

## **The red dust meets the bitumen: An experience of interchurch family life in Australia**

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**Margie:** One of the things we have learned is that the title of our talk doesn't work in the US. No-one knows what bitumen is. So, please translate the word in your mind to whatever word is familiar to you for the black stuff that our roads are made of – bitumen, asphalt or tarmac. Firstly, a bit about us and our differing paths to a marriage that has lasted almost 30 years.

**Jeff:** I was born amidst the red dust of Kalgoorlie, a gold mining town on the fringe of the desert in Western Australia. I was a 'cradle Catholic', baptized into the Catholic Church even though my parents were only nominally Catholic.

I was educated by nuns and brothers in Catholic schools. At the second school in an even smaller mining town, the Reverend Mother took a particular interest in me. She made provision for me to do subjects more advanced than those of other students, particularly a subject on Scripture, which gave me a more extensive familiarity with the land and history of Israel and with the New Testament. I attended daily Mass regularly as an altar boy, and developed an inclination to enter either the priesthood or religious life.

Perhaps my quest for understanding the Bible came partly from needing to frequently defend my faith against my father who had rejected Catholicism, and often engaged me in arguments about it. However, when I decided to travel to a larger town for higher secondary education to enable me to join the teaching order known as the Irish Christian Brothers, he relented and let me go. My eventual decision to join that order was largely based on my desire to become a teacher.

A local priest lent me some books on theology that piqued my interest in a deeper theology than I had previously encountered. Not many teenage boys in Kalgoorlie would have purchased their own copy of the Documents of Vatican 2.

I was at a Christian Brothers' school and naturally the brothers did what they could to support my vocation. When I needed to travel to Melbourne for the formation, the principal of the school paid my travel costs. Having six children, my parents simply couldn't have afforded it.

My formation in religious life began immediately after I finished secondary school and took three years. It was heavily influenced by the ideas of the recent Vatican Council. Ecumenism and justice were important features of the content. These elements were important in the way that Margie and I met. For the next decade and a half I taught in the Brothers' schools.

Ecumenism and Justice are still central to my life and are also the reason I so appreciate my current position with the National Council of Churches in Australia.

**Margie:** I was born in Norway of a Norwegian father and an Australian mother. Coming from a long line of Methodists, Mum wanted me baptized in the Methodist church. But she was overruled by her mother-in-law who insisted that I should not be one of those sect children.

From my earliest days I went camping with my family. This was not a posh tent in a holiday park. This was bush camping. As I got older, I began to dislike this form of holiday more and more until the famous day when dad said that I was born with bitumen between my toes.

When we came to Australia I went to Presbyterian and Methodist Sunday Schools. For a time I went to Christian Endeavour which got me into a Sunday routine of Christian Endeavour, morning church, afternoon Sunday School, evening church and finally youth group. Many years later I came across the Endeavour pledge, which I had long forgotten. Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I promise that I will do whatever he would have me do. I will pray and read the Bible every day and take part in the meeting whenever I am asked to do so. Not a bad rule for life.

I sat on the edge of the church until I read the Diary of Anne Frank. I knew that anyone who knew about Jesus, but did not accept him as their personal Lord and Saviour, would go to hell. Anne wrote that she and her dad read the New Testament. I felt that you could not hope to find a more pure and holy soul than Anne Frank and that if God was going to consign her to hell, you could include me out.

My path back to the church began with having my eldest daughter baptized. I had promised my best friend at school that she could be Godmother when the time came, so it seemed that baptism was essential if I were to keep that promise. When my second daughter was born, I told my then husband that I didn't believe all that stuff and that I couldn't do it with integrity. He persuaded me by saying that we couldn't have one done and not the other. I felt that I couldn't front up to get the second kid done when they hadn't seen me for two years, so I started going to church. But I was adamant that I was not a Christian. That term carried too much baggage from my Methodist past where what made you a Christian was that you didn't drink, smoke, swear, gamble or dance.

The people at the local Methodist Church welcomed me with open arms, with all my questions and doubts.

When I left my first husband it would have been easy to drift away from the church, but something had been kindled within me. Eventually I had a powerful experience of Jesus and set my life to following him. From my training in Christian Endeavour, I knew that I needed to belong to a Christian community, but which one?

Culturally, I had a lot in common with the Uniting Church in Australia. This denomination was founded in 1977 from a union of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches. At the same time I found the sense of mystery and transcendence in the Catholic church very attractive. For a long time I went to the Uniting Church on a Sunday morning and to mass at night. I also went regularly to the Carmelite monastery where one of the externs took me under her wing.

But eventually the Catholic church with its maleness and hierarchy was a step too far. I decided that the Uniting Church was the best of a bad lot. I continued going to mass, just because I loved it. And it was there that the girl with the bitumen between her toes met the boy with the red dust between his.

Over the two years when our relationship was developing, several factors informed our spirituality and supported us:

- our participation in Action for World Development, an ecumenical movement for justice
- saying the Rosary together over the phone every night when we only saw each other occasionally
- the Rock Mass at the Catholic Cathedral in Adelaide
- being part of a dynamic Uniting Church community

I'm sure you can appreciate how difficult it would be for a divorced Protestant to marry a Christian Brother with the full blessing of the Catholic church. I found out more about Catholic red tape than I ever wanted to learn, but that is another story.

**Jeff:** Our wedding was a great celebration. It was conducted as part of the regular Sunday morning worship at Margie's church. Our Catholic priest preached and gave the nuptial blessing. A Baptist minister who was a particular friend of ours did one of the readings.

For close to thirty years now we have lived as an inter-church couple. For us, this has meant a life of challenge, sometimes of heartache but mostly of great blessing. We have found this to be true of other couples in our situation. We have received a lot of support and encouragement along the way. Especially we would like to name our very dear friend, the late Fr Adrian Lyons SJ who walked this ecumenical journey with us for over three decades until his untimely death a year ago.

We have had help and support from Uniting Church folk as well, but the situation is quite different. In the Uniting Church, we ask what is termed the ecumenical question: Is someone else already doing this, or can we do it with another church?

A basic principle of our relationship has been that "because I love and respect you, I love and respect the tradition that has made you who you are." Thus we are open to receiving the gifts that each tradition has, and we have experienced a broadening and deepening of our Christian life as a result.

**Margie:** In 1999 the national dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia produced a report: *Interchurch Marriages: Their Ecumenical Challenge and Significance for our Churches*. This was approved by the Australian Catholic bishops Conference and the Uniting Church in Australia Standing Committee on behalf of the Assembly, our national body.

The late Bishop Michael Putney was a member of that dialogue group.

This document began by describing the phenomenon of interchurch marriage. Taking a definition from George Kilcourse's book, *Double Belonging*, the document says that: "an interchurch marriage is defined as the marriage of two baptised Christians from different traditions, in which each spouse participates actively in his or her particular church, and in which each spouse takes an active, conscientious role in the education of the children."

After surveying each church, the dialogue group found that priests and ministers rarely encounter the situation where both parties are equally committed to their religious traditions. But where they do, the dialogue group's questionnaire to Catholic priests found what they describe as an almost bewildering variety of attitudes and practices. There is no one size fits all. The report lists a variety of ways in which couples have lived

with denominational differences. Two examples, each partner might attend their own church and worship at the other on special occasions. One child might be baptized in one church and the second in another.

In our own situation, we have usually attended Mass on Saturday night and the Uniting Church on Sunday morning.

Like many other couples, we struggled over where to have our children baptized. After a lot of soul searching, we eventually had them baptized in the Uniting Church in a ceremony incorporating many elements of Catholic baptism. Later each made her first communion in the Catholic Church.

The report acknowledges that such involvement in two churches can mean a stretching of time and resources. This can usually be dealt with with good humour and a sense of give and take. For example, recently Jeff's priest rang and asked me if Jeff would be available to read at the Easter Vigil. "Nah," I said. "I've got first dibs on him for the Vigil, but you can have him on Easter Day."

**Jeff:** As the report sums up: "It is necessary ... that we respect the decisions others make as an expression of their faith in Jesus Christ, the one Lord of the church."

The living out of this 'dual belonging' is deeply affected by the attitude of welcome that each church gives to the partner of the other denomination. Our experience has varied – in two Catholic churches in particular, Margie was recognized and welcomed warmly, in other cases largely ignored. The Uniting Church has a category of belonging termed Member in Association. Hence I have been accepted into membership, even to participating in a leadership council.

What was especially notable in the report was that the couples made the decisions about the upbringing of their children privately, without talking to their respective clergy who were then presented with a fait accompli.

Pastors indicated a desire for some guidelines to support couples in their decision-making. The dialogue group suggested that their report might help those marriages which at present are only 'mixed' to become truly interchurch marriages and families, and be a real catalyst for ecumenism.

**Margie:** Many years ago I worked with Gayle, a Catholic woman. When she was ten years old, she was invited to be flower girl at her Anglican cousin's wedding. Their parish priest told her father that the family should not attend an Anglican church. Her father said that it was his niece who was getting married, his daughter was going to be flower girl and that was that. It has been my contention that it is people like Gayle's father who have been as successful ecumenists in their civil disobedience as learned people in formal dialogue.

Where the separation of the churches can cause particularly painful experiences is in differing approaches to Eucharistic hospitality. This has led us, and many couples, to tears and to walking out of services. Couples have responded to this challenge in different ways.

As the dialogue report sets out very clearly, the Catholic church can extend Eucharistic hospitality to a non-Catholic in certain very specific circumstances. However, these restrictions are interpreted very broadly in many parishes. In some churches it has been

made very clear that I am not welcome to receive communion. In those cases, since communion is such an integral part of the Mass, I choose not to attend. In other Catholic parishes I have been made very welcome, as is the case in our current parish. The Uniting Church practises an open table, so Jeff is welcome to receive at any time.

It seems strange that a couple who are united by Baptism and by Marriage, should be separated at the Lord's table.

**Jeff:** Interchurch marriages might therefore provide our churches with a new paradigm for the restoration of Christian unity and point out the urgency of seeking it, since the experiences of these couples and their children make manifest in less formal ways some of the principles and possibilities of church unity that are discussed and established at higher theological and authoritative levels.

**Margie:** As an interchurch couple we welcome this report. We would strongly encourage its implementation in Australian Catholic and Uniting churches. It is a step on the way, but it is only a step on the way. Its promise has not always been fulfilled. A Uniting Church couple in my congregation attended the funeral mass of their Catholic niece and were told very clearly that they should not receive communion. I encouraged them to contact the priest and tell them how they felt. He visited, to his credit, and told them that he was above all a servant of the pope. I then wrote to him, saying that he may have forgotten this document, pointing out that a funeral is specified as one occasion where Eucharistic hospitality might be practiced.

When we are discouraged, we pause and take the long view. Fifty years ago, interchurch couples had to be married in the sacristy of the Catholic church, not in front of the altar. This deeply affected a friend of ours who married a faithful Christian man, and their marriage lasted until his death. Even many decades on, she broke down in tears when recounting the story of their wedding.

This report shows how far attitudes have changed when it says that rather than the churches needing to forgive interchurch couples, the couples need to forgive the churches for the difficulties that the divisions cause.

**Jeff:** A further quote is a very hopeful sign for the future: "So the presence of such couples in our midst may be a sign of God's unnerving and grace-full call to us. Thus the pastoral context moves from a problem to an opportunity. It may move from our producing an answer to an issue to our being addressed by God's Spirit."

Or, as interchurch couples often say, "We are a prophetic sign, not a problem." While each interchurch family has a different story to tell, we are grateful for the presence of God in our story.

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