When we meet as interchurch families in an international conference (as at Bellinter in 1994) we realise afresh that many such families share the same aspirations throughout the world: to develop our spiritual life as a couple, to share the riches of both our traditions with our children, and to help our churches forward on their way to unity.

But these same aspirations are lived out against very different backgrounds. Situations differ so much that it is not surprising that on so delicate a matter as admission to communion the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, strongly recommends episcopal conferences or diocesan bishops to establish local norms for the application of the general norms given in the Directory (n.130).

This is not easy for episcopal conferences. Even within particular countries there is already an extraordinary difference in the way interchurch families are treated where admission to communion is concerned. In England, for example, in some Catholic parishes couples may often be able to receive communion together with the knowledge and support of the parish priest and members of the community, in others this is possible on special occasions, in others it is regarded as impossible, so that if couples deeply need to receive communion together they have to go elsewhere. In one diocese a Catholic bishop is "very happy" to admit to communion on the occasion of a child's First Communion; in another a bishop refuses because he does not think a First Communion is an exceptional occasion in the sense intended by the 1993 Directory.

How can we move forward? So far as we know no episcopal conference has yet responded to the "strong recommendation" of the 1993 Directory by establishing local norms. The French bishops, however, have pointed out that they do not need to do so, since their 1983 Note on Eucharistic Hospitality had covered the ground.

How did they tackle the question in 1983? First, they stated that their intention was to encourage "a just assessment of particular cases". Next, they laid down their conditions. For admission to communion there must be a "real need" experienced and expressed. There must be active commitment in the service of the unity which God wills. Conscientious decisions about admission to communion could be made on a local level, referring these to the bishop or to priests specially appointed by him for ecumenical relations.

The French bishops were writing ten years before the 1993 Directory specifically referred to "exceptional eucharistic sharing" for mixed marriages between baptised Christians. They placed their explicit reference to interchurch families against a wider background of ecumenical commitment. They did not try to establish a list of suitable occasions for the admission of interchurch families to communion (any such list would be inappropriate in the case of some mixed marriages between baptised Christians, and unduly restrictive in others). Instead, they concentrated on encouraging a just assessment, made at local level, of the particular needs of particular couples, based on the conditions which they had laid down. The 1993 Directory has vindicated their approach.

In Christian marriage we travel towards the Kingdom two by two. Each couple is unique; each couple has different needs on its journey. Catholic ministers are asked to act justly in response to the real needs expressed by particular couples and families.

This is presumably what the Directory requires when it states that, if there are no norms laid down by the episcopal conference or the bishop, Catholic ministers are to "judge individual cases" in accordance with the norms of the Directory itself (n.130).

Looked at in this light, what is now required of interchurch couples who feel the need to share communion, is perhaps not so much that they should look for "exceptional occasions" but that they should stress their "exceptional needs".

Ruth Reardon
Paul’s First Communion

Paul is seven years old and attends the local village primary school. When we felt he was ready for first communion training we decided to test the water for the possibility of his Anglican mother taking communion with the family on Paul’s special day, and for this to be followed by Paul receiving communion in both churches.

Rejection from an unexpected source
We were off to a flying start! Without any prompting, our Anglican vicar suggested that Paul should receive communion with the family in the Anglican church as soon as he had received his first communion in the Catholic church. He would of course need “to consult the bishop”. We were confident that the bishop would agree. However, his response to the vicar was that he did not feel able to give permission for two reasons. First, Paul (at seven) would be setting a precedent which might cause problems in the parish; second, as a bishop he could not officially sanction us to break what he saw as strict Catholic rules.

Although upset at rejection from an unexpected source, we did not give up. We rang to make an appointment with the bishop and ended up by speaking to him there and then on the phone. After a long discussion, during which he began to recognise how important the issue was to us as a family, he first suggested as a compromise that he could not officially sanction us to break what he saw as strict Catholic rules.

The vicar spoke to Paul the week before his first communion to explain that it was a special privilege, and then on the phone. After a long discussion, during which he began to recognise how important the issue was to us as a family, he first suggested as a compromise that he could not officially sanction us to break what he saw as strict Catholic rules.

The vicar spoke to Paul the week before his first communion to explain that it was a special privilege, and that he and the bishop had agreed that they saw it as a positive sign of fellowship between the local churches. Another small step ...

“Not exceptional enough”
Meanwhile we had asked our newly-ordained Catholic priest for Paul’s mother to receive communion at that special mass. His first reaction was “Doubtful ...”, but he said that he would consult and get back to us.

At our next meeting he reported that, having discussed it with various people, he was even more doubtful. We asked him not to say “No” to us yet. We suggested a letter to the bishop. He readily agreed and we wrote a supporting letter to accompany his. Much to his consternation and that of the religious community in which he lives, the bishop rang just before supper! He offered all knelt together and all shared in the Lord’s supper together. It was another step in our journey of faith as a family.

We were very disheartened, but again we did not give up. Our priest was happy for us to write to the bishop directly. We wrote at length this time, trying to deal with all possible arguments (armed with the 1993 Ecumenical Directory) and to impart some sense of the desperate need we felt. He replied in a handwritten letter, saying that he had given much thought and prayer to our request with which he had “great sympathy”. As he pointed out, he had always been sympathetic to our previous requests (both our younger children had been baptised in the Anglican church by Roman Catholic priests). However, he could not give permission “in this instance”. It would set a precedent which would be hard to control. He said the matter would be considered at a pastoral conference by clergy and laity together, and after that guidelines would be issued. He apologised again for being negative as he signed off.

We were not really expecting a dramatic change of heart in his reply, and so were beginning to come to terms with Paul’s mother being unable fully to participate on the big day. We were heartened for the future by his reply. We feel that if nothing else he is now well aware of our existence, and of some of the issues we might present in years to come. We have two younger children ...

Tinged with sadness
The day came and was a very happy occasion. Our priest welcomed all non-Catholic Christians up for a blessing: Paul’s contribution to the bidding prayers was a prayer for Christians to be united all over the world “as Jesus wanted”. One of the most moving moments of the service was seeing members of our Anglican church walk in unexpectedly, to share in Paul’s celebrations. They later reported it a moving service - possibly shattering some preconceptions about Catholics and the mass. The day was nevertheless tinged with sadness because Paul’s mother was not sharing completely in the central part of the celebration.

The bishop had however intimated that our priest could discreetly celebrate a house-mass for us and give Paul’s mother communion, which he did the next day, while grandparents were still with us. Before the house-mass, our priest took Paul’s mother to one side and suggested that while the fact that she was able to receive communion on this occasion was not a “secret”, it should remain confidential. We have never wanted to receive communion surreptitiously - for us, this somewhat defeats the object of the exercise. However, we did appreciate it, even though it was not the same as being able to receive at the actual event and to celebrate with the rest of the community.

Paul received his first communion in the Anglican church the following Sunday - with no fuss, family, or friends - and yet it was very special indeed for us both, because we all knelt together and all shared in the Lord’s supper together. It was another step in our journey of faith as a family.

Paul’s parents

*This request is very significant. Paul’s parents have always respected it in their local situation, realising that what lay behind it was the fear of the effect on other people who might come to know of it. Here names have been changed to avoid any identification of place. Ed.
There are two factors which combine to make it impossible for me to accept the Roman Catholic Church’s unwillingness to give me communion.

“Christian”
I was born and brought up in Edinburgh. My father was an Anglican and occasionally went to our nearest Scottish Episcopal church, though he usually attended our local parish church with the family. My mother was of solid Presbyterian Church of Scotland stock. She died of cancer when I was ten, and in the five years of illness before her death she always filled out the “Religion” box on her hospital admission form with the word “Christian.” At some point she explained to me that the information that was really required was “Catholic” or “Protestant,” but that she felt that the only correct answer in her case was the one she always gave.

I grew up, I left school, I left Edinburgh. I stopped going to church. Only in my mid-twenties, when I was living and working in the Manchester area, did I find my way back and was confirmed - as a Methodist, the local church in which I felt happiest (I had been round them all and tried them out).

Believers together
Now comes factor number two. In 1981, I went to teach English in Moscow and met my husband, a Roman Catholic. My husband was delighted to meet someone whose life was equally centred on Christ, and through all our discussions, both on our own and with the priest to the American Catholic community whom we consulted at some length, we felt that what we had in common was far more important than anything which divided us. In those Soviet atheist days you were in Russia either a “Believer” or a “Non-believer”. Those who dared to admit they were Believers gave each other recognition and support unstintingly. Against this background, as part of a beleaguered Christian community in an atheistic society, I was never refused communion, and it never occurred to me that I should not receive it - the parable of the Prodigal Son had played too important a part in my finding my faith.

We returned to London, started our family, tried alternating between the Church of Scotland in Pont Street (there was a creche there!) and our local Roman Catholic church. As I grew more familiar with Catholic ways I realised that I should not be taking communion there without asking the priest. I considered converting, but felt that I would be saying nothing that had not already been said when I was confirmed. I approached our local priest and was firmly put in my place. Luckily, as a “good Presbyterian” I had been taught that individuals do not need to accept uncritically everything that comes from priests. I decided that my relationship with God could easily cope with my being refused communion by one particular priest. As we were about to go on a four-year posting to Germany, it was something I could get over.

Warm and welcoming
In Germany we regularly attended the American Catholic mass. In fear and trembling, I eventually approached the priest and asked permission to receive communion. He was a great burly white-bearded fellow, warm and welcoming. “If it means to you what it means to me ...,” he said, and gave me the impression that he wondered why I felt I had to ask.

What now?
Eventually we returned to London. By now one son had made his First Communion (in Germany) and our second son was doing his preparation in our old parish - it is lovely, friendly and local, and has helped us to settle back into London life. The priest is the same, too. He had forgotten that I am not a Roman Catholic. I am back to where I was in 1987, pre-Germany, and I am not sure where to go from here. I want to attend mass with the family. I have absolutely no problems about our three sons being brought up as Catholics - the eldest is now at St Mary’s Hall, the Jesuit preparatory school for Stonyhurst to which he will move on in due course, and the other two boys will follow him.

However, I feel very strongly that they must know and understand emotionally and “in their guts” that you do not have to be Roman Catholic to be Christian. It is an historical/geographical accident that I am not a Catholic. My parents and grandparents were not personally involved in the Reformation, they did not personally start out as Catholics and turn away from Rome, and no more did I. I have brothers, sisters and a mother-in-law who are non-Roman Catholic Christians. We are all of us, Catholic and other Christians, “not worthy to receive” - yet, “only say the word, Lord ...”

Why should that prayer, which we say together every time we celebrate mass, only work for Catholics? My nine-year-old son certainly has no deep understanding of what he is receiving, and he is allowed to receive, so why can’t I?

Mary Brinkley
Welcome both partners into the life of your church so far. That the churches at national level examine what the churches at local level can do, and that they keep in contact with each other, and with one another, and with other churches in the denomination, as to how they can help the churches involved. That the churches build on what has already been done in this field and in the field of ecumenism generally. That local churches in appropriate groupings should be encouraged to work together to establish opportunities for joint marriage preparation using suitably prepared teams. Have details of all the legal and canonical requirements for marriage at hand for reference when needed.

The original intention was to update the recommendations on pastoral care of interchurch marriages published by the Joint Working Group of the British Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in 1970. In the context of changing church relationships and of social trends which have had considerable impact on marriage and family life, however, the project became more ambitious. The book has much to offer both to those concerned with ecumenical relationships and to those with an interest in marriage and the family life cycle, as well as to all involved directly in pastoral care. Interspersed with the text are guidelines to help parishes in the context of growing unity between the churches. They are extracted here as an invitation to explore the issues raised with the help of this book (obtainable from the Association of Interchurch Families).

**Guidelines**

1. Welcome and encourage interchurch couples who present themselves; do not regard them as disloyal for wanting to marry across Christian divisions, but see them as a positive resource in the context of growing unity between the churches.
2. See interchurch marriages as an opportunity for exercising pastoral care in a way that will have long-term benefits for relationships between local congregations.
3. Welcome both partners into the life of your church so far as they wish to be involved, respecting the fact that there may also be a loyalty to another congregation.
4. Help interchurch couples to see their differences as a source of growth rather than unfortunate obstacles to unity.
5. Encourage interchurch couples to explore how they can remain attached to their two traditions, rather than presenting them with a one-church option as the only hope of success for their marriage.
6. Realising that interchurch couples can be helped a great deal by meeting others in similar situations, inform couples of the existence of the Association of Interchurch Families and encourage them to make contact with it if they wish to do so.
7. Help engaged interchurch couples to recognise how their church loyalties and pattern of churchgoing may relate to their natural need to maintain both closeness to each other and a certain separateness.
8. Work closely with pastors of other churches in marriage preparation and support, both for interchurch couples and more generally.
9. In preparing for the wedding, look at all the options within the disciplines of the churches and do everything possible to make both partners feel at home in the service.
10. Assess with other churches the scope to increase involvement in marriage preparation.
11. Whatever the provision made by the churches concerned with regard to second marriages, recognise the pastoral and spiritual help that the couple together, or one of the partners, may be looking for.
12. Do everything possible to support interchurch parents who want to share the riches of both traditions with their children and bring them up within the life of two church communities; respect any feeling of double belonging on the part of the children, who should not be required to make an exclusive choice.
13. Enable those involved in marriage preparation and support to be aware of the current policies and guidelines of your own and other churches on interchurch marriage.
14. Have details of all the legal and canonical requirements for marriage at hand for reference when needed.

**Recommendations**

1. That pastoral policy towards interchurch families should be based on seeing them as a promise, not a threat, and on a desire to help them to make a positive contribution to the growing together of the churches.
2. That the churches explore together the extent to which the sense of double commitment/double belonging experienced by some interchurch families can be recognised pastorally and given formal expression in church discipline and structures.
3. That the churches look together at the “double belonging” experienced by some interchurch children and address the ecclesiological questions which this raises.
4. That the churches together produce catechetical material which emphasises what they have in common, but also shows where there are remaining differences.
5. That the churches build on what has already been done in their liturgical commissions (or equivalent) and continue to work for a common liturgy for the celebration of interchurch marriages which could be approved as appropriate.
6. That local churches in appropriate groupings should be encouraged to explore opportunities for celebrating baptism together.
7. That local churches in appropriate groupings should be encouraged to work together to establish opportunities for joint marriage preparation using suitably prepared teams including lay people.
8. That local churches in appropriate groupings should be encouraged to work together to support families throughout the life cycle, wherever possible in co-operation with existing marriage and family agencies.
9. That the churches at national level examine what machinery is needed to help them work together in marriage preparation and support, following up what has been done ecumenically to help the churches respond together to the International Year of the Family.
A Dual Commitment

Lawrence Baschak (Roman Catholic) and Ingrid Thiessen (Mennonite) belong to the Interchurch Families group in Saskatoon, Canada.

In the Mennonite tradition, church membership involves belonging to a local congregation and making a specific commitment to it as a member, after an initial period of getting to know it. In May 1994 Ingrid made her commitment to Nutana Park Mennonite Church in Saskatoon. At the same time, Lawrence was welcomed into the congregation as a friend. A special form of service marked the event, and we give part of it here.

The pastor first addresses the congregation:
In the church, we worship, maintain Christian fellowship, help each other mature in faith and bring others into the fellowship of God’s kingdom. Into our fellowship have come Ingrid and Lawrence. They have previously been instructed in the good news of Jesus Christ and received baptism. Ingrid in the Mennonite Church and Lawrence in the Catholic Church. They have been worshipping with us for some time and know who and what we are. Ingrid wishes to become a member. They also continue worshipping and participating in the life of Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church.

The pastor asks Ingrid and Lawrence to share their stories:
Ingrid, we are glad about your decision to become a member of this congregation in full covenant relationship with those who worship and serve God here. And Lawrence, we are glad that you find our congregational life meaningful as you and Ingrid nurture Katherine, your daughter. I invite you to share your stories of faith.

Called to be one

Churches Together in England are undertaking a major ecumenical exercise to discover the kind of unity God wills for the Church now. As part of this Called to be One process, Bodies in Association have been asked to share their experience of working ecumenically. The Association of Interchurch Families is one such Body in Association, and a group at its 1994 Silver Jubilee Conference worked on a response to the questions put to them. We give an extract below from the response made by AIF.

As interchurch couples and families we share our whole lives with one another, as equal partners, across denominational boundaries; we are fortunate therefore by our very life situation to be called to be growing points for unity.

In spite of their commitment to pilgrimage together, the institutional churches are very slow to recognise that they are on a journey. It is easier for us as interchurch families to feel that we are on a journey; we invite them to travel with us. We have a sense of urgency, because we have a shorter lifespan in which to travel together, and to bring up our children.

Our experience leads us to believe that Christian unity is rather like a marriage - we grow into it as we practise mutual recognition and trust, as we listen to one another and respect one another, as we strive to love one another, as we ask one another’s forgiveness when we fail, and as we share our lives together. In our marriage we are different - male and female; we need this diversity; we benefit from it; it is enriching for us. We do not seek uniformity.

We know that we must be equal partners, making no assumptions about each other, but always ready to listen first and to find a way of working together.

We know that we are called into unity, and unity has therefore to be a priority for us. When we married we needed to make a leap of faith, trusting not only in our love for each other but in God’s will to make us one - two persons, but one flesh, one body. God can do this in us; and can do it for the churches too. This is the unity of persons in God for the sake of the world for which Jesus prayed: “May they be one in us ... so that the world may believe”. (John 17:21)

This unity is the sharing in love which we learn from God. Falling in love helped us to begin; the churches need to act like lovers! In our marriage commitment we knew we had to be prepared to make sacrifices, to take risks in putting each other first. We had to grow into a deep level of communication, into intimacy. When we achieve this, we are energised to share that love with others.

Interchurch families are domestic churches; a domestic version of Local Ecumenical Partnerships, sharing our buildings, our resources, our lives, nurturing our children within the one faith we share and also within the two churches which nourish our one family. Interchurch families and interchurch children bring together two churches in love, and as such they can be a sign to the churches on the way to unity - to that unity in Christ which is rather like a marriage - that unity which in its ultimate form has been pictured as the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Ingrid is asked to reaffirm her faith:
Ingrid, do you now reaffirm your faith in, and loyalty to, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and to his gospel?

Ingrid is asked to commit herself to the congregation, with the recognition that she also has a loyalty to the Catholic Church:
Ingrid, as you voluntarily and willingly unite with this congregation, will you worship, serve and share in its programme, support it by your prayers, regular attendance, loyal service and faithful stewardship, as God gives you strength, recognising also the need to nurture your marriage by participating in the life of the Catholic Church that has nurtured Lawrence?

Ingrid and Lawrence are welcomed.
We have heard Ingrid’s and Lawrence’s witness to their Christian faith, and their wish to be our companions, Ingrid as member and Lawrence as friend and supporter. It is our privilege and delight to welcome them into our family of faith.

The commitment of the congregation to the couple is expressed:
Your shared stories of faith remind us to renew our own covenants. In your coming to us we are again invited to be a community of the Spirit, come among us and within us. On this Pentecost Sunday we commit ourselves to you in worship, study, service and discipline. We commit ourselves to watch over you and each other with concern and caring. We accept you, Ingrid, as member; we accept you, Lawrence, as friend, as we walk together in the power of the God of Pentecost.

We accept we grow into it as we practise mutual recognition and trust, as we listen to one another and respect one another, as we strive to love one another, as we ask one another’s forgiveness when we fail, and as we share our lives together. In our marriage we are different - male and female; we need this diversity; we benefit from it; it is enriching for us. We do not seek uniformity.

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The Agony & the Ecstasy

From an article on Communion in the Domestic Church in the newsletter of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.

There is an important convergence of images and ideas around communion, the church and the family. St Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, reminds Christians that there is a great mystery symbolised by the love of husband and wife, and that is the love of Christ for his church (Eph. 5: 32).

Very often married couples feel this image of Christ and his church is far too lofty an ideal for them to find inspiration from it for their daily lives. And yet this is precisely what they are called to do by the sacrament of matrimony. The Christian ideal for marriage and the family is impossible without the grace of God. But with that grace the Christian life becomes enfleshed in the love that two people have for each other, and is incarnated in the children who are given life because of that love.

The encyclical of John Paul II, Familiaris consortio (On the Family), is a neglected source of inspiration in our time. Yet it is filled with great wisdom and the great tradition on marriage which should be meditated on and provide inspiration for Christian families.

The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in the celebration of the sacraments, is the living source and inexhaustible sustenance of the supernatural communion that gathers believers and links them with Christ and with each other in the unity of the church of God. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realisation of the ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called “the domestic church” (21).

Domestic church

The term domestic church originated with the practice of the early Christians gathering in homes for the celebration of the eucharist. In a time of persecution it was a safe place. At a time when Jewish practice still influenced Christians a great deal, religious meals in the family setting were still the norm.

Gradually the church became institutionalised, and with the Edict of Milan (by Constantine) there was no longer a need for the church to worship in hiding. From that moment on churches took the shape of the basilica (the royal rooms for banquets) and the days of the domestic church as normal eucharistic setting were over.

The church cannot go back to those days, though post-Vatican II permission to celebrate home masses is deeply appreciated in the wake of the Council’s liturgical renewal. Our point here is not liturgical, but theological. In recent years the concept of the family as the domestic church has gained acceptance. It implies that the church is the “family of families” and that the church is alive in the family.

The concept of domestic church is even richer than this simple reality. It is intimately tied to the concept of the church as communion. If the paradigm for the church is the trinity of persons in God, this same paradigm is verified in the domestic church, the family. Paul talks about the love of Christ for the Church as “the great mystery”. It is the incarnation of God’s love for his people. And the love of husband and wife is a sharing in the love of Christ for his Church.

The love of parents for children is also understood in the love of God for his children whom we are. Thus love (communion) is at the heart of what makes the family, the church and, ultimately, God, for “God is love” (I Jn. 4: 16).

Interchurch families

I find this idea of communion in the domestic church particularly compelling in the discussion of interchurch families. Just as the communion of the church is broken by the centuries of division in the church - to the scandal of the world - so the restoration of communion will rebuild the unity of the Body of Christ which is the Church. The church and the family should mirror the love of God in the trinity of persons: Father, Son and Spirit. The Son was sent to mankind by the Father “to reconcile everything in Christ”. All Christians must be involved in this saving work of reconciliation (II Cor. 5: 18-21). And this is at the heart of the ecumenical movement.

Interchurch families experience the agony and the ecstasy of the ecumenical dilemma. We are called to be one, and yet we are separated by the divisions that have marred the church down the centuries. These divisions today are within the church as well as among the churches. Hence the pressing need to deepen the communion which must exist in the domestic church and in the Church Universal.

Ernest Falardeau, SSS

A prayer from Day 8 of the booklet prepared for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 1995 by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland:
Pray for Christians in Uniting Churches, covenanted churches, Local Ecumenical Projects, local covenants and for all interchurch families, that their life experience may provide examples that will enable deeper and fuller communion between all Christians.
Enthusiastic reports on the Eighth International Conference of Interchurch Families, held near Dublin, 22-24 July 1994, have been appearing in the newsletters of the national associations of interchurch families. The Fourth International Conference had met in the Irish Republic in 1986; once again we came to Bellinter House. Thirty families from eight different countries were there. Untoward circumstances prevented the presence of interchurch families from Australia - but a sister from New Zealand represented the World Council of Churches.

In the International Year of the Family, we took the theme: The Nurture of Interchurch Families: Ecumenical Approaches.

The Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association had prepared for the conference by a survey of the experience of interchurch children, and a discussion of segregated and integrated schooling. From the Republic came a description of the pre-marriage courses which interchurch couples together with the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council run for engaged couples in Dublin - 750 couples in the last few years. AIF-England introduced Churches Together in Marriage about to be published by Churches Together in England. France contributed information on the pastoral care of mixed marriages and on joint catechetical work. Canada (represented for the first time) focused on baptism, and American AIF told of the Development of Community Marriage Guidelines through which churches work together for marriage preparation and support.

We are grateful for permission to print here the texts of two addresses given to the international conference: one by the American theologian Fr George Kilcourse on the interchurch family as domestic church, and the other the opening address by the former Taoiseach (Prime Minister of the Irish Republic), Dr Garret Fitzgerald.

The “Domestic Church”

Tim, the eight-year-old son in a Canadian interchurch family, came home one May afternoon to report that his second-grade teacher had discussed Mary during religion class. Because a number of his classmates were Protestant (as is typical of Canadian parochial schools), the teacher had asked each student whether or not he or she was a Catholic and familiar with Marian devotions. Tim had responded, “I know my father is Norwegian and my mother is Polish!” It had not occurred to him that his father’s belonging to a Lutheran church and his mother’s belonging to a Catholic church was a cause for division or separation. He did know that ethnic identity all too often creates boundaries and emphasises striking differences between people. One cannot imagine a more hopeful sign that ecumenism at the grassroots is opening up unimagined possibilities for both the churches and a new generation of young people. Despite differences, they are no longer seen as absolutely divisive. The family itself is experienced as a source of unity, not of division.

When the Roman Catholic Church heralded the family as the “domestic church” in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium, 11), a new emphasis was placed upon family life as genuinely sacramental. We were asked to consider the family as representative of the true nature of the church (a church in miniature, or an ecclesiota). Lumen gentium also gave us other refreshing metaphors for understanding the nature of the church: the church was “the people of God” rather than the bureaucratic institution. For interchurch families, a new horizon dawned when the Roman Catholic Church began to speak in the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis redintegratio, 22) of a deeper sacramental unity: “Baptism, therefore, constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn.” But the Council went on to insist that baptism is “only a beginning, a point of departure ... [ordained toward] a complete integration into eucharistic communion.” (See G. Kilcourse, Double Belonging: Interchurch families and Christian Unity, Paulist Press, 1992, pp. 124-28.)

Theological research in the USA

In June 1994, the Catholic Theological Society of America’s annual convention, meeting in Baltimore, included a session on The Domestic Church. This seminar reported on the work of a team of theologians who were appointed by the CTSA president in response to a request from the US National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family Life.
The CTSA was asked to research and evaluate the theological concept of “the domestic church.” In their initial public session, the members commented on their various contributions to the research. They envision their research as an extended project, perhaps requiring five years of work. In the wake of numerous methodological questions, they have struggled with definitions of both “family” and “church.” The literature addressing the “crisis” of the family session, the members commented on their various universal call to holiness concept of “the domestic church”. In this initial public this perfectly,” they reflect the teaching of Vatican II’s schema, interchurch families. Michael Fahey, SJ, Dean of the Theology Faculty at the University of Toronto, cautioned theologians that the term “domestic church” was introduced into the third version of Vatican II’s schema, De Ecclesia, and it was initially employed to promote the role of parents in cultivating among their children vocations to the priesthood and religious life. To what extent does this narrow original use of the term construe the subsequent connotations of “the domestic church”? Fahey suggested that it would be more theologically fruitful to emphasise the koinonia, or communion, elements in the family as a foundation for our appreciation of the family as a resource for an understanding of the nature of the church as koinonia.

The evolution of the Roman Catholic Church’s affirmation of the family has gained momentum in the past two decades. In 1981 Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation Familiaris Consortio for the first time positively linked the sacramental life of the family to the sacramental life of the Church (see Kilcourse, Double Belonging, pp. 66-70). “Marriages between Catholics and other baptised persons,” said John Paul II, “have their particular nature, but they 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.” (n.78) In 1993 the Vatican’s new ecumenical Directory reflected the church’s progressive attitude towards “mixed marriages” by including an entire chapter on “Communion in Life and Spiritual Activity among the Baptised”; a six-page section of that chapter details the church’s policy towards “mixed marriages”, including a careful treatment of the possibility of “exceptional” but nonetheless real eucharistic sharing by interchurch family members. The major importance of this 1993 Directory is the fact that it did not retrace the generous possibilities opened up by canon 844 of the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law while it reflects throughout its pages the theology of “stages of communion” and the rights of all baptised persons.

Follow the Way of Love

In November 1993 the US Catholic bishops issued a pastoral message, “Follow the Way of Love”, which speaks not exclusively of Catholic-Catholic marriages but of the “Christian family”. The title of the text comes from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (5:2): It is “the vocation of every Christian to follow the way of love, even as Christ loved you.” The bishops affirm for families that “You are the church in your home” and illustrate how faith and love, fostering intimacy, evangelising and educating, praying and serving, welcoming strangers, acting justly and affirming life, all give evidence of a domestic church. When the US bishops state that “No domestic church does all this perfectly,” they reflect the teaching of Vatican II’s universal call to holiness (Lumen gentium, 11, 40 and 41). They also echo a key teaching of John Paul II when they say, “A family is not holy because it is perfect but because God’s grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew every day on the way of love.” (In Familiaris Consortio, n.78, Pope John Paul II affirms the daily struggle of “mixed marriage” couples and their children against obstacles that impede what he calls “the dynamism of grace” operative in their marriages.) It remains disappointing that the US bishops chose the imprecise, generic term “interreligious marriages” (and, alternately, “interfaith marriages”) to describe all marital unions that include a non-Catholic. However, they are quick to offer an optimistic note along with their commitment to more deliberate pastoral care to such families: “Families arising from an interreligious marriage give witness to the universality of God’s love which overcomes all division. When family members respect another’s different religious beliefs and practices, they testify to our deeper unity as a human family called to live in peace with one another.”

These developments, while less than adequate for the genuine needs of interchurch families, prove a barometer to measure the changed climate in which the church is awakening to the centrality of the family. Whether the neologism, “the domestic church”, will survive as the new vector for further progressive steps towards full communion of the churches seems problematic. For too many interchurch families, this terminology of the “domestic church” can carry connotations of domesticating their family according to some pre-conceived, canonical paradigm that accepts the scandal of our division and only grudgingly affords possibilities for fuller communion, e.g. in “exceptional” eucharistic sharing that is hardly a celebration, but all too often carried out as an institutional church’s averted glance. “Domestic church” can unfortunately communicate “status quo” in such circumstances. There are ambivalent signals coming from the Roman Catholic Church when the realities of interchurch families are introduced into the discussion of the “domestic church”. Because the original use of the term nowhere acknowledged the fact of growing numbers of mixed marriages or the lived experience of interchurch families who personify the vision of the Decree on Ecumenism and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, a huge gap yawns before us.

In an effort to suggest how we might avoid a cul-de-sac understanding of the “domestic church”, I will raise four issues that interchurch families can contribute to our appreciation of the nature of the church: (1) the family as koinonia; (2) the family vis-a-vis the early house churches; (3) the interchurch family as a model of “unity in diversity”; and (4) the base community as a mediating structure between family and institutional church.

1 Family as koinonia
The development of the koinonia, or communion, model in ecumenical dialogue has provided an extraordinary gift to the churches. Not only in ARCIC and other bilateral dialogues, but even in the documents of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission, the churches have come to...
envision their relationship in terms of “degrees or stages” of communion en route to the restoration of full communion. What the family experience contributes to this understanding of communion should not be underestimated. The relational quality of our lives has begun to be emphasised in terms of the foundational doctrine of God as Trinity. Catherine LaCugna (in God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life, Harper, 1992) insists that our misunderstanding of this doctrine, and the consequent metaphysical rarifying of its meaning, misses the point. We experience God as Trinity in a highly practical doctrine. In what ways does our experience of the life cycle in family reflect a relational reality, mirroring an equality of persons? One of the foremost ways in which the family is renegotiating this mystery comes in terms of family roles which are no longer seen as hierarchical. In the Christian family, with Christ as the “head”, what experiences of the “domestic church” are carried over into the life of the institutional church?

2 Family vis-à-vis the early house churches
It is frighteningly easy to forget that the Jewish roots of Christianity drew us back to the family as central to a home life of prayer. The Friday celebration of sabbath and the meal, with its ritual prayers and roles, all afforded patterns for early Christian worship. The Pauline letters give ample evidence of the early Christian house churches. The egalitarian nature of these gatherings where slave and free associated and accepted one another in a demonstratively countercultural assembly tells us something profound about the earliest Christians. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (in Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, Crossroad, 1983) has surveyed the scholarly literature on house churches and contributes her own research to open the question of a feminist interpretation of the ekklesia of women in the early church. We can accept the dramatic appropriation of the church by the interchurch families and the institutional church itself glean from such a reconsideration of the nature of the “domestic church”? Could there be a way out of the labyrinth for our churches, which are also divided over the question of the ordination of women in the life of the church, if we begin with the family of baptised persons as equal disciples? Are we necessarily limited to the historical choices about the church and its structure which were made in particular social contexts? What choices are we making for the structures of today’s church and how does the life of the believing family affect our future choices?

3 The interchurch family as a model of “unity in diversity”
One of the most neglected resources in the lives of interchurch families is the New Testament. The canon of epistles and gospels reflects an extraordinary diversity. Different understandings of the church sit side by side in these various writings. It can prove an eye-opening experience for interchurch spouses and their children to retrieve the extraordinary range of understandings which co-exist in the New Testament. The continuum, ranging from absolute ecclesial authority to charismatic expressions by prophetic figures, affords a dramatic insight into the church of the first two centuries as well as the later church which selected a canon of books that maintain a “unity in diversity” that gives us the paradigm for our ecumenical vision of “communion” between our distinct church traditions. Raymond Brown sketches a very readable and provocative study of The Churches the Apostles Left Behind (Paulist Press, 1984), in ways that an interchurch family would find strengthening their own sense of a family living the “unity in diversity” of the early church. How might a family appropriate this and offer their own new gifts for the Great Church of the future?

4 The base community as a mediating structure between family and the institutional church
In the CTSA research team’s report on the “domestic church”, an important note was made of the experience of US Hispanic Catholics. The familiar “base communities” (which trace their origins to Latin America) exhibit a healthy distrust of the institutional church. Hispanics are not oriented to the institutional church. They prefer the “extended family” to the US model of the “nuclear family”. What becomes apparent in this analysis is the need for mediating structures between the “domestic church” of the family and the larger institutional (and bureaucratic) church.

One finds in Hispanic culture the propensity to welcome others into the home. Several “godmothers” can be welcomed into the house of a family for prayer and biblical reflections. One is reminded of the delegates of the Word in Third World countries. Because many of these communities are virtually without priests, new ministries emerge. Popular religiosity keeps the faith alive. Such roles of leadership and ministry exercised by baptised persons in these larger-than-family (but smaller-than-institutional church) structures suggest that the “domestic church” needs a mediating structure. In the case of interchurch families, associations of interchurch families offer that very element. How do we bring “mixed marriage” couples from their domestic church experience as the true locus of the “dynamism of grace” to these mediating structures of interchurch family groups? Without such bridges to the institutional church, they risk being marginalised or even suffering the malpractice of unenlightened officials in the institutional church. If there is any new vector, I suggest that it can be found in the tentative and fragile structure of our AIF networks.

A conclusion. Of all the parables of Jesus, the one that intersects subtly but effectively with this topic of the “domestic church” is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18: 9-14). All the parables are important to us because they surprisingly reverse our expectations. They were canonised in order to keep the institutional church from absolutising itself. In this particular parable, Luke describes both the Pharisee and the tax collector going up to the temple to pray. What a contrast! The self-righteous Pharisee justifies himself by a catalogue of his virtues which make him more acceptable than the despised tax collector. The very placement of the two characters tells us something: the Pharisee took up his position (a position of honour in the Temple), but the tax collector “stood off at a distance”, reluctant even to raise his eyes. His prayer was a sinner’s simple but poignant plea for God’s mercy. Luke concludes the parable by telling us, “I tell you the latter went home justified, not the former.” The geography tells us everything: home is the place of holiness for this reconciled tax collector. Humility is the way of love, a virtue acquired and negotiated in every home and family’s life. Here all family hierarchies unravel in the wake of a love that recognises the inherent dignity of every person. Its origin is in the only “head” of the Christian home, Christ who humbled himself as an example for us.

From such a “domestic church” of our homes, we seek mediating structures to lead us with our gifts and needs to the church, the gathering of believers in the assembly of faith. We come, not domesticated, but enlivened with faith and an impulsion for mission. In such a way, interchurch families contribute to the church both light and new vectors for an exodus out of a dark cul-de-sac of the status quo.

George Kilcourse
A Protestant mother
This interest began when, some 63 years ago, as a five-year-old talking to my mother, I made some bigoted reference to the Protestantism of our then Deputy Prime Minister. This evoked the gentle rebuke, “Dear, you do know that I am a Protestant too, don’t you?” I hadn’t in fact known this, for I had been misled by the conscientious way in which my mother had taught me my Catholic religion, and by the fact that she always accompanied my father, brothers and myself to mass. I had failed to notice that she did not receive Holy Communion - or, if I had noticed this, I may have assumed that she did not want to leave me alone in the bench when the rest of the family went to the altar rails.

While for the first half of my life I was, like most Irish people, a very conservative Catholic, I was not thereafter a bigoted one.

Later in life it became my lot to have to address this issue as a politician, and though for several years past I have retired from politics, you will I hope excuse me if I approach this subject at least partly from a political viewpoint. I feel that Northern Ireland is today more or less unique in the physical danger that can threaten those who marry interchurch marriages of Protestants, and a rather higher percentage of marriages of Protestant men, were interchurch marriages with partners to the assurances they were required to give, the great indifferent can more readily brush aside some of these difficulties.

A life-threatening conflict
But I believe that Northern Ireland is today more or less unique in the physical danger that can threaten those who marry someone of another Christian communion. Some spouses in interchurch unions would, indeed, seem to have lost their lives through sectarian assassination precipitated by the hatred and suspicion which their marriages have aroused in one or other community.

Of course, the conflict in Northern Ireland is not about religion, but is an ethnic guerilla war between extremist members of two communities which, with the disappearance between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries of linguistic differentiation between them, have long since been distinguishable from each other only by their inherited religious affiliations. Similarly, it is in no way the strictly religious dimension that has produced the atrocities committed against some partners in interchurch marriages. The motivation of terrorists on either side is ethnic hatred bred by mutual and reciprocal fear - unionist terrorists fearing a threat to their identity which they see emanating from the nationalist majority in the island as a whole, while nationalist terrorists fear a return of repression and domination by the local unionist majority in the North.

Erosion by marriage
On the unionist side, the fear of nationalism has been greatly intensified by the fact that the number of Protestants in the area of the State fell from about 10% to 7% between 1911 and 1926, partly as a result of the departure of the British army and of emigration by some Protestants at the time the State was founded seventy years ago - and thereafter continued to decline, effectively halving between 1926 and 1981 to 3.5%.

To Northern Protestants, the virtual halving of the non-Catholic population of this State during this period of just over half a century appears very sinister indeed, suggesting the operation of anything from ethnic cleansing to job discrimination. The fears thus intensified have in their own way contributed to tensions in Northern Ireland, heightening the fears of Protestants there which have contributed to the emergence of the sectarian assassination campaign carried on sporadically by Loyalist paramilitaries since the mid-1960s.

Now the fact is that Protestants have not suffered discrimination in this State. The only discrimination on a religious basis that has existed has taken the form of discrimination in the provision of school transport in favour of the more dispersed Protestant rural population, together with a somewhat higher rate of State grant for Protestant secondary schools.

Moreover, because for historical reasons the Protestant population owned more property and held a disproportionate share of posts in business and the professions, since 1926 there has been less emigration by Protestants than by Catholics. Why then did the non-Catholic share of the population virtually halve between 1926 and 1981? To some degree this reflected a lower Protestant birth rate, as well as the fact that from the outset the Protestant population had a higher age profile and therefore death rate. But by far the most important cause of the decline in the non-Catholic population was the impact of interchurch marriages combined with the Roman Catholic Church’s insistence that in such marriages the parties must commit themselves to bring up their children in the Roman Catholic faith.

The profound impact of this upon the Protestant population in this State reflected the fact that, because of the small size of the Protestant community, from the outset some 25% of all marriages of Protestants, and a rather higher percentage of marriages of Protestant men, were interchurch marriages with Catholics. And because of the stringent requirement imposed by the Catholic Church authorities, and the fidelity of both partners to the assurances they were required to give, the great bulk of the children of these marriages were brought up as Catholics. Over two generations, this process had the arithmetical effect of reducing the non-Catholic population by some 40%.

Quite apart from the dangerously negative impact in Northern Ireland of this erosion-by-marriage of the Protestant community in this State, this development was clearly undesirable in its own right, threatening the existence of a community whose distinct ethos and cultural heritage constitute a valuable and vital element of our society.

There was no equivalent erosion of either community in Northern Ireland, where the overall population ratio is currently estimated at 57/43 in favour of the Protestant community and is likely in my view to stabilise during the first half of the next century within the range 50/55% Protestant and
45/50% Catholic. This has been for the simple reason that both communities in Northern Ireland have been large enough throughout the area not to have to marry outside their own group, while the pressures against intermarriage have been much greater precisely because of the tensions that this relatively even population balance has created.

A special policy in Ireland?
It was against this background that, following my appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs in March 1973, I decided after an informal discussion with Cardinal Casaroli in the margins of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe in Helsinki in July of that year, to submit him a memorandum on this and some more specifically Church-State issues with Northern Ireland implications (e.g., contraception, divorce, and integrated education) - issues that I followed up personally during a visit to Rome in September of that year.

On the occasion of this visit, I was disappointed with the reaction to my document which had stressed the importance, from the point of view of restoring peace in Northern Ireland and reducing the risk to the Catholic population of sectarian attacks upon them, of minimising avoidable sources of inter-community tension arising from issues like that of the Catholic Church’s requirements in respect of mixed marriages. Cardinal Casaroli’s reaction was to observe that Irish unity was unlikely to come soon; in these circumstances, should we be upsetting people in our State by making changes now along the lines I had raised with him?

I argued this out with him, emphasising that the most important area of all was that of interchurch marriages; while since Vatican II there had been considerable progress in this area at the pastoral level, in our State we were concerned about the impact on Northern Protestant opinion of the halving of the proportion of Protestants in our State as a result of the operation of the Catholic Church’s mixed marriage code. This population effect was a unique aspect of interchurch marriages in Ireland. Cardinal Casaroli’s response was to suggest that I discuss the matter with the Nuncio and with some of the Irish bishops - who, I knew, felt that they could not move without permission from Rome.

Shifting the responsibility
There are many other aspects of this question - legal, theological, pastoral, or in the sphere of interpersonal relations - that you will be considering in the course of this conference, learning from each other’s very different experiences in the countries represented here.

I hope that I may have helped your discussion along a little by adding to it an additional dimension - that of an Irish politician, himself the product of a very happy interchurch marriage, infused with a deep faith on both sides. But I am also a politician desperately concerned that tensions between different Christian communions in this island should not be allowed to contribute further to the violence that for over two decades has disfigured and disgraced our island and damaged severely the name of Christianity world wide.

Garrett Fitzgerald, former Taoiseach of Ireland

The positive benefits which parents and children can derive from living in the context of a mixed marriage include tolerance for the religious conscience of the other, sensitivity to the value emphasized by the other tradition, and a conviction of the central importance of faith at the heart of all Christian life. We wish to express our encouragement and admiration of those couples living in a mixed marriage who, in full loyalty to their faith and conscientious convictions, work together to create a truly Christian home and, in the joint living of their vocation as Christian parents, seek to share with their children the authentic riches of their respective Christian traditions.

From the Directory on Mixed Marriages issued by the Irish Episcopal Conference in 1983
INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is a twice-yearly journal which 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). It 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.

Pastoral care
It is addressed to:
- interchurch couples,
- clergy and ministers,
- theological students and seminarians,
- relatives and godparents,
- marriage counsellors and teachers,
- marriage preparation teams,
- baptism preparation teams, and
- those preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation,
- 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 variety.

Towards Christian unity
The journal is also addressed to:
- ecumenical officers,
- ecumenical commissions,
- local groupings of churches,
- in fact, to all 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. An interchurch family is a "domestic church", and interchurch families are the smallest units of "Churches Together".

The journal is published by the English Association of Interchurch Families, but it intends to serve the needs of English-speaking interchurch families, and all who care for their welfare world-wide. It warmly welcomes contributions and editorial help from all parts of the world.

The Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) offers a support network for interchurch families and mixed marriages and a voice for such families in the churches. Most members are interchurch couples and families; some are individuals who wish to further the Association’s work.

Mutual support
AIF began in 1968 as a mutual support group, formed by couples who had found that the exchange of experience with others in similar situations could help each find its own way forward. There are local AIF groups throughout England. A national conference is held every year at Swanwick in Derbyshire.

An Association for others
The support network which AIF offers extends far beyond its own members. Many interchurch and mixed couples find information and a listening ear a great help in times of crisis. One of the Association’s most important tasks is to build up a support network of informed people who are ready to respond to enquirers.

Commitment to change
AIF members are also ready to work for increased understanding by all churches of the pastoral needs of interchurch and mixed marriage families, at local, diocesan, national and international level, as their own circumstances allow. The Association is committed to the movement for Christian unity; interchurch families suffer because of Christian divisions, but they also have particular incentives and special opportunities to work for the healing of those divisions. AIF is a "body in association" with Churches Together in England, and members will work for unity within their own families and at whatever level they can.

The Association is a registered charity (no. 283811) dependent on the subscriptions of members and the donations of others who wish to support it.

Presidents are: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, Dr Kenneth Greet, Bishop Alastair Haggart.

Members receive the Journal, AIF News and Notes and The Interdependent (written by and for interchurch children).

Details of membership, resources (publications, leaflets, AIF video), and a constantly up-dated list of Local Contacts throughout England are available on request to the Association at its London address.