We have always said that there is no blueprint for an interchurch family.

Some of us are even-handed in our church-going, our use of time and talents, our financial contributions to our two churches. Others lean in one direction or the other – either through choice or through particular circumstances. Some partners and families are together most of the time in their church-going; others are apart most of the time. Some of us stick to our local parishes and try to make our witness there, however hard the circumstances; others seek out local church communities where the family will be fed. There are no “right” answers when decisions have to be made. There is no standard pattern to be held up as an “ideal”.

We need to remind ourselves of this from time to time. It was a salutary shock to receive a letter which said: “The AIF video is excellent, but left us feeling that AIF was only for those who have achieved ‘Double Belonging’, which we haven’t to a full extent .. . ”

In defence of the video, we might say that it couldn’t deal with everything in twenty minutes (and in it John Coventry did repeat: “There is no blueprint!”) and also it was trying to make a point in a way which raises sharp questions for our churches, when it showed “double belonging” pushed to its limits in a way which some families have done. It is a point raised very particularly by the older children who are asking for a joint confirmation. But there are plenty of interchurch children who have settled for one church – or seem to have abandoned both - and it isn’t the only point to be made.

No “ideal” two-church family

The letter we received went on to say: “We are both sad that the children are not more committed Christians, but hope this is at present a healthy teenage rejection ... Are others too feeling that the ‘successful’ Christian two-church family image is taking over too much?”

It is good to be reminded that if we hold up an “ideal” two-church family as a goal to be striven for we shall only reap discouragement and a sense of failure. Two-church families are no more proof against teenage rejection than one-church families – though probably not less so. Two-church families experience separation and divorce like other families – though probably not more so. We have our joys and our sorrows like other families. But there is a common factor in all our stories: the struggle to express the “two-churchness” of the family, although in different degrees and in different ways. In his recent book Double Belonging George Kilcourse describes an interchurch family: “(1) it joins in marriage two baptized Christians from different traditions, (2) each spouse participates actively in his or her 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.”

A well of experience

Things work out very differently in different families, but it has always been a great joy and strength for interchurch families to cast their experiences into the common pool, and to draw out whatever is relevant to them from the experience of others. “We drink from our own wells”, and the AIF well has been a source of life-giving refreshment to many.

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“You live in your marriages the hopes and the difficulties of the path to Christian unity.” Pope John Paul II, York, 1982.
Mary and Ian Paton have been married for 22 years. They have four children, now aged 21, 20, 17 and 17. In the main, they attend church separately. In 1987, shortly before hearing of AIF, Mary wrote to the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Perth, Australia. Her letter, and her subsequent history, follows.

Dear Archbishop,

I began to write to you during our week of Christian Unity to add my voice to those who have attempted to express to you the pain involved in interdenominational-Catholic marriages.

As you know, Ian is a Catholic and, as you may not know, is descended from a fairly long line of mixed marriages which were certainly not without their suffering. My forbears were mostly Presbyterians, Anglicans and Baptists, and included, as far as I know, no Catholics.

When we were married I agreed that all our children, of whom there are now four, should be brought up as Catholics. And so they have been.

About eleven years ago, when our twins were very tiny, I seriously considered becoming a Catholic so that our family would be fully united in church membership and in Holy Communion. I had talks with our parish priest of that time and was advised to read and pray about the matter, which I did. However, when I understood that by becoming a communicating member of the Catholic Church I would no longer be permitted to share the Eucharist with my parents and others who had led me to Christ, I became very unsure of taking the step. Our priest then advised me not to go ahead if there was a conflict of conscience, but added that, if I were to attend church with the family and receive Holy Communion with them, he would not turn me away. Ian was very happy with this suggestion and for much of the past eleven years this is what we have done.

Nevertheless, it has posed a number of problems for me. When our parish priest was replaced by another, I became aware that my welcome at the Lord’s Table was no longer wholehearted, and that, should I approach him on the subject, I would undoubtedly be told to come no more. This is not intended as a criticism of his stand. I know the official rules and that priests vary as to their interpretations of them. I did, however, have to make a decision myself between pleasing my husband and children in continuing to go with them to church, or to face a confrontation in the sure knowledge that from then on our family would be divided in worship. The children were still very young at that time and I chose to continue as we were, taking the responsibility on my own conscience. I’m afraid I commit a number of sins every day and fail to fulfill Our Lord’s commands as well as I should. God forgives me and so does I love Him.

One bad result of this has been, however, that for all these years I have had no spiritual home, no wise adviser to approach in times of difficulty. I have only lived in Australia for twelve years, so my previous pastors as well as my mother and brother are 10,000 miles away. There has been considerable strain on our family life because of my spiritual loneliness and unhappiness. All our children are aware of the problem, but cannot understand why there has to be one. They all prefer me to attend church with them and some of them also enjoy going to the Anglican or Uniting Church with me occasionally. We had an ARCIC discussion group here in our home, and there was agreement on almost every point (except authority); the love and unity felt between our group members was a great joy to us all. The only person who showed any sign of upset during the whole series was myself. I knew that I was being given a taste of joy in fellowship and unity, only to be thrust back into the same situation as before, to await the slow process of ecclesiastical debate.

In our area alone I know at least six families in similar circumstances to ours. In all these cases the wives have shed many tears about their divided families. Some of the Catholic partners eventually became Anglicans so as to be able to worship together, some alternate their church attendance between two denominations and others attend two churches every Sunday. This latter would, of course, be ideal except that for any mother who has to scrub and control three or more small children twice per Sunday, the Sabbath becomes a nightmare instead of the day of rest and renewal that it is intended to be. Nor do they get a day off on Monday to recover.

I don’t think any of these couples have taken their decisions lightly. They are all enthusiastic Christians, eager to serve their Lord. It is very difficult for families involved in internal conflict to battle effectively against the powers of darkness. Both Ian and I are deeply concerned about the needs of people in the Third World and all the underprivileged and victims of injustice. We are also very conscious of the decline in faith and morality in Australian society and the breakdown of so many families, with tragic results for all those involved. The Catholic Church is one of the most vocal and effective forces in the attempt to uphold family life. Wonderful things are being done and at Marriage Encounter we were told what “couple power” could do — and then we were told that we must not take Communion together.

This letter has taken me ten days to write and, I fear, is rather long and ponderous, but I am calling on you, as my Archbishop-in-law, to hasten the day when the whole Church can be one in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Yours sincerely . . .
The Archbishop was so nice and it was the hearty laughter we shared which I found most healing. Sadly, I can't remember what we laughed about. He talked to me very seriously about the “Pipeline Theory” and I hadn't a clue what he was on about! Had he said “Apostolic Succession” I'd have known immediately, but I didn't find out that it was the same thing until Ian explained to me afterwards. Now I'll have to wait until we get to heaven to complete the conversation. (The Archbishop died early in 1991.) At the time of our interview our children were about 16, 14, 11 and 11. At the earliest stages referred to they were more like 5, 4, and two one-year-olds. I wasn't sure that the Archbishop could imagine the scrubbing involved...
Having met in Canada and completed our preparatory instruction with a fairly untending young priest in Vancouver, we were married in Mary's home town, Leeds, by an elderly Irish priest whose attitude was very different from his Canadian counterpart. At the time, I put this down to the happy ecumenical spirit which was abroad in England and which found an echo in the gentle tolerance of Mary's family, especially her father who was an Elder of the Presbyterian church.

Early in our marriage I met the most influential of Mary's evangelical friends. These are good people—strong, austere, Scottish Bible Christians—but their opinion of the Catholic Church was (and is) so venomous that I was quite taken aback. It was nothing like the comparatively mild prejudice that I had encountered elsewhere.

The first few years of our marriage saw a pattern of religious observance develop in our family which I described at the time as being Catholic in public and Protestant in private. We had different beliefs regarding, for example, the Eucharist, and Scottish Bible Christians—especially her father who was an Elder of the Presbyterian Church—were committed Catholics would occasionally send their children to State schools on the grounds that they were breaking out of the ghetto, or that any school fees undermined their egalitarian principles, but almost never to Protestant schools. We decided to do just that for our girls.

Mary had expressed a longing to pass on, especially to her daughters, the knowledge and love of the great Protestant hymns which mean so much to her. She felt that this could be done by sending our eldest, Jenny, to Penthos College, a UNiting Church school reasonably close by. I was persuaded more by the intensity of her feelings than anything else. For me, music is on the periphery of my faith. With Mary it is not so. For example, did you know that one of the major reasons for the schism of the eleventh century which created the Orthodox Church was that the authorities could not agree upon a formula to work out the date of Easter each year? I am not saying that this is stupid exactly—the celebration of Easter is the most important on our calendar, so it is fair enough to worry about whether we are doing it properly and everything. People in those days—some at least—felt so strongly about it that they were willing to die for their beliefs. But we should try to put everything into perspective, and I am getting into very deep water here, so I will just get on with what I was going to say.

Back in Australia

A short time after settling back in Australia, I found myself in a parish with a most unusual parish priest. He was a married man with a family, having previously been an Anglican priest. Previously I was quite unaware that those whose ecclesiology springs from the Reformation, like Mary, the blanket prohibition of priests marrying tends to make them sometimes threatening and less understanding of women's needs. So now she was able to speak to a Catholic priest she liked and respected and who liked and respected her. For my part, he encouraged me to acknowledge with greater emphasis the special charisms of her Protestant traditions, such as the high place given to the study of Scripture, and to avoid defending the indefensible in my own. During his ministry, Mary would sometimes come to Mass with me and our four very small children, and after some discussion with him she accepted his suggestion that she receive Communion. She rarely attended any other service, but developed a most fruitful prayer relationship with another mother of four who was a member of a neighbouring Anglican parish.

After some years, the Catholic priest was replaced by a man more in the traditional mould, quiet uninterested in ecumenism. Mary continued to receive Communion whenever she accompanied me to Mass and I encouraged her in this. I also dissuaded her from confronting the new priest, since I knew he would simply ask her not to receive Communion. I felt justified in pursuing this level of insubordination because I was aware of our converging Eucharistic beliefs and because I felt that our family's pastoral care should not rest simply on the vagaries of clerical appointments.

Schooling for our children

It had always been my intention and our joint understanding that our children should go to Catholic schools. There are three school systems in Australia. The State system derives from various Education Acts dating from the 1880s when free compulsory and secular education was introduced. The Catholic system caters for about one-fifth of the student population and more or less parallels the State system. It dates from the same era and was built up without any government assistance. The third system comprises high fee-paying schools run by Protestant churches for a socially elite clientele somewhat on the model of the English public schools. Serious, committed Catholics would occasionally send their children to State schools on the grounds that they were breaking out of the ghetto, or that any school fees undermined their egalitarian principles, but almost never to Protestant schools. We decided to do just that for our girls.

Mary’s growing discomfiture with what she increasingly felt to be a subversive participation in Mass whenever she came with me reached a head when she wrote to the Catholic Archbishop explaining her hurt at how she was being treated by the Church. I wrote too in support of her. During our interview we were granted permission to receive Communion in each other’s church. By now Mary increasingly described herself as an Anglican. I was amazed. I had never in my life been so uncertain of my vocation. I had anticipated a life in the Catholic Church, and I had spent my whole life in this with no nagging doubts. Having been a fairly indifferent Catholic, I had always followed the Church's teachings of the time on the Eucharist without question. I had always considered the Eucharist the most important on our calendar, so it is fair enough to worry about whether we are doing it properly and everything. People in those days—some at least—felt so strongly about it that they were willing to die for their beliefs. But we should try to put everything into perspective, and I am getting into very deep water here, so I will just get on with what I was going to say.

JENNY’S

A few years ago, when she was 17, Mary and Ian’s daughter Jenny gave a talk to the Antioch Group in their local Catholic parish. In it, she said:

Last year I was really into Ecumenism—that is, the bringing together of all the different Christians: Anglicans, Baptists, Uniting Church and so on, and Catholics. It is ridiculous that we all disagree on things that in God’s eyes are totally insignificant. For example, did you know that one of the major reasons for the schism of the eleventh century which created the Orthodox Church was that the authorities could not agree upon a formula to work out the date of Easter each year? I am not saying that this is stupid exactly—the celebration of Easter is the most important on our calendar, so it is fair enough to worry about whether we are doing it properly and everything. People in those days—some at least—felt so strongly about it that they were willing to die for their beliefs. But we should try to put everything into perspective, and I am getting into very deep water here, so I will just get on with what I was going to say.
The Church – one and diverse

The publication of the final statement of ARCIC I was an event of the utmost significance for me. Following its release, informal grass roots discussions were held throughout Australia, including one discussion group which met in our home. It is important for an understanding of the nature of our family’s interchurch challenge to explain that for Mary ARCIC meant almost nothing. For her, the Church is the local community of believers who think along similar lines. This decisively congregationalist outlook introduces a wonderful asymmetry to our relationship. My church includes all the Borgias, the Mafia and sundry local reprobates, a powerful organisation with evil tendencies. Mary’s church consists only of people she knows well, or whose integrity she can vouch for. Her church is welcoming and friendly. Mine is remote and forbidding. I love Mary’s church, but I love my own too even as I acknowledge its reprobates, for I feel the power of its sanctity stretching back through the ages to the time when Our Lord walked by the shores of Galilee.

To me, one of the noblest themes of the AIF literature is the idea that interchurch families, by their very existence, challenge the Churches to break new ground in ecumenical dialogue. Mary does not identify with this struggle, since to her the Church is the local Christian community of believers, or a believing community. Does God speak primarily to individuals, or through the community? Which community? Is our marriage, our domestic church, sanctified by the sacrament conferred by the larger Church, or does this wider Church only receive legitimacy through our participation? Is faith an objective reality grounded in history, or an inner spiritual feeling? And, finally, must these questions be couched as ORs, or could they be ANDs?

What next?

I am sure that our situation is not unique, but it is certainly different from the usual case histories dealt with in AIF literature where one spouse is Catholic and the other strongly bonded to the Anglican Church or one of the Free Churches. In our case, Mary, as the non-Catholic partner, is strongly attached to no one denomination, although she is currently a member of a particular congregation which happens to be Anglican. I feel we could go forward along one of two paths.

Mary’s identification with the Anglican church might grow, which could lead to some exciting developments including a joint confirmation of Elisabeth, our only unconfirmed child. Another way forward is for us somehow to combine Catholic freedom with Protestant freedom. Essentially this is what we have been trying to do all along, but on one level these are simply direct opposites which can draw us away from commitment towards conflict.

In the meantime we look forward to our 25th wedding anniversary, in November 1995, which we hope we shall be able to celebrate in a suitably ecumenical way. Please pray for us.

We are one Body – Christ is the Peace between us.

As most of you know, my mother is not a Catholic, and I did not go to a Catholic school but to a Uniting Church one. These two things put together mean that I have had a lot of exposure to other denominations. I had to go to “chapel” every week at school, and fairly often went to other church services, especially Anglican, but actually practically every sort. Sometimes I take Communion and sometimes I don’t. Anyway, last year Mum and Dad went to see the Archbishop about this matter, and he gave them permission to go to each other’s churches and take Communion there.

This leads me up to what I was originally going to say, that at the end of last year we had a Communion service at school to say goodbye to the Year 12s, and I went and participated. This was the first time I had done such a thing without my family – I mean that it was my own decision – and I feel that it was my way of making a statement about the Unity of the Body of Christ, and I felt a peace that is very rare.

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the universal Church is either an unrealistic abstraction, or a merely human organisation which has always been rent by division and discord, fuelled by ambition and cupidity. But she does identify with that other great theme of the suffering family whose hurt is imposed from without by churches demanding a destructive and sectarian loyalty, trampling over the inner loyalties of the family. Since her church, by its very nature, makes no demands, the villain once again is the Catholic Church.

From my point of view, our family situation is very much a microcosm of the whole Church. How do we reconcile Christian freedom with Christian faithfulness? Is the Church a community of believers, or a believing community? Does God speak primarily to individuals, or through the community? Which community? Is our marriage, our domestic church, sanctified by the sacrament conferred by the larger Church, or does this wider Church only receive legitimacy through our participation? Is faith an objective reality grounded in history, or an inner spiritual feeling? And, finally, must these questions be couched as ORs, or could they be ANDs?

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Mary’s identification with the Anglican church might grow, which could lead to some exciting developments including a joint confirmation of Elisabeth, our only unconfirmed child. She would have to be willing, and the Catholic and Anglican bishops would have to be persuaded to do something that has probably never happened in Perth before. As things are at present, I don’t think Mary could see the point in battling with ecclesiastic authorities to overcome a division which is scandalous to her only in so far as it impinges on individual freedom. There are other ways round that.

Another way forward is for us somehow to combine Catholic faithfulness with Protestant freedom. Essentially this is what we have been trying to do all along, but on one level these are simply direct opposites which can draw us away from commitment towards conflict.

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Beginnings and a wedding

Our backgrounds are broadly dissimilar: Liz is Church of England, accustomed to a low church; I am a Roman Catholic, accustomed now to variety in worship (but brought up largely pre-Vatican II). Both of us were born in 1947, but Liz was a year later than me in arriving at Birmingham University where we met through the University Scout and Guide Club. Neither of us was particularly devout at age 18; we did not dabble in eastern religions (the fashion in the late 'sixties), but nor did we explore our own faith through the university chaplaincy or elsewhere.

When we decided to marry, it was understood between us that we should do so in Liz’s church, that being the traditional way things were done. It did not occur to me that pre-Vatican II ideas still persisted, and I was surprised when my parents told me that they had been advised by their parish priest in Bristol that they could not attend the ceremony. Liz’s mother had been brought up as a Wesleyan Methodist, but felt at home in the low church the family attended; her father was completely at home there and had encouraged Liz in reading in church and other activities.

Church-going and contact with AIF

After some three years of married life, with religion playing only a peripheral part in our lifestyle, we started attending Evensong at the local Anglican church. Light summer Sunday evenings, the novelty of the service for me, the community aspect of church life, all appealed, and we began also attending Mass at the local Catholic church. At this stage, neither of us even considered the possibility of there being a way in which attendance could be more than accompanying one’s partner and taking part in whatever of the liturgy was appropriate.

The curate at the Anglican parish had married a Roman Catholic girl and we were invited by them to meet another couple and a local Catholic priest to talk about problems and about this new body – AIF – which had come into existence a few years earlier. Through them we attended a number of meetings of AIF’s London group and began to question our own positions. We continued to attend both churches, but the Catholic parish had little life and Anglican one too few people. At this time, Liz became pregnant and I was promoted at work. This both required and enabled us to move house – our existing place was too small and the location was not ideal for bringing up a child.

Another wedding...

In about May 1974, with Liz increasingly obviously pregnant, we arranged with the priest mentioned above for a Catholic wedding ceremony at the college chapel where he was chaplain, for the express benefit of my parents. Since our wedding they had been supportive without being happy about our two-church complications (which were simply ignored at all times), and they were delighted that we were going “to put things right” (their thoughts) before God prior to Catherine’s birth. The ceremony was a felony, as we were already married and this was no mere blessing of a marriage but a full-blown wedding with Nuptial Mass, but it meant so much to my parents (my mother in particular) that it was worth doing, even though on the day Liz was a month away from giving birth!

Two churches and children’s baptisms

On moving house (1975), we attended both local churches and were more made welcome at the Anglican than at the RC church – possibly because of our persistence in attending the 8.00 a.m. Mass with a babe in arms. We became part of the Anglican community – I joined the church badminton club and we became involved in the “DIY” creche, going camping with other Anglican families (these shortly included the other family to whom we had been introduced at our last parish). Among our friends we counted the curate and his successor and their respective families, and we continued attending, often with the other family, the London group meetings at Heythrop College.

By this time we had been through Catherine’s baptism, having waited until she was seven months old. She was christened in the Catholic church, at which the priest who had married us was an occasional celebrant, his chaplaincy lying within that parish, by him and the then curate from our new Anglican parish. The parts of the service were divided between them and at this remove I cannot remember who did what.

When James was born, we arranged the baptism at the Anglican church. We tried to hold this during the 9.30 a.m. Parish Communion service, but the friendly Catholic priest told us that he was unable to take part in such an event, though he would gladly join in a baptism held privately in that church. The attitude of the then (Anglican) vicar was amazing; in response to my hesitation about a joint christening during a communion service, on the grounds that it might be upsetting to his parishioners, he asked whom they might be and said, “Let them stand up and be counted!”

Church reorientation

The lack of welcome at the Catholic church, together with my involvement with the neighbouring parish’s folk group, led to a change of (RC) church. We had increased our links with the Anglican parish, to the extent that Catherine started attending Brownies there (Liz took over the Brownie pack and is still Brown Owl) and we went to its social functions. At our new Catholic parish we found catechism classes for Catherine, held locally, and she went through these up to First Communion. This was a bad time for us ecumenically, as we asked for permission for Liz to receive Communion at the service, but were refused. We were heartened by the attendance of her vicar, but saddened by the continuing split. We had both received Communion at each other’s services on occasion, but felt it wrong to do so at parish level. We still see the division as being there to be witnessed to and say so at appropriate opportunities.

James was about the age to begin catechism classes when the Catholic parish switched its local classes to the church hall – not a feasible option for us. We were also finding that the family was not sitting together at Mass because I sang in the folk choir on two Sundays in each month. The social pull of the
Anglican parish was increasing; Catherine was going to Guides and James was starting at Cubs; additionally, Liz joined the Parochial Church Council and Catherine began (Anglican) Confirmation classes and joined the choir. Then I was invited to join the RC team of eucharistic ministers. At that time, men sat (in cassock and cotta) on the altar and thus not with their families. Although this has now been changed, it did mean that, as the rota was organised so that if I was involved in my music ministry I was not also asked to exercise my eucharistic ministry on the same day, I never sat with my family in my own church, only in Liz’s.

Which church for the children?
As time passed, Liz was elected church warden and thus had more pressures on her, both to be at church early and to be there every week. James joined first the choir and then the servers at Liz’s church. Catherine became one of two choir leaders at the church and was attending Confirmation classes there. I took over my church’s folk choir when the leader moved way. We were polarising into Anglican (Liz and the children, with me attending when my commitments let me) and RC (me, with Liz attending when her commitments let her).

Neither child felt comfortable in my church, Catherine because the girls of her age all went to the same local Catholic girls’ school and was thus an outsider in conversations about teachers, other girls, and so on, and James because he knew no one from my church, had never been to catechism classes, and had not gone through the training for, and ritual of, First Communion.

Our own worship
Since that time, Liz has started coming with me in the evening (I have asked for the occasional evening rota duty for this purpose) while I go to the Anglican Parish Communion the same weekend; this enables us to be with each other as often as possible. Catherine has gone to university, where she has dropped formal religion (temporarily, we hope) and James, now 15, has begun to exercise his right not to go to church when he doesn’t want to—which turns out to be every Sunday he’s not down to serve!

Family ecumenism
A number of factors appears to have affected the drift of our ecumenism over the last twenty odd years.

(a) The RC reaction to our wish to marry in the Church of England; lack of help for us and my parents being advised not to attend (together with my/our not getting together with them to talk about it, which in turn reflects the Catholicism I’d been brought up with).

(b) The coincidence of there being a curate married to a Catholic girl at our first local Anglican parish church, together with another two-church couple and a friendly RC priest nearby.

(c) The relative distances away of the two churches following our house move, exacerbated by the coolness of RC parish no. 1 and the even greater distance of RC parish no. 2.

(d) The warmth and community feeling in the Anglican parish (a smallish church population, closely tied up in our experience with school, Brownies and other, similar, non-church contexts), as against the diffuseness of the Catholic parish with six Masses each weekend, and a small “Mafia” (in the nicest sense) of mums of our generation who had been to school together and thus formed something of a clique.

(e) The requirement in the early days for eucharistic ministers to sit apart from their families, so that I could not even share with Liz any sign of pain at being able to receive communion when she couldn’t, combined with the folk choir occupying a block of pews in which there was not really enough room for families as well.

There is so much more I could mention— involvement in the local group of churches, my parents’ attitudes, my sisters’ experiences, our Anglican vicars and curates, my own parish and assistant priests, our family involvement in music-making at church . . . No doubt the story will continue to unfold.

Looking back, I am struck by how we were led—by geography and by external pressures, mainly—into the present situation of my RC church almost “claiming” me as if to say, “We can’t force your wife and children into our building but by the Lord we’ll make it difficult for you to escape!”

Liz adds a post-script
Not only has Andy’s RC church “claimed” him— or he’s allowed himself to be so claimed. My C of E church has done the same to me. First, Sunday School teaching, then church warden, and for Catherine, choir membership. There was no question of alternating where we worshipped each week; it had to be C of E plus RC—which the children didn’t accept (i.e. going to church twice).

The Catholic church’s attitude when James came to First Communion preparation stage was unfortunate. The local (walkable to) classes closed, and we were offered 4:45 on Fridays in the presbytery (too far away, with no direct bus, and I was at work with the car; my elderly father, who cared for James, could not have managed it). No-one offered a lift, no-one offered an alternative, except Andy’s Mum, who tried to arrange for a Catholic Women’s League “holiday camp”.

Our children know about Jesus and God, but don’t yet seem to know him for themselves. In my experience this is typical of C of E teenagers; and of some RC ones—but are we the only Alf members who haven’t “achieved” active Christian children?

Return to Journal index
INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

This first round-up giving a brief history and current preoccupations of interchurch families begins with France, Britain and Ireland. In our next number we shall look outside Europe and give news of associations in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

FRANCE

How things began
It was in the early 1960s that a small group of interchurch families (foyers mixtes) began meeting in Lyon, the city where thirty years earlier Abbé Paul Couturier began his great work of establishing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and that “spiritual ecumenism” which was later acknowledged as “the heart of the ecumenical movement” (Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism, n.8).

The couples involved two clergy in their discussions: Fr René Beaufépère, the Dominican director of the ecumenical Centre St Irénée, and Henry Bruston, a Lutheran pastor. By 1965 they had produced a written statement of their experiences and their hopes, the “Charter of Lyon”, which was considered both by the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Christian Unity, formed in France immediately after the Vatican Council, and the Commission for Relations with Catholicism of the Protestant Federation of France. Because of the publicity given to this document, several new groups of foyers mixtes were established both in France and Switzerland.

They did not form an “Association” (an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon!) but the Centre St Irénée kept contact with the various groups and tried to help more isolated couples. Weekend retreats were held in various parts of France and Switzerland, and in 1967 the first Franco-Swiss meeting was held near Geneva. In 1968 the quarterly magazine Foyers Mixtes was launched by the Centre St Irénée; this year (1993) its one hundredth issue is published, entitled Ecoutes Notre Histoire – Listen to our Story.

Most of this hundredth issue is devoted to a masterly account by Fr René Beaufépère, first of the period up to 1970 and the papal motu proprio Matrimonia Mixta, then of developments in France in four fields: joint celebration of baptism, catechetics, age of First Communion, and eucharistic hospitality. Finally he considers three fields for “further battles”: the abolition of canonical form for the validity of marriage; the disappearance of the promise which is still to be made by the Catholic partner (which can be interpreted satisfactorily, but fiancés unused to theological and canonical language can be uneasy at these “intellectual gymnastics”); and the relationship of an experienced “double belonging” to the one Church – for “the most dynamic mixed couples are active pioneers of the renewal and unity of the Church”.

ENGLAND

The first Association of Interchurch Families
It is from 1968 that AIF (England) dates its story; an annual conference has been held ever since the first in that year. Fr John Coventry, SJ, then Secretary of the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales, and Martin

Reardon, an Anglican priest then Secretary of the Sheffield Council of Churches, were at this first meeting and are still co-chairs of AIF (joined in the 1980s by Ruth Matthews, a Baptist minister).

AIF began as a mutual support group. Soon there were a number of groups throughout the country. In its second decade AIF became a registered charity, published a printed Newsletter, and forged links with similar groups in other countries – an international conference of Associations of Interchurch Families has been held every two years since 1980.

In its third decade it rented office space in Inter-Church House, the home of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, became a “body in association” with Churches Together in England (and also, together with the Scottish and Irish Associations, with CCBI), and launched a Development Appeal to fund a new level of work. It has produced a video to communicate the experience of interchurch families to parishes, local churches and ecumenical bodies and groups. It has begun to print a series of leaflets for wide circulation, the first being a general leaflet on interchurch families and AIF, followed by “Getting Married”, “Baptism” and “Sharing Communion”.

Local groups throughout the country flourish and decline, depending on who is where when; there have been regular national meetings of group secretaries since 1980. They will now be joined by county contacts – couples ready to respond to enquirers but also to be link-persons with the county ecumenical officers of Churches Together in England.

Over the past year AIF has worked with the Group for Local Unity of Churches Together in England on a document intended to update the Guidelines for the Joint Pastoral Care of Interchurch Families produced by the British Council of Churches-Roman Catholic Joint Working Group in 1971. More information on this later.

In 1994 (which is the United Nations International Year of the Family) AIF celebrates its Silver Jubilee Year. In preparation for IYF 1994 the Association has been working with an ecumenical group representing marriage and family organisations on a leaflet for wide distribution in the churches, and with the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland in preparing material for the Week of Prayer for Unity; the theme for Day 5 is The Household of God: in the Home, and there will be special prayers for interchurch families.
A campaigning group

An Irish Association began in the Republic in 1973 as a campaigning group to obtain the legal right for interchurch couples to adopt children. This was achieved (the only Association to have effected a change in state law?), and their aims broadened.

The outstanding achievement of AIF (Irish Republic) has been to establish and help to run a marriage preparation course for mixed couples in partnership with all the main Churches and the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council. In 1992 there were three courses of six Tuesday nights, two courses of two Saturdays and one course of Friday/Saturday. (We hope to hear more next year, when the Eighth International Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families is hosted by the Irish at Bellinter House, north of Dublin, 22-24 July 1994, on the theme of The Nurturing of Mixed and Interchurch Families: Ecumenical Approaches.)

Originally based in Dublin, the Association is establishing a network of contacts throughout the Republic, and working out ways of keeping in touch with them. Cork and Galway used to have local groups, but these have disappeared. An annual conference is held in Dublin. The Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin has been a constant support.

In June 1992 AIF was invited to the annual meeting of the Catholic Advisory Committee on Ecumenism at Maynooth. A delegation of three attended, and the chairman Jim Grace addressed the bishops and clergy present. (NIMMA - see below- was also represented and made a separate but parallel presentation.) As a result the national Ecumenical Officers decided to prepare a pastoral guide on interchurch families for the Roman Catholic clergy. AIF was asked to help by producing draft material, and this work is now in hand.

Mixed marriages in a divided community

In Northern Ireland “mixed marriage” means only one thing: Catholic/Protestant marriage. For historical and social reasons the Association there, formed in 1974, was called the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA). Its members live in a more difficult, indeed dangerous, situation than any other interchurch families. The Corrymeela Community has been a constant support, and NIMMA’s annual conference is always held at Corrymeela on the North Antrim coast.

NIMMA is a small group with few resources (“We are a local group trying to do the work of a national association”) but the potential is enormous. This was realised in preparing for the Maynooth meeting mentioned above. A stimulus also came last year from the international conference on “Marriage across Frontiers” held in Northern Ireland, and Gillian Robinson’s survey Cross-Community Marriage in Northern Ireland made in preparation for it (see Interchurch Families, January 1993, pp.10-12).

NIMMA had just finished the major task of printing a 36-page booklet, Mixed Marriage in Ireland: a Companion for those involved or about to be involved in a mixed marriage, and was ready to take on something new. Also, the booklet had been printed with financial assistance from the International Fund for Ireland, and NIMMA realised that funding was available for work regarded as socially useful – indeed, essential – in the Northern Ireland context. With the help of a facilitator at their annual conference at Corrymeela in March 1993, NIMMA began to plan future development.

Already a leaflet, Housing without Labels, has been produced jointly with the Housing Rights Service and published by the Community Relations Council. Discussions have started with the Northern Ireland Catholic Marriage Advisory Council in view of a joint pre-marriage course something on the lines of the one run in Dublin. NIMMA is considering taking on a much higher profile than it did in the past (not an easy decision in Northern Ireland), and using paid help with clerical and secretarial tasks so that its work can develop. “Are we prepared to move into a new method of activity retaining the unique resource of our own experience but having a better back-up service, maybe a worker?”

The fourth Association

The third International Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families was organized by the English but held at Scottish Churches House, Dunblane, in 1984. At that time AIF had a handful of members in Scotland, and as a result of the meeting at Dunblane these felt confident enough to stand on their own feet as Scottish AIF (SAIF), with their own annual conference and newsletter.

SAIF has had its ups-and-downs, but has persevered with a small membership in a colder ecumenical climate for interchurch families than that south of the border, and in 1992 the Scots were able to host the seventh International Conference, which met at St Mary’s, Kinnoull, Perth, in May (see Interchurch Families, Summer 1992).

This year’s General Assembly of the Church of Scotland meeting in May 1993 received a report on the areas of agreement and disagreement between the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church over marriage. At the end of the report there is a short consideration of interchurch marriage, in response to a Roman Catholic statement. While agreeing with the aim of “lived Christian unity”, the report suggests that this lived unity would be much more convincing “if there were not so much pressure from one side creating the impression that only one partner is a true believer”. Acknowledging the “real distress” still often felt in both Church of Scotland and Catholic homes at the prospect of an interchurch marriage “because of Scotland’s long tradition of mistrust, even hostility, between the Reformed and Roman Catholic communions”, the report asks both churches “to emphasize the shared Christian faith of both partners”. As things are, “division is highlighted at the marriage ceremony and perpetuated throughout the life of the couple by the present impossibility of their ever sharing in the Eucharist”. Happily the new Directory from Rome opens the door to meeting both points made by the Church of Scotland, and there may be more hope for SAIF and other Scottish interchurch couples in the future.
The New Ecumenical Directory

We are grateful to Fr John Coventry, SJ, for the following introduction to the provisions for mixed marriages contained in the long-awaited "Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism" issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity from Vatican City on 25 March 1993. (In England it is published by the Catholic Truth Society, Do615, at £3.75.) This is an up-dating of the Ecumenical Directory which was originally published a few years after the end of the Second Vatican Council by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in two parts in 1967 and 1970.

Since then many new documents with a bearing on ecumenism have been published from Rome. Those of especial interest to interchurch families were the motu proprio Matrimonium Mixta in 1970, the SPCU Instruction on Admitting Other Christians to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church in 1972 and the more restrictive Interpretative Note of 1973. (For the text of these and a commentary see Sharing Communion by Ruth Reardon and Melanie Finch, pp.117-9 and 125-6). These documents include the new Code of Canon Law (1983). There has also been a great deal of ecumenical experience gained over the last two decades. So we have this new Directory, "addressed to the Pastors of the Catholic Church", but "also concerning all the faithful" and "useful to members of Churches and ecclesial Communities that are not in full communion with the Catholic Church".

The New Ecumenical Directory on Mixed Marriages

After twenty-three years Rome has published a revised Ecumenical Directory. It is a weighty document of over 100 pages in the CTS edition, covering every aspect of the ecumenical scene. It is noteworthy in having a special section on Mixed Marriages between Christians, thereby singling them out as potential "builders of unity". These paragraphs will deal only with some matters of special concern to AIF, leaving matters such as baptism for later consideration.

Eucharistic sharing in general

This is located in the earlier part of the Directory before inter-Christian marriages are considered.

In n. 129, the two principles governing admission of other Christians to Holy Communion are given: the expression of unity in faith and life which constitutes a link with full ecclesial communion; on the other hand, the sacraments are at the same time a means for developing union. Hence in general (and so not exclusively) only Catholics are admitted to the sacraments. But in the light of the two principles, admission of others may be allowed by way of exception in stated circumstances.

In stating the conditions for such exceptional admission (n. 130) the document repeats the former rules (e.g. inability of other Christians to have recourse to their own ministers). So the focus is still on the spiritual needs of individuals, and the situation of the family is not at this point adverted to – nor is it excluded.

What is noteworthy is that the decision should be taken by the Catholic priest or deacon according to norms (guidelines) laid down by his bishop or the episcopal conference, or in default of such guidelines according to the Directory's norms. In other words, don't first ask the bishop, though you can appeal to him if refused.

Mixed marriages

As has been said, it is notable progress that the Directory has a separate section on "mixed marriages", by which are meant those "between a Catholic and a baptised Christian who is not in full communion with the Catholic Church", a terminology that reflects the term used by Canon Law (mixed religion) as opposed to marriage with the unbaptised (disparity of cult). Marriages where both partners are committed to their own Church's life are said to "contain numerous elements that could be made good use of and developed both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution they can make to the ecumenical movement" (n. 145).

Straight away (n. 144) it is emphasised that, as in all marriages, the primary concern of the Church is to support the marriage and the family. Indeed, in n. 148, each spouse is urged to be faithful to his/her own Christian commitment. There is no talk of trying to convert the other: the conscience of each partner is to be fully respected (nn. 150, 151); contact with non-Catholic ministers and joint pastoral care are recommended as "a fruitful field of ecumenical collaboration" (n. 147).

In n. 151 it is explicitly recognised that in a particular case the children may not be baptised and brought up as Catholics, but the Catholic partner has not thereby failed to carry out his/her undertaking and remains in good standing with the Church and can still do much to share the Catholic faith with the family.

At the wedding a Catholic priest may take part in, not be merely present at, the ceremony in another Church, and conversely the non-Catholic minister in a Catholic ceremony (nn. 157, 158).

The bishop may permit a nuptial Mass at a mixed marriage, and "the decision as to whether the non-Catholic party of the marriage may be admitted to Eucharistic communion is to be made [not necessarily by the bishop] in keeping with the general norms ... taking into account the particular situation of the reception of the sacrament of Christian marriage by two baptized Christians" (n. 159). Surely this last clause can only be understood as positive encouragement.

Finally, it is clearly envisaged (n. 160) that there are other occasions of eucharistic sharing between the couple, though it is emphasised that these "can only be exceptional", and that the stated norms should be observed. The stated norms only envisage the spiritual need of individuals (possibly unable to approach their own ministers), but this paragraph clearly looks at the need of a couple. One must conclude, not only that the spiritual need of the non-Catholic to communicate with his/her spouse is a sufficient ground, but that the spiritual need of the Catholic so to communicate should be considered too.

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Unfortunately there is still no consideration of children of communicant age, but the same consideration should be applied to the whole family.

Conclusion
One has to recognise with gratitude very considerable progress, even if there is still some way to go, particularly in consideration of interchurch children. And it is a pity that almost exclusive stress is laid on the wedding as an occasion for eucharistic sharing, even though it is seen that there are other “exceptional cases”. As AIF members well know, such sharing is a growing need in a united Christian life and does not exist only for certain highlight occasions near the start of a marriage; the couple and the family need lifelong nourishment if they are to be “builders of unity”. However, the Directory banishes for ever the mistaken and oft repeated answer, always in conflict with Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism, n. 5, that eucharistic sharing can only be a sign of full communion and never an expression of partial communion as a means towards full communion.

John Coventry, SJ

The New Directory: Section on Mixed Marriages

The 1993 Directory is much longer than the earlier one. It contains a section on Mixed Marriages, which is a new departure. Because of the importance to interchurch families of this section, we are printing it in full here, together with passages from other parts of the Directory to which it refers. We are also noting further references to mixed marriages throughout the document.

Chapter IV: Communion of Life and Spiritual Activity among the Baptized

Section C: MIXED MARRIAGES

143. This section of the Ecumenical Directory does not attempt to give an extended treatment of all the pastoral and canonical questions connected with either the actual celebration of the sacrament of Christian marriage or the pastoral care to be given to Christian families, since such questions form part of the general pastoral care of every Bishop or regional Conference of Bishops. What follows below focuses on specific issues related to mixed marriages and should be understood in that context. The term “mixed marriage” refers to any marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian who is not in full communion with the Catholic Church.

144. In all marriages, the primary concern of the Church is to uphold the strength and stability of the indissoluble marital union and the family life that flows from it. The perfect union of persons and full sharing of life which constitutes the married state are more easily assured when both partners belong to the same faith community. In addition, practical experience and the observations obtained in various dialogues between representatives of Churches and ecclesial Communities indicate that mixed marriages frequently present difficulties for the couples themselves, and for the children born to them, in maintaining their Christian faith and commitment and for the harmony of family life. For all these reasons, marriage between persons of the same ecclesial Community remains the objective to be recommended and encouraged.

145. In view, however, of the growing number of mixed marriages in many parts of the world, the Church includes within its urgent pastoral solicitude couples preparing to enter, or already having entered, such marriages. These marriages, even if they have their own particular difficulties, “contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution they can make to the ecumenical movement. This is particularly true when both parties are faithful to their religious duties. Their common baptism and the dynamism of grace provide...
on the essential ends and properties of marriage which are not to be excluded by either party. Furthermore, the Catholic party will be asked to affirm, in the form established by the particular law of the Eastern Catholic Churches or by the Episcopal Conference, that he or she is prepared to avoid the dangers of abandoning the faith and to promise sincerely to do all in his/her power to see that the children of the marriage be baptised and educated in the Catholic Church. The other partner is to be informed of these promises and responsibilities. (Cf. Code, can. 1125, 1126) At the same time, it should be recognised that the non-Catholic partner may feel a like obligation because of his/her own Christian commitment. It is to be noted that no formal written or oral promise is required of this partner in Canon Law.

Those who wish to enter into a mixed marriage should, in the course of the contacts that are made in this connection, be invited and encouraged to discuss the Catholic baptism and education of the children they will have, and where possible come to a decision on this question before the marriage.

In order to judge the existence or otherwise of a "just and reasonable cause" with regard to granting permission for this mixed marriage, the local Ordinary will take account, among other things, of an explicit refusal on the part of the non-Catholic party.

151. In carrying out this duty of transmitting the Catholic faith to the children, the Catholic parent will do so with respect for the religious freedom and conscience of the other parent and with due regard for the unity and permanence of the marriage and for the maintenance of the communion of the family. If, notwithstanding the Catholic’s best efforts, the children are not baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church, the Catholic parent does not fall subject to the censure of Canon Law. (Cf. Code, can. 1366) At the same time, his/her obligation to share the Catholic faith with the children does not cease. It continues to make its demands, which could be met, for example, by playing an active part in contributing to the Christian atmosphere of the home; doing all that is possible by word and example to enable the other members of the family to appreciate the specific values of the Catholic tradition; taking whatever steps are necessary to be well informed about his/her own faith so as to be able to explain and discuss it with them; praying with the family for the grace of Christian unity as the Lord wills it.

152. While keeping clearly in mind that doctrinal differences impede full sacramental and canonical communion between the Catholic Church and the various Eastern Churches, in the pastoral care of marriages between Catholics and Eastern Christians, particular attention should be given to the sound and consistent teaching of the faith which is shared by both and to the fact that in the Eastern Churches are to be found "true sacraments, and above all, by apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy". (Cf. Decree on Ecumenism, n. 15) If proper pastoral care is given to persons involved in these marriages, the faithful of both communions can be helped to understand how children born of such marriages will be initiated into and spiritually nourished by the sacramental mysteries of Christ. Their formation in authentic Christian doctrine and ways of Christian living would, for the most part, be similar in each Church. Diversity in liturgical life and private devotion can be made to encourage rather than hinder family prayer.

153. A marriage between a Catholic and a member of an Eastern Church is valid if it has taken place with the celebration of a religious rite by an ordained minister, as long as any other requirements of law for validity have been observed. For lawfulness in these cases, the canonical form of celebration is to be observed. (Cf. Code, can. 1127, 1) Canonical form

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### A PASTORAL PRIORITY

Too often people think of ecumenism as some kind of elite game for high stakes indulged in by bishops and theologians. The players seem to enjoy the game without much thought about the results or the passing of time. Laity are generally not invited to play the game.

John Paul II calls ecumenism a "pastoral priority". It is a task of the highest priority to be done by all because it is a pastoral need.

A pastoral approach emphasizes that people are the primary concern of the ecumenical movement. The Church is the People of God before it is an institution. And what concerns people must have priority in the Church. Jesus came to save people, not an institution, a philosophy or a way of life.

In the final analysis, those who are hurt by the divisions of the Church are people. They are separated from loved ones, friends and neighbours by the continuing divisions of the Christian Church. This pain is particularly acute in interchurch families. It affects parents and children from one generation to the next . . .

At a Lutheran-Anglican-Roman Catholic gathering in Albuquerque (New Mexico), participants were asked to share their experiences with baptisms, weddings and funerals. These critical moments in the Christian life were seen as filled with opportunities to think and act ecumenically.

At a time when the joy or pain of people is so intense, clergy and laity must rise to the occasion. Baptisms, weddings and funerals provide ample opportunities for the kind of ecumenical sensitivity required of all ministers today. Recognizing the presence of “the other” is the first step to promoting communion/communion with those of other Christian Churches.

Every Sunday’s liturgy provides similar opportunities. It doesn’t take a great deal of effort to welcome those from other Christian communions who join their spouses, friends and relatives for weekly worship. One can make these brothers and sisters feel welcome or ignore them.

Parish councils, parish committees and concerted efforts in the parish are required for this pastoral priority to become a reality in the Church. It is not so much a matter of doing something more or something else. It is a matter of doing everything in a different way and with a different attitude.

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From an article in The Priest, April 1993, by Fr Ernest Falardeau, SSS, Director of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Archdiocese of Santa Fe in New Mexico.

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is required for the validity of marriages between Catholics and Christians of other Churches and ecclesial Communities. (Cf. Code, can. 1127, 1)

154. The local Ordinary of the Catholic partner, after having consulted the local Ordinary of the place where the marriage will be celebrated, may for grave reasons and without prejudice to the law of the Eastern Churches, dispense the Catholic partner from the observance of the canonical form of marriage. (Cf. Code, can. 1127, 2) Among these reasons for dispensation may be considered the maintaining of family harmony, obtaining parental consent to the marriage, the recognition of the particular religious commitment of the non-Catholic partner or his/her blood relationship with a minister of another Church or ecclesial Community. Episcopal Conferences are to issue norms by which such a dispensation may be granted in accordance with a common practice.

155. The obligation imposed by some Churches or ecclesial Communities for the observance of their own form of marriage is not a motive for automatic dispensation from the Catholic canonical form. Such particular situations should form the subject of dialogue between the Churches, at least at the local level.

156. One must keep in mind that, if the wedding is celebrated with a dispensation from canonical form, some public form of celebration is still required for validity. (Cf. Code, can. 1127, 2) To emphasize the unity of marriage, it is not permitted to have two separate religious services in which the exchange of consent would be expressed twice, or even one service which would celebrate two such exchanges of consent jointly or successively. (Cf. Code, can. 1127, 3)

157. With the previous authorisation of the local Ordinary, and if invited to do so, a Catholic priest or deacon may attend or participate in some way in the celebration of mixed marriages, in situations where the dispensation from canonical form has been granted. In these cases, there may be only one ceremony in which the presiding person receives the marriage vows. At the invitation of this celebrant, the Catholic priest or deacon may offer other appropriate prayers, read from the Scriptures, give a brief exhortation and bless the couple.

158. Upon request of the couple, the local Ordinary may permit the Catholic priest to invite the minister of the party of the other Church or ecclesial Community to participate in the celebration of the marriage, to read from the Scriptures, give a brief exhortation and bless the couple.

159. Because of problems concerning Eucharistic sharing which may arise from the presence of non-Catholic witnesses and guests, a mixed marriage celebrated according to the Catholic form ordinarily takes place outside the Eucharistic liturgy. For a just cause, however, the diocesan Bishop may permit the celebration of the Eucharist. (Ordo celebrandi Matrimonium, n. 8) In the latter case, the decision as to whether the non-Catholic party of the marriage may be admitted to Eucharistic communion is to be made in keeping with the general norms existing in the matter both for Eastern Christians (cf. n. 125 above) and for other Christians (cf. nn. 129-131 above), taking into account the particular situation of the reception of the sacrament of Christian marriage by two baptized Christians.

160. Although the spouses in a mixed marriage share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, Eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional and in each case the norms stated above concerning the admission of a non-Catholic Christian to Eucharistic communion (cf. nn. 125, 138 and 131 above), as well as those concerning the participation of a Catholic in Eucharist communion in another Church (cf. n. 132 above), must be observed.

Sacramental Sharing

The latter part of this section of the Directory on “Mixed Marriages” refers back to the section on “Sharing Sacramental Life with Christians of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities”. For clarity we therefore print nn.129-131 on sacramental sharing.

129. A sacrament is an act of Christ and of the Church through the Spirit. Its celebration in a concrete community is the sign of the reality of its unity in faith, worship and community life. As well as being signs, sacraments – most specially the Eucharist – are sources of the unity of the Christian community and of spiritual life, and are means for building them up. Thus Eucharistic communion is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion and its visible expression.

At the same time, the Catholic Church teaches that by baptism members of other Churches and ecclesial Communities are brought into a real, even if imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church (cf. Decree on Ecumenism, n.3) and that “baptism, which constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn . . . is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ”. (Cf. Decree, n.22) The Eucharist is, for the baptized, a spiritual food which enables them to overcome sin and to live the very life of Christ, to be incorporated more profoundly in Him and share more intensely in the whole economy of the Mystery of Christ.

It is in the light of these two basic principles, which must always be taken into account together, that in general the Catholic Church permits access to its Eucharistic communion and to the sacraments of penance and anointing of the sick, only to those who share its oneness in faith, worship and ecclesial life. (Cf. Decree, n.8; Code, can.844) For the same reasons, it also recognizes that in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments may be permitted, or even commended, for Christians of other Churches and ecclesial Communities. (Cf. Code, can.844)

130. In case of danger of death, Catholic ministers may administer these sacraments when the conditions given below (n.131) are present. In other cases, it is strongly recommended that the diocesan Bishop, taking into account any norms which may have been established for this matter by the Episcopal Conference or by the Synods of Eastern Catholic Churches, establish general norms for judging situations of grave and pressing need and for verifying the conditions mentioned below (n.131). In accord with Canon Law, these general norms are to be established only after consultation with at least the local competent authority of the other interested Church or ecclesial Community. Catholic ministers will judge individual cases and administer these sacraments only in accord with these established norms, where they exist. Otherwise they will judge according to the norms of this Directory.

131. The conditions under which a Catholic minister may administer the sacraments of the Eucharist, of penance and
AN APPEAL TO THE CHURCHES

The following text is an appeal to the Churches from a consultation which took place on the island of Iona in Scotland in May. The meeting was arranged by the Iona Community, started in 1938 by the Revd Dr George MacLeod of the Church of Scotland. The Community rebuilt the ruined Abbey founded on Iona by St Columba in the sixth century. A group of twenty people from interested bodies were invited, half from Scotland and half from England and Wales; the Association of Interchurch Families was invited, and Brian Dwyer took part on AIF’s behalf.

SHARING COMMUNION

Gathered together in Iona in May 1993, at the initiative of the Iona Community, to discuss intercommunion, we, a representative group of twenty people including members of the Anglican, Baptist, Church of Scotland, Congregational, Methodist, Roman Catholic and United Reformed Churches, have experienced a deep fellowship in the Holy Spirit. Out of that experience, we make the following appeal to the churches.

It is of the utmost urgency to prepare for the new millennium. As a matter of priority we appeal for a further advance in offering Holy Communion to one another, particularly

- in cases of exceptional pastoral need such as in interchurch families;
- in situations where a sufficient degree of unity already exists as in residential communities such as Iona;
- on special occasions such as ecumenical gatherings and shared pilgrimages as at Haddington in Scotland;
- in appropriate ecumenical projects such as Penhys in Wales and the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes in England.

Levels of Ecumenical Activity

27. When members of the same family belong to different Churches and ecclesial Communities, when Christians cannot receive Communion with their spouse or children, or their friends, the pain of division makes itself felt acutely and the impulse to prayer and ecumenical activity should grow.

Suitable Settings for Ecumenical Formation

66. The family, called the “domestic church” by the Second Vatican Council, (Constitution on the Church, n.11) is the primary place in which unity will be fashioned or weakened each day through the encounter of persons, who, though different in many ways, accept each other in a communion of love. It is also there that care must be taken not to entertain prejudices, but on the contrary to search for the truth in all things.

(a) Awareness of its Christian identity and mission makes the family ready to be a community for others, a community not only open to the Church but also to human society, ready for dialogue and social involvement. Like the Church, it should be a setting in which the Gospel is transmitted and which radiates the Gospel; indeed Lumen Gentium states that in the domestic church “parents should by their words and example be the first preachers of the faith to their children” (n.11).

(b) Mixed marriage families have the duty to proclaim Christ with the fullness implied in a common baptism, they have too the delicate task of making themselves builders of unity. (Evangelii Nuntiandi, n.71; see also nn.143-160 of this

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It is of the utmost urgency to prepare for the new millennium. As a matter of priority we appeal for a further advance in offering Holy Communion to one another, particularly

- in cases of exceptional pastoral need such as in interchurch families;
- in situations where a sufficient degree of unity already exists as in residential communities such as Iona;
- on special occasions such as ecumenical gatherings and shared pilgrimages as at Haddington in Scotland;
- in appropriate ecumenical projects such as Penhys in Wales and the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes in England.

The following text is an appeal to the Churches from a consultation which took place on the island of Iona in Scotland in May. The meeting was arranged by the Iona Community, started in 1938 by the Revd Dr George MacLeod of the Church of Scotland. The Community rebuilt the ruined Abbey founded on Iona by St Columba in the sixth century. A group of twenty people from interested bodies were invited, half from Scotland and half from England and Wales; the Association of Interchurch Families was invited, and Brian Dwyer took part on AIF’s behalf.

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We would also urge that in the light of the churches’ increased commitment to each other, every opportunity be taken to further mutual understanding and warm appreciation of each other’s celebration of the Eucharist.

Our appeal is made all the more urgent by the deep pain and anguish caused to many people by present church practice. Moreover, the credibility of the Church’s mission is increasingly compromised by our separateness.

Our churches have been renewing their life and this has brought us onto ground which is largely shared. The time has come to witness to our commitment to unity by extending opportunities for sharing Holy Communion.

RUTH BELONGS TO BOTH

We married some sixteen years ago in the Catholic church. The church was chosen for two reasons: it was, and is, the church I attend every week and John wasn’t practising at the time. We did have an Anglican vicar robed and on the altar to give the final blessing.

For the first seven years of our marriage John did not practise in an effort to avoid the probable problems caused by belonging to two different churches. During this time we had long discussions about our faith, and I was praying for him all the time, that he would find his way back to the Lord. I knew that the Lord would answer my prayer, but I suppose I assumed that God would answer it by John joining me – of course, the Lord had other ideas.

At about the time that our second child was baptised, we heard that one of the Anglican churches in the town had a minister who was married to a Catholic. We went there one Sunday and have been going there ever since (about ten years). It hasn’t been much of a problem; all the discussions we had earlier meant that we could get past the limitations of the words used and really understand each other. We realise now that we don’t belong to different Churches, but we belong to One Church which includes several different modes of expression.

A shared faith

We eventually realised that we do in fact share a eucharistic faith and we were very pleased that John was able to take communion with us when the children made their First Communions. John had, I must add, the full support of the Catholic community. The children were admitted to Anglican communion on the days following their First Communions (Matthew had to come out from the choir to make his promises on that occasion). Matthew serves in our Catholic parish as well. Ruth goes one better and serves in both churches. I play guitar in the music group and John often brings his flute when he comes to mass. The vigil mass last Christmas was great fun. John, Ruth (recorder) and I played, and Matthew served.

Midnight celebration at the Anglican church came later, so it all dovetailed quite well. On Christmas Day we achieved a family ‘first’ when we all played the Gloria that we had used the night before as a Grace before Christmas dinner (Matthew joined in on the piano).

Ruth has been told by fellow pupils at school that she can’t be a Catholic and an Anglican, that she must make a choice. She tells them, very patiently, that it’s no use telling her that she can’t belong to both churches, because she does! In this she had the support of the head of RE in her school (this teacher just happens to be in our local AIF group . . .).

It isn’t easy, but it’s nowhere near as difficult as we thought it would be. With plenty of love, a sense of humour and, of course, trust in the Lord, we do very well.

Margaret Crossman

SHARED HOME, SHARED CHURCH

St Andrew’s Church, Cippenham, was built to be shared between Anglicans and Roman Catholics before the days of Local Ecumenical Projects and Local Covenants. Members of the two congregations were asked to share their experience at the Churches Together in Berkshire annual forum last May. This is the contribution made by Paul and Beverley Hollins (Roman Catholic, Anglican couple) to the presentation.

We deliberately moved to Cippenham, rather than to any other part of Slough, in order to join St Andrew’s, as we had previously visited the church and received a very warm welcome. We were a little surprised not to find it brimming with other interchurch couples, especially as friends at the Association of Interchurch Families were quite green at our good fortune.

Sharing a building

Perhaps the nicest aspect of sharing a building is being able to say that we belong to one church. That’s a technical point, you may argue, but when you are divided in the eucharist, little things mean a lot. Being kept apart at communion can feel like an alienation of marriage vows – sharing the sacred body and precious blood with everyone but your partner.

Being a member of St Andrew’s by no means heals these wounds. We are still separated at communion, and sometimes feel that our pain is lost at ‘joint eucharists’ where receiving from two different places has become a fact of life.

However, it is a joy to be in a place where there is regular shared worship, where two communities do try to consider each others’ needs.

Double commitment

As an interchurch couple, each committed to the other’s tradition, we have a lot to gain from being in a church that does so much sharing under one roof. We hope that we can bring something to St Andrew’s too. We bring a vision of committed ecumenism. While for many people, meeting on two or three evenings a month is progress, we have to live ecumenism out day by day. We are facing the challenge of sharing our different church upbringings, practices and occasionally beliefs. We can share what we have learned, and are glad to be amongst a community that is more likely to understand than most.

A covenant for unity

We joined St Andrew’s knowing that it has been a trendsetter. Our vision for it continues to set trends – two communities that have been sharing, co-habiting even, coming to an ever greater commitment to each other, living out ecumenism and taking it into daily life.

After a long courtship, the communities became officially betrothed when our covenant was signed in February 1992. Our prayer is that we shall be around to see the wedding day.
It is as a contribution to that well of experience that we publish two lengthy accounts of the development of two interchurch families in this Journal. For our churches, they raise different pastoral questions from those raised in the video. We see, for example, the sense of loneliness and isolation which can be felt by parents whose children habitually go off to church with the other parent. Pastors need to be aware of this, and to give special attention to the needs of the lone parent. We see too the way in which church communities can be insensitive to the way families want to be together sometimes, making unilateral demands which can be experienced as a threat to the unity of the family. Church communities can learn to grow more sensitive to this kind of situation. But it will only happen if we explain it to them.

There is a mediating role here between couples and church communities which can perhaps best be undertaken by interchurch families who have felt the hurts in their own lives and so can better understand the hurts of others. (Some clergy are very good at it too!)

**Good News**

The sooner Associations of Interchurch Families can do themselves out of business the better. But there is still a long way to go yet. It was cheering to hear on the phone a young voice (which had poured out a long story of anxiety in a pre-marriage situation) say: “Oh no, I’m not depressed any longer – not now I know you exist.” For the time being, we are called to go on existing, and to go on sharing our stories — with one another, with other mixed and interchurch couples, and with our pastors and church communities.

So long as the existence of Associations of Interchurch Families is experienced as Good News, we are called to continue to play our small part in the great proclamation by the whole Church of the Good News of God in Christ reconciling the whole creation to himself through the Holy Spirit.

*Ruth Reardon*

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**Eighth International Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families**

at Bellinter House, nr Dublin 22-24 July 1994

Details from Irish AIF

(for address see below)

**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 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.

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.

**Interchurch Families around the World**

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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

American AIF, c/o Kentuckiana Community, 1115 South 4th, Louisville, Ky 40203, USA

AIF (New Zealand), c/o 15 Kelvin Road, Remuera, Auckland 5

Full details and a list of local contacts throughout England from

**The Association of Interchurch Families, Inter-Church House, 35-41 Lower Marsh, London SE1 7RL. Tel. 071-620 4444; Fax 071-928 0010.**

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