A NEW LOOK FOR INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

Now in its fifteenth year, the Newsletter of the Association of Interchurch Families has acquired the status of a Journal.

It will continue to appear twice a year, to discuss the theological and pastoral issues raised by the existence of interchurch families (especially families in which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a Christian of another communion), to share the experience of these families with a wider public, and to help readers to keep abreast of developments which concern mixed marriages and interchurch families, in the context of the wider ecumenical movement.

The difference is that items which are of mainly domestic interest to members of the Association of Interchurch Families are being removed to AIF News and Notes. Members of the Association will receive News and Notes and The Interdependent (written by and for interchurch children) as well as INTERCHURCH FAMILIES.

Family support

But as a Journal, INTERCHURCH FAMILIES invites a much wider readership. It is addressed to all interchurch couples, whether they are members of the Association or not. It is addressed to clergy and ministers, to theological students and seminarians, to relatives and godparents, to marriage counsellors and teachers, to those involved in marriage and baptism preparation at all levels - in fact, to all who are or expect to be in any way responsible for the pastoral care of mixed marriages and interchurch families in all their infinite variety.

Towards Christian unity

The Journal is also addressed to ecumenical officers, local groupings of churches, and those concerned with the movement towards Christian unity in any way, for in interchurch families the pain of Christian division and the celebration of Christian unity is focused at its most local level: in the family, the “domestic church”, the “household of faith”, which is one church united in baptism and marriage and yet attached to two denominations; the smallest unit of “Churches Together”. Interchurch families expect something from the growing together of their churches, and have something to contribute to the movement.

“You live in your marriages the hopes and the difficulties of the path to Christian unity.” Pope John Paul II, York, 1982.

ALEXANDRA’S FIRST COMMUNION

Our daughter Alexandra attends our local Catholic primary school. When the school announced that they were going to delay preparation for First Communion until the age of eight we breathed a sigh of relief. Apart from anything else, neither of us thought that Alexandra had a sufficient understanding of communion in a one-church situation, let alone in two churches.

Many of the other parents were less pleased. Her best friend, the youngest of five, received her First Communion after being prepared by her parish. But by the age of eight, when the class were being prepared, Alexandra was beginning to take much more interest. We began to discuss with her the First Communion day and that Daddy (who is an Anglican) would not be able to receive communion with her. We also told her that if we arranged for her First Communion away from home it would be possible for Daddy to receive too. It is hard to know how much a child reflects her parents’ input, but two things were clear: she wanted to receive communion with her friends and she wanted Daddy to be able to receive too.

We asked our parish priest, who is very traditional, for his views. He said that it was not possible for him to decide to give William communion, but he agreed that if we could persuade the bishop to sanction it he would be very happy to do so.

No Exceptions
Mary is involved with the Catholic diocese, and she arranged for us to see the bishop. The whole family went, and the result of a reasonably friendly discussion was that as assistant bishop he did not have the right to give permission, and he very much doubted if the diocesan bishop would either. It was really not acceptable for Anglicans in England to claim that they did not have access to their own priests, and urgent need did not include “social occasions” such as First Communion, weddings and, yes, funerals.

A letter to the diocesan bishop requesting an audience elicited a polite but firm “No”: communion is the goal of ecumenism, not the means, and other diocesan bishops who allow exceptions are wrong to do so.

A Way Forward
Alexandra found the bishop hard to understand, and said that if there were any chance of Daddy being able to receive communion she would gladly wait.

Shortly afterwards, we attended a mass celebrated by the bishop. Some Anglicans present were given communion (no doubt without his knowledge) and this struck a raw nerve. William was cross and accosted a priest friend who was there with the challenge “Your bishop is trying to pull our family apart”. Instead of the defensive reply we expected, this was what we got: “William, of course you are allowed to receive communion and if you come to my church I will gladly give it to you. If the bishop objects I will tell him he is wrong.”

The warmth of this reply was overwhelming — and we came away uplifted and encouraged. Were we not right to perceive the openness of Christ himself? But after the mountain top experience comes reality - how was all this to be achieved? It was now past the First Communion date anyway so we had a year to prepare.

During the year the possibility of Daddy being able to receive was demonstrated when we all shared in the joy of the Bard family at Ellen’s First Communion (see Interchurch Families, no.23). We now had a way forward — but was it the right one? Alexandra still hoped to receive First Communion with her friends, and what were we going to tell the parish priest? She was beginning to feel more and more left out. Going to mass began to provoke tantrums.

Relief and Commitment
We thought we would try again in a nearby parish where some of her friends went to church. To our surprise, the parish priest did not reject the idea out of hand. He said that he took each case on its merits, and that if he found William’s attitude to be as Mary described it, he would have no difficulty in offering him communion. Alexandra had better come for the final lessons as the First Communion day was in three weeks’ time! Alexandra was over the moon!

Needless to say, the few days before Daddy’s interview with the priest were rather tense, but our fears were unfounded. What our priest wanted was a belief in the eucharist, and commitment. He was quite clear that the latter existed, and he would take William’s word for the former. As both parents were responsible for bringing the child to communion it would be unnatural if they did not both receive it with her. He would also be happy for William to come to communion on other occasions.

What about complaints from his parishioners? He was quite good at explaining to people that the object of the church was to help people find God. Were these words the fruit of ClTor

Our Vocation
The First Communion mass was a wonderful occasion. Alexandra looked forward to mass again ... although Sunday School still had its attractions – and it became a more fulfilling experience for the whole family. William no longer felt left out, and for a while we were able to share in the worship of the Catholic community without the weekly reminder that the church was unable to acknowledge the unity in our marriage. We actually prefer the more spontaneous worship in the Catholic church, and for a while may have been tempted to take a less full part in the Anglican community, although there remains much that the Anglican church has to offer that we value as a family.

However, we were brought up short when the Catholic priest had to leave the parish unexpectedly, and William again feels less welcome at mass. Perhaps this was a reminder from God of our vocation to continue to be a visible sign of family unity across denominational boundaries.

Would it really be Christ’s will that we give up the struggle to promote good relations between our local churches? Was not our enthusiasm for Christian unity given by God as a gift to be shared with both communities?

William and Mary and Alexandra
HELENA’S FIRST COMMUNION

The evening before our baby son was christened I attended Mass, and I can remember having to fight back the tears as I walked up to receive communion. There had been so much bad feeling over this occasion, which in any normal family should be a happy event. We had displeased some members of my family by choosing to have our second baby baptised in my husband’s Anglican parish church, and an almighty row ensued.

As I fought my emotions in church that evening, I thought with dread about all the occasions in the future which might similarly cause conflict.

This year, five years on, our eldest child had been prepared for her first holy communion at school. Now we were faced with another challenge. The parents of the other first communicants decided that they wanted the children to receive together, with families following on afterwards. We have always felt that it should be an occasion which is more family oriented, because we as parents have played a major part in preparing our child for this day. This, together with the fact that the date chosen was Pentecost Sunday, when my organist husband would have found it very difficult to arrange a deputy, made us consider the possibility of arranging a house mass at which our daughter could make her first communion.

Our priest was enthusiastic and a date was arranged. We invited another AIF family who live locally and other close friends. It was a wonderful occasion: informal yet meaningful, here in our ecclesiola where there are no boundaries to divide us. For us it was the perfect solution. Our daughter also took part in the Pentecost Sunday celebration which I was able to enjoy in the knowledge that our family had been one in Christ on the evening of the house mass.

Patricia Sears

WATER ON THE CARPET

The question of the baptism of Julian, our younger son, prompted our contact with AIF. Our elder son, Stephen, had been baptised at a standard Roman Catholic ceremony. Should Julian be baptised at an Anglican service (for balance within the family), or at a Catholic service (for consistency towards our two children)? We could not agree on either option.

There seemed no obvious solution. However, AIF helped us to think more deeply, not just about baptism, but about how we bring up the children, and we learned of concepts such as “double belonging”. A new pattern of shared worship evolved.

A joint celebration

This led us to consider the idea of a joint baptism, with our two ministers taking part (both “pouring the water and saying the words”) and we talked with each. Both ministers were supportive within the limits of their respective churches. The Anglican vicar had no difficulty in accommodating our wishes, but the Catholic priest saw problems.

There followed three years of discussions with ministers, including the Vicar General. There were periods of hope and periods of despondency. We found that we could only take so much at a time, so there were months of trying yet again for a solution followed by others of inactivity.

Our solution came when we wrote to the Vicar General, asking if a baptism elsewhere than in a Roman Catholic church would be acceptable. Following on from earlier discussions about the “domestic church”, he replied that the Bishop would agree to a baptism according to the Catholic rite, in our home, with the participation of the Anglican vicar. Although this suggestion differed from our original proposal, there was recognition that we are a two-church family, and we decided to accept it.

We enjoyed preparing the order of service, including elements of both the Catholic and ASB services, and both ministers approved this.

The day went according to plan. Julian, now aged four, was well prepared. Friends from both churches were present in the small congregation. The godparents read the lessons, the children said the prayers. The lack of accompaniment did not detract from the enthusiasm of the singing. The Anglican vicar baptised Julian (who ticked him off for spilling water on the carpet!). It was a moving service. We feel that Julian has been baptised into the Church of Christ as represented by our family.

Our thanks to all in AIF who have assisted us in so many ways. Our faith journey as a family is the richer because of you.

Andrew and Helen Granger-Bevan

“Families resulting from a mixed marriage also have the duty of proclaiming Christ to the children in the fullness of the consequences of the common Baptism; they have moreover the difficult task of becoming builders of unity.”

From the papal encyclical Evangelii Nuntiandi, December 1975
CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS

This article is a shortened version of a Lenten lecture given by Professor Adrian Hastings of the University of Leeds at the Centre for Reformation Studies of the University of Sheffield in April 1992 under the title Catholicism and Protestantism. It is very relevant to interchurch families who are engaged in a constant struggle to come to terms with being one family which has both a Catholic and a Protestant identity. When these families talk about “double belonging”, a common response from both Catholics and Protestants is that this is impossible. When pressed to say why, the reply often comes: “Well, . . . what about the papacy?” This article helps to clarify the issue, as well as showing very clearly how “double belonging” has only become thinkable since the Second Vatican Council. The full text of the lecture will appear in the review One in Christ.

... nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That’s born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative.

If grace perfects rather than destroys nature, as Thomas Aquinas insists, we may be right not to be surprised if it too seems to contrive that every little Christian is either a little Catholic or else a little Protestant; the Christian life is not immune to a binary divide. That may seem a rather frivolous beginning, but it’s meant to be more than frivolous – just as Gilbert’s lines, while frivolous enough, did in fact express a basic underlying reality of political life as experienced in Britain in the late nineteenth century.

A healthy commonwealth needs the interplay between progressive and conservative tendencies and if the Christian church is a human society with at least some characteristics in common with the political community, it may well be that its health too requires a comparable binary tension. If so, we may start our enquiry by asserting the possibility that in some way Catholicism and Protestantism, as contrasting modes of Christian belief and experience, may not be opposed to each other as mutually exclusive rivals but should be seen as necessary interacting poles in an ongoing oscillation of Christian pilgrimage.

“Catholic”: the ideal
To understand the two contrasting forms which Christianity has assumed in western Europe over the last four hundred years, we need to go behind that divide and explore the concept each has had of itself. We shall start with Catholicism. It is indeed the primary term with which, ultimately, both sides continue to identify, “One, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” The Nicene creed is common territory. The term “catholic”, nevertheless, is more than one of its four ecclesial adjectives, even if it remains probably the most enigmatic of the four; the undivided church regularly named itself catholic in a way that the other terms were not used. The word “catholic” was thus accepted as somehow encapsulating the very essence of what the Christian church saw itself as being, or, perhaps, coming to be. Catholicism meant universality, wholeness, Christianity incorporated into the entire range of human diversity, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, sexual, whatever; faithful to itself and yet almost infinitely variegated. The Catholic could be trusted because it was not particularist, it represented the whole gospel in the world and by its very universalism was guaranteed against error.

Of course, it was an unrealised and unrealistic ideal. Nevertheless, the fact that an ideal is unrealised or even unrealisable within the course of history does not invalidate it. The nature of the church, its holiness and its unity as much as its catholicity, is something to be striven for, something hoped for in God’s future, at least as much as it is something ever actually realised in any particular space-time context. Yet it has been more realised in one context than another, though the exclusions when they came about were justified, not in cultural terms, but in those of the failure of one or another tradition to be adequately faithful to the original revelation, that which had to be expressed. All agreed that in principle such exclusions could be necessary, but all, or almost all, failed to realise how inevitable it was that in the course of history the ceaseless cultural reinterpretation, linguistic and philosophical retranslation, of the original vision would not be identical with, but only to a greater or lesser extent equivalent, within a new context, to the original gospel “once delivered to the Saints”.

One might say that before the nineteenth century (Newman’s teaching on development) Christians were so deeply unaware of the intrinsic dialectic of their tradition that they were more or less compelled to belittle or even condemn as heretical a great part of its contemporary expression in favour of some imaginary, and fundamentalistic, past pattern of “catholic” wholeness or of biblical and apostolic purity.

“Catholic”: the practice
Catholicism came thus to have a double meaning: on the one hand, a wholeness held to have existed in some golden age of church history; on the other, the actual, limited form which contemporary Christianity had come to take in a later age and a particular ecclesio-cultural tradition. This was most obviously the case for the Latin west, medieval and post-medieval, the tradition in fact most committed to the nominal use of the word and in consequence that which has ever since come to be in practice defined by the name of Catholic, the communion of Rome. Catholicism has come to mean a pattern of Christian faith and practice stressing sacraments, hierarchy, religious orders, the value of celibacy, the dominance of scholastic theology and canon law, above all the decisive authority of the See of Rome – a form of Christianity stabilised in a rather rigid way in the Latin west between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries and maintained substantially unchanged from then until the twentieth century within the Roman Catholic Church. The high point of its formulation was at the first Vatican Council of 1870. While there almost always remained some recognition that liturgical languages and rites other than the Latin could exist, that a more biblical or patristic theology was not necessarily heretical, nevertheless anyone deviating significantly from the Latin and scholastic model was accorded only rather second class citizenship. The continual tendency from the reign of Gregory VII to that of Pius XII was a...
The model of Catholicism which prevailed throughout those centuries and in which my own generation was still brought up was, then, unquestionably monolithic and precise. It was anything but pluralist, either socially or theologically. It justified the use of Latin throughout the liturgy, it entirely excluded the laity and all nuns from communion of the cup, it insisted upon the celibacy of the clergy, it at least theoretically justified discrimination against non-Catholics in Catholic countries. It had never begun to repudiate the Inquisition, Roman or Spanish; and where possible, as through concordats with Mussolini or Salazar, it still obtained whatever political privileges it could to place it above any other religious group.

Two rival systems

Protestantism was, in origin, exactly what the word suggests – a movement of protest against the dominant existing model: that is to say, late medieval, papally-controlled Catholicism. Led by priests and monks, it was certainly not an attack on catholicism in our first sense, but an attempt to recover it as against the deformations of Catholicism in our second sense. If catholicism is understood as the pursuit of an ideal through changing forms, the character of a pilgrim people through history, then it should certainly be perceived as requiring oscillations of protest and reform if it is to retain an underlying fidelity to the faith and ideals of its origins. Protestantism, then, can be seen as an example of a mechanism within the very structure of Catholicism requisite for the historical retention of its balance and purity. That is not at all to say that everything the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century said, all the attacks they made on current Catholic belief and practice, were necessarily right. They were not after all agreed among themselves, and why should they be? What was valid as part of a healthy Catholicism was Protestantism as a movement of sincere, scripture-grounded critique and reform made at a time when the church was undoubtedly in a pretty shabby state. It has absolutely to be seen as in purpose part of the organic life of the whole catholic, not a breaking apart to form some other whole. There can be in the end but one Christian whole: that was common ground to all sides in the separations of the sixteenth century. But the Catholicism of the time, more papally dominated than ever after the collapse of the conciliar movement, could not conceive of such a movement as justifiable. By and large the Roman and Catholic reaction was to reject and to condemm, and in this there was only too much in common with the attitude of many of the reformers.

The result of the process was the hardening of two restricted systems, Catholicism and Protestantism, though the latter at least was never intended to become such. The early Protestants did not want to create Protestantism. They wanted to reform Catholicism. Protestantism grew out of the ecclesial vacuum created by the rejection of Roman imperialism by reformers and monarchs and the necessity of developing one or another ecclesiastical and doctrinal system to take its place. Despite variations, it shared a common rejection of large elements of standard late medieval Catholicism. Thus it everywhere insisted upon the vernacular Bible and its availability to the laity, vernacular services, lay communion of the cup, a married (or at least marriageable) clergy. Behind all this lay a theology of faith and grace which may well be contrasted sharply enough with the theology informing the late medieval piety of multiple masses for the dead, indulgences, pilgrimages, relics and the rest. It is, however, arguable that the theologies of faith and grace of Reformation and Counter-Reformation were by no means irreconcilable, or, at least, that one moderately tolerant church could have contained all the main ones. What was irreconcilable was Protestant insistence upon a number of important and necessary reforms in worship and ministry, freedom to maintain and develop a range of theological opinions, with the Roman refusal to allow space for such reforms and theological views.

It is impossible not to recognise the clear contrast between what existed historically from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century as two separate and rival systems. Of course, they shared much: the Nicene creed, the scriptures, the authority of the Fathers, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption and a great deal more. But in terms of 95% of their members, this shared foundation was mediated through highly contrasting systems, each of which had to be defended against the other.

The edges on both sides were undoubtedly frayed. There were some liberal Catholics who wished at least to stop papal authority growing ever larger, there were some Protestants (especially in England, but also elsewhere) who wanted to regain lost elements within the Catholic package. Once the Tractarian movement and Anglo-Catholicism had begun to affect the Church of England, our binary model became seriously confused. It is a reason why, for quite ordinary members of the national church, quite convinced that they were Protestant, Anglo-Catholicism could be so absurdly unpopular. It failed to fit within the categories, but it also finally failed to disrupt them.

Crossing the divide

Fifty years ago a Catholic would have been in considerable trouble for suggesting that over any serious matter Protestants had been right and Rome wrong. Today, even on explicitly Catholic principles, I don’t think that it is possible to deny this. The acceptance by the second Vatican Council (1962-65) and Paul VI in the immediately post-conciliar years of a vernacular liturgy, lay admission to communion of the cup, the practice of concelebration which soon brought an end to the liturgical scandal of simultaneous “private” masses said on a multitude of adjacent altars, all involved the belated acceptance of major points of Reformation criticism. No less significant were the Constitution on Revelation, sanctioning a real pastoral revolution in attitudes to scripture, and the Declaration on Religious Freedom. On these and other matters the highest authority within Catholicism decisively rejected segments of the Post-Reformation Catholic synthesis and adopted what were in fact segments of the Protestant synthesis.
In making these quite revolutionary decisions the Council and Pope Paul doubtless did not see themselves as Protestantising, though they did most certainly see themselves as establishing a new ground on which to relate to Protestantism. What was happening was a redefinition of the ideal of Catholicism, less in substantively medieval terms and more in those of an earlier model – a model which Protesants could to a greater extent share. For many Christians the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism would no longer be very clear. It would become quite easy to cross and recross the divide and joint ecumenical services were encouraging more and more people to do so. Two generations ago very few people would even have called themselves Christians: they were Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, above all they were Protestants or Roman Catholics. Today the name of Christian has returned to regular usage and many a believer would object to being precisely defined as anything more than that.

If this sea-change in attitudes was prepared for by the ecumenical movement over a number of decades, it was the second Vatican Council which, by quite suddenly involving Roman Catholics within it, forced almost everyone else as well to a profound reconsideration of where they stood in regard to Catholicism. Perhaps it was the presence of observers from other churches at all four sessions of the Council and the close co-operation which this produced that psychologically ended the sense of two contrasting communities and recreated an awareness of substantial, if incomplete, unity. At the same time the sense of two contrasting communities and recreated an awareness of large parts of the laity. They had all, with the spirit of Vatican I and within the context of Pius Xl's model of Catholicism. That is the basic institutional fact with which we have all to reckon in the pontificate of John Paul II. However the very clarity of current Roman policy may have helped many Catholics to see that Vatican II can be better read as an imperfectly expressed attempt to revive the very different ecclesiology of conciliarism, to accept the very core of the Reformation critique, and to recognise that the late medieval Catholic system can be carried through five centuries and across Vatican I to reach its high point in the reign of Pius XII was in considerable measure uncatholic, unchristian and untenable.

The logic of Vatican II

Nevertheless, strictly speaking Vatican II formally authorised no such desegregation. The adoption of many important propositions, hitherto part of the Protestant and not the Catholic package, did not in theory dismantle the latter. Other elements in the traditional Catholic package could be discarded as outworn, but the principle of the total ecclesiastical authority of the See of Rome has not been. It very nearly was, in the discussion of collegiality. The Council emphatically affirmed a collegial model in chapter 3 of Lumen Gentium, but it was over-careful, under Pope Paul's directions, to insist that this in no way subtracted from the essentially supemacast model which Catholicism had worked with for centuries, and, while it was silent about the word “monarchy” — hitherto so much favoured in Roman theology — it produced no collegial machinery to replace the monarchical machinery of power long in place.

In the post-conciliar euphoria common to Catholic and Protestant alike, and in the earlier years of ecumenical dialogue which followed, this crucial point was not sufficiently noted. So much had changed that it was not realised that the essential principle of division between Catholic and Protestant, or —shall we say? — Roman Catholics and all other Christians, had not. The binary divide in theory remained, yet the changes which had taken place had undermined its plausibility. In fact, it remained in the minds of the Pope, the Roman curia, a certain number of bishops and the code of canon law, but it could hardly be said to remain in the collective commitment of Catholic theologians, the pastoral clergy, or the more diffused consciousness of large parts of the laity. They had all understood that the logic of Vatican II went beyond its letter, that collegiality needed to be made into a reality rather than minimalised, and that it needed as soon as possible to be seen as embracing, rather than excluding, the bishops of the Orthodox and other churches.

Papacy and collegiality

Thirty years since the start of the Council we have now reached a position in which we can, painfully if realistically, map out the current relationship between Catholicism and Protestantism once more. The great tide powered by Vatican II has, at least institutionally, spent its force. The old landscape has once more emerged and Vatican II is now being read in Rome far more in the spirit of Vatican I and within the context of Pius XI's model of Catholicism. That is the basic institutional fact with which we have all to reckon in the pontificate of John Paul II. However the very clarity of current Roman policy may have helped many Catholics to see that Vatican II can be better read as an imperfectly expressed attempt to revive the very different ecclesiology of conciliarism, to accept the very core of the Reformation critique, and to recognise that the late medieval Catholic system carried through five centuries and across Vatican I to reach its high point in the reign of Pius XII was in considerable measure uncatholic, unchristian and untenable.

This is by no means to reject the papacy, or the kind of role it played in the first five centuries of the church, but it does reject...
a monarchical papacy of the sort already rejected by the Orthodox in the east and Protestants in the west. It calls in question the ecumenical character of Vatican I, something which almost no Catholic theologian would have dared to suggest thirty years ago, but which many today take almost for granted.

It is very clear then what the stakes are in the almost titanic conflict now developing within the Roman Catholic Church. On one side, the model of Catholicism as described earlier remains essentially unchanged: a monolithic church dependent upon central Roman authority which is trying to erode the proper subsidiarity and freedom which bishops and bishops’ conferences had begun to achieve after Vatican II. The restoration of the earlier model is reinforced by a renewed emphasis on the traditional Marian devotion that went with it and the canonisation of new saints by Rome. Never indeed have so many saints been canonised as in the pontificate of John Paul II. There have been undoubted changes following Vatican II, such as the liturgical use of the vernacular and a greater role given to lay people. The core of the old system, the authority and power of the papacy, has not changed. It is the same system against which Luther protested in the sixteenth century.

A profound theological debate
Against this model a great many Catholics now propose an alternative. They suggest a pluralism of collegial episcopate and council, papacy and laity, the guidance of the Spirit and the abiding norm of the scriptures. It is a model which undoubtedly fails to provide an infallible mechanism available at any precise time and is open to all the problems which Protestants have experienced in the past in attempting to locate authority; nevertheless, it is a model consonant with human society and ecclesiastical history, and one whose ultimate viability can be seen as dependent not upon a rule of thumb but upon faith in the presence of God’s Spirit in the church. I don’t believe that for centuries there has been such a large and profound theological debate within the Roman Catholic Church.

In this struggle, the whole nature of Catholicism is in question. Is it to remain something with which Protestantism has still to be contrasted, or is it to become again across an extension of the logic of Vatican II something to which classical Protestantism sees itself as belonging in the way the Reformers once wished to belong? Christians in other churches have in this predicament to decide how they understand their ecumenical task in relation to Roman Catholicism and there are fundamentally two different ways in which they can do so. The first is to accept that the nature of Roman Catholicism is appropriately defined by the current, canonically valid, Roman leadership. The second is to insist that Catholics and Protestants are not two sorts of being but rather two groups of one sort of being, a Christian being. If Rome’s insistence on its own monolithic control of the church, on the law of clerical celibacy or whatever would be intolerable for Protestants for themselves, then it should remain intolerable for Catholics today too. And Protestants, Anglicans or whatever, should continually make it clear that they believe this to be so.

Within one communion
Catholicism and Protestantism may still remain as two attitudes of mind, the one concerned with guarding the status quo, the other concerned with a critique of the perennial failure of the present to be faithful to the wholeness of the original vision, the demands of scripture, of truth, of the revolutionary requirements of the Spirit of Jesus in every age. In this sense we will always need both Catholics and Protestants, but we need them within a single communion.

It would be disastrous if Protestants now turned away from Roman Catholicism with nothing but bitterness that the springtime of Vatican II had turned back to storm and disillusionment, but it would be almost as disastrous if they wiped the tears from their eyes and settled for a never-ending polite dialogue with an unchanging, infallibilist Rome. We need both temperamental Catholics and temperamental Protestants, wrestling within a single communion; we need the inheritance of Huss and Luther, just as we need a papacy liberated from imperialist hallucinations and free to be genuinely a “see of unity”. Those of us who remain within the communion of Rome, realising that we are Protestants but still needing the authority and power of the papacy, can only appeal to our fellow Protestants of other communions to hope and pray that, through the drama of post-Vatican II Catholicism, the middle wall of partition which has divided us since the sixteenth century may indeed be finally broken down, and the unity of the body of Christ, one, holy church of God, be visibly recovered.
A bishop's view

Bishop Vincent Nichols, now Bishop in North London, was until the beginning of 1992 Secretary to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. He is the moderator of the steering committee of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, and it was made when all the Presidents of the CCBI took part in the intercessions at his ordination mass in Westminster Cathedral. We were therefore particularly pleased to have him present at the AIF Swanwick Conference in September 1992. Here are his reactions to and reflections on the AIF video.

The video is sensitively made and therefore very moving. I appreciate its positive approach to the situation of interchurch families; I should not have liked to be battered by painful narratives.

The reference to historical perspectives is helpful; there is a clear recognition that there has been real change since the older couples were married.

It is very positive to see connections made between an interchurch family and the life of the local churches. I like the exploration of the structural links created by the couple who worship in a shared building. I like the way in which the question of parents sharing communion at their child's First Communion is related to particular children. We could see that this is not a static question; it is part of a dynamic, living, on-going process.

The beginning and ending of the video are good. It starts with a couple separated at communion. It ends with the views of the children of interchurch families, which I found very powerful and provocative. The final words "which I am" takes us to the core of the issue. (The last teenager says: "I'm lucky because both my churches were involved with my baptism and First Communion. However, it looks as though my Confirmation is a long way off, because the churches can't agree on how I can be a member of both - which I am.")

Sharing communion

On the question of the admission of the non-Catholic partner to communion, there is a realisation in the video of the pressure which this puts on bishops. I can say that this pressure is felt as much by the bishops who feel obliged to say "No" as by those who say "Yes".
Let me share a personal story. My week began at Minehead, where I was conducting services at the Baptist church and staying with friends nearby. Having a few days holiday owing to me, I decided to walk home, or as much of the way as I could. So on Monday morning I set out along Exmoor from west to east, stopping overnight at Exford, staying with a Baptist minister friend at Watchet on the second night, and on the third day walking over the Quantocks to Bridgwater from where I caught a train home. The only problem was that it rained most of the way! The kind people in the small hotel at Exford put all my clothes in the spin dryer, and the friends at Watchet gave me another dry and welcoming night.

However, I look back on this brief August pilgrimage with considerable pleasure and satisfaction, my sense of achievement all the greater because of the modest amount of hardship endured. Meeting with other walkers, enjoying the natural world, will stay in my memory for a long time. And my mother had different worries. “He will take you into his family and we shall lose you. You will become one of them.” My mother had different worries. “He will take you into his family and we shall lose you. You will become one of them.”

Above all, it reinforced something that I have believed in theory all along — a simple enough truth which goes to the heart of some of your experience in interchurch families. It could be summarised thus:

No pain, no joy;
no hardship, no achievement;
no suffering, no growth;
no cross, no resurrection.

I have listened to some of your stories during the time that I have been able to be here at Swanwick, and what I hear is a mixture of pain and joy: the pain of what you still cannot do together, and the joy of anticipating the one church in your own family life and of developing rich religious experiences for yourselves and your children.

I believe that your “cross” experience will lead to “resurrection”. One day we shall be able to eat and drink together at the table of the Lord, to share each other’s ministries, and experience fully the one baptism. As recently as the 1970s it wasn’t officially possible for Free Church people to receive communion at Anglican tables. Rules can be changed.

In Churches Together in England are trying to sort out what kind of “unity” we are really looking for. Is the phrase “conciliar fellowship” useful to us? The New Testament word koinonia (communion, fellowship) is becoming more prominent. Churches Together in England is launching a five-year exploration process and I hope you will be involved. This may help us towards some kind of “resurrection” of the ecumenical hope.

So I would say, be patient, but not too patient: keep pressing and one day the walls which divide us will surely come down. The Christian story says, no resurrection without a cross, no grace on the cheap, no true joy unless you take suffering seriously. It also says, no cross without resurrection. It’s a painful business, but one day the church will live in the freedom of the resurrection. And then AIF can have its last meeting, because we will all be one church. I am working to put your organisation out of business, and I hope this is your dream too. Meanwhile, “I reckon that the sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the splendour, as yet unrevealed, which is in store for us.” [Romans 8:18]
MARRIAGE ACROSS FRONTIERS

A three-day conference held in May 1992 in the beautiful setting of Newcastle, Northern Ireland, offered an opportunity to see interchurch marriage in the wider context of mixed marriages across national, ethnic and religious frontiers.

The gathering was held under the auspices of the Commission on Marriage and Interpersonal Relations of the International Union of Family Organisations, and brought together members of 37 organisations from 15 countries. The local hosts were the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, and the Catholic-Marriage Advisory Council, and the Association of Interchurch Families received an invitation because the subject this year was “Marriage across Frontiers”.

A global perspective

It was a salutary experience. On the one hand, the “problems” of interchurch families seemed to pale into insignificance beside those which face families which span national, ethnic and faith divides; on the other hand, the similarities stood out clearly. For us, it is a question of how the churches together can come to terms with mixed marriages between Christians, just as on a global level nations and ethnic groups and world religions have to come to terms with a situation in which mixed marriages are increasing fast in numbers. Once again it was clear that questions facing divided churches are a microcosm of questions facing a divided world.

I was very much in a minority representing interchurch families. Some people were there because of the subject, but many others were representatives of family organisations who are at the conference every year whatever the topic. The Commission “brings together people from different parts of the world who have a professional interest in practice and policy matters concerning family life”. In that context, interchurch marriage became a very specialised minority interest. “Catholic-Protestant marriages are no problem,” everybody said, “except in Northern Ireland, because people don’t practise any more.”

A special study by Gillian Robinson of the Queen’s University, Belfast, on Cross-Community Marriage in Northern Ireland had been commissioned on the initiative of CMAC and Relate in preparation for the conference, and a shortened version of it was presented by Professor Stringer. The title “cross-community” in itself indicates that in Northern Ireland Catholic-Protestant marriages span a social divide as well as a religious one. In fact, very few of the couples studied were of the kind likely to have joined AIF’s sister-association NIMMA (Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association), but their problems were clear enough.

The second main input came from Professor Barbara, of Nantes University, who has studied for many years marriages between French nationals and immigrants. His stimulating lecture showed the complexity of classifying cross-frontier marriages. Every marriage of course crosses frontiers of gender and family culture. But one of the findings of the conference was that differences of nationality, ethnicity and religion can highlight collective aspects of the nature of marriage which are easily overlooked, especially by cultures which stress the value of individual choice. Thus studying them can contribute to our understanding of marriage itself.

Apart from the two keynote papers, most of the conference time was spent in group work, pulled together in a final plenary session. This was chaired by Christopher Clulow of the Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies, who also put together a six-page report of the conference. Here I am summarising its findings under four of his main headings.

Subversive marriage?

Marriage is both a social institution and a personal relationship. When individuals in their marriage cross the collective frontiers of nationality, ethnicity and religion they raise issues for the group; they can threaten the security of the group. Marriage can even be seen as an act of treason – for instance, in the case of Anglo-German, Franco-Algerian, Israeli-Egyptian and Serbo-Croat marriages in recent history. Questions of identity are raised – both on the collective and individual levels.

Areas of vulnerability

Pressure to conform with the identity of the group may place individuals in their marriage cross the collective frontiers of nationality, ethnicity and religion they raise issues for the group; they can threaten the security of the group. Marriage can even be seen as an act of treason – for instance, in the case of Anglo-German, Franco-Algerian, Israeli-Egyptian and Serbo-Croat marriages in recent history. Questions of identity are raised – both on the collective and individual levels.

Areas of potential

The areas of vulnerability are also the areas of potential. Couples may succeed in managing differences that communities have failed to manage, and their success may offer hope to others who wish to bridge the gap in conflicts which threaten to tear communities apart. In the absence of shared history, culture and language may give rise to misunderstandings and poor communication which could destabilise marriage in times of crisis. Children may introduce particular conflicts into the relationship when choices have to be made about parenting practices, education and religious affiliation. Matters that can be taken for granted in same-culture marriages may require difficult negotiations and compromise for partners who come from different cultures. These may have to be managed by the couple unsupported; there will always be a fear (and sometimes a divisive hope) that those who are taken into the couple’s confidence may have one-sided views and demand conformity to the social norm.

Differences between partners may encourage planning and communication between them, developing their capacity to negotiate, as well as being enriching in opening up new worlds. The potential for developing a mature relationship may be enhanced in cross-frontier marriages, with partners less
Reflections from an interchurch family perspective

It seems to me that interchurch families’ experience has something to offer in the wider mixed marriage context where national, ethnic and faith barriers are concerned. That remains to be seen. In what follows I am simply suggesting that the findings of the conference can help to clarify some of the questions which face interchurch families.

We can’t help being subversive

The conference was clear that cross-frontier marriages are by their very existence a threat to the identity of the group, subversive of the existing order, a danger to traditional institutions. But, as the report points out, “it is unlikely that couples themselves will attribute these meanings to their choice of partner”.

As couples, we tend to think first of ourselves as the vulnerable ones, and maybe need to recognise more fully the threat we constitute to our churches, and especially perhaps to the Roman Catholic Church with its very strong sense of corporate identity. Thus we need to be able to exercise a great deal of imaginative empathy in our relations with the clergy whose role is to represent in a special way this corporate identity. A very good example of this kind of imaginative empathy is to be found in the spontaneous reactions of a URC wife to a Catholic bishop’s letter, as seen in the AIF video. It was maybe easier in this case because the bishop himself indicated his own vulnerability, as well as responding positively to the family’s request. We need to develop our understanding of how we ourselves can appear as a threat, in order to exercise imaginative empathy also in situations which are extremely difficult for us.

George Kilcourse’s recent book Double Belonging is very helpful in this respect. It shows the enormity of the paradigm shift which has to take place in the Roman Catholic Church if the insights of the Second Vatican Council are really to be integrated into its life; how essential this is for the welfare of interchurch families, and how interchurch families themselves are contributing to the process.

The magnitude of the task should not be underestimated. But we do contribute to the process, and we can consciously “own” the inevitably subversive character of our marriages. “By challenging the existing order,” says the Newcastle report, couples in cross-frontier marriages “may have long-term community interests at heart.” We believe that we do have long-term church interests at heart. It is not so much that we have to do anything; we just have to exist as interchurch families. We have to hang on to what is necessary to us as families, while at the same time being aware that by our continuing existence we can sometimes make like just as uncomfortable for our church communities as they do for us, by remaining divided.

A question of identity: the couple

The conference report brings out the fact that a point of convergence between the public and private meanings of cross-frontier marriage is the preoccupation with identity. At collective and individual levels there is concern to differentiate “me” from “not me”, “us” from “them”, because identity is marked out by the drawing up of such distinctions. The fear of being overrun operates between groups and individuals alike; similar dynamic processes operate to protect identities. The report notes that at a psychological level there may be no differences between marriages in terms of dynamic and developmental issues; the “foreign-ness” of a partner may only surface as an explanation for problems when the relationship is under pressure.

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Supporting cross-frontier marriages

The Commission felt it important to support cross-frontier marriages, rather than accepting the point of view that they should be discouraged because of the challenge they represent to existing orders.

International law should take account of the diversity which characterises family life today; a supra-national framework is required so that the outcome of family disputes which cross national boundaries should not depend on the law of any one country.

Educational opportunities exist to break down barriers of prejudice. Children of cross-national marriages can be integrated in the educational system with sensitivity and in ways which respect their differences. Couples planning to marry across frontiers can be encouraged to think ahead and prepare for the challenges they may meet. All religious bodies and denominations have a pastoral responsibility here.

Organisations helping couples have a duty to provide training for their staff. The media and the dramatic arts have a part to play in sensitising the community to the predicaments of those in cross-frontier marriages.

Socio-economic policy should take account of cross-frontier marriages. The issues need clearer definition. It is not helpful to see marriage as a solution to obtaining the right to work in, or the citizenship of, a country; nor should those entitled to live and work in a country be socially and economically disadvantaged because of their marital status.

Psycho-social factors affect the capacity of those in cross-frontier marriages to make the most of their situation; counsellors and others need training to develop understanding of the interplay of social and psychological factors affecting partners and children.

The full report by Christopher Clulow and the keynote papers by Professors Stringer and Barbara can be obtained from the Secretariat of the International Union of Family Organisations, 28 Place St George, 75009 Paris. Gillian Robinson’s full survey Cross-Community Marriage in Northern Ireland can be obtained from the Centre for Social Research, The Queen’s University of Belfast, 105 Botanic Avenue, Belfast, BT7 1NN.

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Partners in interchurch families have often said, "I am a better Catholic (or whatever) because I married an Anglican (or whatever)"; identities have been strengthened because they have had to be affirmed and explained. And yet at the same time many partners have also felt themselves, at least to some degree, to be taking on a new identity, sharing to some extent in the "other" church, within the overarching identity of Christian marriage.

So the subversive question which these couples ask the churches (along with many other Christians committed to the ecumenical movement) is how long we have to go on with exclusive definitions—as if this, not that; if a Catholic, not a Protestant; if Orthodox, not Methodist; Catholicism and Protestantism belong together, as Adrian Hastings makes clear in his article in this number of Interchurch Families. All Christians belong together. There is a Christian identity.

Recently AIF had a visit from Rabbi Jonathan Romain, who has worked with Jewish-Christian marriages and wanted to see how far the questions raised by these are similar to those raised by interchurch marriages. He said that within Judaism terminology is changing: "mixed marriages" used to mean marriages between two kinds of Jews (e.g. Orthodox and Reformed), whereas now it is losing this meaning and coming to be used for marriages between Jews and non-Jews.

As in a shrinking world we come to identify ourselves increasingly as members of the one Body of Christ, bound together by the one baptism (whatever the distinctions within this identity), a similar change in terminology will presumably gain ground.

It is worth noting perhaps that Roman Catholic canonical terminology already distinguishes between marriages of Catholics with non-Christians, for which one needs a dispensation from "disparity of cult", and those with baptised Christians, where the dispensation is from "mixed religion". It is only in the second case that the marriage is recognised as a sacramental Christian marriage.

A question of identity: the children
Most people at the conference took it for granted that parents should choose an identity for their children—one or the other—and preferably as early as possible. From the experience of an interchurch family, my instinctive reaction was to question this assumption. Of course, many interchurch families do choose one denomination or the other for their children, and would testify that this can work well; but many others have opted for a dual identity, refusing to make an exclusive choice within the overarching Christian identity they seek for their children.

They believe that this can make sense in a situation in which the churches have committed themselves to unity, to becoming one church. There cannot in the end be irreconcilable differences between them; differences, yes, but differences which can be held together in communion.

The trouble is that we have not yet reached the end, and to many people in all our communities the differences do still appear irreconcilable. Bishop Vincent Nichols told us at Swanwick that we do no service to our children if we bring them up with unreal expectations; there are at present essential differences between the churches. It is certain that, by not choosing one identity or the other on their behalf, parents place a burden on the children as well as offering them a gift. The question is whether the value of the gift is greater than the weight of the burden. Many would claim that it is.

There are many kinds of marriage across frontiers. Sometimes the identity of the child is settled because of the place where the parents live. The conference noted that it may be hard in these circumstances for the non-indigenous partner to preserve an individual identity.

It seems often to be the case that where children are clearly brought up in one church rather than the other, one partner experiences a real sense of isolation and therefore pressure to join the rest of the family. Sometimes this can be done in good conscience, after mature reflection, and family life can become that much easier, but in other cases the sense of being a foreigner in one's own family can persist, and special pastoral care may be needed. There is a certain parallel with the situation where "the power balance in a relationship is likely to favour the indigenous partner in terms of language, familiarity with surroundings, networks, procedures, social support and legal rights", as the Newcastle report notes. This is identified as one of the "areas of vulnerability" for cross-frontier marriages.

Where interchurch couples opt for dual identity for their children, they are committing themselves to managing differences that their church communities have so far failed to manage—an "area of potential", according to the Newcastle report, but equally requiring pastoral concern and support. Professor Barbara remarked that if parents do not choose an identity for their children, society will do so. It remains to be seen if this will happen in the case of interchurch children: whether or not the churches will continue to try to urge them to choose an exclusive identity if they wish to be confirmed.

Good for everybody
In our group at Newcastle we talked about educational equivalencies and how difficult it is for parents who want their children to move between two cultures to move them from one educational system to another. But other families, too, it was agreed, would benefit if this were made easier. "What's good for mixed marriages is good for everybody", someone remarked.

So maybe what's good for interchurch families is good for the churches as a whole. It's an encouraging thought for interchurch families who remain within two communities but struggle to persuade those church communities to express and celebrate more fully that growing unity between them which they already acknowledge.

Ruth Reardon
IN DUBLIN’S FAIR CITY

The context is different, but the hopes and commitment of interchurch families are just the same wherever they are. That was our feeling when we returned from the Irish AIF’s annual conference in Dublin at the end of September.

About forty adults (and lots of children) gathered in a newly-built Church of Ireland parish centre to the south of Dublin. In spite of the impressive surroundings, we picked up the feel of a large dominant Roman Catholic Church, with the Church of Ireland and other Protestant churches in the “also ran” category.

It isn’t an easy situation in which to practise “double belonging”, and much pain was expressed, but perhaps it is all the more important for interchurch partners there to stress that in marriage they are equals; that they share responsibility for the spiritual health of their marriage and for the Christian upbringing of their children. There was too a recognition that things are changing; that possibilities are opening up for interchurch families that would not have been there even recently.

The church today
But why haven’t things moved more quickly? Here we found the talk given by Fr Gabriel Daly, O.S.A., particularly helpful, as he analysed the major conflict within the Roman Catholic Church today.

In the '60s, the Second Vatican Council opened up the Roman Catholic Church to the modern secularised world, and tried to relate the Christian tradition to it. The reforms of the '60s breached a walled city; some rejoiced, others were dismayed. There was no reversal under Paul VI, although he agonised over what he recognised as an very complicated situation.

But today there is a strong ‘restoration’ movement. A confident Pope John Paul II sees the church as an army of light in a dark world. (Some Protestant groups feel the same way.) Life is a battlefield, and the church has to go into action. The corollary is that priests who leave are “deserters”; ecumenism with its pluralistic basis is too much to cope with; the “elite” troops (groups like Opus Dei) become “the real church”; the church is more aggressive and authoritarian. (Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee said that when he was at the Second Vatican Council in 1966 the Catholic Church was a humble church, but now it is a “green beret” church – the green berets were the US shock troops in Vietnam.) This historical perspective is important.

The church of the future
In sketching his idea of a church for the future, Fr Daly stressed that the notion of participation is vital. We cannot rely on coercion and social pressure. People have to decide to be Christians. Evangelisation will involve us in becoming more aware of the presence and action of the church in unchurched places and persons, in listening to the unchurched and marginally churched in a humble and non-imperialistic way. The church will be more decentralised and pluralistic – but we shall struggle to hold the new diversity in unity. The ecumenical church of the future will not see itself as an answer, but as part of the problem.

Interchurch families
Structures for participation are not yet in place, but pressure from the base will get through to the top, Fr Daly assured us.

Only we must be realistic about the situation we are in at present. Interchurch families are in the van of the ecumenical movement, so inevitably they face many practical difficulties. We can aim at changing the rules, but we mustn’t expect approval; we can’t have conscientious action which conflicts with the rules and church approval.

What matters is that we hold firm to our hope in the God of surprises; that we do not allow ourselves to be discouraged; that we cultivate a judicious mixture of patience and impatience.

What matters is ecumenical conversion. (ARCI documents were written by people who had been converted to ecumenism; they go over cold when read by people who haven’t been through the conversion process.) An interchurch marriage can be an occasion for ecumenical conversion. A mixed marriage can become an interchurch marriage. (“I reserve the term interchurch marriage,” said Fr Daly, “for people who accept the full challenge of asking: what is the mind of Christ? and: what are we going to do about it?”)

Marriage preparation
The AGM which followed included a report from the pre-marriage co-ordinators. We in England have much to learn from the Irish experience here. In the Dublin area 6-week (or weekend) marriage preparation courses for mixed couples are sponsored by a committee representing the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, Methodists and Presbyterians. Most of the input is from the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, with clergy taking one evening, and interchurch couples another – the interchurch couples also host the whole course, so there is a considerable time commitment involved.

There was a good discussion; how to get the term “inter-faith” banned when interchurch marriage was in question; how to redress an imbalance perhaps by using Relate counsellors as well as CMAC; how to improve the standard of the AIF input so that it ranged more widely than one couple’s personal story. (Perhaps our new video will help here – though it was felt to be “very English” by those who saw it in Dublin!)

We personally gained a great deal from our two days with our Irish sister-association; we were very grateful for their warm hospitality, and hope they will send representatives to our Swanwick conference next year.

Ruth Reardon and Gill Walsh

“Have patience with me; God isn’t finished with me yet.”
(Corrymeela poster)

“That’s true for all of us”, said Gabriel Daly, “for our churches, and for the ecumenical movement.”
ENGLISH ARC

Marilyn Quail was asked to join the Anglican team on English ARC precisely because she is a member of an interchurch family. She is also lay chair of the Horsham deanery synod and a member of the Chichester diocesan synod. She writes here about her first reactions to English ARC.

A letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury! Not an everyday occurrence in our household, it caused rather a stir, especially trying to explain to Maria, our puzzled Italian exchange guest. “Well, it’s a bit like getting a letter from the Pope . . . !”

It was an invitation to join the Anglican/Roman Catholic Committee, or English ARC, the function of which is to promote relations between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church in this country.

I’d heard of ARCIC, some sort of distant body that discussed Anglican/RC relations, so was this similar? Yes, but it’s more of a home body, made up of Anglicans and Roman Catholics from all over England. It was a relief to see two familiar names amongst the rather imposing list of members – Martin Reardon (for Churches Together in England) and Mary Bard (on the RC team), two people whom I knew would have similar views and goals as myself. The Committee meets three times a year, including one overnight meeting.

No theologian

In my reply to the Archbishop, I made it clear I am no theologian. I hoped I would not be out of place in what sounded like a rather august gathering. I said that I should represent the ordinary person in the pew, who ideally would like to cut through most of the red tape.

Well, after one year and four meetings, I am still a new girl and what I said to the Archbishop holds true. It is a very august and influential gathering, but what lovely friendly people. A lot of the discussions are incomprehensible to me, but I am learning, and occasionally have spoken up! (Hope to get braver as time goes by . . .)

Grass roots ecumenism

Topics discussed have been joint schools; twinning and exchanges; simultaneous eucharists; the Church as communion; tolerable diversity within our communions; the visit to Italy by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Reports come from French ARC, Belgian ARC, WCC, CCB, CTE, CEC (if you don’t know what they all stand for, find out – I had to!). The topic from which real strides in ecumenism might develop is how to communicate what ARCIC is all about to the person in the pew. This has exciting possibilities which are currently being researched and masterminded by Mary Bard.

At the recent residential meeting in mid-October, one highlight for me was the showing of the AIF video. I had not seen it before and certainly for other members, the majority of whom were ordained and included four bishops, the film was a new experience. Our message came over loud and clear, especially from the children, and, I felt, left a slightly stunned audience who had suddenly seen what grass roots ecumenism is all about.

FINDING THE BRICK WALL

ROMAN CATHOLIC/METHODIST COMMITTEE

The Methodist team on the Roman Catholic/Methodist Committee has included two members of AIF for some time. Recently Margaret Nichol has been replaced by Gill Walsh.

Here Alan Baxter, a Methodist local preacher who has served on the Committee for ten years, reflects on its work.

At AIF Swanwick 1992, Keith Lander asked me about the Roman Catholic/Methodist Committee. “Isn’t it like banging your head against a brick wall?” I heard myself saying that the real point of the dialogue was that we were still trying to find the brick wall. What is confusing is that for most of the time Catholics and Methodists seem to be on the same side.

The Roman Catholic/Methodist Committee in England and Wales has been talking for 25 years. Its main task is to shadow and predigest the work of the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council.

The focus is unashamedly theological, and I have stopped worrying about it. In fact, I have been converted to thinking that theological work is vital in the long run.

On the AIF video, Margaret Minolleti says that there is a lot more to the questions posed by the existence of interchurch families than can be answered simply by saying, “Yes, you can share communion.” She goes on: “There’s a long road in front of us and we’ve got to travel down it together.” Bishop Vincent Nichols picked up that point at the Swanwick conference. He said that we need to keep in mind that there are real differences between the churches, and we need to work on those things. This is what I meant when I said that we were trying to find the brick wall; the essential task of the official interchurch dialogues is to locate and clarify the differences. To use a military metaphor, the broader interchurch process, which includes interchurch families, needs permission to speak, a common language, and a good map of the minefield we are setting out to cross.

Permission – We found that we have in common the Bible and several creeds and councils, not to mention the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Of course, we knew that already in theory. By meeting, talking and praying together we have discovered it in a more direct way, and the discovery gave permission to go further. It created a degree of trust. Catholics and Methodists have official permission to work and pray together, but there is more to giving permission than simply having confidence in one’s own position and accepting the good faith of others. For people who are not theologians, these talks provide a kind of safety check. (Be warned: talking to other Christians can seriously damage your prejudices.) To justify our existence, talks like ours have to start a conversation. You can carry it on wherever you like, in your own home, parish, or anywhere.
Language -- It is easy to conduct interchurch life in the politically-correct language of well-meaning diplomacy. Generally people are not rude enough. But in the search for clarity and understanding we have reached a stage where fudging will not do. So we have learned that “justification” means the whole business of salvation in Catholic-speak, while Methodists use it to describe stage one of a process of growth. We agree that we all depend utterly on the grace of God, though the role of “merit” is more of a mystery, and purgatory means the whole business of salvation in Catholic-speak, while Methodists use it to describe stage one of a process of growth.

What are Methodists to say about the papacy? Methodists have been given a specific historic task which is probably completed. Now we have to realign ourselves and move on. In theory, it should make us willing partners in ecumenical work. But we have accumulated a lot of excess baggage in 250 years and not much experience of peaceful change. Most of the changes in Methodist history have been achieved at the expense of people parting company. Catholics are not the only ones with a history to live down, or outdated trappings to discard. So long as both Catholics and Methodists are in a state of change, we have to be very careful how we tread.

**Mapping minefields --** We are still talking about “Authority.” What are Methodists to say about the papacy? Methodists have been given a specific historic task which is probably completed. Now we have to realign ourselves and move on. In theory, it should make us willing partners in ecumenical work. But we have accumulated a lot of excess baggage in 250 years and not much experience of peaceful change. Most of the changes in Methodist history have been achieved at the expense of people parting company. Catholics are not the only ones with a history to live down, or outdated trappings to discard. So long as both Catholics and Methodists are in a state of change, we have to be very careful how we tread.

**GRANDPARENTAL ECUMENISM**

Perhaps our marriage began the trend -- or did it begin earlier, when my Anglican father married a Methodist and we were all brought up in an active Methodist society?

I married a vicar’s daughter and, because of our work, our three children went to Quaker boarding schools. One by one they married Roman Catholics, very fine people, dearly loved by us, and along came grandchildren, gloriously different, and bound by warm love not only into their own parents’ generation but into ours.

All of them made up our family. Perhaps some of our flexibility came because Margaret and I were committed Christians first, as well as having allegiance to the Church of England, where her family roots lay deeper than mine in Methodism. It was not always easy. We had painful antagonism from one mother-in-law, and one son-in-law had a dreadful time when he told his bishop of his wish to marry in an Anglican church. We, meanwhile, were reading booklets on “Why Mixed Marriages Fail”.

We worship the same Lord

Our children were told that love and reason were insufficient basis for a marriage; maybe it was the consequent tears which dissolved the anger and brought us all closer. One son-in-law, confessing his love for our daughter, said, “I am a Christian. I just happen to have been born into a Catholic family.” What more could we say, who worshipped the same Lord he, too, had known from childhood?

Having an interchurch family might have been easier had some of its members set aside personal conviction, but what an enormous loss this would have been -- a loss to us both, to each of our children and now to our grandchildren. It would have been a denial of all the mixed guilt-feelings, the half-hidden loyalties, the childhood teachings, the memories of family worship, of church occasions shared, and of many other recollections of the journey from childhood to mature faith.

The wood and the trees

Within our growing family, weddings (after the first) became occasions for sharing, with clergy from both churches taking part. There was one in which my Methodist minister brother shared the service with a Catholic priest; he did the same at one memorably beautiful baptism.

Continuing discussion between family members, conducted with a determination not to let the trees of our denominationalism obscure the wood of our faith, has deepened our respect for one another, our understanding of one another’s churches. In this way (if I as an older person may dare to express this) we grow to love one another more deeply as very fallible children of one Father.

Love never fails

The apostle Paul was right when he said that love never fails. As grandparents, we are grateful for the growth we have known in and through our family. Recently we celebrated our golden wedding in the small church where my father-in-law married us. Our children and grandchildren joined us at the communion rail.

There are clear advantages in growing up within the relative safety of one well-defined church community, but surely it is not outside the great purposes of God that our grandchildren will have the wider, if more difficult, concept of one truly catholic and apostolic church. This hope, at least, is surrounded by the circle of grandparental prayers.

John Elvidge
The theme of the International Year of the Family 1994 is “Family resources and responsibilities in a changing world.”

By a fortunate coincidence, the Association of Interchurch Families celebrates its Silver Jubilee Year in 1994. It can adapt the theme of the International Year for its own celebration: “Interchurch family resources and responsibilities in a changing church”.

AIF is involved in several groups preparing for 1994.

The Bishops' Conference Committee on Marriage and Family Life

The Roman Catholic Bishops in England and Wales set up a Working Party for the IYF on which Mike Hope is the AIF representative. One proposal is the establishment of Family Ministry Teams in parishes, supported by a diocesan co-ordinator.

Family Life Education

Ecumenical Project

This group set up an Ecumenical Meeting in preparation for the Year; Gill Walsh and Ruth Reardon have represented AIF. A lot of work has gone into a leaflet for local churches, suggesting ways in which they might mark the Year and informing them of the resources available for family support and enrichment.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

The theme of the Week of Prayer for 1994 is “The Household of God”. The initial preparation of material was done in Ireland and taken up by the international committee responsible (representing the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church). AIF has been invited to send a representative to the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland’s editorial group which is adapting the international texts for this country, and Diana Simons will serve on it.

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES discusses the theological and pastoral issues raised by the existence of interchurch families (especially families in which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a Christian of another communion), shares the experience of these families with a wider public, and helps readers keep abreast of developments which concern mixed marriages and interchurch families, in the context of the wider ecumenical movement.

It is addressed to interchurch couples, to clergy and ministers, to theological students and seminarians, to relatives and godparents, to marriage counsellors and teachers, to those involved in pastoral care of mixed marriages and interchurch families in all their infinite variety.

The Journal is also addressed to ecumenical officers, local groupings of churches, and all those concerned with the movement towards Christian unity, for in interchurch families the pain of Christian division and the celebration of Christian unity is focused at its most local level.

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES appears twice a year; the annual subscription is £4, and should be sent to the address below.

The Journal is published by the Association of Interchurch Families. Membership of the Association is open to interchurch couples and all interested individuals who wish to forward its work. Members receive the occasional AIF News and Notes and The Interdependent (written by and for interchurch children) as well as the Journal.

AIF’s presidents are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, the Revd Dr Kenneth Greet and Bishop Alastair Haggart.

The co-chairs are the Revd John Coventry, SJ, the Revd Canon Martin Reardon and the Revd Ruth Matthews.

The Association of Interchurch Families is a registered charity (no.283811). It provides a network offering information, encouragement and support for interchurch families and mixed marriages. It is a “body in association” with Churches Together in England and (jointly with its sister-associations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic) with the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Its publications and video reflect the experiences and concerns of interchurch families.

Sister-Associations of Interchurch Families

American AIF, c/o Kentuckiana Community, 1115 Sough 4th, Louisville, Ky 40203, USA
Irish AIF, c/o Irish School of Ecumenics, Milltown Park, Dublin, Irish Republic
Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association, c/o Corrymeela House, 8 Upper Crescent, Belfast BT7 1NT
Scottish AIF: c/o 28 Galston Court, Low Waters, Hamilton ML3 7YH
AIF (New Zealand), c/o 15 Kelvin Road, Renuera, Auckland 5

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