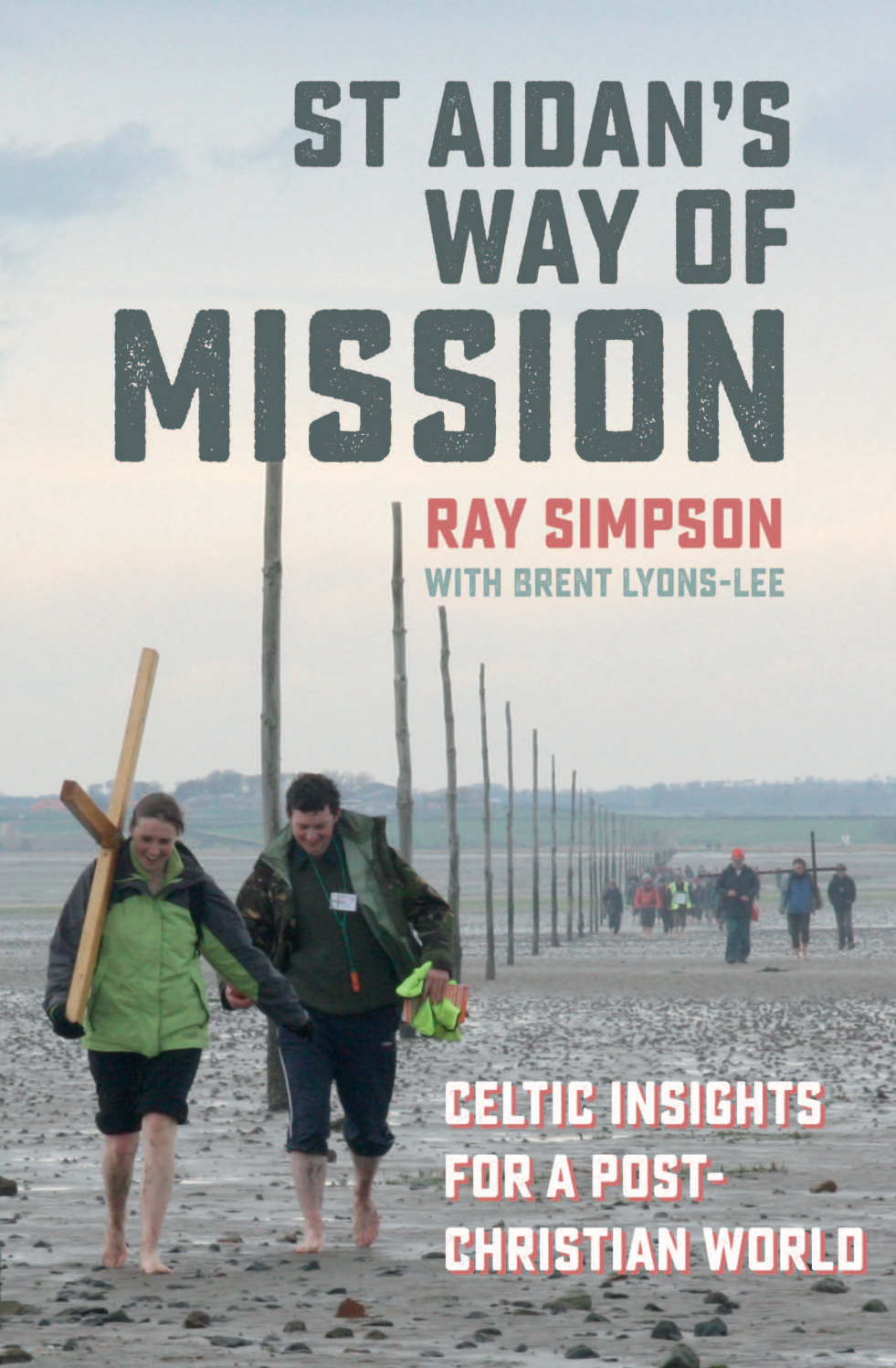
ST AIDAN'S WAY OF MISSION

RAY SIMPSON
WITH BRENT LYONS-LEE



CELTIC INSIGHTS FOR A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the challenge posed by ISIS (or ISIL) to the world, Archbishop Justin Welby said:

> *It is also necessary, over time, that any response to ISIL and to this global danger be undertaken on an ideological and religious basis that sets out a more compelling vision, a greater challenge and a more remarkable hope than that offered by ISIL… If we struggle against a call to eternal values, however twisted and perverted they may be, without a better story, we will fail in the long term.*[1]

Aidan's seventh-century mission to English-speaking peoples offers a better story, a more compelling vision and a greater challenge than any I know.

The archbishop told a meeting of new monastic communities that he could not see how the churches can bring the gospel to the world because they are so disunited. Their disunity springs from historical circumstances that have no relevance to people today. The only way forward he could see would be through a revival of some kind of monasticism that went deeper than the divisions. Aidan inspires a contemporary missionary monasticism whose roots are older and more organic than Benedict and which can sow seed and bear fruit not just in enclosed places but in the streets of the world.

Winston Churchill said:

> *When one generation no longer esteems its own heritage and fails to pass the torch to its own children, it is saying in essence*

> *that the very foundational principles and experiences that make it the society that it is are no longer valid. What is required when this happens and the society has lost its way, is for leaders to arise who have not forgotten the discarded legacy and who love it with all their hearts. They can then become the voice of that lost generation, wooing an errant generation back to the faith of their fathers, back to the ancient foundations and the bedrock values.*[2]

Aidan, whose name means 'little flame', calls us to rediscover the best of that legacy and to pass on the torch of faith like Olympic flame bearers who circle the globe.

Although Aidan was a man of a particular time and place, he is archetypal and universal. His bottom-up mission took root and fruited in the English soul. In the 19th and 20th centuries, vast numbers of English-speaking Britons and Irish dispersed across the world, taking with them, whether they knew it or not, something of Aidan in their gene pool. Among the diverse worldwide mission approaches in the centuries that followed Aidan, the top-down approach has often dominated. A paradigm shift requires a new lens by which to look afresh at our Christian narrative. Aidan's Irish mission to the English is not only a great story; it offers a bottom-up model that can transform our time.

1

INCARNATIONAL AND INDIGENOUS MISSION

ANY COMMUNITY, CHURCH, NATION THAT FORGETS ITS MEMORY BECOMES SENILE.[3]

Mission has become a bad, if not uncomfortable word. It has ridden on the back of colonial conquest. For example, the colonists who settled in Australia created the legal fiction that its indigenous people did not exist, in order to legitimise their conquest. They had a disregard for the spiritual depth of the tribes. Later, they created reservations for Aboriginal people but forcibly 'stole' their children and put them in 'the Mission', which was run by the government or the church. There, the gospel was preached but abuse was modelled.

Hispanic peoples were brought the gospel by members of religious orders who had a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other. These missionaries called the natives 'savages' and required them to renounce their beliefs, good and bad alike, and embrace 'the true faith'. The Anglos in North America took a similar approach, giving rise to the conflict between cowboys and 'Indians'. Some of them preached the gospel but failed to respect either the Native Americans or the earth they cherished. Many Afro-Caribbeans have inherited their faith from forebears who were slaves. The slave owners made sure the gospel was preached to them, but modelled slavery.

We need a new paradigm, for these reasons and, in the broadest sense, because there is now widespread talk of 'the end of Christendom'. One definition of Christendom is 'the church, organised according to the machinery and mindset of empire'. After the Roman emperor Constantine (d.337) had claimed to be a Christian upon seeing a cross in the sky with the words 'In this sign conquer', the church was organised much along the lines of the Roman civil service. Its bishops were enthroned and wore imperial purple and its congregations were clericalised. The mindset continued during the centuries of 'the Holy Roman Empire' (ninth to 18th centuries in varying parts of central Europe) and remains to this day.

Are we post-Christendom? David Edwards begins his book *The Futures of Christianity* with these words: 'Christianity is young and if it lasts for as long as humanity is expected to last on this planet it has futures of at least two thousand million years ahead of it.'[4] The worst thing that could happen would be for the old Christendom to be replaced by a new Christendom emerging from the fast-multiplying churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Philip Jenkins alerts us to this danger in *The Next Christendom: The coming of global Christianity*.[5] The prosperity gospel appeals to the poor, but what happens when they have a welfare state? Mass-organisation evangelism by churches in Korea and China are like a giant productivity drive, but they have not worked in Europe's alien culture because they have not been culture-sensitive. They can appeal to governments because of their work ethic. They typically have no time to 'waste with God' in inner transformation of the false ego.

The 'Christendom' or 'colonial' mission instinct also built the tower of Babel. God opposes this and any project to standardise and control. God's response to the tower of Babel was to scatter the people, who developed competing cultures and languages. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost overcomes the confusion and fragmentation, but it does so (in the words of

Miroslav Volf) 'not by reverting to the unity of cultural uniformity but by advancing toward the harmony of cultural diversity'.[6]

These flawed models have led to a reaction. Liberation theology, rooted in South America, identified God's kingdom among the poor and the powerless. In Africa and Australasia, post-colonial theology is taught. This uses the term 'missional', as do recent evangelistic networks, in order to distinguish their approach from the 'mission' of the colonial era. By the late 1990s in Australia, the Forge network was inspiring pioneering church leaders, and, when Alan Hirsch wrote *The Shaping of the Things to Come* with Michael Frost in 2003,[7] this book became a must-read for any Christian interested in the future of the church. The concept of the *missio Dei* (the mission of God), which is central to their thesis about the church becoming a missional movement again, was drawn from missiologist David Bosch's seminal work.[8]

A major shift also took place within the Church of England, which reverberated throughout other denominations when the *Mission-Shaped Church* report was launched in 2004.[9] Church renewal was taking place already throughout the UK. However, with this report, the experimentation was recognised as not just a fringe concept but absolutely necessary for the future of the church.

A detailed study entitled 'An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992–2012' was carried out by the Church Army's Research Unit between January 2012 and October 2013.[10] The researchers spoke to the leaders of 518 fresh expressions in the dioceses of Liverpool, Canterbury, Leicester, Derby, Chelmsford, Norwich, Ripon and Leeds, Blackburn, Bristol and Portsmouth. These dioceses were chosen to reflect variety in context and geographical spread and different stances towards fresh expressions. A fresh expression of church is defined as:

- missional: it serves those outside the church.
- contextual: it listens to people and enters their culture.
- educational: it makes discipleship a priority.
- ecclesial: it forms church.

Canon Dr George Lings, who led the study, said, 'Nothing else in the Church of England has this level of missional impact and the effect of adding further ecclesial communities.'[11] Bishop Graham Cray, Archbishops' Missioner and leader of the Fresh Expressions team, said:

> *This thorough research shows the numerical scale, the demographic spread and the sheer variety of fresh expressions of church in the Church of England. Particularly significant is the proportion of people involved who have never been part of any church in their lifetime, and the number of new lay leaders who have never previously been involved. These findings offer hope and show that the Church of England does know how to draw unchurched people into Christian discipleship and fellowship, and that decline is not inevitable.*[12]

Many missional networks originate in the USA. In popular perception, the empire of recent decades has been US-led capitalism. This has gone worldwide through 'brand imposition' by capitalism's 'hidden persuaders'—open and subliminal advertising that puts product success before the well-being of the producer, the consumer or the society. Some emerging evangelistic networks, perhaps without being aware of it, use essentially the same approach, aiming to reach the greatest number in the shortest time with a product—the product being Jesus, presented in their own unique format. This must be the right approach, they argue, because it registers the highest response rate. John Drane has called this approach 'the McDonaldisation of the Church'.[13]

There is a danger that mission is divorced from justice and the bedrock values that create community, and that the short term

is divorced from the long term. Both ISIL and Pepsi Cola have a mission: what decides their worth are the values upon which their mission is based.

In the light of these challenges, we now look at the seventh-century Aidan Way of Mission to see if we can learn from its components and credentials.

THE AIDAN WAY OF MISSION

Pagan Ireland had become 'a land of saints and scholars'. It was said that great St Columba alone had founded 300 seven-days-a-week faith communities, whose mother community was across the sea on the island of Iona. The Irish, who were known as Scots, had colonised a western section of the land now named after them—Scotland. Iona was part of this colony, which they named Dalriada. Columba had sailed from Iona to anoint its king in the name of Christ at his fortress on the Rock of Dunadd.

Columba had a passion for evangelism. It was said that his soul friend had urged him to win as many souls to Christ in a foreign land as had been lost in a battle between his tribe and another. Once, Columba made the long trek up the Great Glen beside Loch Ness to befriend the pagan Pictish king Bruid. On the way, he commanded a monster Loch Ness fish, which had attacked fishermen, to depart in the name of Christ. This it did until the modern tourist industry revived interest in the Loch Ness monster. Columba prayed for a sick member of King Bruid's family and began to evangelise the Picts.

Columba died in 597, about the time that Aidan was born. Aidan joined Columba's family of monasteries. We don't know where or when, but we presume he was steeped in Irish monastic ways—genuine, close to the people, soaked in scripture, hospitable in his zeal to live and share the gospel. Many of Columba's monks came from his Ui Neill tribe and many of the abbots who succeeded him were related to its chief, Conall Gulban. Perhaps Aidan was, too.

About the time when Aidan was most probably posted to Iona, concern grew among the Christian Dalriadans about the pagan Anglo-Saxon colonists who had established their largest kingdom on Dalriada's southern border—a kingdom known as Northumbria. Northumbria's rival kings constantly slew each other. One of them, Edwin, married a princess from Kent who had become a Christian through the mission sent there from Rome by Pope Gregory. She brought her Italian chaplain, Bishop Paulinus, with her. Edwin became a Christian and summoned his subjects to royal centres to hear Paulinus. He baptised thousands in various rivers. These conversions had an effect: it was said that a boy could run from one end of the kingdom to the other without being molested. Yet, when Edwin was slain, Paulinus fled to Kent and most of the converts went back to their pagan gods. The mission had been a firework display. The people had accepted the externals of the new religion but they were not changed from within.

Edwin's predecessor, Ethelric, had been killed by Edwin's ally. Ethelric's boys, the legitimate heirs, took refuge, with family and staff, in Christian Dalriada. They were adopted by treaty and became Christians. The most devout of them, Oswald, used to rise early to pray with his hands open to heaven. He regained the Northumbrian throne following a year of ghastly bloodshed. He asked Iona to send a mission to his mostly pagan people, but it failed.

It seems that Corman, the mission leader, made the same mistake as Paulinus. He expected ordinary peasants to come to royal centres. They found themselves in a foreign place, with a foreign person using a foreign language. He told them about a foreign religion that required them to accept foreign ways; and, unlike Paulinus, he did not even dazzle them with hints of a Christianity of future pomp and circumstance. Corman's mission team returned to Iona and blamed the uncouth Northumbrians for its failure.

The Iona brothers were devastated. This was the greatest missed mission opportunity in their history—but then came a surprise from the God of surprises. Oswald asked them to try once more. Their senior brothers met in council under Seghine, Iona's fifth abbot. This was not only a post-mortem: in the brokenness of failure they sought to learn God's lessons. Aidan spoke. 'My brother,' he said to Corman, 'I think you were too harsh with those people. It is better not to lay on them our own rules and ways of doing things. Just gently give them the milk of God's word.' Was he thinking of milk from within a mother's breast being imbibed by her infant? The milk of God's word mixed with the milk of human kindness: thirsty people would not resist that.

So Aidan was sent to Northumbria with twelve brothers, based, as was usual in Irish missions, on the template of Jesus and his twelve apostles. He must have given careful thought, in the light of the first mission's failure to connect, to the kind of brothers he should select for his team. They had to be strong enough to connect with the Saxon warrior culture and to walk long distances, yet they also had to be gentle, open to listening, patient and adaptable. Doubtless, among the gifts he looked for in his team were those of teaching, friendship, practical skills and devotion to prayer. Aidan was already a senior monk and a presbyter. Now (unless we believe the Scattery Island version) he was also made a missionary bishop, because he was entering uncharted territory and this position would give him the church's authority to exercise oversight.

In 635, Aidan and his twelve 'apostles' journeyed south and crossed over into Northumbria, crossing from one race, one religion and one language to another. He gave the rest of his life to incarnate Christ among foreign peoples—the pagan Anglo-Saxons and the remnants of the Celtic Britons who had survived the invaders and who spoke what we now call Welsh.

Aidan came, like the two previous missioners, with a message, but unlike them he also modelled the message. He did this in

two ways: first, by living a way of life that reflected gospel values, and second, by creating little 'colonies of heaven' that modelled something of the kingdom of God on earth. He did not rush out where angels fear to tread. He built up a relationship of trust with his sponsor, King Oswald, and with Oswald's staff and warriors. He had learned some English from the royal refugees at Dunadd, but, until he was fluent, Oswald, with great humility, translated as Aidan shared the gospel at the court.

Aidan, however, was keen to go into the highways and byways. His plan met an early hurdle that could have aborted the mission before it had begun. Oswald gave him a royal horse. No doubt Oswald thought this was fitting for a bishop and would enable Aidan to reach the greatest number in the shortest time. Aidan, however, wished to walk alongside his missionary brothers and alongside the peasants who could not afford horses. This was what Jesus had done on the paths of Judea. To ride a horse would put him above ordinary people and create a cultural divide. Risking Oswald's anger, he refused the royal gift.

With a few brothers, Aidan traversed both town and country on foot. The travellers turned aside to greet anyone they met, whether poor or rich, listening to them and becoming friends. If the people they met were believers, the brothers strengthened them in the faith and stirred them up, by words and actions, to the giving of alms and the performance of good works. They asked unbelievers if they would like to know why they had come, and told them Gospel stories.

At the Iona post-mortem on Corman's failed mission, Corman had put its failure down to the barbaric nature of the Northumbrians. Aidan had argued that the missioners should have been more gentle and should have only gradually laid down the whole gamut of Christian teachings. Bede (the monk-historian who recorded these events some 50 years later) commended Aidan's tenderness in comforting the afflicted and relieving the poor, living what he taught: 'He took care to neglect none of those

things which he found in the Gospels and the writings of apostles and prophets, but to the utmost of his power endeavoured to fulfil them all in his deeds' (*EH* 3.17).

This approach had a deep effect. Two decades after Aidan's death, Bede could record:

> *Wherever a missionary brother went, he was joyfully received by all as God's servant; and even if they chanced to meet him upon the way, they ran to him, and with bowed head, were glad to be signed with the cross by his hand, or blessed by his lips. Great attention was also paid to their exhortations. (EH 3.5)*

The result was they had to send for more Irish missioners, who arrived almost daily. A sea-change was under way. A grass-roots revolution had begun.

MISSION NEEDS TO BE INDIGENOUS

Aidan's aim was to develop an indigenous, English-speaking church. In Britain and Ireland, none of the pre-Saxon Celtic Christian missionaries who won over the indigenous population were martyred. This was because they were able to contextualise and see where God was already at work. Celtic Christians incorporated insights from the druids who had the wisdom of nature. The druids had a deep intuition. There is an Irish story that, on the day of Christ's crucifixion, King Conchubar noticed the eclipse of the sun and asked the druid Bucrach the cause of this sign. 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is now being crucified by the Jews,' replied the druid.

As a baptised boy, Columba was taught by a druid; as an adult he supported measures to strengthen the institution of the bards, yet he tried to lead both druids and their pupils to Christ. 'Christ is my druid,' he told them. Celtic believers Christianised the pagan seasons. The pagan blessing of the lustral waters on 6 January became a commemoration of Jesus' immersion in the waters. Candles were held to the throat for healing on the first day

of the Celtic spring, and this became St Brigid's Day. Christians continued the druids' use of ashes as a sign of purification. The veil between earth and heaven was said to be at its thinnest on Samhain, the first day of winter's dark: Christians filled it with the splendour of All Saints' Day.

An example of Jesus being introduced to an indigenous people with a sensitivity similar to that shown by Aidan can be seen from an Aboriginal people in the Daly Bridge region of Australia's Northern Territory. In *Dadirri: The Spring Within*, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann writes, 'There are deep springs within each of us. Within this deep spring, which is the very spirit of God, is a sound. The sound of Deep calling to Deep. The sound of the word—Jesus.'[14] This book quotes an Aboriginal person:

> *In our own way we understood what the Fathers and Sisters were telling us about Jesus, but He lived in a far away country and moved among white people dressed in strange clothes. This was what we saw in pictures, in books and in statues in the Church. Why couldn't He be like us? Why couldn't His country be our country? Now is the time to make the Christian truths our own. We do not want to change those truths but we want to explain them in a way that makes them real to us. Hence our paintings that take the place of words. We have not been told to paint in the way we have. It is from our hearts.*[15]

In Australia, some Aboriginal dreaming stories have amazing connections to the Christian message. Certain tribes were familiar with the kind of stories that the Christian missionaries told and, in some cases, they were awaiting the arrival of a 'redeeming son' or a 'great resurrection'. One example of this is provided by Jerry Jangala, who is responsible for the Emu dreaming story in Warlpiri country. In this story, the flying emu has a redemptive purpose and is resurrected. Jerry makes the easy connection to Jesus when he talks about this story of his people, claiming that 'Jesus is a flying emu'.

Their Way: Indigenous Christianity among the Warlpiri people, by Ivan Jordan,[16] gives inspiring examples of this approach. Jordan argues that no one need change cultures to be a Christian. Looking at Acts 15, if the requirement of circumcision had prevailed, Christianity would have become no more than a sect of Judaism. 'Uncle' Rex of the Warlpiri people in the Northern Territory of Australia says, 'The Bible fits our culture in Western Australia and Jukurppa—the law of our culture.'

Ethnically mixed areas in our cities cry out for the Aidan approach. Stories circulate of thousands of Muslims in certain Arab countries who became followers of Jesus and joined a church. The church members offended the new believers by not removing their shoes and placing their Bibles on the floor (both signs of disrespect), so thousands also left these churches. The Aidan approach calls out for churches in ethnically mixed areas that worship in Muslim style: they have carpets, remove shoes and hold Bibles aloft. It is interesting that the Lindisfarne Gospels, a rich fruit of Aidan's mission, draw their carpet pages from the same oriental tradition that marks Muslim art. Michelle Brown points out that Northumbrian, Celtic and Byzantine monks all used to pray on decorated prayer carpets, known as *oratorii*, just as Muslim and certain Eastern Christian Churches have always done and still do.[17] Perhaps the Aidan approach also calls for Christians to use prayer mats?

Alan Roxburgh, in his book *Missional: Joining God in the neighbourhood*, writes:

> *The Spirit is breaking apart a form of church that took shape in the Protestant West from the sixteenth century forward… God is on the move. The kingdom is so much bigger than our little, tribal cultural enclaves, and the world is in crisis. The Lord of creation is out there ahead of us, he has left the temple and is calling the church to follow in a risky path leaving behind its baggage, becoming like the stranger in need, and receiving*

> *hospitality from the very ones we assume are the candidates for our evangelism plans. Luke re-theologising would say that the only way we can understand and practise again this kingdom message is by getting out of our churches and re-entering our neighbourhoods and communities. This is where we will discern God's future, not in our vision and mission statements or the arrogant need to start a movement in our own image. This is a time for a radical shift in the imagination and practices of our once dominant Euro-tribal churches.*[18]

Ross Langmead, in *The Word Made Flesh: Towards an incarnational missiology*, points to three interpretations of incarnational mission: (1) follow the patterns Jesus used in the Gospels; (2) participate in Christ's risen presence with us in our context; (3) join God's cosmic mission of enfleshment in which God's self-embodying dynamic is evident from the beginning of creation.[19]

REFLECTION

I imagine Aidan training his younger brothers to become culture-friendly by deep listening to those Saxon peasants whom Corman had dismissed as barbarians. Pat Loughery, Adjunct Instructor at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, who lectures on Celtic Spirituality and follows the Community of Aidan and Hilda Way of Life, asks his students to sit on a park seat and listen while someone tells their story. He says it has become a fun challenge to ask his students to listen to other people tell their stories, and also to try to discern the stories that the culture is telling as a whole.[20] A Scottish training course for youth workers invites them to listen to music that young people like or to photograph street graffiti and draw out what speaks of a longing for God, of dysfunction because of the flouting of God, or of recognition of good and therefore godly values. Try one of these exercises.

I imagine Aidan thinking how best to get inside the Saxons' culture and redeem it. Young Western people often have a pagan

mentality that is drawn to the supernatural; symbols include vampire films and tarot card readings. A church led by a member of The Community of Aidan and Hilda has a youth bus that shows films on the top deck and gives one-on-one spiritual readings on the lower decks, by drawing out information and combining it with perceptive prayer. What are our cultural symbols? How can we baptise them?

I imagine Aidan saying, 'We must move on from the "We are right; you are wrong" approach.' Corman was sure he was right and the Northumbrians were wrong. The Northumbrians had much yet to learn about God, but Corman had much yet to learn about cross-cultural mission. The Pharisees took Corman's approach. Many of the numerically successful churches fall prey to a message that says, 'You are lost and a target of God's wrath. We have Jesus who saves you. Come to Jesus.' The veiled message is, 'We are right; you are wrong.' These Christians' emotional security lies in their being right. There is no room for questions. 'We are right; you are wrong' churches may be judged by their fruit—immaturity and divisions. Members of churches based on Jesus' values become more loving; they make friends with people who don't think like them; they are more attentive and more in touch.

Is your approach more like Jesus' or more like that of the Pharisees who condemned him? Is it about God whipping people or wooing them? A different kind of security from that of the 'We are right' school comes when we say to the triune God of love, 'You have me; you have them.' Then we can let go of what we are holding on to. We are free to meet people in their humanity and to let God do his work his way. This has authority to rally the soul. Proselytism is about converting A to B, and it requires pressure. Evangelism is about bearing witness to Jesus and letting the Holy Spirit lead A, and it requires trust. How do you respond to these two approaches?

I imagine Aidan saying, 'Notice the ways God uses the different

characteristics of the first twelve apostles. No two meetings are the same.' Many groups have based missional initiatives on the number of the apostles. The G12 network, started in 1983 by Pastor Castellanos, believes that every Christian can mentor and lead twelve people in the gospel, and then that group can subdivide and repeat the process. The network now claims to have 45,000 cells. In mission that reflects the dynamic of Jesus and the twelve apostles, however, it is not just the number that is important: the spirit is even more so. No two groups should be identical in their approach because God has made each one unique. The group needs to do and say whatever the loving, seeing heart of Jesus directs. The standardised approach is not like milk uniquely given from a mother at the other's moment of need; it is like milk pumped from a machine. Nevertheless, 'the world has yet to see what God can do through twelve people wholly given to him' (Frank Buchman).[21] Recall a saying of Jesus to a needy person that you might describe as giving milk. Empathise with Jesus' compassion for that person as he speaks the words. Focus on the milk of human kindness in yourself. In your imagination, speak a Gospel word to someone out of that milk of kindness.

I imagine Aidan saying, 'Look for Christ in the welcoming heart of a stranger.' Aidan did not bang his head against a door; he went through the door that opened. Jesus said, in effect, 'Go where you are welcomed' (see Luke 10:8). Become aware of what God is already doing in a place and support it. Become aware of doors that are opening, and try them. Oswald's invitation was the opening door, and Aidan needed to build a good relationship with the door opener. What is God already doing in your context? Who are the door openers? How can you support what God is doing?

What are the marks of Aidan's mission by which we may evaluate today's missional models? What are your mission priorities?

Set us free, O God, to cross barriers for you,
as you crossed barriers for us.
Make us open to others in listening,
observant of others in learning,
and sensitive to others in living,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

3

SOUL FRIENDS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

WITH DISCIPLES YOU CAN BUILD MOVEMENTS. WITH CONSUMERS YOU CAN BUILD NOTHING.[27]

Pagan Ireland, it was said, became a land of saints and scholars. Soul friends kept alive people's love of holiness and learning. We do not know whether there was a soul friend tradition, dimmed but still alive, among the Celtic Britons within Northumbria. The Welsh word for soul friend is *periglour*, meaning a person who will allow me to tell the whole truth about myself and to seek healing. We do know that the tradition was burgeoning in Ireland.

Aidan grew up in Columba's family of monasteries, which were steeped in the soul friendship tradition. Columba's friend Comgall, the sixth-century founder of the monastery at Bangor, stated, 'Though you may think you are very solid, it is not good to be your own guide.' His large community taught that 'a person without a soul friend is like a body without a head'.[28]

As I have mentioned, Columba's Iona monastery came into being as a result of his soul friend's advice that he should win as many people to Christ in a foreign land as had lost their lives in the battle between his tribe and another in Ireland. Adomnan's *Life of Columba* cites examples of advice and prophecies that Columba gave, both as a soul friend and more generally.

On one occasion, however, two lads whom Columba had baptised revealed dysfunctional behaviour patterns, and he asked his nephew, Colman, to become their soul friend. Colman was the founder of a monastic village at Land Ela (now Lynally) in central Ireland. He was compared with John the beloved disciple, who laid his head against Jesus at their last supper and to whom Jesus bequeathed his mother as he was dying, thus causing Celts to call him Jesus' foster brother.

Upon receiving Columba's request, Colman said, 'Give them to me to foster and nourish, for God has given me two paps, a pap of milk and a pap of honey, and I will give one to each.' So they, along with others, became his fosterlings. Colman was tough and a friend of the king's chief warrior, but in our language we would say he was in touch with his 'inner feminine'. This image suggests the soul friend as the midwife of souls.

There are two threads in the ancient Irish soul friendship tradition—the provision of fosterers for young people and the provision of soul friends by monasteries. The foster parent was not, as in today's society, a substitute for the physical parents, but was a cherished supplement, who might be widowed or unmarried. The foster parent would not live with the family, as would a modern nanny; the child would stay with the foster parent for periods. As children shared in the life of the foster parent, they might learn to cook, fish, pray, repeat stories, make relationships and grow confident in both practical living and their inner life.

As Christianity spread, Christian parents would sometimes sense that a child was being called to a spiritual vocation, so they would place the child under the care of a holy hermit or nun who lived in their district. A good foster parent would be both worldly-wise and spiritually wise. In sixth-century Ireland, future Christian leaders went to be mentored by a monastic *amma* or *abba* (an affectionate name for a spiritual mum or dad), who taught the wisdoms of scripture, prayer and community in a

monastery that combined holy learning with holistic living.

In the early days of the monasteries, there was such trust and desire to move along God's path that a trainee monk was expected to pour out his soul each day to the senior monk who was his soul friend; in this way, things that clogged relationships with God or the brothers could be confessed and forgiven. It is thought that these monks also became soul friends to many people outside the monasteries who were keen to follow God in their ordinary jobs. Both the foster parents and the monastic forms of soul friendship kindled warm bonds of human affection.

St Brigid told a young priest in fifth-century Ireland that, just as the water in a well full of lime was good for nothing, so was a person without a soul friend. Ciaran, who later founded the Clonmacnoise community, first went to be mentored under Finnian of Clonard. Soon after he had established the Clonmacnoise community, Ciaran caught the plague and lay dying. They fetched his soul friend, Kevin, from Glendalough to be with him in death. Kevin seemed to have arrived too late, but Ciaran's spirit re-entered his body. The two friends communed together from one watch to another and Ciaran gave his bell to Kevin as a sign of their lasting unity.

Maedoc founded a seventh-century community at Ferns, Ireland. Many came for spiritual direction, and many went on from there to be soul friends to others. Maedoc first tried to discern whether Ferns was to be their place of resurrection, so he asked them, 'Did any of you hear a bell ring when you arrived?' They did not. Maedoc sensed that, although Ferns did not ring a bell, their place of resurrection would be somewhere within the region to which they had been drawn, so he walked with them to a rise from which they could see miles of countryside around. Speaking out what the Spirit put in his mind, he pointed in each of the compass points in turn. No bell rang. So he told them that they should keep walking until they came to a place that rang a bell.

In Aidan's Ireland, the desire to become holy, to pursue learning and to find a soul friend had become a popular passion. Aidan, like all the brothers at Iona, was allocated a soul friend. Yet much of this was alien to the Anglo-Saxons. How on earth could Aidan crack this hard nut? He modelled it himself and among the monastic communities and schools that he founded for Anglo-Saxons. This was not in the Roman tradition of the monk Bede, who records the bare outlines of Aidan's mission without a mention of soul friends; but it shines out in his account of the life of Cuthbert, the first great Anglo-Saxon church leader and a firstfruit of Aidan's mission, who loved holiness, learning and his soul friend.

After ministry as a prophetic evangelist, healer and prior, Cuthbert lived for nine years as a hermit prayer warrior on the Inner Farne Isle, and then two years as a missionary bishop who planted the church in the shadow of the Rock of Edinburgh. Throughout that time, he was soul friend to the hermit Herbert, who lived on an island in Derwentwater, in today's English Lake District. Each year Herbert trekked from west to east to meet with Cuthbert. Once, Cuthbert met Herbert while on a visit to Carlisle. He urged Herbert to say everything he would wish to say before departing this life, since Cuthbert sensed that his own death was near and this would be their last meeting. Herbert wept and asked Cuthbert to pray that they would each depart to their place of resurrection on the same day. This they did, on 20 March 687.

As the churches in the West became more Romanised, soul friendship became clericalised, and therefore male. Confession of sins became a formal procedure that could be made only to a priest. The Reformation churches did not enforce the practice of confession to a priest, but they failed to rekindle the soul friendship tradition. The Eastern Orthodox churches never entirely lost the tradition of the elder or the holy mother—or, in Russia, the *staretz*—to whom Orthodox Christians could bare their souls as to a trusted friend.

CONTEMPORARY SOUL FRIENDS

The use of spiritual directors, both male and female, began to grow in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in the 20th century. Today, when life coaches and mentors are in great demand, the soul friend tradition is reviving. A Welsh Franciscan writer, Brother Ramon, sensed the emergence of a vocation to soul friendship among lay folk.[29] After talking it through with him shortly before his death, I wrote *Soulfriendship: Celtic insights into spiritual mentoring*, which explores this vocation further.[30]

Members of an Alpha course decided that, as new Christians, they wished to continue discipleship training but not to join a conventional church, so they formed an Alpha café church. Those who had been leaders during the Alpha course, who were at home with their Bibles and with biblical prescriptions, became 'table leaders' of the café church. Their job now was to intuit where the new Christians on their table were in their unique inner journey and to accompany them. A despairing overseer of these table church leaders came to see me, saying, 'Can you teach people how to get in touch with their intuition and to accompany others from where they are?'

A soul friend may seek to discern with you the context that is, or will be, most life-giving for you. It will take into account your calling, the place where you connect most deeply with the environment, the people and God. You may already be in your place of resurrection, but certain things may still need to be put in place. Remember that Jesus' cross was near to his place of resurrection. The place of resurrection is not pain-free, but it is, at the deepest level, in the will of God. The soul friend may help you to accept what cannot be changed, to change what can be, and the wisdom to know the difference.

The Community of Aidan and Hilda has defined a soul friend as follows:

A soul friend helps a person, in one-to-one meetings, to:

- *Grow in their relationship with God and others.*
- *Explore different ways of praying.*
- *Reflect on the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit.*
- *Feed on scripture.*
- *Gain self-awareness.*
- *Find comfort and strength in times of adversity.*
- *Develop their potential as a human being created in the image of God.*
- *Apply the gospel to each area of their life (for example, money, sex and work).*
- *Maintain a good balance of prayer, work and recreation.*
- *Identify how God has led them in the past, reflect on where they are now and discern direction for the future.*

The Community specifically requires each person who follows its Way of Life to journey with a soul friend—a mature Christian friend with whom we openly share our spiritual journey and meet at least twice a year.[31]

'We prefer groups,' say some missional networks. Groups have a useful place, but their members can be held hostage by the demands of the group's least aware ego. Soul friends also have their limitations, of course, but at the least they are an accompanier, a sounding board, a confidante. Choose a soul friend who recognises their limitations.

DISCERNMENT

Discernment is a key ingredient in contemporary soul friendship. Spiritual discernment is to separate distinctly that which is authentic from that which is false. It is the art of finding God's will in the concrete decisions that face us in the maze of life. It

is the process by which we examine, in the light of our faith and our experience of God's love, what draws us away from God and what draws us into intimacy with him. As Christians interact with scripture, church, circumstances, creation and inner conviction, they gradually discover what the indicators of the divine will are.

An early Celtic saint named Morgan (better known by his Latin name, Pelagius) taught that we learn the general principles of behaviour that pleases God from the teachings and example of Jesus, such as the honesty and unselfishness taught in the Beatitudes. Many thoughts or actions can be eliminated as not God's will because they are not absolutely honest, pure, unselfish or loving. Pelagius taught that we must be honest with ourselves, recognising clearly those areas of our lives that we have not yielded to Christ. He identifies sins and attitudes that hinder us from discerning God's will.

Pelagius advises us to use reason to weigh up good and bad consequences before we make a decision, pray about our provisional intentions, become willing to do God's will, and sense by listening to our conscience whether the actions we contemplate or have taken bring increasing peace or increasing disquiet. For Pelagius, the soul friend did not foster dependency but liberated discernment in the seeker.

Soul friendship in the Irish tradition could be holistic. St Ita rebuked Brendan for not consulting her on how to make his boat. Can such soul friendship take root more broadly in our societies? Britain, like other countries, has a shortage of young skilled labour. Migrants help to fill the gap, but this is unpopular because so many British-born people lack paid work. In some areas of the country now, three generations of families have never worked. In Germany, apprenticeship schemes are widespread and effective. The provision of enablers who accompany those who have lost the motivation to work could yield rich dividends. My friends Kylie and Sammy Horner use the income from their live music performances to apprentice needy people in Thailand

and India. They teach them to make and mend things and to utilise water. They also care for their souls.

LIFELONG LEARNING

The monastic communities that became the backbone of Ireland from the sixth century included schools. Sir James Ware calculated that there were 164 famous schools,[32] but there were many more smaller ones. All Columba's monasteries of any size had schools; he founded 32 in what is now Scotland. In general, they had a missionary character. The word 'nurseries' might better describe some centres, such as the school of the legendary St Ita, who was known as the foster mother of the saints of Ireland. Here, learning involved personal and holistic mentoring. In the monasteries the scribe was highly valued. He devoted his time to copying and multiplying books. Scribes not only provided the educational tools for each generation of students; they also preserved the memory of their Christian history and theology.

Aidan continued the same basic pattern of including schools in his monastic communities. Each student was given an *anamchara*—a soul friend. Students memorised the 150 psalms, rehearsing them as they walked and reciting them in the church. They learned to read Latin, the living language of educated people in those days, and to write on tablets of wax. They studied the Gospels and were taught the theology of some of the great church and desert fathers. Aidan had to adapt to the new culture. His students came from Anglo-Saxon families known but not necessarily related to the local king, unlike those in Ireland, where all were part of the king's tribal family. Their tutors, initially, were foreigners—the Irish. Nevertheless, the concept of family remained strong, both because the abbot was a parent figure and because children of families linked to their king made their home there.

Aidan founded his base monastic community in 635 on the tidal

island of Lindisfarne, a few miles from Bamburgh. Although Bede wished to equate Aidan's diocesan system to that of Augustine of Canterbury, which is based on geographical boundaries rather than peoples, even he concedes that, at Lindisfarne, the bishop lived with his clergy and the abbot with his monks 'after the manner of a household' (*EH* 4.25). Aidan was bishop of a people, not a place. Something of this spirit was reflected on Lindisfarne a generation later, under Cuthbert. Bede writes in chapter 16 of his prose *Life of Cuthbert* that it is both the seat of a bishop and of an abbot. One dwelling place holds both, and all are monks. The bishop exercises his episcopal functions while the abbot rules the monastery. All the priests, deacons, readers, singers and those in other roles, together with the bishop, keep the common Rule.

Lindisfarne was a mission base more than a university, so the sending of bright pupils to study in Ireland began under Aidan and greatly increased in the years following. Bede informs us that after plague ravaged England, some years after Aidan's death, many of 'the nobility, and of the lower ranks of the English nation' went to Ireland, 'either for the sake of sacred studies, or of a more ascetic life; and some of them presently devoted themselves faithfully to a monastic life; others chose rather to apply themselves to study, going about from one master's cell to another'. The Irish 'willingly received them all, and took care to supply them with daily food without cost, as also to furnish them with books for their studies, and teaching free of charge'. The 20-year-old Egbert took Chad and others with him to Ireland (*EH* 3.27).

Aidan himself was a model of lifelong learning, and his practice took root among English people of different backgrounds. Bede noted 'his industry in keeping and teaching the Divine commandments, his power of study'. English children, as well as their elders, were instructed by their (Irish) teachers in study and the observance of monastic discipline (*EH* 3.3).

Bede writes:

> *[Aidan's] course of life was so different from the slothfulness of our times, that all those who bore him company, whether they were tonsured or laymen, had to study either reading the Scriptures, or learning psalms. This was the daily employment of himself and all that were with him, wherever they went; and if it happened, which was but seldom, that he was invited to the king's table, he went with one or two clerks, and having taken a little food, made haste to be gone, either to read with his brethren or to pray. (EH 3.5)*

This habit of learning took root among all the races and language groups in the British Isles:

> *There are in the island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine Law was written, five languages of different nations employed in the study and confession of the one self-same knowledge, which is of highest truth and true sublimity, to wit, English, British, Scottish, Pictish, and Latin, the last having become common to all by the study of the Scriptures. (EH 1.1)*

It was after the 664 Synod of Whitby that Chad, 'being consecrated bishop, began immediately to labour for ecclesiastical truth and purity of doctrine; to apply himself to humility, self-denial, and study' (*EH* 3.28).

When universities were separated from the monasteries in the second millennium, they gained greater freedom of research but they also lost something—a holistic understanding of godly learning that embraces head, heart and hands and whose source is God. Wisdom is not learned by mere data accumulation or cerebral analysis. That is why individuals, churches and networks now thirst to recover wellsprings of wisdom. We may catch from the Irish a love of learning rather than a love of letters.

Lifelong learning is for everyone, whether they have an aca-

demic or a practical orientation. It begins with daily reflection on scripture. We don't treat scripture as a mere recording. We learn about the times and the issues when a particular biblical document was first written, and about the strengths and weaknesses of the characters portrayed. We accept what is called progressive revelation, and we always ask what new insight God was trying to communicate in that situation. Some people find it helpful to think of scripture as a love letter from God, while others try to memorise a verse a day; one person decided to learn New Testament Greek at the age of 80, and another can't read but listens to scripture recordings.

Many find the practice known as *lectio divina*, or godly reading, helpful. This involves a prayerful reading of a scripture passage, with an openness to hearing God speak through it. You may choose any passage that speaks to your present condition, work through a book in the Bible section by section, or follow a lectionary. Read the passage slowly several times. Stop at words or phrases that speak to you, and mull them over. Let them sink in. Ask yourself both 'What do I think about this?' and 'What do I feel about this?' Share your thoughts, feelings, questions and hopes with God as you would with a friend. Make a response—a prayer of commitment, thanksgiving or repentance or a request for help. Then relax and enjoy God's presence for a while. This pattern is sometimes called the four Rs: reading, reflection, response and relaxing.

Lifelong learning may develop further through reflection on creation and the use of creative arts. Jesus taught us to learn by observation: observe the birds and the wild flowers (Matthew 6:26–30). We interpret clouds and winds to predict the weather, so we can learn to interpret deeper, unseen patterns in order to interpret what God is bringing about (Luke 12:54–56). An ancient church catechism ends with the question 'What is the fruit of study?' The answer is 'To perceive the eternal Word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal,

and every man and woman.' Meister Eckhart, the German spiritual leader, preached, 'Every creature is a word of God.'[33] So we journey with the book of scripture in one hand and the book of creation in the other.

We also remember that we are co-creators with God. We can learn through creative arts, whether information technology, flower arranging or poetry. We use and learn through all our senses. Through experiencing great art, observed former Czech president and playwright Vaclav Havel, we are opening up to 'the other' and to 'the beyond—to that which lies at the horizon of our being'.[34] This requires us to learn the biblical art of meditation. David Cole, in his book *The Mystic Path of Meditation*, writes that meditation 'is a state of concentrated attention… [It] is as normal and necessary as sleep… We extend our inner senses out to connect with God's Spirit around us.'[35]

Lifelong learning deepens through reflection on inspired people. 'Remember' is God's constant reminder to his people in the Old Testament: Remember what Abraham did, what lessons your forebears learned from Moses, and so on. 'Have you not heard?' asked Jesus. The church invites us—in the season of Advent, for example—to learn from prophets such as Isaiah and pioneers such as John the Baptist. All these can spur us to expand our thinking and living.

'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses…' says the letter writer to the Hebrews (12:1). The implication is that we should look at these Christians who have completed their course on earth and who witness to us, cheering us on in our race of faith. The cloud of witnesses is always growing. We may wish to draw desert fathers and mothers, Celtic saints, Spanish mystics or radical social workers into our field of studies.

Lifelong learning grows through reflection on experience. Self-knowledge lies at the heart of wisdom. Even mistakes can become learning opportunities as we invite the Holy Spirit to teach us. A time-honoured way of learning through experience

is to reflect back on the day's events before we sleep. Some call this the 'examen'. Is there something for which to give thanks, something for which to say sorry, and some lesson we can learn? 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' said Socrates. 'I have learned,' said the apostle Paul, 'to be content… in any and all circumstances' (Philippians 4:11–12).

> *The Bible is… a conversation where various, sometimes harmonious and sometimes discordant, human voices contribute to the gradually growing picture of the character of Yahweh; fully revealed only in Jesus. But it is also a conversation that, rather than ending with the finalisation of the canon, continues beyond it, involving all those who give themselves to Christ's on-going redemptive movement.*[36]

This is a conversation, a habit, for every day of our lives. It is a fascinating dialogue because it is about the meaning of human life. Could multitudes of eavesdroppers, stressed and left empty by the world's mindless digital chatter, join this life-giving conversation?

REFLECTION

I imagine Aidan living alongside those he appointed as tutors in his monastic schools, laying out a curriculum that embraced study, prayer and soul friendship, how to learn from communal interactions, and how to integrate head learning with things of the heart and the hands.

Holistic learning has been lost to our society. Although Bede skips over such things, it seems clear that Irish monastics were often warriors who learned to integrate their physical and spiritual natures. Feats of endurance and daring in the inner life and in service to others marked them. The custom of standing in cold water, chanting praises and prayers, is one example. Cuthbert, an English product of Aidan's mission, like earlier Celtic Christians, practised it.

How may we develop such a holistic and integrative approach? Friends tell me of their rites of passage. They immerse themselves in water in order to get the depths of their being immersed in God. They see this as a pattern. They wrestle or roll in mud in order to become at home with the elements. They hit bales with sticks, in order to bring out things they are angry about. They run the gauntlet: after recalling negative things said about them by peers, which have stunted their lives, they tell these to the group, who yell them out while they run through the group and break the power of the negativities. They end their initiation weekends with chants of scripture so that their dysfunctional patterns are replaced with patterns of prayer and poise. This is in stark contrast to the absence of any rites of passage in our society, or to sick rites such as those practised by drunken rugby club members who strip naked and have sex with women for whom they have no respect. The Christian rites of initiation help men get in touch with their feminine and masculine dimensions, and to be tender and true.

I imagine Aidan seeing each person he met on his travels or at royal centres as children of God, with a capacity to learn less systematically, but just as really, from God in the Gospel stories and in everyday life. Ask, 'What is the God-shaped way of learning that best suits this person?' as you meet people today.

I imagine Aidan asking boys in his schools not to blame themselves or others for mistakes, but asking what they had learned from their experiences. 'If life is viewed as a maze, every mistake is an unnecessary detour and a waste of time. If life is a labyrinth, then every mistake is a part of the path and an indispensable master teacher.'[37] Before you sleep, reflect on lessons you have learned from things that have gone wrong or right during the day.

A little boy named Colton Burpo nearly died and apparently went to heaven. 'What did you do in heaven?' his father asked him. 'Homework,' he replied. 'Jesus was my teacher. Like school.

Jesus gave me work to do and that was my favourite part of heaven.'[38] What homework might Jesus wish to give you or those you care for?

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Revd Ray Simpson is a founder of the international new monastic movement known as The Community of Aidan and Hilda and is principal tutor of its Celtic Christian Studies programmes. He has written more than 30 books on spirituality and lives on Lindisfarne, offering a ministry of counsel and support to visitors, especially those in church leadership. He leads retreats on several continents.

Revd Brent Lyons-Lee contributes material from an Australian cross-cultural mission perspective. He is part of the Baptist Union Mission Catalyst team (Victoria, Australia) and a member of The Community of Aidan and Hilda, and has co-written with Ray a book that explores indigenous mission in Australia, Celtic Spirituality in an Australian Landscape *(St Aidan Press).*

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