

Good company: Genesis 11:1-9; John 14:8-17

by [Amanda Wright](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, said that in order to form community, people must be engaged in a “demanding common task.” In his case the task was to rebuild the accommodation areas of Iona Abbey. The group that he led included people with considerable formal education (trainee ministers), who were used to working with the written and spoken word, as well as people with little education—unemployed men from the most depressed parts of Glasgow who were manually skilled and practically minded. These men and women formed community out of purpose and in difficult conditions. In the late 1930s they shared what they had and learned from each other. They built with stone and with their lives, even though they could not know what the results of their work would be.

The people of the earth in Genesis 11 also joined together in a demanding common task; they, however, knew exactly what they were aiming for. They wanted to get to God, to make their way to heaven by building a tower that reached up to the sky. Why? What need drove them to this costly and time-consuming exercise?

Maybe they were experiencing the need to have control over their surroundings and their future, to be safely gathered and protected against their enemies, to dominate. Maybe they thought that they should and could be as God, able to direct events, to protect themselves from unseen danger, to show others their cleverness and wealth. They built to reach up to the heavens, but maybe they should have built a place suitable for heaven to come down to them.

When I was in my early teens, I used to watch films and TV programs with romantic heroines. I particularly liked the actresses with luxurious dresses, especially as I wasn't much of a dress wearer myself—I found them too fussy and, as this was the '70s, usually too short. For a while after I'd seen a program, I'd find myself remembering particular mannerisms and turns of phrase that a character used, and even taking on some aspects of them myself. I would imitate a character's walk, maybe, or practice turning my head gracefully or resting my hands on the banister rail coming downstairs. Until a new program came on, I inhabited one particular character, or, rather, it inhabited me. It lived in me and I took on some of its

characteristics.

John records in his Gospel that Jesus describes the Spirit as coming to dwell with the disciples. Here is a word that has been used before, right at the beginning of the Gospel, describing Jesus, the word made flesh, coming to dwell with us, full of grace and truth. The Word comes into the created world and makes his home among us. A woman is willing to say yes to the purposes of God and to make a place of welcome in her body. The small family that is formed by this task offers hospitality to the Lord of all, while God offers all humanity hospitality by inviting us to join the household of heaven.

I am startled again as I remind myself that God likes my company. God seeks me and desires to dwell with me, to abide with me, to stay. The conversations that John remembered, meditated on, recorded for others, are a reminder that Jesus wanted to be with his friends in a community of mutual love. Being around and about was not enough. God wishes to be with those he loves, not hovering above in some high heaven. What God waits for is a welcome, the hospitality which says, "Come in, there is a place for you here." How do we welcome God? We keep, or observe, the commands that Jesus gave—that is, we keep an eye on them, keep them in mind, at work within the heart. And what commands does Jesus give us? Love one another as I have loved you. Jesus always looks to the Father, knowing that God is gathering those around him into a household, a home, a community by the working of that same love. The dwelling place that we seek to build is constructed piece by piece from God's longing for all of creation to be reconciled. The hospitality that we offer is a cup-full scooped from the ocean of God's welcome home.

The people of Babel tried their hardest to get to God. But since their underlying motive was to protect themselves, to elevate themselves, to please themselves, they ended up being scattered as they separated themselves from all those round about them. They forgot that they were all creatures of God, who chose to seek welcome in the midst of an unsettled country, to build a dwelling place with the lives of ordinary people, to make whole the earth by seeding it with heaven. The Spirit will abide with us and stay with us. God-Still-with-Us will make a home.

So, what will this home be like? Last spring I decided to thin and trim the top off a large bush that was choked with dead wood and becoming quite ragged. I fought my way through the branches with my long-handled pruning shears and started cutting frantically while standing inside the bush. A neighbor, watching from a window, was

intrigued to see a large plant shuddering violently for no apparent reason. He came out to investigate and, after realizing what was going on, stopped me, gently made some helpful suggestions, and took a turn with the shears until the work was done.

In God's home, such "simple" love and hospitality will be available to all. The reconciling activity of God will be there in the lives of those whose eyes are open and whose hearts are filled with the commands of love.