

Netzwerk Ökumene: konfessionsverbindende Paare und Familien

1.3.2005

Report on the Annual Conference, Friday 18 to Sunday 20 February 2005, held at the Aichenbach Retreat Centre, Schorndorf

Theme: Interchurch couples and church leaders: what do we hope, what do we expect from one another?

Participants: Around 40 adults and 15 children (see participants' list); representing their churches, Deacon Friedl (Roman Catholic), Deacon Junt (Protestant), and Superintendent Quack from the Protestant church headquarters in Stuttgart took part in some of the sessions; Pastor Hermann Barth from Weil der Stadt (in spite of recent 'flu!) took part on Saturday and Sunday. Frank Waier, a journalist from Bavarian radio, was present for the entire conference, and is making a programme about our annual conference. Oliver Hillinger, journalist responsible for the Schorndorf news, the Württemberg parish newsletter and the Catholic Sunday news sheet, was present for some sessions, (as was press photographer Habermann). On Friday evening there was a visit from the gospel singer B. Free from Backnang. On Saturday morning Dr Gebhard Fürst, bishop of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, and Dr Gerhard Maier, bishop of the Protestant church district of Württemberg came to give presentations.

Friday, 18 February

19:15 Introductions

Greeting by Beate Beyer.

The children introduced themselves, then went to the room set aside for them, where they were looked after by Ms Marlis Kiunke.

Nicole Huber occupied the time until Gaukels' arrival by presenting the team leadership.

Gabriele and Christoph Gaukel placed pictures in the centre of the floor. Everyone went silently around these, and selected a picture.

Then the actual introductions began (moderated by Gabriele and Christoph Gaukel). Each person introduced him or herself using the picture chosen, then laid the picture in the centre of the floor.

21:30 Gospel singing (moderated by Nicole Huber)

The singer B. Free sang several gospel songs of his own composition, accompanied on the piano. His motto was: 'music which enters the soul remains there and lives on for ever'. The participants thanked him with a lively burst of applause.

The evening closed with a short prayer.

22:00 Social time together in the meeting room

Saturday, 19 February

8:50 Morning worship (Beate Beyer) using a story by Heinz Erhart: *the Golden Key to the Kingdom of Heaven*.

9:05 Greeting of the bishops (Jörg Beyer)

9:10 Presentation by Bishop Dr. Fürst

He began by quoting from an encyclical of Pope Pius XI from 1930 containing a warning against mixed marriages as a danger to eternal salvation.

Also in the encyclical *Matrimonia Mixta* of Pope Paul VI in 1970 mixed marriage was still viewed in a negative light.

Today this has radically altered. It is recognised that interchurch marriage is an ecumenical opportunity. The bishop stressed this in his address to the participants with the words *you are the spearhead of ecumenism*.

On the question of sharing in the Eucharist he referred to the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, of 2003. It runs (in the English version) *It is a source of joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer the sacraments of the Eucharist.....to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments.....in this case, in fact, the intention is to meet a grave spiritual need for the eternal salvation of an individual believer*.

An important concern was held to be a shared translation of the Bible. At present an ecumenical translation is used in Catholic services, the Lutheran translation in Protestant services.

9.40 Presentation by Bishop Dr. Maier

He welcomed the fact, first, that such a conference for interchurch families takes place, and stressed that marriage is ordained by God, for all people – not only for Christians. The biblical foundation is the story of creation in the book of Genesis. Here the translation should read ‘side’ rather than ‘rib’. He quoted Luther: ‘God instituted marriage’. Through marriage between man and woman a new existence comes into being. Yet marriage is ‘vulnerable’.

The Christian marriage ceremony ought to involve a commitment to a Christian way of life. His recommendation would be for a couple to share the same denomination. Yet he stressed that an interchurch marriage can bring about an expression of this sharing. Essential to it is a conscious awareness of living as Christians, without compulsion, without indifference. But clear arrangements are required over church attendance, upbringing of children, and what to say to the children. The churches need to give sensitive pastoral care to families in mixed marriages.

On the question of sharing in the Eucharist he said ‘I am confident that we are moving in that direction’. But he was of the opinion that ‘we need the strength, on certain questions which we cannot change, to live with them’. He viewed prayer together, reading the Bible together and love of the Church as essential in every Christian, so also in interchurch marriage.

10:10 to 11:30 Discussion of the presentations (moderated by Gudrun Steineck)

In the very lively conversation that followed, the major topic was sharing in the Eucharist and the Lord’s Supper. There was a discussion on the concept put forward by Professor Neuner, that Christian marriage – and so also interchurch marriage – is a kind of ‘house church’; as the Eucharist is an integral element of the Church, so also is it of a house church.

The bishops made clear that the churches are drawing closer to one another: in the Protestant Church the worship includes Holy Communion as an integrated part, in the Catholic Church today nearly all share in Holy Communion. Above all Bishop Fürst stressed, ‘make sure that you know what you are doing’.

One of the participants drew attention to the fact that today a third of families in parishes are of mixed marriages. He suggested that the bishops should address a joint pastoral letter to these families. The bishops did not explore this suggestion. One participant characterised the interchurch family as model for the unity of the churches.

Finally Bishop Maier spoke of the duty that all Christians bear as an essential duty: ‘you are to be my witnesses’.

After lunch:

13.30 Discussion between leadership group and the regional contacts.

Klaus Georgi has put together texts on the subject of ecumenism and interchurch families (Church documents, published works etc.) and put them on a CD in PDF format. He will continue to keep the CD up to date. He gave each member of the leadership group a copy of the CD.

14:00 Singing together with the children (Beate Beyer and Gabriele Gaukel)

Following this the children went tobogganing with Beate Beyer (the conference centre provided the sledges).

14:30 Work groups (with coffee break)

- Group 1: Typical Catholic/typical Protestant – an approach to the theme using drama (Nicole Huber and Christoph Gaukel) with tableaux, movement and short scenes (with and without words). It was very entertaining for everyone, and striking how, using drama, opinions emerge in an authentic way that drives home the points.
- Group 2: Discussion on the conference theme (Jörg Beyer, Olaf Becker and Rudolf Lauber) in its three aspects: Eucharist/Lord’s Supper, living in the parishes, the task of interchurch families. The 16 participants in the group discussion, including Pastor Hermann Barth, worked on the outline of a text to go to church leaders, the press etc.
- Group 3: Musical approach to the theme (Gudrun Steineck). A variety of works of music were played and the participants in the group expressed their impressions in the form of pictures created by each member.

17:00 Plenary reports on the outcomes of the groups (moderated by Bertram Huber)

The pictures created in Group 3 were displayed.

Following this Klaus Georgi introduced three new books on the theme of ecumenism, and also the book by Beate and Jörg Beyer, available for sale at 4 Euros.

After supper:

19:00 Evening prayer (Birgit Frohnhoff and Rosmarie Lauber)

Birgit Frohnhoff led a meditation based on the words of encouragement in Ephesians 4.1-6. Songs from Taizé were sung, using a song book collection. Rosmarie Lauber brought a picture for meditation: the gravestones of a couple in a mixed marriage, lying either side of a wall separating the Catholic from the Protestant area of a cemetery. The gravestones, reaching up and over the top of the wall, are united with one another.

At 19:30 the small children were put to bed.

An editorial team (Jörg Beyer, Olaf Becker, Klaus Georgi and Dietmar Riedhof) worked to produce a text for publication, on the basis of the outline which Group 2 had put together in the afternoon.

20:00 Report on international contacts (Rudolf Lauber)

There was an explanatory commentary on the text in the conference folder (yellow sheet).

Review of the *Katholikentag* (national R.C. Church day) in Ulm and a look forward to the Protestant *Kirchentag* in Hannover 2005 (Rosmarie Lauber). Several participants said that they were ready to help in running the stand.

Following this there was a social time together in the meeting room

Sunday, 20 February

9:30 Family worship together

Pastor Hermann Barth led the celebration of the Eucharist. The biblical readings were of Abraham's journey into the unknown, with God's promise, and of the experience of the disciples on Mount Tabor and their descent into the valley. The children presented a display they had made, based on the readings. Pastor Hermann Barth and Jörg Beyer preached. Their message: 'have no fear, you are on a journey with God!'. The children did the intercessions. The music for the service was organised by Ulrike Becker and her daughter (violin) and Olaf Becker (guitar).

11:00 Final discussion (moderated by Stephan Frohnhoff)

By general consensus the weekend was held to have been good, encouraging and strengthening. Several participants gave special commendation to the introduction of creative elements. The worship together had been a moving experience and the high point of the conference.

The following wishes were expressed:

- Discussion in small groups
- No presentations on Saturday, but work on the themes (e.g. work in the parishes)
- A walk from Wittenberg to Rome to be organised by the Network (!)
- That an article which was going to appear in the Schorndorf news should be sent to all participants by email.

Suggestions as possible themes for the following year were:

- the Charta Oecumenica
- Saint – example or advocate?
- What is possible in the parish – we exchange experiences and collect them together

The theme will be decided by the leadership group

Finally Olaf Becker read out a (provisional) text prepared by the editorial team the previous evening. Everyone present was in full agreement with the content of the text. Some of the wording required further refinement. It was suggested that the heading of the text should be the words addressed to the conference participants by Bishop Fürst: *you are the spearhead of ecumenism*.

Report compiled by Rudolf and Rosmarie Lauber