

‘Mein Glaube: Wie ich wurde, was ich bin’ Netzwerk Ökumene: konfessionsverbindende Paare und Familien in Deutschland – Tagung in Rudolstadt

Our story begins at the 2006 Swanwick conference when Melanie Finch and Bev Hollins told us about their trip to Brazil to attend the WCC 9th General Assembly. We were struck that the ‘inter’ dimension of ‘interchurch’ represents not only interdenominational ties but also international ties. Not only how experiences of Christianity and interchurch families can vary from country to country, but also that we are part of a much wider family than our British group. Catherine being a German-speaker and both of us being up for a bit of a challenge, we asked to attend the annual German interchurch family’s conference in February. The conference was held in Rudolstadt (30km south of Weimar in old East Germany). The conference theme was ‘Mein Glaube: Wie ich wurde was ich bin’, which roughly translates as ‘My faith: how I got here, what I am.’

Catherine arrived a couple of days before the conference and stayed with one of the families attending the conference, so she could psyche up her German brain. They were a lovely family and were keen to show her as much of their area and German life as was possible to see in two and a half days! George finished her university term later and so came straight to the conference. This involved a rather epic journey – first flying from Glasgow to London to drop off her stuff from uni, before flying to Germany after 4 hours sleep followed by a couple of train journeys.

The conference started on the Friday evening with a meal, before the introductory meeting. We then split into 3 groups of about 20 and each couple went round in turn and told their story – which partner was what denomination, how they had married, what they had done with their children and any problems they had encountered along the way. A couple of stories in particular stood out. Firstly was the story of a couple who were so frustrated by the fact that the Lutheran husband was not allowed to receive communion at the Catholic church, that they took it into their own hands. The couple would go up communion together – the Catholic wife to receive communion, the Lutheran to receive a blessing. Once the Catholic had received the host she broke it in two and gave the other half to her Lutheran partner! After a while, the more liberal of their two priests gave in and started to give them a host each.

Lots of couples had very positive tales to tell of both being so heavily involved in one another’s parishes, that the distinction of being from another denomination became so blurred, to the extent that fellow church-goers regularly mixed up who came from which church. In one case, the Catholic husband was invited to lead a service at his wife’s Lutheran church when the pastor was ill, because of the huge role he played in the church. Very positive stories indeed! One Catholic lady, now sadly widowed, admitted that through her interchurch marriage she learnt about the Lutheran doctrine and felt that it was more relevant to her than the Catholic doctrine, but wouldn’t convert, because, as she said ‘Once a Catholic, always a Catholic!’

Ines (the mother of the family Catherine stayed with) told her about some of the things they had learnt since joining the organisation and first attending the conference roughly 3 years ago. At the time I didn’t fully understand the complications of ‘double belonging’ in Germany and so the stories seemed a little odd, but later Melanie Finch explained the issues to me. Basically, Germans can choose to pay a proportion of their taxes to the Church. Because of this, an Interchurch child has to be baptised and confirmed in one Church, and is considered primarily a member of that Church. Although the child is still free to attend both churches, they will be treated as a pure Protestant or Catholic in many aspects of their life, particularly at school where RE classes are segregated into Protestant and Catholic. This does not commit the child to that denomination – they can choose to convert, but the initial choice is the parents’.

Some of the different approaches that parents took to reach this difficult decision were rather interesting:

- Baptise all the children in the denomination of the church where the parents both felt most at home
- Baptise them all to the denomination of the mother, as she is at home more than the father and therefore has more contact **to** the children (not my opinion!)

- Baptise all sons in the father's denomination and all daughters in the mother's
- Alternate the denomination of each child – 1 Catholic, 1 Lutheran, 1 Catholic, 1 Lutheran

We found the first evening rather overwhelming. George was attempting to shake the cobwebs off her very sketchy German and despite speaking German, there was a lot of ecumenical vocabulary that was outside Catherine's knowledge. There were also quite a few things we didn't understand, because we didn't have the background knowledge of how interchurch matters work differently in Germany. We also found it hard knowing so few people, compared to knowing most at Swanwick. Happily, by the end of the weekend, all of these things had been reversed – we soaked up lots of new vocabulary, learnt more of the issues that interchurch families face in Germany and got to know quite a few people – we even got an invitation to go and visit a couple whenever we wanted!

The second day we left the main session and instead gathered the children together to speak about what the conference offers for them. We discussed the children's and YAG programmes at Swanwick and asked them what kind of thing they would want from their own programme. Several parents had approached us to ask if we could talk to the children about how the children's programme works in England with the view of inspiring them to pursue something similar. As the group of children is getting slightly older, some of the parents felt that the programme was no longer as relevant for the older children and teenagers. There is quite a big group of 11 year olds and I think the parents wanted to find out about organising something over the next couple of years to be ready for this group. The conference has also dramatically increased in size over the last few years, meaning that it's become slightly less practical for all of the children to be in one big group.

We were very conscious that an exact replication of the AIF programme wasn't what was needed. For one thing, the conference is smaller than Swanwick, the oldest children were 15/16 years old and the experience of German interchurch children is in many ways very different. We were also aware that the motivation for the group needed to come from the young people themselves. We decided just to have an informal chat with the older children about some aspects of our programme in the hope that this would encourage them to think about what they might want.

We started by asking what kind of things they'd been doing in their programme at the moment. They do a variety of activities including crafts, games and preparing a sketch for the Sunday service. They seemed to really enjoy the activities that were organised, but the older ones especially commented that a lot of the activities were, by necessity, aimed at the younger children because of the age range of the group. We then talked to them a bit about the children's programmes and YAG- especially about the Interdependent and how we organise our programme for Swanwick.

That afternoon we had a couple of hours of free time, so we decided to go exploring. The conference centre was 15 minutes drive from the nearest town so we thought we'd go for a walk to see if we really were as 'in the middle of nowhere' as we thought! We found a little village called Zeigerheim, about 3km away from the conference centre and had some apple strudel (yummy!) in a slightly eerie Gasthaus.

The afternoon was spent in small groups of six or seven which worked really well, because the more intimate approach meant that people were happy to stop and explain things that we hadn't understood. It also allowed us to get to know a few people well. It was in these discussion groups that problems for the churches in Germany specifically, arose. A lot of Germany's experience with its churches comes from its history. A notable period of history that affected the people we met was the expulsion of native Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia (as well as other Eastern countries) after the end of the war. Not only did they have to find new places to live, but also new churches, often of a different denomination than they were used to. However, the biggest effect on the religious life of Germans was the division of Germany into East and West. Christians in communist East Germany faced huge problems, as religion and Communism were fundamentally incompatible. To enforce this, priests were forced to get 'proper jobs' as the priesthood was not seen as real employment. Lots of people had stories to tell of how this affected them in their religious practice.

Each evening was rounded off with an informal get together, where people could come and go as they please and chat to lots of different people. People were very approachable and were interested to find

out how similar the English conference was, how long it lasted, how it is organised, whether the children had their own programme and so on.

The Sunday morning started with an act of worship with a fantastic role-play that the children had prepared (complete with costumes!) on the Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14: 15-24). And after the closing talk and a short feedback session, we shared lunch together for the last time before we went our separate ways.

We both thoroughly enjoyed the weekend and felt that we took a lot away from it. We were both very glad we had attended and had made some new friends. Following the conference we both stayed in Germany for a few more days, visiting friends, before returning home. We would like to thank Rosmarie and Rudolf Lauber, for orchestrating our visit, organising host families, station pick-ups etc. Also a huge thank you goes to everyone who attended the conference who were so friendly and welcoming. (George would also like to thank Cat for her masterful translating!)

Georgina Walsh and Catherine Garsed

[←Previous](#) | [Next→](#)

Return to [IFIN Index](#)