

Interchurch Families as Pioneers

There was a time when 'mixed marriages' were looked upon as a problem. People were discouraged from marrying someone from another denomination, for fear that their Catholic faith would be put at risk. Today, however, many claim that those in 'interchurch marriages' are pioneers, who are witnesses not just to the possibility of unity in the Church but also to a way of life that is enriched rather than torn apart by diversity. When we speak of interchurch families we are not simply speaking of people from two different church traditions or denominations marrying. The emphasis is on people who are active in their churches and whose identity has been formed within a particular church community. They are engaged in the life of their own church and wish to remain so. They also hope that as a couple they can be active in both churches.

Marriage is always the meeting of two different people: a man and a woman, each with their own experience of family life, of love, of growing up, of developing personal identity, of reconciliation, and of ways of experiencing God. All of this has taken place in various communities, the most basic of which is the family, but which also extends to relatives and friends, places of education, and the Church. The starting point for all marriage is diversity and over time married partners grow together as a couple and a family.

Rather than being a problem, diversity can be a source of great richness. Each brings not only the personal gifts that every person brings to a marriage, but also the spiritual gifts that come from belonging to a particular church community with its own traditions of prayer and worship, its own experiences of community life, and its own ethos. In this new family these gifts are the foundation of the marital and family spirituality that will develop over time.

I have heard moving stories of people at important moments in the life of their family, such as a birth or a death, when the member who belongs to one church was supported more by the congregation of their partner's church than by their own. It may be that the gift of hospitality is stronger in one church tradition and is experienced as something unexpected.

Of course, interchurch families can also experience struggles and disappointments. For all the wonderful experiences of being welcomed by the members of another church, there are the sad tales of being rejected by a church community. Sadly, members of the congregation may lack the spiritual maturity to welcome the interchurch family. Many a couple have spoken of the often difficult task of helping some church members grow spiritually so that they can welcome other members to their congregation. The basic issue here is one of identity. Some members of the congregation can feel that their denominational identity is under threat.

This is one of the important aspects of the spiritual development that takes place in an interchurch family. The personal and spiritual identity of the husband and wife – formed in their own church – is enriched by their involvement in the other church. Things, however, can be a little more complex for their children, who grow up in both churches and do not identify themselves as belonging more to one than the other. This is often referred to as 'double belonging'. The analogy is sometimes made with being bilingual (and bi-cultural): you do not necessarily mix the two churches up, but you are at home equally in both of them.

Even with this sense of belonging, there are institutional questions about the sacramental life of interchurch families. For example, in which church will a child be baptised? How will the baptism take account of the lively faith of both parents, who are from different churches? The family is a place of nurture, where identity is shaped and the experience of faith nourishes each member and creates bonds between them. If they are not able to share together in a

sacramental life, especially the Eucharist, the great sacrament of unity, then the pain is intense. This is an area of discussion among interchurch families and slowly progress is being made to respond to this deeply spiritual need.

I have spoken above mainly of the gifts and challenges experienced by interchurch families themselves. However, they are also a source of spiritual encouragement to other members of the Christian community. In this sense they are a gift to our churches. The gift they offer is the concrete witness to the possibility of unity for the churches.

There is a spirituality here, which has developed out of reflection on the Letter to the Ephesians. The letter speaks about God's plan for the whole of humanity being realised and fulfilled in Jesus. It is a plan for the unity of creation. It is no accident that the letter quotes Genesis 2:24, which speaks of the two becoming one flesh. (Ephesians 5:31). The story in Genesis went on to say that the man and the woman became estranged from each other and from God. The consequences of this Fall were serious and led to the breakdown of communities and relationships: Cain killed his brother Abel; the Tower of Babel represents the inability of whole communities to communicate with each other. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians tells us that Jesus has broken down this dividing wall and that God's plan for one new humanity is being realised. In this plan marriage between Christians is a sign of a reconciled humanity.

Interchurch couples give a unique witness to this great Mystery. They show that unity is possible. They show that it involves a readiness to engage in a genuine dialogue. Interchurch couples show that the diverse gifts they bring are truly for the building up of relationships and not for their destruction. They show that the fruit of this is hospitality and a deep sense of welcome. They show the meaning of Christian discipleship.

This is why interchurch couples are pioneers. They challenge the churches to hasten to live the unity that is God's gift. They show society and the Church that God's gift can be received with graciousness and can be a source of a deeper, more fulfilled life.

Gerard Kelly is a Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of Sydney. He lectures in theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, where he is also the President. In August 2005 he participated in the 11th International Interchurch Families Conference in Newcastle NSW. He is actively involved in the ecumenical movement, and represents the Roman Catholic Church in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues.

[←Previous](#) | [Next→](#)

Return to [IFIN Index](#)