

Liberté chrétienne des foyers mixtes au sein de Eglises et de leurs autorités

*Fifth conference of French-speaking interchurch families
13-14 May 2006, Lyon-Francheville*

Nearly 200 participants, including 70 couples, 47 children and 20 church and ecumenical leaders attended this year's biennial meeting of interchurch families in France. They came from France itself, from French-speaking Switzerland, and one representative from England. The weekend was very well organised by the Centre St-Irénée in Lyon and a group of families from the Lyon area.

Following the publication by the ecumenical Groupe des Dombes in 2005 of a book entitled 'One master: the authority of doctrine within the churches', it was decided to focus on this subject from the point of view of interchurch families, to reflect on the themes of authority, liberty, responsibility, and what such families can contribute to ecumenical dialogue, under the title: 'Christian liberty of interchurch families within the churches and their authorities.'

The conference took place at the Maison St Joseph at Francheville on the outskirts of Lyon, a centre attached to a Catholic seminary, where many of the participants were excellently lodged and fed. The children were beautifully cared for by a group of Scouts de France (an RC organisation) who camped in the gardens. Significant attendees from among church and ecumenical leaders, and other speakers, were:

- Pastor Jean-Arnold de Clermont, Reformed, President of the French Protestant Federation, President of the Council of Christian Churches in France, President of the Conference of European Churches.
- Mgr Hervé Giraud, Auxiliary RC Bishop of the Lyon diocese, former chaplain to interchurch families in the Ardèche region.
- Pastor Gill Daudé, Reformed, ecumenical delegate to the French Protestant Federation
- Pastor Martin Max Hoegger, Reformed, ecumenical delegate from Switzerland
- Fr Michel Mallèvre, Dominican, Director of the French National Secretariat of Christian Unity
- Mme Béatrice Soltner, journalist from French Christian Radio

and a dozen other members of the clergy from different Christian backgrounds.

Plenary sessions were moderated by Mme Soltner, and the keynote speakers on the theme were Pastor de Clermont, Mgr Giraud and Pastor Daudé, who each gave an address followed by questions and comments from the floor.

Workshops during the afternoon covered a wide range of topics and texts allied to the overall theme. Discussions were lively and enabled participants as usual at interchurch family meetings to share their personal experiences. Each group prepared questions which were fed into the plenary session of the next day, where an extended round table discussion included the other ecumenical representatives. There was lively discussion between them on questions such as:

- How important is it for interchurch families to deepen their theological knowledge to solve some of their problems which are linked to a difference in Christian cultures between them?
- How can a new generation of interchurch families benefit from the experience of their forerunners, given that the concept of authority is no longer the same as in the 50s?
- How and where should the churches' authority be exercised: in doctrinal matters, in family matters, in the socio-economic field?
- How do we reconcile personal conscience and the doctrine of the magisterium?
- Various recent events like the Iraq war and questions of immigration have shown that the churches are not listened to on subjects where they have some credibility. Do these institutions still have authority in society today?
- History, with the Second World War, has shown that the churches used to have a culture of obedience: what do you see as critical moments of obedience and disobedience in their history?
- Do our churches still have a sense of service? Isn't power a weakness behind which a body takes refuge when it has no more authority?
- Does authority help us to grow in faith? The authority of conscience perceived through discussion with another seems essential to interchurch families. How can we recognise when we are well-grounded in our faith?
- How can we create an ecclesiology of communion? How can we live in this communion?
- Can the churches agree with each other? A question to the Catholic Church: what are the obstacles which remain to intercommunion when holding an ecumenical service? A question to the Protestant churches: what importance do Protestants attach to 20 centuries of Christian history?
- Why do we regularly have to defend what has already been granted (in the 1983 text), instead of continuing our reflection into other fields?
- The authoritative word of God is a liberating word, and the authority of the Church should be a liberating way for all. How can my verbal witness and my way of life be authoritative in my spouse's community?
- Children cannot live in the freedom of Christ without the support of their parents, youth groups and the Church ... how can these work together to encourage freedom of choice among their children?
- Is it a real difficulty for the children of interchurch families to find their place?
- Should interchurch families be more embedded in their churches? Should they be more visible? And should interchurch marriage only affect their private lives? Isn't the hope engendered by these marriages an ecumenical awakening?
- How can interchurch families be more visible?

Mme Soltner then invited Frère Franck Lemaître and Pasteur Samuel Amedro to conclude by expressing what had struck them in the course of the discussions.

Frère Franck pointed to the need to confront the questions of liberty and authority ecumenically, and said it wasn't only interchurch families who had these questions. He invited foyers mixtes to be 'domestic church', to practise an open table as they wished it could be among the churches, to live with Christ always present in their lives, in order to create the conditions necessary for his presence in a society which is less and less conformist. A table too where memory can tell again and again the history of the churches and their relationships, sometimes difficult, sometimes not, can read again the words of the fathers of the Church, can develop an interest in Judaism. An open table for seekers after truth, where theology has a significant and creative place, where there may be some modest experimentation of what life in

full communion might be, where an ecclesiology of such a communion might develop. An open table which might be extended to include guests who are newer to the French and Swiss Christian landscape.

Pasteur Samuel talked about the balance of the relationship between the institution and the individual. Institutions are called to preach the gospel today with the words of today, but nourished with the traditions of the past. Authority can only be recognised when it helps people to grow, and allows free speech because it is rooted in something beyond ourselves. An institution creates a framework which can protect it from the manipulative power of people who really don't help that growth. Conscience needs to be illumined by the Scriptures, communion by tradition and welcome of the other. Faith is a risk rather than an assurance, so we can grow into an ecclesiology of communion. This ecclesiology is a work in progress, a mutual gift, a gift of God, with all its difficulty. He called on foyers mixtes to be seekers after truth rather than 'affirmers' of truths, to be bridges, witnesses, compass needles, advocates, to be visible by welcoming people to their table and by going to the table of others. Nobody else will take this place which is quite specially theirs.

My principal recollection of the weekend is the large number of young families with children, many of whom came for the first time to a Foyers Mixtes conference. The children were excellently led and contributed beautifully to one of the acts of worship based round the Noah's Ark story. The input from speakers was often profoundly philosophical in the way the French do so well, and was matched by the enthusiastic and energetic debate of those who attended, the question of liberty v. authority touching deeply the French psyche and historical consciousness. Light-hearted moments were not lacking, either, particularly during the Saturday night entertainment by a blind magician who kept us literally spellbound for two hours, aided by his volunteer assistants 'Harry' and 'Marie' Potter!

The [Association Française des Foyers Mixtes Interconfessionnels Chrétiens](#) (AFFMIC) is growing in membership and fostering closer relationships with church leaders. May it continue to be a driving force within the ecumenical movement in France and round the world!

(If you would like further details in French of the various talks and workshops, please get in touch.)

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[Previous](#) | [Next](#)

Return to [IFIN index](#)