The ninth international conference of interchurch families held at Virginia Wesleyan College, Norfolk, Virginia, USA, 24-28 July 1996, brought together participants from Canada, England, France, Ireland, Italy and the United States. It was the ninth biennial English-speaking international conference, but the first to be held outside the British Isles.

This alone gave a new global dimension to the interchurch family movement. The fact that in 1998 the English-speaking international conference will return to Europe but will join together with the French-speaking movement of foyers mixtes, with simultaneous translation into both languages, will significantly deepen this global dimension.

We offer this number of Interchurch Families as a Virginia Report: a reminder of those days together for those who were present, and a way of sharing in them for those who could not be there. All the texts are shortened, but we give something from each of the main addresses by the Revd Dr Judy Bennett of the Virginia Council of Churches, Nicola Kontzi, who works with Fr René Beaupère, O.P., at the Centre St Irénée, Lyon, Canon Martin Reardon, General Secretary of Churches Together in England, and Fr Ladislas Orsy, S.J., of Georgetown University, a leading expert in canon law. Fr Falardeau, Director of the Office of Ecumenism in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico, prepared his text for one of the workshops; it offers a good introduction to the conference theme: Interchurch Families: Catalysts for Church Unity.

We are grateful to participants who sent in their reactions to the Virginia experience, and sorry they had to be so drastically shortened. There was a wealth of workshop riches which can only be mentioned here. Fr George Kilcourse on interchurch families as a case study in Koinonia; Mitzi Knutzen and Sr Peggy O’Leary on the Minneapolis Lutheran-Catholic Covenant and Guidelines for Interchurch Marriage (details on this in a later issue); Bonnie Mack of the Cincinnati Family Life Office on “Living in the Weaver’s Home” - family spirituality; Ruth and Michael Slater on “We all need windows - setting up a local group of AIF”; Fr Philippe Thibodeau, Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, Montreal, on “Reception: what can we do to help the churches?” Fr Gregory Wingenbach, Director of the Kentucky Interfaith Community, on “Beyond dialogue - sharing in marriage and family life”. One regret expressed by a number of participants was that there was too little time for sharing experiences in small groups; some of the workshops partially fulfilled this need.

We hope to offer other material later - a fuller version of Fr Orsy’s address, workshop material and an update on what has been happening around the world before Virginia and as a result of the conference. Michael Lawler, Director of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, spoke of his research on interchurch families, and we hope to give progress reports. Further reflections on Virginia, post-conference news and suggestions for the way forward for interchurch families on the global level will be warmly welcomed by the editor.

Mention should be made of the great debt of gratitude owed both to Fr George Kilcourse of Bellarmine College, Louisville, for all the work he put in to the organisation of the conference, and also to the local covenanted Church of the Holy Apostles (Episcopal and Roman Catholic) at Virginia Beach, whose clergy and members shared in parts of the conference and welcomed participants so warmly to their community and to their homes.

Ruth Reardon
We went to Virginia

Thank you for your recollections to: Anne and William (Belfast, Northern Ireland), Barbara and Tony (Gateshead, England), David and Fiona (Birmingham, England), Denny and Kay (Ohio, USA), Gianni and Myriam (Milan, Italy), Helen and Philip (Liverpool, England), Jenny and Brendan (Kent, England), Lynne and Doug (Nebraska, USA), Margaret and Peter (Essex, England), Mary and Chris (Essex, England), Mitzi (Minnesota, USA), Nicola (Lyon, France), Ray and Fenella (Manitoba, Canada), Richard and Helen (Leeds, England), Shirley and Bernie (Saskatoon, Canada).

Coming together in all our diversity
Getting to know each other, sharing laughter, prayer and concerns despite varying backgrounds, cultures and languages was like a reunion of a diverse but essentially unified family.

Tony
We have been married for 14 years. We present Ecumenical Panels for engaged interchurch couples. We had no idea what to expect, but were eager to meet others. One of the highlights was this opportunity to meet so many diverse couples and families. We began to develop a global picture of interchurch families with similar pastoral needs, yet different experiences.

Lynne and Doug
Seven years ago we joined AIF when we found its address at the back of a church. Our local group had theological discussions for adults, but social occasions involved children so, as we have been unable to have any, we tended to stay away. We were the only couple where the wife is Roman Catholic and the husband another denomination, which added to our feelings of not belonging. In Virginia we were amazed to find couples like ourselves, with no children, whole families, couples whose children are grown up.

Helen and Richard
The greatest blessing was to meet so many wonderful people from across the world. Through letter-writing and the video from England we felt that we knew many of them and a bond was created, but to meet face to face was the greatest joy.

Shirley and Bernie
Would we be two of twenty, or of two thousand? We had no idea. We had a sense that God was at work in our lives, calling us to step out and participate in something that could be a real gift or a real burden, and may well prove in different ways to both. So we came, having spent the previous weeks in prayer for a true openness to God. We were not disappointed. Not that all went smoothly. The approximately 130 people present were far too much members of a real family for that, with our own agendas, aspirations, expectations, understandings. We laughed, cried, argued, denounced, rejoiced. But through it all we saw God at work, moving us along toward the unity for which Jesus prayed. We were blessed with a sense that we are not alone. Christian traditions present included Anglican at the one end to Waldensian at the other (we didn’t see any ‘X’, ‘Y’, or ‘Z’), each family with its unique story of living as sign and foretaste of unity. We heard of the pain of working with bishops, pastors, and laity who are only slowly recognizing the reality and understanding the needs of interchurch families. We heard stories of joy and excitement, of couples moving from a sense of burden on the church to an experience of themselves as gift to the church, and recognised as such.

Ray and Fenella
New beginnings
One of the excitements of Virginia was to see the Canadian Association of Interchurch Families come into being, and the accelerated development of the American AIF. Europeans were amazed at the vast distances involved, and the problem which this poses to national Associations.

The Omaha group is a chapter of AAIF, but we always wished there was a better way to network with other groups around the US. The Ark, the AAIF newsletter, was our only source of information about other groups. We have been energised to continue our ministry and to let other groups know that there is a group in Omaha interested in what they are doing.

Lynne and Doug
When Ellen Bard came to Canada in 1995 and stayed with families in Montreal, Morden, Saskatoon and Calgary, her dream was to help us form a Canadian Association of Interchurch Families. Because of the distance between groups the idea seemed unattainable, but it was not dropped, rather it was prayed for. At 8.00 in the morning on 26 July 1996, around the breakfast table, the Gushues, Buchanans, Fr Phil Thibodeau from Montreal, the Temmermans’ from Morden, the Karstads from Saskatoon and the Dungen from Calgary met as one big Canadian family. We decided as a group that we should like to support and reach out to each other on a
more active basis. We are very excited about our newly formed Association and are working on our commitments to each other and our Charter. Our head office is in Montreal at the Centre for Ecumenism, because of the great support we received from Fr Phil Thibodeau and because the Montreal group has the greatest number of active families. We are grateful to Ellen Bard for being the initiator of our Association. Shirley and Bernie

Not until we went to America were the vast distances there really brought home to us. Listening to the Americans and Canadians telling their stories showed the lack of national organisations and personal contacts with others in the same country. Only by meeting can these be established, and cost makes this difficult when a plane is needed rather than a tedious car journey. Jenny

Philip and I notice the difficulty of taking part in the life of two churches now we are in rural England not London suburbia, but meeting with our friends in America and Canada showed us how much more difficult was their situation where they had to travel for hours just to meet each other. Helen

The Americans came from the four corners of the United States, as far from one another as New York is from France. Nicola

**Friday evening - a “Quaker meeting”**

On Friday evening there was an “open forum” in which participants could share anything they wished with one another. Two have used the words “Quaker meeting” to describe the experience.

My abiding memory will be of the experience described by the Canadian, living out in the prairies, who spoke from the heart of his pain in feeling so unsupported in their pastoral need. That outpouring of emotion was a watershed that moved us from head to heart. Margaret

After the heart-rending plea the “Quaker meeting” that followed was amazing and I felt the silence was very telling. Barbara

It was the Canadians who stole the limelight for us, first with their ecumenical commitment and knowledge, but secondly with their openness in expression. This culminated in a most moving and heartfelt plea for understanding from a man in an interchurch marriage for whom the pain he felt was only recognised at an international conference, and not by the priest in his locality. David and Fiona

**Saturday - two eucharists**

On Saturday evening the need to talk manifested itself in a very moving session, like a Quaker meeting, where people spoke as the spirit urged. The pain and hurt and joys of situations was met by expressions of understanding and solidarity. Even before this people had been feeling the need for a eucharistic celebration and now it became imperative. At 7 a.m. on Saturday couples gathered in the chapel where William celebrated an Anglican eucharist very simply, as befits an early hour. In the evening we burst into song at mass - the powerful intoning of the Alleluia was memorable and somehow swept you into the Jewish roots of Christianity. Anne

The sessions with most impact for us were Fr Falardeau’s and Fr Orsy’s on eucharistic sharing. When we arrived, this was the area of our lives with the most tension. We felt there was little chance of receiving the eucharist together. At the conference, we received the eucharist as a family for the first time. It was very emotional, yet it felt so right. We felt that the Holy Spirit had ensured that we would be able to receive together - an answer to years of prayer. Lynne and Doug

It was in the area of positive change that we felt that there was not enough emphasis placed. Why not celebrate one victory of unity instead of lamenting not being able to receive communion every time? For some of us, the mass at the chapel was the first time we as husband and wife had ever been able to receive communion together. It was a wonderful experience. Let’s praise God for that one instance of unity in his worldwide church! Denny and Kay

**Sunday - a final session together**

Many were driven to stand up and express personal anxieties - couples without children, couples who had left babies on another continent, couples desperate for shared worship and communion. Somehow I felt like a privileged member of a most wonderful gifted family, but with many rightly fighting over their place for attention, care and love. Within that one sensed the cries of those wanting to be given courage, and asking not to be forgotten. Tears, fears, love and prayers all offered me the sense of belonging and hope for the future as part of the wider international Christian ecumenical family. Tony

**Sunday - Holy Apostles - unfinished business**

At the end of the conference participants joined in the Sunday eucharistic celebration of the Church of the Holy Apostles, the covenanted Episcopal/Roman Catholic parish in Virginia Beach whose members had offered us such warm hospitality. At the beginning of the canon Roman Catholics were invited to follow the Catholic priest to an altar at one end of the church; Episcopalians and other Christians to follow the Episcopal priest to an altar at the other. The disorientation experienced by some interchurch families as each struggled with an enforced decision was a concrete demonstration of the suffering which had surfaced earlier and to which Fr Orsy had responded. It is not without meaning. It is, in its own way, a gift within the wounded church, an offering to the divided churches.

We were asked to take up the elements at the offertory, William with the Anglican wife of our hosts to the Anglican table, and I with her Roman Catholic husband to the other table. Fr Philippe told us afterwards that seeing William and me walking in different directions brought home to him the terrible pain of Christian division. The impact of the eucharist at Holy Apostles is something we are still pondering. It would be nice to go the church in the same place and at the same time, and could simplify “belonging” no end. It really required a conference session afterwards. Anne

I can only describe it as the deepest spiritual shock of my life. I thought I had worked it out after 18 years of marriage - we have at times been able to share communion, but generally I receive a blessing whilst the rest of the family take communion in the Catholic service. The important thing is that we all go as a family to one altar. Suddenly I was being instructed to walk what seemed like a million miles in the opposite direction - with my back to the rest of the family. I felt totally distraught. Our wonderfully hospitable hosts expected that we would feel enriched by this experience, but all I could feel were the tears rolling uncontrollably down my cheeks. I went with the family to the Catholic altar but could not stay there - so I slipped back to our pew and wished that the ground would open up below me. The sound of the two priests saying the
eucharistic prayer simultaneously, but not in any kind of harmony, was very distressing. Then I realised it is what God is seeing all the time, as we go to our separate altars - it is just that in Holy Apostles it became more obvious. Fellowship is very evident in the congregation and clearly many people derive much support by worshipping in Holy Apostles. Would it be different if we worshipped there every week? It has given me much food for thought, and makes me think that the 

called to be one process is more urgent than ever. Margaret

To go to our ‘own’ altar would have meant dividing the family so we would be at opposite ends of the building at communion. We could not face that. We decided (quickly and with some whispering) that we would go, as a family, to the end nearest to us. We had to move towards the centre of the church. and it was then that the true awfulness of the situation hit us. Standing in the middle of the church, we could hear both celebrants, and the impression was that they were shouting at one another. We were transfixed. The four of us, mother, father and two daughters, simply stood and looked at each other, while the terrible noise went on. The image in my mind was the Tower of Babel, and what can only have been a minute or two seemed to last for ever. Chris suggested, very quietly, that we should not receive communion. The thought was in all our minds, and we agreed immediately. We stood in the middle, refusing to be divided by the two altars, until we could quietly make our way back. Mary

It was very painful for us to be separated from Bernie (a Lutheran) at this time. I can’t imagine Jesus making such a distinction and separating a family at his banquet table. However, on the positive side, this type of church makes participating to the fullest in one church community as a family a whole lot easier. This promotes strength in community and a stronger bond with church. For us as interchurch families, unity is a must. Shirley

I did not find the eucharist at Holy Apostles such a harrowing experience as some did but, in comparison to the parallel eucharist at Thamesmead in England, the cacophony resulting from two eucharistic prayers being said simultaneously was distracting. Helen

Our visit to Holy Apostles Church kept us talking for days after the conference ended, as we drove around Virginia, about how divisive it was as people received communion from a Roman Catholic or an Episcopalian table. The service upset our daughters as they felt they should go both ways and not have to make a choice. One of them did not receive because of the dichotomy. We discussed it and explained that that is how we parents had felt at other times. Barbara and Tony

Two couples from Holy Apostles talked of their joy at going to services together, even though communicating at separate altars. The warmth of the welcome there and the enthusiasm were most moving. It was alarming to hear that the church had such a low profile and this is kept deliberately so. We felt that it had something to say to a society where consumerist religion rules. People at Holy Apostles had deliberately chosen a painful route where ecumenical endeavour cost something. They should be proud of what they are doing and not keep their ecumenical work quiet for fear of protests. We had a sense of isolation as we went to two opposite altars. Going back to our seats our son sensed the strangeness of the mood between us and asked if Fiona wanted to sit next to Dad. In fact, we both wanted to stand at the same altar and receive the same elements together. David and Fiona

After Virginia

It blew the mind and lifted the spirits - we are not alone despite our special context (Northern Ireland), and together we can be a force for change. Hearing from many of the couples of what they are doing to raise awareness of the need for change in church attitudes was heartening. Interchurch couples can join the ‘movers’ and influence by their example and because they know. Anne

We came home with so many ideas, we felt overwhelmed! Our perspective is broadened, our determination reinforced, and our family blessed with wonderful new friends. Lynne and Doug

It was exhilarating. We left Virginia feeling enlightened, positive and bonded with other interchurch families. We certainly brought back a new spark to our group. Shirley and Bernie

Where will all this lead? We don’t know. We give thanks for the gift God gave us, and look forward to more. Ray and Fenella

I found the gathering especially encouraging. The opportunity for networking with interchurch families, ministers to interchurch families and involved clergy was truly affirming. It was a testimony to this much-needed ministry in society, and provided inspiration to return to our regions with energy and conviction to encourage the spread of the Association of Interchurch Families. Mirci

We did a lot of work in Italy, emphasising the meeting in Virginia; we wrote pieces for Riforma, a weekly Protestant paper, for Eco Chisone, a weekly Catholic paper in Pinerolo, and with pleasure also for Regno, the monthly Catholic magazine that is considered the No. 1 in Italy. Gianni

So we cannot always receive communion together. At least we can sit together, sing together, pray together, read and study Scripture together. Let’s walk in that freedom and work towards fuller freedom through organisations such as AIF. Let’s share more of the ways we have solved problems and celebrate those victories! Since the conference we have been interviewed by three local newspapers and received phone calls from people who wanted to tell their stories or voice concerns. We are still giving workshops on interchurch marriage for the local diocese and are adding information we gleaned at the conference. We discussed it with ministers from both our churches. Denny and Kay

One useful outcome of the international conference was the initiation of an international email mailing list for interchurch families. Ray Temmerman (rttemmern@MTS.net) has volunteered to forward emails of AIF news to anyone who would like to be added to his email address list. The facility to converse with people throughout the world at little cost is a wonderful development and provides the potential to help many who would otherwise be isolated. Ray is also setting up an interchurch families web page, and is planning a newsgroup. Philip

Alongside all our very necessary activity, the deepest meaning of the conference is the way that we can mutually support one another in prayer, right across the globe. Nicola
I. The Church as Communion

We are aware, especially after the Faith and Order Conference of 1993 in Santiago de Compostela, that communion (koinonia) theology is at the heart of our forward movement toward Christian unity. The church is a communion. It is a relationship between God and Christians and among Christians.

There is a growing emphasis today on society and family as relationship. Similarly the church is understood as a family of families and the family as the "domestic church". The church is an institution, but the more it acts like a family, the more it will be truly Christian.

John's first letter is a basic text on communion/koinonia: John writes so that all Christians may realise that they are one in Christ with the Father and the Son. Our fellowship with God is the basis of our fellowship with one another. In the priestly prayer of Jesus, John's Gospel speaks of this communion as will be truly Christian.

II. The Eucharist and the Church

In the context of communion/koinonia, the eucharist is the sign/symbol and sacrament of the union between Christians and their Risen Lord. It is the sacrament by which the Father continues to give life to the followers of Jesus. It is the sign by which the Holy Spirit transforms bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus so that Christians may be transformed into the Mystical Body of Christ.

The eucharist makes the church and the church makes the eucharist. This has been repeated many times since Augustine: ever true, it succinctly expresses the relationship between eucharist and church.

In the Orthodox understanding of the church, the church is where the eucharist is celebrated. The church, in Orthodox perspective, is not so much institution as celebration, essentially sacramental. True sacraments constitute the true church (orthodox is Greek for "true").

The Roman Catholic perception is more juridical and hierarchical. But we Catholics need to remember that more fundamentally the church is a relationship with Christ. It is Christ who baptises, celebrates the eucharist, forgives sins. The church does so in his name, and by the merits of his Cross.

III. The Church and the Family

The family is the domestic church, the church of the home. Just as the family is the heart of society, so is it the heart of the church. The church is made up of families, as is society.

The concept is a rich one that deserves our attention. At the heart of the theology of the domestic church is the idea that the church does not exist except in the family. Everyone belongs to some family. We came into the world as members of a family. There is a bond between individual and the family (even in a one-parent family). And there is a bond between each family and the church.

The Jewish faith is more conscious of the notion of people (qahal Yahweh). The word church is synonymous with ekklesia, the called, the assembly. The church is the people of God (cf. 1 Pet 2:9).

The notion of the family as domestic church begins to highlight the idea that we are interconnected, interrelated, interdependent. The individualism that characterises our culture has blurred and dulled our perception of the church as a body, a people, a family.
Pope John Paul II does not elaborate a theology of the domestic church in *Familiaris Consortio*, but he does more than simply use the term. In the underlying theology of the encyclical, he points a direction for this theology and how it can help us to understand better the sacrament of marriage.

We no longer view marriage as merely a contract. The new understanding is of a covenant between two Christians in Christ. The possibility of keeping the covenant rests not on the strength of the couple, but on the grace of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit that binds Father and Son in unity in Trinity is the paradigm for the love of husband, wife and children in a Christian family. It is the same for the love of Christians in the church (cf. 1 Jn 1:3).

The eucharist makes the domestic church and the Christian family. It is the same for the love of Christians in the church (c.f. Jn 1:3).

IV The Eucharist and the Family
The eucharist makes the church and the family is the domestic church: and so the eucharist makes the domestic church, the family. The eucharist makes the family; this is simple logic. Pope John Paul explains in *Familiaris Consortio* that without the eucharist the family cannot be what it is called to be:

The eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage. The eucharistic sacrifice in fact represents Christ’s covenant of love with the church, sealed with his blood on the cross. In this sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant, Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed. As a representation of Christ’s sacrifice of love for the church, the eucharist is a fountain of charity. In the eucharistic gift of charity the Christian family finds the foundation and the soul of its “communion” and its “mission”, by partaking in the eucharistic bread, the different members of the Christian family become one body, which reveals and shares in the wider unity of the church. Their sharing in the body of Christ that is ‘given up’ and in his blood that is ‘shed’ becomes a never-ending source of missionary and apostolic dynamism for the Christian family (#57).

The eucharist is the model of Christian self-giving. It is the sacrifice that incorporates in the self-offering of Jesus, the gift of self that husband and wife give to each other in Christ.

The Christian life can be described in terms of sacrifice (cf. 1 Pfr 2:5). We understand sacrifice not in the medieval terms of blood and gore, but in the post-Vatican II understanding of self-giving. Jesus gave himself for us. His whole life was a self-giving to the Father, from the incarnation to the resurrection. Today Jesus continues to make intercession for us with the Father. His prayer is the offering of his self-sacrifice, his obedience to the Father’s will.

Husband and wife must see in the eucharist the model/paradigm of marriage. By receiving the eucharist together they share deeply in the life and Spirit of Jesus, and are better able to give themselves to each other in Christ.

The eucharist is the summit of the Christian life. We bring to the altar the gift of our lives, to be offered together with the offering of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are not suggesting that the offering of Jesus was insufficient. Rather it is incomplete until the offering of Jesus has become our own. “I fill up in my body what is wanting to the sufferings of Jesus for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24).

Thus the image of the church as Body of Christ finds new and deeper meaning when seen in the context of St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, that the love of husband and wife are symbols/icons of the love of Jesus for the church (Eph. 5:23-33).

If the church is a family and we are not to perpetuate the individualism of our culture, we need to emphasise strongly that the eucharist is not to be received in isolation. If the eucharist is a communion, the communal dimensions of this sacrament are to be given full scope.

Thus there is more than simple convenience in Christian couples receiving the eucharist together (or Christian families together). *This is the way it ought to be.* This is the way it was in the beginning, in the domestic church.

V The Eucharist in Interchurch Families
We have pointed out the necessity of the eucharist for Christian marriage. It would seem logical to conclude that interchurch families share the same need for the eucharist. Why would there be a difference?

If there is any difference, it is that these couples need the eucharist more than other couples. They face greater challenges, difficulties and pain. Indeed, for many, if not for most, the pain of the division of the churches is very real and acute. It affects their families daily.

Further, interchurch couples should be seen not as the exception, but as the rule. Most churches until now have said that Christians should marry in their own church. It is quite natural for churches to say this because their self-understanding is that they are the church and other churches are not. The problem with that perception is that it is not true. The church of Christ may “subsist” in our church, but it “exists” in all Christian churches. The church is not many churches. It is one church - but a divided one. Interchurch couples are not the exception, they are the rule. They symbolise and exemplify the church as it is: one but divided. However, interchurch couples do more than indicate what the church of Christ is in reality, they also point the way to unity, which is love.

Let me say a little more about this aspect of love pointing the way to unity.

Those of us who are involved in pastoral ministry to interchurch couples are well aware that these couples and their families are on the cutting edge of ecumenism. It has taken the churches some time to realise that, but I believe the realisation is beginning to sink in.

The distinct contribution which interchurch families bring to the ecumenical movement is the love they have for one another. It is precisely love that will bridge the gap between the churches. It is not theology, or negotiation in dialogue, or moving juridical boundaries. It is love.

Interchurch families show the churches how to love one another, how to bridge the gaps created by history and theology and years of estrangement. They are truly catalysts for church unity.

Ernest Falardeau, SSS
Christian Unity and Interchurch Families: An English Perspective

A popular cartoon of Christian unity and interchurch families might look like this: Christian unity is about three things - first, about practical co-operation between churches (denominations), second, about doctrinal agreement between churches, and ultimately (when that is reached), about institutional union.

When people marry across denominational frontiers, they present a problem and an irritant to the movement for Christian unity, because they bring personal and pastoral complications which spoil the careful and painstaking progress towards unity.

Like all cartoons, such a sketch is instantly recognisable, but it distorts the truth.

The witness of four ecumenical pioneers

The search for Christian unity includes practical co-operation and painstaking work for doctrinal agreement leading to the institutional merger of separated denominations, but it is far deeper than that. Listen to the witness of four ecumenical pioneers.

(The four witnesses called and quoted at this point were Bishop Azariah of Dornakal in South India, speaking at the Edinburgh 1910 missionary conference, Cardinal Désiré Mercier who hosted the Malines Conversations in the 1920’s, Abbé Paul Couturier who founded the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the 1930’s, and William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, who chaired the preparatory committee for the World Council of Churches until his death in 1944 and presided over the formation of the British Council of Churches in 1942.)

These four witnesses remind us of the depth of the mystery of Christian unity - the divine depth, since it is rooted in nothing less than the love between the persons of the Holy Trinity, and the human depth, since it is about real and persistent human love and friendship - the divine-human depth, since the human love is nothing unless we are incorporated into divine/human Jesus Christ, the true Vine. Because the movement for Christian unity is so profound, there can be only one movement, fundamentally the same everywhere in the world.

The experience of interchurch families is also fundamentally one and the same wherever we are in the world, as we have been discovering in these few days of mutual exchange.

An English perspective

But there is a third element to the title I have been given - not only ‘Christian Unity’ and ‘Interchurch Families’, but also ‘An English perspective’, so let me give you a very brief and simplified history of ecumenism in England during the past century.

The subject is the same, but the context is particular.

An American friend spent a year in Europe studying ecumenism, and he returned to the United States convinced that the Germans had provided the theology for ecumenism, the French had provided the spirituality, and the English the pragmatism. I am not certain that any of those three nations would be entirely happy with that caricature, but I cannot deny that the English have been very pragmatic.

For simplicity let me divide the period into three phases.

(The first two phases described were 1910-1942, the period of the enthusiasts, and 1942 - the birth of the British Council of Churches - to 1982.)

1982-present The year 1982 not only saw the end of thirty-five years of negotiations about national schemes of union in England. It saw the publication of reports of the first two really significant international theological dialogues - Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and the Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. It saw the visit of Pope John Paul II to England. His visit was consciously and intentionally ecumenical. He met leaders of all the British Churches in Canterbury and ensured of them and of the Roman Catholic bishops about ecumenical relations.

The juxtaposition of these three events led to a rethinking and redirection of ecumenism in Britain and especially in England. Church leaders consulted one another about the way ahead, and decided also to consult local churches. In 1988 about one million churchgoers of all denominations discussed together in small groups the nature and purpose of the Church. They found the experience rejuvenating. They affirmed their desire for closer Christian unity in diversity. They valued one another’s gifts and traditions. They discovered that to be different was not necessarily to be wrong.

In 1990 therefore the British Council of Churches gave way to new ecumenical instruments in Britain, including Churches Together in England, and to new ways of working ecumenically. There is not time to spell them out in detail, but I will mention five of their characteristics.

1. All work for unity must be undergirded by prayer and worship, since it is God’s unity that is sought. Of course, this emphasis had never been lost, but it had sometimes seemed overlaid amidst the union negotiations of the previous decades.

2. Work for unity is the concern of all persons at all levels, locally as well as nationally and internationally - and especially (a new emphasis in many parts of England) at diocesan level. England was divided into about 50 areas or counties in which ecumenical councils were established, an ecumenical officer appointed, and in many of which church leaders covenanted to work together. Underlying this is the conviction that Christian unity concerns persons and groups of persons in relationship with one another and with God.

3. Christian unity requires a mutual covenant or commitment between churches (denominations). The decision-making bodies of all member churches of Churches Together in England were consulted beforehand and asked to commit themselves. Their representatives signed that commitment at the inaugural act of worship which brought Churches Together in England into being. Moreover, the Enabling Group, the
central council of Churches Together in England, never makes
its own decisions on major issues. It has to consult the
decision-making bodies of the member churches each time, since they alone carry the authority. This is very different
from the way the old British Council of Churches worked, and very much slower, but we trust that it means that our actions
and statements are really those of the churches together.

4 As Archbishop Robert Runcie and Pope John Paul II said in 1989, 'Christian unity is not just about the removal of
obstacles but about the exchange of gifts.'

5 Fifthly, Christian unity is for the sake of mission - "that they
may be one that the world may believe". We are not
concerned for the unity of the church only, but for the
reconciliation of the whole world to God.

This new way of working has forced us to focus much more
carefully than before on what we actually mean by the visible
unity of the Church. We have established a five-year process,
which we have entitled Called To Be One, in which our
answer is a very high proportion indeed, much higher than that
for the majority of church members. So it is not surprising
that the 50 ecumenical officers I mentioned earlier are eager to
make their acquaintance.

Interchurch families present both a problem and an opportunity
for the churches. I want to suggest, however, that for the
future we should explore our role (to use the words of the letter
to the Ephesians) as a mystery. In the fifth chapter of that
letter the author appeals to Christians to love one another and
so to imitate Christ who gave himself up for us as a sacrifice to
God (1, 2). He appeals to husbands and wives to love and be
subject to one another out of reverence for Christ (21-30). He
then quotes Genesis 2:24, For this reason a man shall leave
his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two
shall become one flesh, and goes on to say: This mystery is a
profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the
church: however, let each of you love his wife as himself, and
let the wife see that she respects her husband (31-33). It we
can overlook for the moment the relationship of subordination
of women to men common in the author's time, and very
convenient to his argument about Christ and the church, let us
focus on the central theme. The relationship of husband and
wife is a mystery of unity in love which is worthy of being used to
describe the self-sacrificing love of Christ for his church.
The mystery can then be reversed, so that the author can appeal to
Christians to love one another as Christ first loved them.
This three-fold relationship - marriage - Christ - church - is a
'mystery', the Greek word which the Orthodox use for
'sacrament'. When the church spread throughout the
Mediterranean in the first three centuries, it settled in
'households' or families long before it was free to meet in
specially dedicated buildings (e.g. Colossians 4:15). We are
told that the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference in the
United States has recently commissioned a study of the family
as the 'domestic church'. There is a mysterious sacramental
depth of relationship here worthy of further theological and
spiritual exploration.

What does this have to say about mixed marriages, interchurch
families? Remember that the context in which the author of
the letter to the Ephesians used the word 'mystery' of the
relationship of husband and wife as of Christ and the church
was an appeal for Christian unity. Fr Rene Beaufre and I were invited to join a small working
party on the Pastoral Care of Interchurch Families set up by the
Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the
World Council of Churches in the 1980s. The working
party's report asked that the churches should explore further
theological and ecclesiological significance of the
experience of interchurch families. This work is still to be
done.

Look again at the five characteristics of our new ecumenical
ways of working in England:

1. The undergirding of prayer and worship

Interchurch families are united in the sacraments of baptism
and marriage, and often have a deep longing to share the
cucharist together. I am sure that many of the families here
will testify not only to their desire to pray and worship
together, but also to the need to do so in order to sustain and
build up their marriage and family life. They will also testify
to the enrichment they frequently receive by being able to
worship in two different spiritual traditions, especially when
they are permitted to receive the eucharist together.
Christian unity concerns persons and groups of persons in relationship
What human relationship is closer than that of husband and wife, parent and child? The Letter to the Ephesians quotes Genesis and speaks of "one flesh." We must be careful not to overemphasise and oversimplify a mystery, but is there not some analogy between the co-inherence of the three divine persons of the Trinity and the "one flesh" relationship of a Christian sacramental marriage?

Christian unity requires a mutual commitment or covenant between the churches
In all our traditions the theology of marriage is moving away from a basis in the old Roman concept of a legal contract and into the Judaeo-Christian understanding. From a basis in struck during the week before I left England for this conference that two church leaders quite separately used the analogy of a marriage covenant when talking of the need for married persons. The letter to the Ephesians quotes what marriage is for mission: Parents are the first teachers of their children. They have a ministry and message of reconciliation. In order to convey to their children the gospel of God's reconciliation through Christ, the parents have to be reconciled.

A contribution
This remarkable coherence between interchurch families and work for Christian unity has not gone unnoticed by the Association of Interchurch Families in England. In 1988 it made its own contribution to the establishment of Churches Together in England in the following words:

Interchurch families rejoice that the churches of which they are members have committed themselves to one another to grow into unity.

We are couples in which the partners are members of different churches. We have committed ourselves to one another in Christian marriage. Because we belong to different churches, our married unity in Christ has to be expressed within those divided churches. It may be, therefore, that our experience of growing together will be useful to our churches at this stage.

Most of us started with no ecumenical experience. We were quite ordinary Christians. But then we met one another, we got to know one another, and we fell in love with one another. Because we loved one another, we wanted to commit ourselves to each other for life. The English churches are now at this stage of committing themselves to one another in the love of Christ who first loved us. Some members of our churches, however, have not yet reached this stage, and need to be encouraged to meet and get to know one another.

Once we had made our commitment to one another in Christian marriage, we had to learn to live together. A shared building helped - what would our marriages be like if we lived in separate houses? We shared our resources, material and spiritual. We undertook common tasks, and agreed on individual areas of responsibility. We were ready to say sorry to one another when we made mistakes and hurt each other. Is this how our churches may be helped to grow together?

We found it very important to worship together in one another's churches. We found it especially important to be together at the eucharist, even though this is a painful experience when we do not share communion. When we can receive communion together we find this strengthens our unity as a couple and as a family. Increasingly, we feel it wrong to be separated at the table of the Lord. Maybe it is only as more members of our churches come to feel more sharply the pains and wrongness of separation at the eucharist that they will be motivated to seek more urgently the unity of the Body of Christ. In particular, it seems to us that many of our clergy by the nature of their work are insulated from this vital experience.

Another motivating force for us has been the shared responsibility we have for our children, since we need as parents together to nurture them in Christian faith and life by our words and our example. How can we speak to them effectively of the Christian gospel of reconciliation if we ourselves are divided? How can the churches speak effectively to the world if they are divided?

We have learned in our marriages that unity does not mean uniformity. Differences enrich our common life. There are, however, some differences between us which threaten the unity of our marriage. In these cases we have to be prepared to discard what is not essential to us, to be ready to give up certain things which we enjoy as individuals, for the sake of our life together. If we were not prepared for this 'giving up', and adapting ourselves each to the other, our marriages would not work. Equally, the churches need to be prepared to change certain aspects of their life for the sake of unity, if they are really committed to becoming one church.

In our marriages we share all kinds of experiences and activities - a whole network which holds our life together. Equally, our churches need the threads of practical experience and activities to tie them together. We ourselves have found that there are all kinds of practical ways in which we can take part in the life of our partner's church: for example, by leading intercessions, joining the choir, teaching the children, becoming a member of the parish council. Could it not become normal for Christians to take up a particular job within another church community? It would help to bind the churches together in their day to day life.

Celebrating family landmarks is important in contributing to family unity. We have found that when we celebrate weddings and baptisms jointly, involving both our ministers and church communities, this often has a positive effect on the relationships of the local churches as well as those of our families. Could this be extended by the churches working together much more closely in marriage preparation and support? Could they not sometimes find opportunities to celebrate together the one baptism into Christ which we all profess?

In our families we have our ups and downs, but we are committed to making our marriages work. and this commitment by the grace of God keeps us together in a developing relationship which passes through many stages as our unity is forged and grows and deepens. Can it be that our churches need to come together in the kind of way that married people come together to receive and create their unity in living it together?

Martin Reardon
Interchurch Marriages and the reception of the Eucharist: Present and Future

A synopsis made by Fr Ladislas Orsy, SJ, of his address to the Virginia conference

Differing understandings and practices

It is a well-known fact that in the matter of the reception of the eucharist by non-Catholic spouses, Roman Catholic authorities do not interpret the relevant documents, such as the Code of Canon Law, 1983, the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 1993, and the Encyclical Ut Unum Sint ("That they may be one"), 1995, in the same way. As a result, local practices vary from generous reception to rigid exclusion. Understandably, this "unevenness" causes disorientation and discontent. Clearly, there is a need for thinking afresh and searching for a sound theological position in view of an equitable practical solution.

United and divided

The starting point for the re-evaluation of the situation should be in a better understanding of what unites and what divides us. We are united by our common baptism, but we are divided in our beliefs - or so it appears. In reality, our union extends much further. Catholics and other Christians alike receive the Word of God and respond with "I believe". We are united by our common baptism, but we are divided in our beliefs - or so it appears. In reality, our union extends much further. Catholics and other Christians alike receive the Word of God and respond with "I believe". We all surrender to the Word, but - due to our limitation and sinfulness - we remain divided in the perception of its meaning.

A special relationship

This union extends even further in an interchurch marriage because, through the bond between the spouses, a new and special relationship arises between the Roman Catholic Church and the non-Catholic spouse. The latter, by entering into a consoritum totius vitae, a partnership of the whole life, with a Catholic person, enters into a close and mysterious relationship with the Catholic community, a relationship that has its spiritual dimension. Although the spouses may be "interchurch" partners, their marriage is nonetheless regarded in the Catholic Church as the symbol of the unbreakable bond between Christ and his church. They are also the founders and members of a "domestic ecclesia".

If there is so much "oneness", some compelling questions arise. Should the Catholic Church really instruct the spouses to divide for the eucharist - right after they have received the sacrament of matrimony with a Catholic blessing? Should those who are held to be symbols of Christ's unity with his church be separated at the Lord's table? Should the domestic church be divided for the reception of the bread and wine of life that brings into existence and nourishes all churches, large and small?

Or should the church rather find inspiration in the divine saying, "What God has joined together, let no one put asunder" (Mt. 19:6), and find ways and means to keep the couple together at the celebration of the eucharist?

Interpreting the norms

Assuming the right dispositions of the other Christian spouse, there are good theological reasons for the Catholic Church to be generous and there are no serious canonical impediments to the contrary.

The right disposition from a theological point of view is best stated by St Paul himself in his first Letter to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves" (1 Cor. 11:28-29). Firm belief, therefore, in the mystery that the Catholic Church celebrates is necessary. If the same church asked for anything less, it would betray its own internal light and fail in integrity.

True, canon law sounds prohibitive. It declares that "Catholic ministers may lawfully administer the sacraments only to Catholic members of Christ's faithful" (can. 844, 1). This is, however, the statement of a general principle, followed by various exceptions (see ib. 2-4). The Directory for Ecumenism is quite explicit: it says that "in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments [Eucharist included] may be permitted, or even commended, for Christians of other churches and ecclesial communities" (¶ 129). Admittedly, the circumstances are carefully defined, the conditions circumscribed, yet the openness to exceptions is never retracted. In a discreet fashion (not usual for our canon law in matters ecumenical), the door is left ajar for fresh insights and interpretations.

The proper method of such interpretations should consist first in identifying the theological values relevant to the issues, and then formulating the norms required to uphold and promote them.

The principal theological value in our case is, of course, the vital energy that the common participation in the eucharist can bring to support and nourish the sacramental union of the couple. Further, there is the value of strengthening the religious beliefs and practices of the children, they will certainly be helped by being with both of their parents at the Lord's table. (And who can ever tell the harm that may follow when little children are told about God's gift and then they see that one of their parents cannot receive it?)

Special cases

Once the theological values are probed and established, the search for the correct norms ought to follow. Canon law speaks of a “grave and pressing need” that can at times justify an exception: the need to support a sacred symbol of unity and to nourish a domestic church effectively can be precisely such a need. Further, the rules restrict the “openness” to special cases, but by good canonical tradition the "case" can have a broader interpretation and signify the uniqueness of a given marriage bond so that the permission once given can last for a lifetime. All the more so since today, in its relationship with other Christians, the Roman Catholic Church intends to be magnanimous provided no essential beliefs are wronged.

Admission of the non-Catholic spouse into eucharistic communion could be granted on the very day of the wedding. Since such participation is, and will be, always a public act, it is fair that it should be preceded by a declaration of belief, public too in some fashion, in the mystery of the eucharist. (One could think even of a simple exchange of words inserted into the liturgy of the wedding. ) Needless to say, the manifestation of belief in the eucharist should never be misunderstood for an intent to transfer from one church to...
another, or as a weakening of the bond of the other Christian with his or her community: after all, we can share some beliefs while we remain full members of different confessions.

A question of education
There is still, however, an outstanding problem. Will the Catholic communities understand? Will they not regard the admission of a non-Catholic to the eucharist as an assertion that fidelity to one’s own church is of little importance?

The concern of the Catholic community must be respected. The resolution of the problem, however, cannot come in any other way than by judicious instruction and theological education. The people should be given an explanation of the delicate play of values; also they should be led to the perception of a need for generosity. They should be helped to a higher viewpoint where they can have a broader field of vision. Then, and only then, will they be able to see with clarity and without anxiety that no doctrine is compromised or betrayed; it is simply that the commandment to work for the healing of the body of Christ, that is the church, is obeyed.

This is the way the development could go - ought to go. For this to happen, we need not so much a new legislation as a “new attitude of mind”, which is an expression used often and firmly by Pope Paul VI whenever he spoke of the interpretation of canon law after Vatican II. After all, the purpose of every law in the church is to open the way for God’s unbounded love.

At the conference, a couple told me a touching story. At her First Communion, their little girl, realising that her non-Catholic mother was not allowed to be with her, brought her mother a small piece of the consecrated host: “I saved it for you.” “Out of the mouth of babes...” (Ps. 8.2)

Ladislas Orsy, SJ

An appreciation
Listening to Fr Orsy’s talk for two hours and not realising how time was passing was amazing.

Jenny (a member of the United Reformed Church)

His address was particularly important. It was not just that he is a leading expert in canon law, who has taught at the Gregorian University in Rome, Fordham University in New York and Catholic University in Washington, besides writing many books, including Marriage in Canon Law. The brilliance of his presentation was that he was able to transform what could have been simply a canonical question into a spiritual question which spoke directly to the heart of each participant: how, in my situation, can I be a healer?

He did not come, speak and leave - reasonable enough for such a busy person. He was there throughout the conference, talking to couples, sharing the process, reflecting on the “experiential element” which, he told us, complemented the “reflection in isolation” which he had undertaken in preparation for Virginia. We hope to publish later a longer version of his immensely rich address. Meanwhile, here are a few points which are not in the synopsis.

A wounded church: a healing church
Raising the big question: what is the church, one and divided? Fr Orsy suggested that we are dealing with a wounded church rather than a divided church - wounded because of human limitations. Yet it is a healing church too; the healing process is taking place through God’s action.

We learned something about the limitations of canon law. Law is a crude instrument to deal with the balance between unity and division, to provide a rule for a wounded church. Law is there to protect values; it is abstract, universal and impersonal. Law must therefore be completed by equity, since every situation is concrete, particular and personal. When law meets life, life has priority. Law is important - we need guidelines - but it must be kept in its proper place. We are a church of sinners, divided by our sinfulness, but the Lord is continually redeeming us. If we withdraw, if we become angry, we miss our chance to be part of that healing process.

How do we bring God’s saving action into the domestic church? We must respect the integrity of God’s saving action; this has absolute priority. We must respect the integrity of persons, letting them go at their own pace, as God does. We must respect the integrity of communities divided by historical circumstances, who make rules to protect their understanding of the Word and their identity; they too have to go at their own pace. (The rules may not be right, but the integrity of persons must be respected.) The three integrities have to be in a unique balance in every single case - each situation is unique because it is concrete, particular and personal. Such balances can never be determined by law.

Suffering
Fr Orsy responded to some of the pain which had surfaced at the conference: “When I go back and people say: what did you see? I shall say: I saw the church alive. Even pain speaks of life. Only living people can feel pain.”

Having identified the three integrities to be respected, Fr Orsy reflected on this pain. It is possible, he said, that in this complex situation, when we refuse conflict but strive for harmony, for healing, suffering may become our daily nourishment. But suffering has meaning; this is a Christian insight. It goes so much against our nature that there was only one way of proclaiming it: God on the Cross. No great things are done without suffering.

How can I be a healer?
Ideally, the rules are very broad in their value-oriented interpretation. The problem is that persons and communities need to be educated, and this takes a long time. We can turn to God. We can turn to human beings too: we can keep on waking our neighbours in the night because we need bread - and they’ll give us what we need just to get rid of us, said Jesus!

But we may not force people. We live in transitional times. We may see a short-cut and not be able to take it because there are too many people in the way - it is no solution simply to push them aside. Ultimately healing is a question of love; we give ourselves in order to heal, to be used in the humble service of unity.
Bone of my bone,

test of my test

Interchurch Families as Symbol and Sign

Let me tell you about Lily and Mike back in Brooklyn where I went as pastor. Mike was the Trustee everybody counted on to see to building repairs, keep the old boiler running, shovel the snow off the sidewalk. Mike was at every meeting, loved and respected, a powerful voice in that congregation. But I never saw him on Sunday morning.

Lily was always there. President of the women’s group and church treasurer, she’d been a Methodist all her life. It took me a year to figure out that Mike wasn’t there on Sunday morning because he was Catholic. They’d been married for nearly 50 years, which meant they married in the late 1920s. At the time, their families were appalled. Their churches were appalled. You didn’t do that then. Somehow they made it work despite all the dismay. They would be delighted to know that you all are here. I don’t suppose they thought of themselves as an interchurch family, and there certainly wasn’t anybody around to affirm what they did, nor to question the role their churches played in exacting the price they paid for marrying one another.

I know Mike got a lot of satisfaction from being a pillar of that Methodist congregation - which by our United Methodist Book of Discipline he wasn’t eligible to be as a non-member. A lot of pastors through the years had looked the other way, and I was certainly not about to do otherwise.

Signs and symbols

I see you as an enormous source of hope for the church, and for the world as well. I suggest that, because you incarnate - put flesh on - what is at the heart of our faith, you are both sign and symbol for church and world.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines “sign” as a token or indication, an omen or portent, it names that which gives evidence of an event - past, present or future. A sign signifies, means, points to …

A “symbol”, on the other hand, is something used for, or regarded as, representing something else. A material object representing something, often immaterial. A word, phrase, image or the like, having a complex of associated meanings and perceived as having inherent value separable from that which is symbolised, as being part of that which is symbolised.

Baptism

It seems that between the energy of Vatican II and the convergence reflected in the World Council of Churches document on Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, remarkable things began to happen. Once we agreed on baptism, we moved in a direction that is irreversible.

Remember your baptism. We wade into the Jordan with Jesus. We drown, we die, we rise with him. We descend into the water as the old human, with all our vices, all our seeking after status, all our divisions of race and class and gender - all of our “isms”.

We sink to our watery grave, we are instructed by God’s good news, we arise to newness of life - reclothed in the gift of God’s Spirit. But we are gifted with more - much more. Unity replaces the old roles and divisions. Virtues replace vices. The new human is joined to the Body of Christ. Together we are the Body of Christ.

You know that, as interchurch families. You take your baptism seriously, otherwise you would not have chosen this role. Otherwise you would say like generations before you: it’s just too much, and it doesn’t matter that much. We won’t go to any church. Or, alternatively, I will go to my church and you will go to yours, and we’ll figure out something to do with the children.

Harbingers of a new paradigm

You, in the divide between the committed and the casual believers, come down in the committed camp, where “the simplest decisions in one’s life are made in a sacred rather than a secular context” (Kathleen Housley). You are breaking the old mould. You are harbingers of a new paradigm - living life outside the box, in some sense on the margins. What you are doing is a new thing, and I suspect a lot of church folks don’t know what to do with you.

Gary Peluso says that “ecumenical organisations live at the boundary where the church meets the world, especially the world-that-is-coming-to-be”. I think that is also true of the smallest ecumenical unit - the interchurch family.

There is a sense in which you live at the boundary - precisely that boundary where the church meets the world - and it is your day-to-day lived reality with which the churches must deal. It is what you know, what you are learning, that the churches need to know if they are to be of any use to the world.

It is the lived reality of toothpaste all over the bathroom mirror and weeds threatening to choke out the tomatoes in the garden, of poopy diapers and “Where can we afford to go on vacation”, of “Because I’m the parent, that’s why”, and “Honey, we’ve spent the last three Christmases with your family.” It is being together through unutterable bliss and unspeakable sorrow, through crushing defeat and joy upon joy.

It is all of what it means to be a Christian family. It is to be family, with all the ups and downs and backbreaking labour that entails - to be family, in the face of the deterioration of the family as an institution. And it is to be Christian, in the face of cultural indifference, if not outright hostility from the
culture - and lack of understanding from the churches. Surely it would be easier to walk away - but you haven’t done that; I hope you never will.

**Hope for the church**

Because you are a sign. You are that which gives evidence of an event, past, present or future; you point to what is happening now and will continue to happen. People will find one another, the right one another, and will marry and establish households and raise families. And they will do it across all kinds of lines. And they will weary of life in the box, of trying to please everyone and will opt, instead, to do what in their hearts they know is right - pleasing God is what matters most.

The world needs to see that sign. The church needs to see that sign.

And you are a symbol. You are who you are in yourselves, but you also represent something else - you represent the unity of the church for which Jesus prayed so long ago. You put flesh on that immaterial reality - the oneness of the Body of Christ. You are, in the words of Vatican II, *the domestic church*: “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 its Christian identity and mission that makes the family ready to be a community for others, a setting in which the Gospel is transmitted and which radiates the Gospel (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, quoted in *Familiaris Consortio*, §52) and it is mixed marriage families that have the duty to proclaim Christ with the fullness implied in a common baptism, as well as having “the difficult task of becoming builders of unity”.

You give me hope for the church, and I believe you deserve the church’s support. That may require further conversion on the part of the churches. The book *For the Conversion of the Churches*, produced by Catholics and Protestants in France, challenges the churches to recognise that Christian identity rests on conversion - “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news”. That conversion is required by the coming and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its absolute nature opens on to a process which is never accomplished fully in this world. It is initiated and celebrated in baptism, it includes an “already there” but also a “not yet”. It is - and this is such a wonderful phrase - *a grace which opens on to a task*.

And this conversion is ongoing, in all its diverse forms, in individuals - and in churches, where collectively Christians come to recognise the sinful attitudes they share. Their conversion as churches is their constant effort to strive toward their identity as churches.

A United Methodist pastor, participant in an ongoing United Methodist/Roman Catholic dialogue, spoke of the intimacy that built within the group - in itself is something of a miracle. He tells a story about another participant, one of our bishops, who shared with the group in tears that his daughter had married a Catholic. “It doesn’t bother me that she married a Catholic,” he said. “It doesn’t bother me that my daughter will become a Catholic, and that their children will be raised Catholic. What bothers me is that in my lifetime I will never share the eucharist with my grandchildren.”

Christ invites all to his table. Christ reaches out to include all - even the most unlikely - in his love. Christ is not the problem. We are the problem, because we forget that we have been empowered by our baptism to live in the unity of the Body of Christ. The sacrament of baptism,* in the words of *Ut Unum Sint,* represents “a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been reborn by means of it.”

**The glue that bonds us**

Poet Adrienne Rich has written:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save, so much has been lost ... so much has been destroyed. I must cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power ... reconstitute the world.*

To reconstitute the world, one must begin at the beginning, with human relationship - with the ability of one human being to bond with, commit to, care for another human being. The ability of two or more I’s to look at each other and see we. Human relationship, indeed, divine-human relationship, begins for us, bibliically speaking, in the Garden, with our ancestors, Adam and Eve.

*The man gives names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

I want to suggest that those words - you are bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh - describe the “glue” that bonds us to one another at the most intimate level of our lives, and by extension, to the degree that we can say it to one another, it is also the “glue” that makes human community possible.

You have, through your marriage vows to one another before God and the church, promised to look into one another’s eyes and say, we are so intimately bonded to one another that you are indeed bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

And what is it that the church needs, but for fundamentalists and evangelicals, charismatics and liberals, Catholics and Presbyterians and Methodist and, yes, Metropolitan Community Churches, to look into each other’s eyes and recognise therein a sister or brother in Christ - and to say, you are bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

And what is it that the world needs, but for each of us to be able to look into our neighbour’s eyes and recognise there our common humanity, and to say - you, too, are bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

To you who know the hard work and the deep joy of embodying the unity of the church, continue to be empowered by your baptism and surprised by God’s grace. You are a sign of what is and what will be, and symbol of the love of our people-making God who yearns with us for community.

The world needs you - the church needs you. May your tribe increase!

Judith FaGalde Bennett
Before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the situation of interchurch couples (Roman Catholic/Protestant, reflecting French society) was painful. Either Catholic partners who didn’t marry in the Catholic church were excommunicated, or Protestant partners had to put in writing that they would have their children baptised and educated in the Catholic Church.

In the early 1960s the first interchurch couples began meeting in Lyon. None of the churches was yet prepared to recognise their specific identity as couples in which each partner is faithful to his/her own church and also wants to share the spiritual richness of her/his partner’s community to enhance communion. They were joined by Pastor Henry Bruston and the Dominican priest René Beaupère, who listened to what the couples had to say and learned a lot.

As interchurch couples shared their difficulties and their joys, three main themes emerged: the spiritual life of the couple, their relations with their parishes, and the Christian education of their children. At the end of 1964, they decided to share their experiences with others in a document which they named the Lyon Charter. Several other groups of interchurch couples and families came into being in France and French-speaking Switzerland, and the Charter was translated into English by the World Council of Churches and used for a consultation on mixed marriages in 1966.

Then the first interconfessional documents appeared; one was produced in Switzerland (1967) by the Protestant, Catholic and Old Catholic churches. In France Catholics and Protestants worked on a common text (1968). Revised in detail, it was published as the official Recommandations de l’Église Catholique et des Églises Lutheriennes et Réformées de France.

Couples began meeting in groups all over France and French-speaking Switzerland, because they wanted to share their experiences, from October 1968 the bulletin Foyers Mixtes was published three times a year in Lyon. (The first number appeared in the same year that the Association of Interchurch Families was founded in England.)

A very important development in the history of interchurch marriage was the motu proprio of Pope Paul VI, Matrimonium Mixtum (March 1970). It gave a canonical framework and left the bishops to apply it. The bishop’s dispensation remained a requirement for mixed marriages; it was given for a “reasonable cause” on two conditions: that the Catholic partner declared that he/she was able to resist the dangers of losing his/her faith; and that he/she sincerely promised to do everything possible to have children of the marriage baptised and educated in the Roman Catholic Church. This was a step forward: the Catholic no longer had to guarantee to educate the children of the marriage as Catholics, but “do everything possible” for it.

There was the disappointment that marriages taking place outside the Roman Catholic Church were not recognised by the Catholic Church unless a dispensation was obtained from the diocesan bishop (not, as in the past, from the Pope). However, the bishop was allowed to recognise a marriage which had not been celebrated in the Catholic church retrospectively, by a sonato in radice. That meant that the local bishop took a more important part in decisions - it was a form of decentralisation which gave opportunities for local initiatives. In France it led to the Nouvelles dispositions pour les diocèses de France (1970), a big step forward in ecumenical relations. This was followed shortly afterwards by Nouvelles recommandations, prepared by the Protestant members of the Comité mixte catholique-protestant de France, and by other documents from Switzerland, Belgium and Germany, texts which are still authoritative today.

Baptism In France the driving force for ecumenical celebrations of baptism came from interchurch couples themselves - their experience and achievement played an important role in the Mixed Committee’s Note sur la célébration œcuménique du baptême (1975). This extended practices already used in Lyon and Paris throughout France. Baptism, like marriage, can be celebrated with the active participation of both Christian communities and both ministers, Catholic and Protestant. It is not a concelebration, in the sense that the ministers do not concelebrate the actual act of baptism, but several options are suggested for sharing the readings, sermon, prayers, and so on.

These baptisms can be recorded in the registers of both parishes, Catholic and Protestant. Obviously, ecologically speaking, there is only one baptism which is ecumenical in the sense that it is valid for all Christians, and only one minister is necessary. But for many interchurch couples the visible signs of double belonging are important.

Children are encouraged to be familiar with the church communities of both parents. Up to the age of 12, the syllabus is mostly Bible-based, with (sometimes) doctrine classes for teenagers. Since 1975 an annual meeting has been organised by the Centre St Irené in Lyon for catechists, interchurch families, pastors and priests to share their experiences. By 1992 they could state that some points have been definitively established. The results of the main bilateral dialogues have been agreed, and ecumenical education is to be introduced at parish level. It is necessary to encourage it more in denominational schools, and to replicate the ecumenical centres of Geneva and Neuchâtel elsewhere. A discussion point remains - the age of First Communion/Confirmation, which is not uniform; however, this difference can be very fruitful!

Eucharistic hospitality The burning ecumenical question is common participation at the eucharist.

Admission to communion is more difficult for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches than for other Christian communities. Of course, nowadays Protestant partners are in many cases allowed by the relevant authorities to receive the Catholic eucharist if their belief about that eucharist is essentially that of the Catholic partner. The reverse presents a problem, because of difficulties about the total mutual recognition of ministries. The courageous position taken by Bishop Elchinger of Strasbourg, France, in 1972 allowed the possibility of eucharistic hospitality for interchurch couples, because the spiritual unity of the couple is more important than ecclesial differences. The local Reformed and Lutheran
Marriage  The ecumenical celebration of marriage is allowed in the Vatican Directory (1993); for France, see the Nouvelles dispositions pour les diocèses de France, 1970 and 1984. As we saw above, dispensation from canonical form remains necessary; so the promise to do everything possible for the Catholic baptism and education of the children must be given to the bishop. But in 1980 the French Directoire de discernement of the French episcopal conference said that this does not mean "to do the impossible, but to decide in any particular case what will be best without bringing into danger other essential values such as respect for the other partner’s conscience, the likelihood of awakening the faith of the child and, above all, the unity of the couple". Nevertheless, a problem remains; the partner who has to ask for a dispensation is somehow humiliated, a feeling not lessened by these theological acrobatics.

In France, a way has been found to soften this declaration. The Catholic Church proposed that every couple, whether Catholic-Catholic or Catholic-other, after discussion with the priest, should write a "declaration of intent", to contain the main orientations which the couple wish to give to their conjugal and family life. This encourages a more spontaneous and richer expression of the engaged couple’s intentions, and includes the special promise interchurch couples have to make, so the dioceses accept declarations which do not use the ritual expression "to do all that is possible".

Double Belonging  The Catholic tradition has always recognised the Christian family as a little church. Interchurch families are also building a "family church", but one that by "double belonging" draws on both their churches. By their love for one another, interchurch families are able to bring this hope into the churches, with the help of God.

We are sharing love, which is the motor, the facilitator of all spiritual capacities. Finally, after trying to show the richness and dynamism which interchurch families are able to bring to the churches, I want to focus on our spiritual capacities.

Interchurch families have strong spiritual capacities because of their daily experiences in living together which they are willing to bring to our churches and our world.

We are living the faith, together, daily, in common prayer and song, in teaching the children … all this is a daily communion between the churches.

We are sharing love, which is the motor, the facilitator of all shared life. It overcomes barriers, helps us to forgive and heal wounds we inflict on each other, holds hands and hearts open, even if the barricades seem high.

We are living trust and hope, trust in the impossible, in the union of those who are separated, in the promise that life together is possible. Our little ecclesiosda may be called to bring this hope into the churches, with the help of God.

Nicola Kontzi
THE JOURNAL

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 counselors and teachers,
- marriage preparation teams,
- baptism preparation teams,
- those preparing 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 interest,
- 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 "body in association", 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 worldwide. It warmly welcomes contributions and editorial help from all parts of the world.

The annual subscription (Europe) to INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is £5 sterling or €15 for three years, and should be sent to the English Association at the address below. For other parts of the world the annual subscription (airmail printed rate) is £7 or €20 for three years, to be paid by cheque or money order expressed in sterling and drawn on a British bank. (If payment is made in US dollars, add $5 to cover bank charges.)

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THE ASSOCIATION

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 family members, some are individuals who wish to further the Association’s work.

Mutual encouragement
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. An annual 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 enquiries.

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, and 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. 253811) dependent on the contributions of members and the donations of others who wish to support its work.

Presidents are: the Archbishop of Caerleon, 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.

AROUND THE WORLD

The Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families in Britain and Ireland includes the four English, Scottish and Irish sister-associations. It is a "body in association" with the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. AIF is also linked with other associations and groups of interchurch families around the world. Some contact addresses are:

Scotland
Swissich AIF (SAIF), 14 Sandhead Road Strathaven ML10 6HX
Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA), 17, Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7FE
Irish Republic
AIF, c/o Irish School of Ecumenics, Milltown Park, Dublin
France
Foyers Mixtes, Centre St-Irénée, 2 place Gailleton, Lyon F 69002
Italy
Coppie Interconferenziali, via Scipio Slataper 13, 20125 Milan
United States
American AIF (AIAF), c/o Kentuckiana Community, 1115 South 4th Street, Louisville, KY 40203-3101
Canada
Canadian AIF (CAIF), c/o Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, 2065 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec H3H 1G6
Australia
Interchurch Families Association (Western Australia) (IFAWA), 62 Tweedale Road, Applecross, Western Australia 6153
Interchurch Families Association (Western Australia) (NIMMA), 6153

Association of Interchurch Families (New Zealand), 6 Beatrice Road, Remuera, Auckland 5

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE at the Ecumenical Centre Geneva 23-28 July 1998

Interchurch Families and the Churches les fayeurs mixtes et les églises l’un 2000 Towards the Millennium Further information from: Phoepen Misseys, Centre St-Irénée 3 place Gailleton Lyon F 69002 FRANCE