

**A Transforming Ecumenical Initiative:
Ministry to Interchurch Engaged Couples**

By Fr. George Kilcourse

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If we were to identify a single initiative that holds the potential to transform the faith journey of the next generation of interchurch families, there is little doubt that ministry to interchurch engaged couples would be the focus of such an effort. The fortieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's dramatic change in attitudes toward other Christians affords a timely interlude to assess how far we have come and what next, tentative-but-strategic steps are most appropriate to make visible the unity of interchurch spouses. From the Roman Catholic perspective, this diversity-in-unity¹ is already evident through the sacrament of their baptisms and (in the case of a Roman Catholic validly married to a Christian of another tradition) their marriage. Yet after almost four decades of struggling for recognition and respect as interchurch couples (and families), these women and men still too often report that, "When we were engaged and preparing for marriage....," they received virtually no marriage preparation that addressed or even acknowledged the possibility of their living out an interchurch identity². In fact, their narratives of dealing with clergy and marriage preparation presentations too often include traumatic moments when a partner was proselytized by some office-holder in the other tradition, or some authority apodictically pronounced that any ecumenical involvement in the marriage liturgy by a clergy person of the other Christian's church or their family members would not be possible.

The Lived Experience

Such days have, for the most part, happily waned. A key development in Roman Catholic circles in the United States has been the parish-centered "couple-to-couple" marriage preparation ministry that frequently pairs an interchurch couple with the engaged couple identified as a prospective interchurch couple. The genius behind such parish programs sparks interactive and meaningful discussion in a home environment. The host couple "models" how such potentially "interchurch" engaged couples can relieve anxieties and perceived obstacles, while at the same time gives an honest and clear appraisal of the challenges of living as an interchurch family. These parish "couple-to-couple" marriage preparation ministers—often designated 'sponsor couples'—are more than one-dimensional. At their best, they attempt to mirror a range of factors such as the relative age of the sponsor couple at the time of their own marriage and the actual age of the engaged couple so that their experience can better address issues of concern.

Similarly, if both spouses are working professionals, or if they have a long-distance relationship before marriage, a sponsor couple with similar experience could better identify with and more sympathetically prepare the engaged couple. Ideally, interchurch couples who serve as the sponsor couples for marriage preparation to an engaged couple who are potentially “interchurch” would represent the Roman Catholic church³ and the church tradition of the other engaged partner.

Engaged couples in this situation are served well not only in such couple-to-couple ministry but also in highly commendable clergy-to-clergy ecumenical relationships. The ecumenical leadership role of pastors and deacons cannot be underestimated. An attitude of acceptance, encouragement, and collaboration with the ordained minister from another church in both marriage preparation and the planning and celebration of the marriage liturgy are genuine catechesis for both the couple and all those who participate in the celebration. Sometimes a clergy person from one church can be the catalyst for an ecumenical conversion by the clergy person from the other church—here we see the beginnings of an ecumenically sensitive ministry leading to future openness and pastoral care of interchurch engaged and married couples. In the same pattern, parish staff members who might administer pre-marital psychological inventory instruments or interpret such profiles for an engaged couple can communicate a positive attitude and encourage couples who intend to live as an interchurch couple and family. At so many junctures in parish life (beyond the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity), all the baptized in the community can affirm and celebrate the gifts of committed and dedicated interchurch spouses.

This being said, such ideal events remain far too rare in real life. We face the situation where engaged couples approach marriage through the prism of a dominant culture where the wedding reception arrangements, the caterer, the florist, and the bridal consultant all too often dictate and demand more attention than the actual religious preparation for the woman and man about to enter into this religious covenant relationship. In some circumstances, clergy and those entrusted with administering marriage preparation programs abdicate their responsibility and settle for “the minimum.” As long as the proper canonical paperwork has been recorded and the couple attends a required marriage preparation day / evening, then their marriage can take place. This status quo easily turns into a missed opportunity. Given the preponderance of married couples in the United States who hemorrhage away from any ecclesial religious observance (or those who end up divorcing), our still-divided churches have a mutual self-interest⁴ in cultivating better ministries to serve the interchurch identity of such spouses. The alternative is to alienate both “mixed marriage” couples and those couples who aspire to be truly interchurch couples by ignoring them—or worse, by the church’s indifference toward them. Interchurch marriages are *de facto* the majority⁵ in many Roman Catholic dioceses across the United States, making it urgent that we initiate creative strategies to address how we mainstream—and not marginalize—interchurch families in the life of our parishes and congregations.

An Alternative Approach: Re-Designing Ecumenically

Striking variations in the quality of pastoral ministry—particularly marriage preparation—for interchurch engaged couples cause concern among conscientious Family Ministry directors and the staff members who serve such programs. The sheer number of potentially interchurch couples who participate in traditional marriage preparation programs warrants special attention to both their unique gifts and particular pastoral needs. Unfortunately, silence about the presence of such engaged couples at marriage preparation programs is tantamount to an ecumenical version of the expression “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” At the same time, financial constraints in Roman Catholic dioceses across the country have led to shrinking staff as well as budgets; resources in Family Ministry offices are diminishing at the very time when pressing new initiatives need to be implemented. What to do?

In the Archdiocese of Louisville, long-standing conversations between Catholic ecumenical leaders (including the local chapter of AAIF—The American Association of Interchurch Families) and the Director of The Catholic Family Center, Barbara MacDonald, are bringing forth one such transforming initiative. As someone engaged in local ecumenical action over the past three decades, I have long realized that **our goal is not to create new ecumenical structures, but to make more ecumenical the structures that already exist through the church’s various ministries.**

For many years I have attempted to coax and urge ecumenical officers to collaborate in such a pattern. However, given the reality that in Catholic dioceses persons in these positions (ordinarily—and still, predictably—a priest) wear many hats, often serving simultaneously as pastor of a parish. When and if such ecumenical officers are called upon to collaborate with interchurch families, the invitation is placed at the end of a long list of more formal (and visible) ecumenical endeavors in his/her portfolio. Some ecumenical officers decline to engage in this ministry. It is not always out of disinterest but sheer overwork. Because interchurch family ministry involves sometimes complex pastoral questions and issues, many ecumenical officers frequently refer these wives and husbands to the parish priest. In an ideal world, this could be appropriate and effective. In the event that he enjoys a degree of ecumenical literacy and is knowledgeable about the applicable principles, norms, and criteria for making pastoral decisions about the care of children and spouses in interchurch families, this can prove fruitful. However, many of our priests have never had a formal course in ecumenism; virtually all Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States ignore the mandate from the bishops’ conference that such a course be an integral part of the theological curriculum for today’s seminarians. When we (the church) fail to educate the clergy for ecumenism, the consequences can be abysmal and worse than discouraging. Roman Catholic Family Ministers, however, are uniquely positioned to help close this ecumenical gap when it concerns marriage and family life.

At a recent national pastoral convention, I visited the cavernous hall where publishers and new technology gurus displayed their wares. It is easy to spend three hours in such an environment and feel as if you have hardly seen a small portion of the

“latest” and “best” electronic aids to pastoral ministry. When I came upon one vendor heralding new software for a parish database, I listened attentively to his spiel. I explained that I was giving a talk about interchurch families at the convention. His head craned and he stared directly at me. “What’s that?” he asked. I explained and then posed a question: “Can your software allow us to record (and retrieve lists of) such families as “interchurch” and provide the specific denomination of the other Christian spouse? He looked quizzical. He thought the programmers would be able to “add” a field or make some other adjustment. I gave him my card and he promised he would write to me, thanking me for the entrepreneurial idea. Ten months later I have yet to receive a reply from the vendor or the technology wizards in response to my question: How and where do we identify the interchurch families among us?

It goes without saying that interchurch families in American churches are largely hidden, if not anonymous. One of my favorite anecdotes comes from a Louisville woman, a Methodist married to a Roman Catholic husband, whose new pastor approached her after observing for two months how she and the three children were at worship every Sunday. “We have a widows and widowers support group,” he suggested. “My husband’s not dead,” she exclaimed, “He’s just a Roman Catholic!” Each Sunday after he attended Mass at the nearby parish, he would pick up his wife and children and take them to brunch. We have failed to envision or to think about “the church” in categories that reverence or accept the growing presence of interchurch families among us as a palpable ecumenical reality. They are not easily “recognizable” like an interracial couple, or a new immigrant couple, or even like couples from cultures associated almost exclusively with another part of our vast United States (e.g., Hispanic / Latino).

If we are going to pave a new path for interchurch engaged couples in America, then the marriage preparation program offers an ideal starting point. We need to look upon these Family Ministry events as “teachable moments” in the life of the church. What can be learned includes: (1) the Catholic Church’s own ecumenical change of attitude and teaching; (2) a primer on the ongoing ecumenical movement and the Catholic Church’s participation in it; (3) the Catholic Church’s emphasis upon the family as the “domestic church”; and (4) the Catholic Church’s provision of particular possibilities for interchurch families to live out in concrete, visible ways the unity the church aspires to realize, yet which they already share to a larger degree⁶.

Anyone familiar with “marriage preparation” knows that Roman Catholics enjoy the most extensive and intentional programs among churches in the United States. Almost by default, the other churches have failed to offer or mandate adult education that addresses formation for marriage. Most Protestant pastors will explain that, at best, they would offer “counseling” sessions and question-and-answer conversations in their office with any engaged couple. A statistically insignificant number of them would contact an already overworked and stressed-out priest to engage in joint pastoral care or marriage preparation involving a “mixed marriage” or potentially interchurch couple. It is fair to say that Roman Catholic marriage preparation programs are nowadays “the only show in town” when it comes to the opportunity to educate with ecumenical sensitivity and to care pastorally for the increasing number of this particular type of engaged couple.

A Sketch of the Emerging 'Pilot' Project

Where do we start? How do we strategically re-design marriage preparation programs that begin to respond in some comprehensive manner to the systemic ecclesial realities presented when a Roman Catholic marries a Christian from another denomination? The Louisville conversations and planning process now bring us to a plateau where serious, constructive efforts take shape. The Catholic Family Office's recent reorganization, particularly the redesign of its own marriage preparation programs, affords the occasion for both ecumenical and pastoral creativity as well as fidelity to Roman Catholic teaching and our ongoing renewal developments.

In late August, a team of ecumenical leaders (including veteran interchurch couples) will observe a marriage preparation program presented by the Catholic Family Office. The first purpose is to review and analyze the "content" of the existing theological-pastoral presentations. The second purpose is to consider how the dynamics and "process" of the existing program could better accommodate "mixed marriage" engaged couples as well as already-committed or potentially "interchurch" engaged couples who participate. The goal is twofold: (1) to identify where necessary revisions (sensitive to the presence and promise of interchurch engaged couples) in the current program might best be incorporated; and (2) to draft a presentation of ecumenically sensitive theological-pastoral presentations on marriage that are faithful to Roman Catholic teaching yet responsive to the many "mixed marriage" and potentially interchurch engaged couples who attend. This latter goal allows for an interactive segment in this "teachable moment" that might include small group discussions as part of the design.

Discussions about including *only* "mixed marriage" or potential or prospective "interchurch" engaged couples in the presentation and interactive process resulted in a consensus that this experience would be best offered in a full plenary of all couples attending the day's marriage preparation program. Virtually every Roman Catholic can identify siblings, cousins, friends, or neighbors—and perhaps even their own parents—as persons who have covenanted marriages in "mixed marriage" or "interchurch" patterns. Because many interchurch couples already experience feelings of "segregation" or are otherwise marginalized (leading to perceptions that their marriages are inferior to Roman Catholic-Roman Catholic marriages⁷), this plenary session will encompass their immediate concern within Roman Catholic-Roman Catholic engaged couples' broader "extended family" experiences of the interchurch family phenomenon.

Once this event and follow-up meetings result in the incorporation of necessary revisions for ecumenically sensitive theological-pastoral presentations on marriage, presentations that are faithful to Roman Catholic teaching yet responsive to the many "mixed marriage" and potential or prospective interchurch engaged couples attending the Archdiocese's marriage preparation programs, the redesigned "pilot" program can audition. There will undoubtedly be further revisions and "tweaking" of the presentations based upon ongoing review and evaluations by those who attend as well as

by the team designing them. The delivery of the “interchurch” segment of the marriage preparation program will ambitiously aim:

- To present succinctly the Roman Catholic Church’s change of attitude and teaching manifest with regard to ecumenism and Christian Unity, especially pointing out how ecumenism relates to the sacrament of Marriage
- To provide an overview of the ongoing ecumenical movement and the Catholic Church’s participation in it, especially as its “irreversible” development (as Pope John Paul II has described it) will touch the lives of all engaged couples and their future children over the next generation
- To reinforce the Roman Catholic Church’s insistence that the family is the “domestic church” and to explore implications of this teaching in the life of interchurch families
- To teach clearly that the Roman Catholic Church provides particular canonical norms⁸ that may be applied pastorally so that an interchurch family could live out (to some extent) in concrete, visible ways the unity that the still-divided churches aspire to realize
- To confirm how interchurch spouses and children already share a unique experience of a *given* Christian unity through the sacraments of baptism and marriage and their familial experience as a “domestic church”
- To address how and under what conditions the extraordinary possibility of Eucharistic sharing (by way of exception) that the Roman Catholic Church (in principle and in accord with prudent pastoral judgment) may offer another Christian might apply to a particular interchurch spouse or child

Interchurch Marriage and Family ‘After-Care’

The participation of veteran local interchurch couples—the laity—will add immeasurably to the success of this initiative. It is the first time that AAIF local groups and a local chapter will be equipped to offer follow-up experiences, ongoing education, and pastoral care after an engaged couple’s wedding day. Data including mailing addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses can be volunteered by those engaged couples who would welcome this kind of unprecedented ecumenical after-care for their marriage relationship.

It is easy to imagine the integration of interchurch family groups as informal (or even formal) parish organizations. Once these follow-up groups have been cultivated, larger regional or archdiocesan meetings and conferences or interchurch marriage renewal events could be planned periodically. Outreach to Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches could lead to new collaboration with their professional staff engaged in family ministry. The critical 6-month and 18-month stages in the life of newly married couples warrants assembling volunteers from among “mixed marriage” and “interchurch” couples in the “pilot” programs for a day of reflection to re-assess their faith life, progress, and decisions in light of their special identity. Not only the large regional groupings for marriage preparation of engaged couples but also Engaged Encounter and alternative delivery systems will appropriate lessons and insights by employing the model of this ecumenically transforming initiative.

An ambitious date of late January, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, has been tentatively set for the formal announcement of this new ecumenical initiative in partnership with the Archdiocese of Louisville's Family Center office. It is a timely and appropriate moment to draw attention to the growing phenomenon of interchurch marriage. Perhaps a few weeks later, during Lent of 2005, the pilot program will audition. Pending review and revisions, it is not impossible to imagine that an interim report and a template script that details Louisville's transforming response to the needs of so many engaged couples will be available as we cross the threshold of the new liturgical year in November, 2005. The more extensive the transplanting of such a model into diverse dioceses, and the greater the wisdom applied by local ecumenists and family ministry professionals, the healthier and the more effective will be the Roman Catholic Church's ecumenical witness and its family ministry.

How this initiative might be broadened and deepened through the participation of clergy persons, religious educators, ecumenists, and theologians in future decades remains a story to be lived and told at some future date. Variations on the theme will unfold in countless local expressions of the living church. Perhaps in this era, when the very definition and nature of marriage as an institution (both civil and religious) is being tested and contested, the churches can discover a common ministry that once again responds to the World Council of Churches' "Faith and Order" principle of never doing separately what we can better accomplish together. It is time for the Roman Catholic Church to exercise ecumenical leadership and no longer complain that interchurch marriages cannot survive—indeed, they can even thrive and share their gifts with the whole church. Honest pastoral care and ministry to these faith-filled wives, husbands, and children has emerged as a growing and urgent matter in the life of the present and future church.

¹ I use this expression in the sense that Michael Kinnamon employs it in *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003). "The ecumenical vision insists that the church's given unity is wondrously diverse, but we too often speak of uniting our diversities" (115). The familiar expression of the churches seeking "unity in diversity" places such emphasis upon "unity" that we lose sight of the gift of diversity. See chapter 4, "Unity and Diversity," where Kinnamon explores this in more detail. His concluding chapter expresses this insight aptly: "Diversity-in-communion [*koinonia*] is at the heart of our witness" (119).

² While the interchurch marriage or interchurch family is a distinct minority among "mixed marriages," it is an important pastoral question to explore what the church might do by way of pastoral care after a "mixed marriage" occurs in order to assist such couples who might conscientiously desire to live as an authentically "interchurch" couple. See George Kilcourse, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* (New York: Paulist, 1992) where I define such couples in the context of the European and British experience: "An interchurch marriage differs because (1) it joins in marriage two baptized Christians from different traditions, (2) each spouse participates actively in her or his particular church, and to various degrees in one another's church, and (3) each spouse takes an active, conscientious role in the religious education of his or her children" (2). These dedicated couples and their children demonstrate that there are possibilities for interchurch life that involve a significant ecumenical paradigm change in ecclesial understanding, a development that resonates well with the vision articulated by the Second Vatican Council. (See *Unitatis Redintegratio* [The Decree on Ecumenism] n.4 : "The sacred Council exhorts, therefore, all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent

part in the work of ecumenism.... The result is that, little by little, as the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion are overcome, all Christians will be gathered, in a common celebration of the Eucharist....”

³ For the purposes of this paper, I assume that interchurch engaged couples participating in Roman Catholic Marriage Preparation programs are, in fact, a Roman Catholic and a Christian from another tradition / church. While the largest group of active interchurch families in the United States includes a Roman Catholic spouse, there are innumerable other patterns, e.g., Lutheran-Episcopalian, Presbyterian-Methodist, Baptist-Disciples of Christ, etc.

⁴ Creighton University’s Center for Marriage and Family reported in its national study, *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages* (Omaha: Creighton University, 1999) that the number of Catholics who convert to “same church” Protestant marriages is equal to the number of Protestants who convert to “same church” Catholic marriages. Because this is a “wash,” denominational leaders should reverence conscientious shifts of members into “full communion” in each others churches and collaborate on ministering to the large group of “mixed marriage” couples who drift into divorce. Here is a fertile field for mission and catechesis.

⁵ Recent national statistics indicate a precipitous decline in the number of recorded marriages in the dioceses of the United States. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has analyzed data provided for the annual *Official Catholic Directory* for the United States and presented some startling trends. The U.S. Catholic population grew between 1984 and 2004 from 52.4 million to 67.3 million. Yet the annual number of marriages fell from 348,000 to 232,000—a 48% decline in church-recorded marriage rates in twenty years. Given the rising incidence of “mixed marriages” in the United States, one could prudently conclude that significant numbers of Roman Catholics are marrying without seeking either appropriate dispensations, or they choose to ignore Roman Catholic church law; one might surmise that the latter correlates significantly with their perception of many “nominal” or non-practicing Roman Catholics that the church still disapproves of their marriage to a Protestant. This data argues for further research and more attention to authentically interchurch marriages as an ecclesial reality instead of as an intractable “problem.”

⁶ Pope John Paul II identified the lived experience of interchurch couples and their families in these pastoral and ecumenical terms when he described them during his May 1982 visit to York, England: “You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian Unity.” *Interchurch Families* 7 (June 1982) 1.

⁷ Kilcourse, *Double Belonging*, chapter 2, “Crisis Points and Hurdles—Interchurch Marriage Preparation” (24-49).

⁸ An entire section of the Roman Catholic Church’s norms on this and other questions are found in the Council on Christian Unity’s text, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993), especially in chapter IV, “Communion in Life and Spiritual Activity Among the Baptized.” The sub-section (“C”) “Mixed Marriages” has a special bearing on interchurch engaged couples, interchurch marriage, and interchurch children.

Books and documents

- [*The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends*](#) Michael Kinnamon (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003)
- [*Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*](#) George Kilcourse (New York: Paulist, 1992)
- [*Unitatis Redintegratio*](#) [The Decree on Ecumenism]
- [*Ministry to Interchurch Marriages*](#) (Omaha: Creighton University, 1999)
- [*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*](#) (1993)

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