their part, were more identified politically with Ireland than with Scotland. The sea-change that has occurred is evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of Catholics voted against devolution in 1979 but the vast majority voted 'Yes' in the 2014 Referendum. In economic and cultural terms there is an increasing sense of being Scottish and the SNP has moved from the periphery to become the dominant force in

Scottish politics. It is important to notice that it is not an ethnic but a civic nationalism that is prevailing. This is illustrated by groups like Asians for Independence. We now have an inclusive Scotland – one where resettled Syrian refugees will have a vote.

A concluding part of the conversation addressed the question: If a new national anthem were to be written for Scotland what would we want it to contain?

- The language would need to be prepared in such a way that it could be sung in English, Scots and Gaelic.
- A faith dimension – invoking St Andrew, the singing of the Psalms, celebrating a history, expressing aspirations.
- Words on the Mace of the Scottish Parliament – wisdom, justice, compassion, integrity.
- The land – as it has shaped the people; a spiritual landscape; embraced by its beauty; caring for our land and for each other.
- Solidarity; communion – we are all 'Jock Tamson's bairns'; inclusivity, a 'tartan nation'; social justice (Micah 6:8); liberty; the common good; forgiveness; learning.
- Internationalist outlook – emigration; Burns' 'should brothers be for a' that'; celebrating with others the world we live in.
- Recognition that we have come through hardship in our history.
- Belonging, yearning, far horizons, big sky.
- Peace – a peace-making nation. Thinking in terms of what we can give.
- 'Love that will not let me go.'

Argyll's spiritual landscape

The spring 2016 *còmhradh* made a new departure by taking a book as the springboard for the conversation. Ian Bradley joined the group to introduce his recently published book *Argyll: The Making of a Spiritual Landscape*.[7] First, however, everyone brought an object or told a story expressing something in Argyll's spiritual landscape that

has been inspirational for them. Participants shared their experience in a personal and sometimes emotional way, making for a very rich beginning to the conversation.

Ian Bradley explained that the starting point of his book was the question as to why the Christianity of Argyll is so different from that found in neighbouring regions. It is altogether gentler and less judgemental than the Christianity of the Western Isles and Northern Highlands and altogether simpler and more mystical than that found in Central and Eastern Scotland.

Perhaps Argyll's distinctive spiritual atmosphere is the result of a blending of the best of the surrounding traditions – the evangelical simplicity of the northern Highlands and Outer Hebrides, without its harsher side and tendency towards judgmentalism, and the enlightened moderatism of Eastern and Lowland Scotland, without its over-rational suspicion of the romantic and mystical. There are other respects in which Argyll brings different traditions together – sometimes they stand in juxtaposition like the Highland and the Lowland churches in Campbeltown, and the English and Gaelic speaking division of Inverary Parish Church. There is more than in any other region of Scotland an intermingling of the pagan and primal with the Christian, and of the Protestant with the Catholic. Through the interplay of these different streams Argyll has come to be characterised by a blend of evangelical simplicity and liberal mysticism.

Argyll's Presbyterianism has had a distinctive character, markedly more mystical, more liturgical and more liberal than that found in other areas, especially of the Highlands. Several factors may account for this – the lingering influence of Columba and the other Irish missionaries and saints; the fact that, unlike so many clan chieftains and lairds, the Dukes of the Argyll remained loyal to the Kirk and did not forsake it for Episcopalianism; the region's loyalty to the Established 'Auld Kirk' with the consequence that the influence of the Free Church has been less keenly felt than further north. Maybe, too, climatic and geographical factors have played a part, from the soft mild rain that makes Argyll so green, to its location as a liminal borderland and a place on the edge.

In prepared responses, Liz Gibson cautioned against excessive emphasis on buildings in our understanding of spirituality, while

Archie MacPhail highlighted the danger of stereotypes, e.g. in characterising the north-west as harsh and judgemental when it may be simply at an early stage in responding to the evangelical impetus. In looking to the future, participants identified concerns and hopes in regard to Argyll's spirituality.

Concerns

- Individualism – loss of community and orality
- Globalization – plethora of influences
- Lack of shared language – privatization

Hopes

- Resurgence of Gaelic
- Music – *Fèis*
- Art
- Return to rituals and symbols
- Return to the elements – connecting to the land
- Pilgrimage – affirming local culture, not institutions
- Ethical values of youth – affordable housing, land reform
- Changing ethnicity, e.g. Polish immigration
- Return to Christian communities
- Recovery of the mystical
- Need for authenticity

After the Brexit vote: inclusion and exclusion

In October 2016, the *còmhradh* continued its practice of taking account of the political 'moment', this time in the aftermath of the vote in favour of the UK leaving the European Union. This was examined through the lens of inclusion and exclusion, beginning with participants speaking personally about their own experience, both of being included and of being excluded in the course of their lives. Given the salience of immigration in the debates over EU membership, attention focussed on the theme of migration. It was recognised that this is a large-scale global phenomenon in our time, that it raises profound questions of justice for our society, and that it presents both challenges and opportunities to the churches. What

will be the chemistry between migrant Christians and the existing churches? Will they react against each other and go their separate ways? Will well-established churches give the cold shoulder to new groups whose spirituality seems strange? Will newcomers shun the older churches, writing them off as dull or dead? Or will they find fruitful forms of interaction? Will Christianity be found fragmented into groups united by their ethnicity, including groups of ethnic Scots? Or will ways be found to show that the faith that unites is stronger than any identity that divides?

In reflecting on the prominence of the economy in shaping our lives today, the contrast between contemporary thinking and biblical values came into view. If we think of the forces underlying human activity as broadly economic, political and social, we may note that whilst in the contemporary world economic forces are seen as predominant, under God's law in Old Testament times this was decidedly not so. Today the lines of force are widely viewed as moving from the economy and finance to political decision-making and then to social structures. This is the exact opposite to what the Old Testament scriptures envisage for the life of God's people.

In considering how exclusionary dynamics could be resisted and a more inclusive society fostered, the idea of subsidiarity invited fresh consideration – moving any item of government to the lowest level at which it can be handled, bringing it close to the people. By contrast, currently there are many forces drawing government ever more to the centre, whether Edinburgh, London or Brussels. It was also argued that there is need to question excessive specialization in the discipline of economics with a view to building capacity to 'see the big picture'. The most pressing issue is the need for the market economy to be restrained in such a way as to give due place to human flourishing.

Argyll, faith and the visual arts

Participants on the occasion of the spring 2017 *còmhradh* were invited to bring a visual representation of some feature of Argyll. Items presented included pictures, photographs, Celtic crosses, a cloth banner, an engraved slate. Seated in a circle around the item in view,

all were invited to indicate what they could see in it before the person who brought it was invited to indicate what it meant to them. This provoked a rich and engaging discussion, revealing how the landscape of the west coast can stimulate the vision of faith. Important recurrent themes included the capacity of works of art to carry layers of meaning rather than narrowing down a single definition, and the possibility of symbolism having both personal and public dimensions.

Lucy Gray, a Taynuilt-based sculptor, brought some of her pieces – "Words from my Mouth", "Weeping from the Bone" and "Three Prayers".[8] All her work is informed by her faith but she avoids labelling it with traditional Christian language, which unfortunately is off-putting for many people in the present climate. However, she sees the vision of faith as being hidden within her work – and there to be discovered. Rather as C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* can be enjoyed simply as a work of fiction while at the same time containing profound Christian meaning,[9] Lucy intends her work to stand on its artistic merit yet to offer deep meaning in terms of faith for those who can discover it.

Lucy's work is very much shaped by her own spiritual pilgrimage, which led to her discovering her vocation as a sculptor. She aims to create work that is 'not pretty but beautiful' – it 'hits you in the guts'. Rather than simply being representational, she aims to capture feeling – e.g. not drawing a stone but drawing 'what it feels like' to hold the stone. A persistent theme in Lucy's work is that beauty comes through suffering – e.g. "How Pearls are Made". Lucy draws on her Argyll location for inspiration in her work. She sees the Argyll context as quiet, still, loving and accepting. It is also a context that is barren spiritually at the present time. Since it is barren it is also thirsty – so spiritual refreshment is welcome.

Discussion focussed on the extent to which 'anonymous Christianity' could be expressed through art. It was also noted that we are living in a highly visual age and it may be time for the church to embrace the arts more fully – for example, church buildings could feature works of art that would promote meditation.

The conversation continues

The *còmhradh* has never attracted large numbers. Half a dozen people are ever-present, another dozen are semi-regular, and a wider circle of around fifty have participated now and again. The initiative has developed sufficient intimacy to fulfil its conversational purpose. The sharing of meals, coffee breaks, and strolls in the extensive Glencruitten grounds foster an atmosphere in which the discussions outlined above can take place in an engaging way. A minority of participants are formally trained in theology but all have thought deeply about matters of faith and bring a great variety of professional discipline and life experience to the conversation. As a result, it offers the 'dynamic interaction among gospel, church and culture' that Robert Schreiter offered as his definition of 'local theology'.[10]

The five years of the *còmhradh* have vindicated its original inspiration that it is time to be talking of the meaning of faith. The plates are shifting and the gulf is widening between inherited expressions of faith and contemporary life. In seeking to bridge that gulf, the *còmhradh* has been based on the principle of 'dig where you are' – mining Argyll's history and contemporary life in search of insight and illumination. Yet it has not been parochial. Seamus Heaney found that the poet must inhabit both the parish and the universe. The experience of the *còmhradh* suggests that so must the theologian. Digging down into the life and experience of Argyll, far from narrowing the scope of the discussion, has opened it up to universal concerns and issues. This brief account of its conversations is therefore offered in the hope that these may suggest points of engagement that will prove relevant elsewhere. Much of what is outlined above is tentative and provisional, yet it is clear that this is a conversation that needs to take place.

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Notes

1 See Harold Turner, "Deep Mission to Deep Culture", http://www.gospel-culture.org.uk/Deep%20mission%20(full%20text).pdf

2 Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), 3.

3 Ibid., 83.

4 Cit. Christian McEwen, *World Enough & Time: On Creativity and Slowing Down* (Peterborough, N.H.: Bauhan Publishing, 2011), 46.

5 Cit. ibid., 50.

6 William Wordsworth, "The World is too much with us", https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45564

7 Ian Bradley, *Argyll: The Making of a Spiritual Landscape* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2015).

8 See further www.scottish-gallery.co.uk/lucygray, accessed 2 May 2017.

9 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

10 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985), 22.