Beatitudes for Interchurch Families

1. Blessed are the interchurch spouses who participate also in the church of their partners from another Christian tradition; theirs is the Kingdom of God.

2. Blessed are the interchurch parents who share fully together in the religious education of their children; such children will grow to see the unity of the Body of Christ.

3. Blessed are the sorrowing interchurch families who have not found pastors to accept and minister to their needs; they will be comforted.

4. Blessed are the merciful interchurch couples who patiently work with their pastors and help to awaken them to Christ's presence in their marriage; they will know mercy.

5. Blessed are the interchurch spouses who are pure of heart; their marriage will be recognized as a sacrament of Christ.

6. Blessed are the interchurch couples who minister to engaged and newly married interchurch couples; on them God's favor rests.

7. Blessed are the interchurch families who hunger and thirst for the unity of the Body of Christ; they will be satisfied.

8. Blessed are interchurch spouses when they persecute you and utter all kinds of slander against you because you have married a Christian from another tradition; you will be called daughters and sons of God.

Offered by Fr. George Kilcourse,
Professor of Theology at Bellarmine College,
Louisville, Kentucky

Fr. George composed these beatitudes for a presentation which he made in California in 1997. He writes: “In my preparation, I spent time in prayer reflecting upon how often our AIF work gets derailed with intricacies of church bureaucracies and laws. So instead of writing a new Decalogue or Ten Commandments for Interchurch Couples, I decided that it would be more in the spirit of Jesus to proclaim Blessings. Interchurch families are indeed a genuine grace in the life of the churches. And these modest Beatitudes are an attempt to celebrate their faith-filled lives.”
Joy Compounded

Mark is eight years old and was ready to make his first communion. Two years previously, his elder brother Paul had received his first communion and, after discussion with the family’s Anglican vicar and bishop, he had been allowed to receive in the Anglican parish also. However, all had not been plain sailing. Despite repeated requests and letters, Paul’s Anglican mother had not been able to receive at his first communion mass.

As the time drew near for Mark’s first communion (for which the whole family helped to prepare him), we approached the Catholic parish priest. He had intimated in the past that sharing communion was not a possibility, as he understood the rules. However, we asked him to ask the bishop once again for permission for Mark’s mother to receive communion with the family on such a special day. We were not at all hopeful.

The first communion mass was a joyous and happy occasion. The families of the first communicants stood around the altar and received communion together. It felt normal and natural. Parishioners, other family members, and Anglican parishioner friends who had joined us for the service were able to share in our real joy.

Paul’s and Mark’s mother has received communion since—but not every time we attend our Catholic parish. She has a blessing some Sundays, partly out of respect for friends who are married to divorcees and do not receive communion, partly as a sign of the disunity which still exists, and partly in recognition of the privilege we have been offered in the circumstances. But it gives the whole family real happiness to be together in communion. As another AIF member once promised us, “Love will win in the end!”

The Body and the Blood

My guardian angel, knowing my spiritual fragility, works overtime on my behalf. My husband is a Roman Catholic, and I am an Anglican. One Sunday last summer a group of Roman Catholic students with their chaplain were coming to lunch with us, and were going to celebrate mass at our house before the meal. A second priest was coming to join them. My husband stopped me from dashing off on my bicycle to an early Communion Service, saying happily that I would be able to receive communion at the eucharist to be celebrated in our home. I knew from experience that the second priest understood about the need experienced by interchurch couples to share communion together, but I was not sure about the first one, and it was he who was going to celebrate. But I put my bicycle away hopefully.

In the course of the conversation after the students arrived with the celebrant, I grew less sure. The mass began. The second priest had not arrived. I shut my eyes to try to focus on what to do. To my great relief, I heard the voice of the second priest saying happily that I would be able to receive communion at the eucharist to be celebrated in our home. I knew from experience that the second priest understood about the need experienced by interchurch couples to share communion together, but I was not sure about the first one, and it was he who was going to celebrate. But I put my bicycle away hopefully.

The families of the first communicants stood around the altar and received communion together. It felt normal and natural. Parishioners, other family members, and Anglican parishioner friends who had joined us for the service were able to share in our real joy.

Paul’s and Mark’s mother has received communion since—but not every time we attend our Catholic parish. She has a blessing some Sundays, partly out of respect for friends who are married to divorcees and do not receive communion, partly as a sign of the disunity which still exists, and partly in recognition of the privilege we have been offered in the circumstances. But it gives the whole family real happiness to be together in communion. As another AIF member once promised us, “Love will win in the end!”

Claire Malone-Lee
A presentation on the experience of interchurch families

The Second European Ecumenical Assembly was held at Graz, Austria, from 23rd-29th June 1997, sponsored jointly by the Council of European Catholic Bishops’ Conferences and the Conference of European Churches. The theme of Graz was: Reconciliation: gift of God and source of new life. There were six sub-themes, of which the first was “the search for visible unity between the churches”. Ruth Reardon was asked to give a brief contribution to the Dialogue Programme on this theme, and on 26th June in the context of a Forum entitled “Towards Sharing Holy Communion” to speak on “the experience of interchurch families”. She said:

An interchurch family comes from a mixed marriage between baptised Christians. There are many kinds. I speak here of marriages where one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a member of a different communion. My experience comes from within western Christianity, where mixed marriages cross the Reformation divide. I assume here that both partners are baptised Christians. There are many kinds. I speak here of marriages where one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a member of a different communion.

I am Roman Catholic; my husband is Anglican. We married in 1964 – the year the Second Vatican Council issued its Decree on Ecumenism. Because we were called to weave together our baptismal lives in Christian marriage, it was always important to us to be together at the eucharist week by week, as well as to share in the life of both our churches in many other ways too.

This being together at the eucharist is as much the expression of our married unity in Christ as is our sexual union. The experience of being together at the eucharist, over many years, brought us to a profound longing to share communion as a couple. Then our 8-year old son said that he did not want to receive his First Communion in the Roman Catholic Church, unless his father could share communion with him. At this point our responsibility as parents for the nurture of our child in the faith of Christ was at issue. We know that many interchurch couples, throughout Europe and indeed throughout the world, have experienced a similar longing to share communion as couples, and a similar challenge to their responsibility as parents. Like us, they rejoice when it is possible for them to share communion; like us, they suffer when it is not possible.

It has been a source of great joy to us that the Roman Catholic Church has recognised our special, indeed unique, situation of need. I ask you not to underestimate the enormous step taken by the Ecumenical Directory in 1993. It applied the concept of special cases of pastoral need, in which eucharistic sharing is not only allowed but positively commended, under certain conditions, to the specific need of those who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage. This is a unique identification of need at world level – the only specific example of pastoral need besides that of danger of death.

In many regions our churches are now trying to work out what this can mean in practice. It is not easy for some to see that it does not weaken the witness of the Roman Catholic Church to the close relationship between eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion. Rather, it builds on the recognition of the “partial but real communion” which binds all the baptised, also recognising in the case of a baptised Christian married to a Roman Catholic an additional sacramental element which draws him or her into closer bonds of communion with the Catholic Church.

But I venture to suggest that it has wider ecumenical significance. For it is a response to the urgent need of the married couple to share the eucharist. It moves beyond a response to the need of an individual cut off from the ministry of his or her Christian community. The Vatican II Constitution Gaudium et Spes described the married couple as a “community of life and love”. An interchurch couple is therefore seen as an ecumenical community of life and love. It is not so much different in kind from other groups and indeed whole church communities. Where it may be different is in the urgency and the intensity of the partners’ mutual commitment to love, to be reconciled, to grow together in the life of Christ.

An interchurch family presence at Graz

Five representatives of interchurch families from England joined others from France and Switzerland to set up a stall in the agora at Graz, side by side with one staffed by German and Austrian interchurch families. The Austrians organised a workshop, and an Italian couple took part, along with an Italian bishop, in a presentation of the joint text on interchurch marriage published by the Italian Catholic bishops and the Waldensians and Methodists.

But the outstanding memory is of the worship service prepared by the Viennese group of interchurch families. In a packed church, the Mariahilferkirche, they acted out the way in which the churches divide interchurch families. Two strong men saved a wooden Table in half; the atmosphere was electric as the chalice and paten it had held clattered to the floor. In a mime a couple, clinging to one another, tried hard to gain entry into two different groups celebrating the eucharist, each time they were pushed away. Only when they separated were they welcomed, one by one group and one by the other. It was an unforgettable service. Afterwards the two halves of the Table were brought into the agora, and we heard that later one half was sent to the Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the other to the Austrian Lutheran Church.
Growing as Domestic Church through the Eucharist

An address given by Fr Ernest Falardeau, SSS, to the Association of Interchurch Families at its Annual Conference at Swanwick, August 1997, printed here in slightly abridged form. The full annotated text will appear in One in Christ.

Introduction
In our consumer society we are taught to think that “bigger is better”, so we translate growth in terms of increase in size, number, amount. But in the realm of the spirit growth is much more a matter of depth and intensity. The kingdom parables of Jesus recall metaphors of the yeast that leavens the mass of dough, the smallest seed that grows into a large tree where birds nestle in its branches.

The kingdom is a banquet to which many are invited, but few accept, so the highways and by-ways are combed to find guests, however motley... as long as they are willing to put on the wedding garment (Mt 13:1-53). Growth in the kingdom is measured in terms of depth and vitality, in terms of faith, hope and love, by faith working through love (Gal 5:6). Another word for the kingdom is holiness. The Sermon on the Mount tells us how children of the kingdom can grow: by poverty of spirit, single-minded pursuit of the pearl of great price, making peace, humility of heart, suffering persecution for justice’s sake (Mt 5-7).

1 To Grow As Communion
To grow as church is to grow in communion (koinonia), for the church is a communion. It is a sharing in the life of Father, Son and Spirit, the fellowship of all who are united in the three person’d God and join in their dance. Koinonia describes the church in its very essence. The institutional incarnation of this koinonia is achieved with great difficulty.

Communion has become the theological matrix in ecclesiology. In simpler terms: to understand church today one must think in terms of communion; the church is a communion. This is not only a central insight of Vatican II, but a central imperative of the Gospel. In John’s Gospel, chapter 6, we are told that Jesus is the Bread of Life who gives eternal life to all who receive him. This life comes from the Father (and the Spirit). The first Letter of John also points out that communion shared with the Trinity is shared by all who believe in Jesus (1 Jn 1:3). Paul’s metaphor of the Body of Christ explains the same reality (1 Cor 12:12-31). As members of one another we are in communion in Christ and his Spirit. Ephesians and Romans develop the metaphor and consolidate the theology of communion.

The Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission makes communion theology the pivotal point of its theology. The agreed statement on Eucharist and Ordination, and even the main points of agreement on Authority focus on an understanding of the church as communion. The Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago in 1983 outlined the work of theology for the coming decades as rooted in the theology of the church as communion. This focus now turns to what follows upon an acknowledgement that all Christians are in real communion with each other, whatever the degrees or differences that various Christian communities want to make in that communion.

Communion is love; it is life in the Spirit; it is a relationship to Father, Son and Spirit. Each of our relationships to the Father, Son and Spirit is special and coloured by the role which Scripture assigns to each of the persons of the Trinity in creation, redemption and sanctification.

If the church is a communion and the family is a domestic church, then what we say of the church applies to the family. The family must be a communion, an intimate and personal relationship between husband and wife, parents and children.

2 The Mystery of God
If we are to grow as church, we must grow in our likeness to God, grow in holiness. The holiness of God must characterise the church, which is holy because it is the Body of Christ, who is holy because he is God. Jesus taught us the way to holiness, and he is the way, the way to eternal life with God.

Growth in the church must always be considered in these dimensions. The mystery of God is unknown to us, but it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. Our task as Christians is to touch the divine and be touched by divine grace, to be open to God so that he may transform our lives. The transfiguration of Jesus is the model for our transformation. The glory of the Son of God and of the Risen Lord must permeate our lives. Day by day, step by step, we are called to be transformed by the grace of God, through conversion and inner growth. If we are to speak of the growth of the church it must be in these terms; we must be open to God, to his transforming grace, to his creative Spirit. The grace of marriage is the grace of the Risen Lord who gives us his Spirit so that we may grow in his likeness, living our lives in God and for God.

A mystery is not a riddle, but something beyond the horizon of the senses, which we know with our mind, but more importantly which we experience in our souls. The mystery of God is what we find revealed in the Scriptures, in the history of humankind, in the high moments of our daily living. In birth, death, illness and wellness we experience God. God
touched our lives when we are happy and when we are sad. God shares his love with us when we share his love with others.

The mystery of God is especially revealed and present in the mystery of the eucharist; beneath the appearances of bread and wine, Christ calls us into communion with himself, to share in the life of the Father. The Risen Lord gives us his Spirit so we might learn to pray, so that we might know the love of the Father. The mystery of God is revealed in the mystery of marriage (Eph 5:32). Though much has been written about the sacrament of marriage, there is yet much to be said, especially about Paul’s metaphor of the love of husband and wife as the icon/sacrament/mystery of the love of Christ for his church. Paul says: ‘this is a great mystery’. It is undoubtedly a special revelation of the mystery of God; Pope John Paul II says as much in his encyclical Familiaris Consortio. Vatican II put Christian marriage in proper perspective: the holiness of marriage is a revelation of the holiness of God and of the relationship of Christ to the church. Gaudium et Spes began the process of spelling out holiness in married life.

3 Holiness of Life

The purpose of the church is the salvation and sanctification of humankind. Holiness (sanctification) comes in the church and through the church because Christ is Son of God and Son of Man. In him we are made holy; we share in the divine life. Holiness is Christ-likeness. Holiness has to do with who we are before it has to do with what we do. Justification comes by grace in faith, which then becomes faith working in love. We are justified for good works (see ARCIC II Salvation and the Church). We are made holy for the glory of God and the wellsiness of the Body of Christ; transformed into Christ so God’s kingdom may come in us and through us.

4 The Domestic Church

Marriage was declared a sacrament, one of the great seven, by Peter Lombard in the twelfth century. Paul declares marriage the icon (mystery) of the church, of its love for Christ and Christ’s love for his people (Eph 5:32). The ideal of the family as domestic church is lived out in daily life. Vatican II recovered the theology of the family. Twice in the conciliar documents the family was referred to as the “domestic church”. Post conciliar theology, especially the encyclical of John Paul II Familiaris Consortio picked up the theme and developed it. The family is the incarnation of the church; it is where the church happens.

The family is the church of the home. Just as the family is the smallest cell of society, so it is the smallest cell of the church. There can be no church without the family, and the family has virtually all it needs to be the church. Or to put it another way, the church needs to nourish families if it is to build itself up. Modern medicine tells us that DNA contains the pattern for the whole body; each cell is a microcosm of the whole body. So it is with the family, the domestic church.

The health of the church, as of society as a whole, depends upon the health - or holiness - of the family. The concept of domestic church is important to the church as well as to the family. If we look at the paradigm for the church in Acts 2, we see that it was a communion of love among all its members. Everything was shared in common. There was a fellowship in the teaching of the Apostles (didaskalia), in the breaking of bread (eucharistia), in the fellowship (koinonia), and in the prayers (eulogia). These ingredients are the foundation of the Christian family. The characteristics of the church should help the family to be fully Christian, an icon and model of the church at large.

The whole pattern of the church as didaskalia, eucharistia, koinonia and eulogia as a model for the domestic church would make a wonderful theological reflection for us. The family as the first religious school, as communion, as eucharistic fellowship and as house of prayer could provide us with much food for thought. My purpose here is to draw attention to two of the four characteristics of the early church: communion and eucharist.

Is there a problem of the family imitating the church? Yes, if the church is only the institution; no, if the church is a full sharing in the trinitarian communion. For it is in sharing the life of God that the family reaches its highest achievement. This is not angelism, it is incarnationalism, i.e. the incorporation of the life of God into human nature. And the model for such incorporation is the domestic church.

5 The Domestic Church as Communion

At the very heart of the theology of communion is its trinitarian dimension. To be in communion is to share the inner life of the Trinity. The love, knowledge and life-giving interaction of the Trinity is the paradigm for the inner energy of the church. This applies to the church universal and equally well to the domestic church which is the family.

At the heart of the family must be love, communication and sharing of life. This is true of married partners, and of their relationship to their children. As human beings we grow and live our lives fully in the measure that we share our love with others, receive their love, communicate our thoughts and are energised by a sense of sharing and belonging. The domestic church is not hampered by its size. Sharing in life, love and
decision-making is part of being family. Perhaps the emphasis on the domestic church will help the churches to “downsize” and begin to think small rather than large.

Our world says bigger is better, but our experience is just the contrary. In the measure that human and personal reaction is possible, the quality of life is greater. We are social animals and need society for the full development of our human life, yet we remain essentially linked to the context of the extended family. Living in New Mexico, I have come to appreciate the particular gift that Hispanics bring to the American scene and its culture. They naturally live and think in terms of the extended family; parientes, abuelas, tias, tios, padrinos, madrinas, etc. Even godparents and their children have special relations to the godchild and its family. Decisions affect the entire extended family. Joys and sorrows are shared with both the nuclear family and with this wide interconnected whole. When thinking of the domestic church, it might be helpful to think in terms of extended family rather than nuclear family.

In this context the church is the place where we are at home. In the church we should be able to express our thoughts, worship Our God, receive affirmation and love. In the domestic church we live and are given life.

6 Interchurch Families

The interchurch family presents special value. Like the extended family, it goes beyond what we normally think of as family. It extends not only the lines of blood and marriage, but also of faith and church community. Just as the extended family causes the family to broaden the reach of its love, tolerance and acceptance, so the domestic church as interchurch family is the testing ground for ecumenical spirituality and comprehensiveness.

The interchurch family, I believe, represents the reality of the church. It also represents its promise. The church is one but divided. But the promise of unity can be developed only if the church is willing to accept diversity and difference. Otherwise it can only remain a “closed shop”. As the Roman Catholic Church recognises other Christians as brothers and sisters in the Lord, it becomes more truly ecumenical and Christlike.

The domestic church teaches the church to be family. The interchurch family teaches the church to be ecumenical - the Body of Christ. “If there were only eyes, where would be hearing?” (1 Cor 12:17) If there were no feet or hands, where would be walking or touching? All the members of the Body are needed; they contribute to the good of the whole. The interchurch family helps the church to go beyond itself and thus be itself more truly. In the measure that the church reaches out to embrace everyone it is truly the Body of Christ, for Jesus came to save everyone.

7 The Eucharist and Domestic Church

Holiness is essentially our communion with God in Christ. This communion is not a static thing in God or in us. It is activity. Action flows from contemplation. What we do flows from who we are. That is the way it is with God and with us. Our communion with God is deepened by the eucharist. The eucharist makes the church. It makes us Christians. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have life in you” (Jn 6:53). We share the eucharist not because we are holy, but to become holy. Food is no luxury, it is a necessity; we cannot live without it. We cannot live the spiritual life without the eucharist. We pray daily: “Father, give us our daily bread.” We know that the original Greek of that prayer is clearly for the eucharist, our supersubstantial bread (huperousion artron).

Christian families need the eucharist to bind the members in love, just as the church needs the eucharist to bind its members in love. The family is the domestic church. What is true of the family, is true of the church. At the heart of the spirituality of the family is the eucharist. At the heart of the spirituality of the interchurch family is the eucharist. Even if at the moment some of the members receive at different altars, they are drawn inevitably toward unity in the Body of Christ. “Because the bread is one, we though many become one body, because we eat the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17).

The eucharist is at the heart of the family. It is at the heart of the church. Pope John Paul II indicates that the eucharist is both the icon of what the family should be, and the sacrament by which the life of the Christian family becomes possible. He emphasises the need for the eucharist in the family (see Familiaris Consortio 57). It is more than just the symbol of what the family must become: the Body of Christ. It is the very incarnation of the Body of Christ in the world. The family makes the church visible and real. The eucharist celebrates the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrificial love of the spouses; it feeds the members of Christ and gives life to Christian families.

I emphasise that interchurch families do not need the eucharist less than other families, but more. Families of the same church have much to nourish their spirituality. Interchurch families need to struggle more. And so they need all the help they can get. It is precisely because of this struggle and effort, because you are the icon of the Body of Christ that you need the eucharist. Sacramenta propter homines: the sacraments are for human beings, “for us and our salvation”. The task of the church is not to protect the sacraments; it is to use them. And the use of the eucharist could not be more important or necessary than for interchurch families. They need the special help of Jesus Christ to continue the work of making their marriage a sacrament: a sign of God’s love, grace and salvation. Unlike the other sacraments, marriage is ongoing. The wedding takes a few hours; the marriage takes a lifetime. And it is this life-long effort of interchurch families that requires them to share the eucharist.
interchurch families to be true to themselves and to their tradition while seeking Christian unity. This love for the church presses you to be courageous in your efforts to prod the churches toward ever growing unity. Your impatience with the status quo and your prayer and longing for continuing progress toward the unity of all Christians should characterize your spirituality.

You should long for the eucharist, not only in your own tradition, but in the tradition of your spouse. You should long for the day of “full communion” when authorities will allow you to receive in either tradition at will. In the meantime you should press for “interim eucharistic sharing” in those circumstances when not to receive would deprive you of precious and important spiritual moments in the life of your families.

Your spirituality should be characterized by forgiveness and reconciliation. In any family there is a constant need to say “I am sorry” and “I forgive you”. Without this spirit of reconciliation human weakness and failures can only fragment the fabric of family life. This spirit of reconciliation is much needed in our churches as they move toward full communion and unity.

10 Thy Kingdom Come
Interchurch families seek the kingdom of God realised in the domestic church. In the measure that the church becomes the kingdom, in that measure is ‘salvation come to this house” (Lk 19:9). Salvation is the grace of God penetrating the human situation, the human condition. Holiness is the result of salvation taking ever deeper root in the Christian.

What does it mean to grow as church? It means to deepen our communion in Christ and our love for one another. It means to penetrate the mystery of God by faith, hope and love. It means to move steadily toward that full communion in Christ which is the goal of the church, the full maturity of Christ in all his members (Phil 3:12).

We pray for the coming of God’s kingdom when we receive the eucharist because it is at that moment that we are in deepest communion with Christ and with the Trinity. We pray that “our daily bread” may nurture communion in Christ and full sharing of divine life, until he comes again in glory. We share the resurrection of Christ and the life of the Father. Thus we are enabled to fulfill our mission as Christians. God living in us, and we in God; this is the height and depth of what it means to be Christians, united in love.

Conclusion
Interchurch families are called to this spirituality, to this sharing in the mystery of God and the mystery of Christ. The eucharist enables us to “taste and see” the goodness of the Lord. We share God’s presence now in shadow, but soon we will share his life in face-to-face vision of his glory.

Ernest Falardeau, SSS

Return to Journal index
In Newcastle, New South Wales, Chrystie and Warren Sheppard have joined Brian and Bev Hancks in an embryonic interchurch families group. Christine wrote an article for Australian Catholics explaining that she is a Uniting Church minister married to a Catholic; their daughter attends an Anglican school. She writes of the joy of their situation, of “my ordination ten years ago when I processed into an overflowing church, not just with members of Presbytery and Synod colleagues, but also with dear friends who are Catholic priests and religious, and Anglican priests.” She writes of the pain, of “going to mass each Saturday night and at other times, and I cannot receive communion, even though I have been very involved in the parishes we have lived in both before and after I was ordained. Instead, usually I receive a blessing. That can be very hurtful, especially as I have a deep passion for the eucharist. The pain was compounded at our daughter’s first communion, a beautiful mass. when, as a mother, proudly I saw our seven-year-old daughter read the scriptures and receive her communion. I was unable to obtain permission for myself to join her.”

In Brisbane, Queensland, interchurch couples are busy writing their stories in the hope that these will be a useful resource for other couples, or for those working with couples. Monica Sharwood reports that: “The Eucharistic Guidelines are working well - those who have applied through their parish priests have been granted permission for their partners to receive communion when worshipping with them.” (For details of the guidelines, see Interchurch Families, Summer 1996, p.8)

AUSTRIA

ARGE Ökumene

Following the meeting with Austrian interchurch families at Graz (see p.3), English AIF decided to keep up the contact by sending three representatives to the Austrian interchurch families’ annual conference held at St Polten, Austria, 24-26 October 1997, on the theme: Are we one church? We hope to give more on the history and life of the Austrian interchurch family movement in our next number.

FRANCE

The second international meeting of the foyers mixtes francophones took place at Lyon, 7-8 July 1997, under the title “Breakers or Builders of Unity?” (for the first meeting, at Versailles in November 1995, see Interchurch Families, January 1996, p.8). An adult and two young people from England joined the French, and have written up their experiences for News and Notes (for AIF mem in England) and the Interdependent (written by and for interchurch young people). There were about 200 participants including some twenty young people. Speakers included both the former and present Presidents of the French Bishops’ Ecumenical Commission (Mgr A. Le Bourgeois - who celebrated the Sunday eucharist - and Mgr G. Dauccou), both the former and present Presidents of the Protestant Federation of France (pastors J. Maury and J. Tariel), Pasteur M. Freychet, Sr Danielle, Priress of Pomezy and Martin Conway, President of the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham.

Twenty-five years on in Strasbourg

In November 1972 Mgr Léon Elchinger issued some carefully thought-out directives on eucharistic hospitality for interchurch families, concerned for the pastoral care of the large numbers of mixed marriages between Catholics and Lutheran or Reformed Christians in his diocese of Strasbourg. (Two sections of these directives are given in full in the documentation section of Sharing Communion, edited by Ruth Reardon and Melanie Finch, 1983, pp119-203. This book is still available from AIF and is included in our Sharing

Communion Pack.)

25 years on, foyers mixtes in Strasbourg asked the diocesan ecumenical commission to look back at these directives. In April 1997 the commission therefore asked Jo Hoffmann, Professor of Catholic Theology at Strasbourg University, a member of the ecumenical group des Bombes and drafter of Mgr Elchinger’s text, to reflect on the document and its influence. He did so, taking account also of the 1983 Note of the French bishops, which identified the need of long-lasting ecumenical groups for eucharistic sharing, as well as that of interchurch families. We are grateful to Francine Wild for her notes on Professor Hoffmann’s lively and informal address, on which the following paragraphs are based.

It is especially interesting to recall how Mgr Elchinger’s document grappled with the ecclesiological questions underlying eucharistic hospitality. Eucharistic hospitality will always be something anomalous, shocking to the mind, but it exists only because of another anomaly: the rupture of communion between the churches. The Bishop of Strasbourg’s text broke through the anomalies by taking account of the historical dimension of the Church, which is at one and the same time the place of unity already given and unity to be realised.

Therefore, reflected Professor Hoffmann, the question of eucharistic hospitality should never be put in terms of what is allowed/what is forbidden, but in terms of its meaning ("the meaning it takes on", to quote the 1972 text). We can take responsibility for eucharistic hospitality - in principle exceptional - according to the meaning it can have for the persons concerned and for the communities to which they belong. Reciprocity (to which a lengthy section of the 1972 text was devoted) can also be seen in this perspective: what meaning would one-way hospitality have?

The question should not be raised in a purely personal perspective, but related to the church. A couple who deepen their faith together and witness to their children, or an
ecumenical working group, represent units of the church. So it is for them to decide in conscience on the usefulness of eucharistic hospitality, and when it should be renewed. The need is much less obvious when it comes to an interchurch wedding (at a single point in time) or a parish on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Unity, as is being requested in Alsace; in these cases, pastors must accept their responsibilities for making decisions.

But in the case of interchurch couples, it is conscience which should determine whether the act has meaning (according to the circumstances); if it is possible (a community with eucharist makes the church); it is clear that the verb "makes" does not have the same meaning in the two cases.

Concretely, today, there is a tendency sometimes eucharistic hospitality can take on a meaning for some who are present which is not intended by those who practise it.

On the ecclesiological question we must beware of oversimplified formulae like: "The church makes the eucharist and the eucharist makes the church": it is clear that the verb "makes" does not have the same meaning in the two cases. We need not be troubled by different ecclesial accents, some insisting on the believing community and others on the grace received. We think of unity as received. If we think of unity as the circumstances; if it is possible (a community with need is much less obvious when it comes to an interchurch structure and belief, do not.

Since the 'eighties there has been a tradition of splitting up to join local churches for Sunday worship. For the first time, participants joined Catholic and Waldensian communities outside Torre Pellice, going to the village of Perero in the Val Germanasca, reading their "Message" in both and receiving a tremendous welcome from both. It is hoped to hold another Italian-French Swiss gathering in 1999.

**A MEETING IN TOBAGO**

Antony and Janet Denman are members of the Teams of Our Lady, a Catholic organisation for married couples. In summer 1997, with four other couples and two priests from England, they attended a five-day workshop with teams couples in Tobago. They write:

As Antony is a member of the United Reformed Church, he wrote to Archbishop Pantin of Trinidad and Tobago to ask if he could receive communion while at the session. We were able to note that we had been invited to speak on the subject of Personal Prayer, and to stress that in other respects Antony would be a full participant.

We were delighted when the Archbishop wrote a very pleasant letter agreeing, on the basis that Antony would not have access to his own priest. (There are many brands of church in Tobago - Moravian, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist, Open Bible, and Evangelical - but no United Reformed.) The Archbishop is a supporter of Teams of Our Lady, and attended the final afternoon and presided over the final mass. Antony was able to thank him personally, and receive communion from him.

It was a deeply spiritual experience to receive communion together after almost 21 years of married life, and to do so surrounded by our Teams friends, old and new. We were able to share some of our experiences as a mixed couple in our talk and in the discussions. Most couples were from Trinidad and Tobago, and while they were happy that Antony should share, they did note the presence on the Islands of small mission churches which actively evangelise with a totally negative message about what they conceive as the destructive influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is an irony of the current system that in Tobago Antony received communion on occasion from the English priests. Once back in England, however, this will not be possible.

It was deeply moving to share communion, and something we pray we may do again - without travelling so far next time!
Eucharistic sharing in Interchurch Marriages and Families: Guidelines from the German Bishops, February 1997

The following text was issued by the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops’ Conference on 11th February 1997. The German original appears in Una Sancta, 1, 1997, pp.85-88. We give an English translation of the text; then explain the background to its appearance.

1 The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council speaks of two fundamental principles for eucharistic communion: witness to the unity of the church and sharing in the means of grace (URS). These fundamental principles must always be taken together. Eucharistic communion is indivisible and linked to the full communion of the church and its visible expression. At the same time, principles must always be taken together. Eucharistic sharing in communion is indivisible and linked to the full communion of the church. For the parent who is not a Catholic this sharing is equally true.

4 Neither a refusal for all, nor a permission for all partners in interchurch marriages who are not Catholics to share in the eucharist would be appropriate. There may be problems arising from difference in belief. Nor would it be appropriate in the current situation of ecumenical dialogue. Nevertheless, Christians of other denominations may exceptionally receive Holy Communion on the following conditions: it is not possible for them to go to a minister of their own denomination, a situation which can arise in real situations for different reasons. They must of their own accord ask for communion, be rightly disposed, and manifest Catholic faith in the eucharist (URS).

5 Since pastorally the establishment of objective criteria for “serious (spiritual) need” is extremely difficult, ascertaining such a need can as a rule only be done by the minister concerned. Essentially, this must become clear in pastoral discussion. Does the couple concerned (and any children) experience being separated at the Lord’s table as a pressure on their life together? Is it a hindrance to their shared belief? How does it affect them? Does it risk damaging the integrity of their communion in married life and faith? When full sharing in the eucharist is granted to the partner who is not a Catholic, care must be taken that an individual case such as this does not become a general precedent.

The Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops’ Conference is aware that the painful separation experienced at the Lord’s table only becomes a thing of the past when the goal of all ecumenical efforts is reached in the full unity of faith and church communion. As long as the separated churches and ecclesial communities find themselves in the ecumenical time between setting out and arriving, the Roman Catholic Church is convinced that its responsibility is to grant communion at the Lord’s table to Christians of other denominations only in exceptional cases.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE PUBLICATION OF THIS TEXT

The process began in March 1993, when the Council of Churches in Nürnberg decided to ask for the exercise of eucharistic hospitality between all its member-churches in the case of interchurch marriages and families. The Council had invited a number of interchurch couples to talk with them about their situation. These couples had explained the difficulties they experienced in their married lives when it came to being active members of their churches. The Council’s decision to ask for eucharistic hospitality for
interchurch families was forwarded to the Bavarian Council of Churches, which offered to set up a Joint Working Group with the Nürnberg Council of Churches to study the question.

The Working Group held its first meeting in November 1993. Eight of its members were appointed by the Bavarian Council of Churches, five by the Nürnberg Council of Churches. Six were Roman Catholics, one was Old Catholic, four were Lutherans, one was Reformed, and one a Methodist. Another Roman Catholic joined the group to represent the position of the Orthodox churches.

After eight meetings the Working Group produced its report and sent it to the Nürnberg Council of Churches in March 1995.

A summary of the 1995 report

1 The starting point

The report begins with statistics. Of the 227,906 Catholics in Nürnberg (1993), 80,046 are married. Of these 25,317 are Catholic/Catholic marriages; 24,065 are Catholic/Lutheran marriages, and 5,347 are Catholic-other marriages. The situation is similar in the Lutheran churches. The marriage register of the Reformed Church in Nürnberg from 1980 to 1993 records only a tenth of marriages as Reformed/Reformed, compared with 60% Reformed/Lutheran and the same proportion Reformed/Roman Catholic. For Baptists and Methodists, however, twice as many are in same-church marriages as in interchurch marriages.

Interchurch marriage is therefore no longer exceptional, and is an area of pastoral concern for family life. The question of sharing communion for such families is quite distinct from the question of intercommunion. (Taken here to mean the general, unrestricted possibility of eucharistic sharing in another church as well as one’s own, which is possible if the churches concerned move doctrinally and officially to be in communion with one another.) What is at issue is not that Christians should be able to receive communion wherever and whenever they wish. This report is concerned with the exclusion, case after case, of interchurch partners or members of their families; with the fact that there is no eucharistic hospitality for them.

There is no problem where churches have declared themselves in communion with one another. However, among the member-churches of the Council of Churches the Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church restrict the invitation to receive communion to members of their own denominations because of the strict connection they make between eucharistic communion and church community.

The report goes on to point out that this puts interchurch families in a particularly painful and difficult situation. Because of the pastoral needs of such families, there is an unofficial practice in many Roman Catholic and some Orthodox parishes of turning a blind eye to their participation. In some Roman Catholic and most Orthodox parishes, however, care is taken to see that those receiving the communion are strictly members of that church. This means an arbitrary and subjective dependence upon the opinion of the eucharistic minister, which is not an acceptable situation.

2 What do Church, Word and sacramental practice signify in a marriage between Christians?

All the member-churches of the Council, says the report, must ask themselves whether they can conceive of a communion in marriage which does not need eucharistic communion.

The Roman Catholic understanding

A number of texts are quoted from the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other documents, to show that in Roman Catholic understanding marriage is a sacrament, closely related to the church and to the eucharist. “The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between the baptised, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.” (can.1055) “The sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life.” (Catechism, 1661) “The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the church. Already baptism, the entry into the people of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the eucharist. Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the church.” (Catechism, 1617)

Other texts are quoted to show the significance of sharing in the eucharist, and the importance of receiving the eucharist, to which the Lord urgently invites us. It is “the source and summit of the Christian life”, by which “we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all”, and through which we fulfill the baptismal call to form but one body (Catechism, 1324, 1326, 1396). The sacraments of marriage and eucharist are linked: “the remaining sacraments are held together in their connection through the eucharist; they depend on the eucharist” (Presbyterium Ordinis 5)

Return to Journal index
The report adds that in the 1993 Ecumenical Directory the first concern mentioned when considering interchurch married couples is no longer the safeguarding of the faith of the Catholic partner, but the strength and stability of the indissoluble marital union (144). This union means that the interchurch marriage is also church; it has the form of the basic sacrament of church. Church division is encompassed by the sacramental nature of the marriage between baptised Christians, who live as domestic church.

The Reformed understanding

The Reformed churches do not see marriage as a sacrament, but see Christians as called to marriage. The goodness of marriage stems from the “very good” which God pronounced of being alone (Genesis 1); and this is heard again when God’s Word is spoken at the wedding. Married couples can entrust themselves to God’s “very good” in all adversities and can find comfort in it. Because God wills his dealings with us to be through his Word and Sacrament, married people need the Word and Sacrament following on from the Word spoken at their wedding. Anything other than eucharistic sharing for interchurch couples would be a contradiction of God’s “very good”; exclusion of one partner would counteract the “very good” of God and bring about a being alone in the church. One could no longer hear from God that marriage is “very good”, even though the marriage had been made before God and with his blessing.

The Reformed churches worldwide in 1954 and the German Lutheran churches in 1975 decided that admission to communion should be open to all baptised Christians. The evangelical churches of Germany agree that: “Since the Lord is bountiful to all who call on him, all his members are called to his supper, and the promise of forgiveness of sins is for all who long for God’s kingdom.” (Arnoldshainer Theses VIII, 3)

The Old Catholic understanding

The Old Catholic practice is also to invite all the baptised, since Christ himself is High Priest and Offering; it is he who invites. This does not in any way mean that the Old Catholic Church abandons its sacramental understanding of marriage.

This section ends by pointing out that all the churches understand the importance of the eucharist for salvation, for strengthening the faith, love and hope of Christians, so they must do all they can to ensure that believers are blessed by receiving communion. If the churches joined together in the Council of Churches really take their calling to be one in Christ seriously, they will not look for arguments to exclude fellow-Christians from sharing in the Body of Christ, but they will seek out ways of making the invitation possible.

3 For those churches represented among us who do not normally admit others to communion, what exceptional situations and special regulations can be considered?

The report stresses once more that it is not about intercommunion. It is about the pastoral care of interchurch couples and their families who join together to celebrate the eucharist: so that the eucharist should not separate them.

“Intention” and “spiritual communion”

One step in this direction might be a recognition of the “intention to take part”; according to this a valid receiving of communion takes place if someone longs to receive but is prevented from doing so by circumstances outside his control (“spiritual communion” in Roman Catholic piety and theology, defined at the Council of Trent, 1551). Churches which cannot yet resolve the question of eucharistic hospitality should state whether this way of analysing the difficulty could be used for interchurch couples and their families.

Showing an understanding of the situation at each eucharist

It is important that, whether churches have already granted eucharistic hospitality or not, it should be made clear in the course of a service that they are aware of the problem and of those who suffer from it. The invitation to communion should always be accompanied by a word to the marriage partner and family members of interchurch families present at the eucharist. Each church in the Council of Churches should use a form of words for which it can in conscience take responsibility. Where eucharistic hospitality is not offered, the priest should include in his invitation to worship a special ecumenical greeting to Christians from other churches and express his joy at their presence at the eucharistic celebration, even though communion may not yet be offered to them. Respect for the sacramental discipline of other churches (1993 Directory, 107) requires that these churches express their invitation to the Lord’s Supper.

Pastoral exceptions to the general rule

The report goes on to deal with the particular pastoral exceptions to the general rule which forbids eucharistic sharing. The deep feeling of the Catholic Church for the pastoral dimension of the problem is to be found not only in the 1993 Directory’s section on “Sharing in Sacramental Life, especially the Eucharist” (122-136), but also in its section on “Mixed Marriages”. Questions which arise in the pastoral care of mixed marriages between baptised Christians “form part of the general pastoral care of every Bishop or regional Conference of Bishops” (143). Where these judge it useful, “diocesan bishops, synods of Eastern Catholic Churches or Episcopal Conferences could draw up more specific guidelines for this pastoral care” (146). This formulation is applicable to the question of eucharistic hospitality.

4 The plea

The report ends: “A heartfelt plea goes out to the appropriate Greek Orthodox and Serbian Orthodox bishops, but especially, since the Roman Catholic Church shows so much sensitivity to the pastoral aspects of the problem, to the diocesan bishops of Bamberg and Eichstätt: that they might consider, and draw up, guidelines for pastoral ministry which will not bar interchurch marriage partners and families who have been validly baptised from receiving communion together.”

(The full German text of this report, which includes quotations from earlier German documents, is available in a booklet entitled Zur Frage der Eucharistischen Gastfreundschaft bei Konfessionsverschiedenen Ehen und Familien: eine Problemanzeige published by the Nürnberg Council of Churches, March 1996.)

In April 1995 the report was accepted in full by the Nürnberg Council of Churches, which agreed to present it to the new Archbishop of Bamberg after his installation. This was done in October 1995. Archbishop Dr Karl Braun told the delegation that he too found this “a burning pastoral problem for the churches”. He believed that the question should be taken up again as a matter of urgency both from a theological and from a pastoral point of view. True longing for the grace of the sacrament must be taken seriously. He would himself take the report forward to the German Bishops’ Conference. He thanked the members of the Council of Churches for their hard work in drawing up the report, which had arisen from deep concern for faith, mission and evangelism.
Response to the German Bishops' text
The answer from the German Episcopal Conference (given above) was received in a letter from the Bishops' Ecumenical Commission early in February 1997. The Nürnberg Council of Churches issued a statement expressing its gratitude both to Dr Karl Braun, Archbishop of Bamberg, and to the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops' Conference later in the month. It includes the following paragraphs:

The Nürnberg Council of Churches regrets that the Ecumenical Commission has not agreed to the wish of the Council of Churches for an official and general invitation for interchurch families to receive communion together. However, it sees itself confirmed in the essential features of its argument by what the Ecumenical Commission has written. The Ecumenical Commission also stresses the fundamental significance of the mutual recognition of baptism as "the sacramental bond of unity" and of the effect of the sacrament of marriage, through which the other baptised partner shares in the reality and the mission of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is a cause for joy that the text of the Ecumenical Commission makes no irksome restrictions and reservations in allowing the ministers concerned the possibility of admitting interchurch families to receive communion together. The Nürnberg Council of Churches sees this ruling as an encouragement and strengthening for all those involved in pastoral care who have already been doing this, and as an invitation to those who are still hesitant to take courageous steps along the same pastoral road.

The Nürnberg Council of Churches hopes that what the Ecumenical Commission has written will lead to a clearer acknowledgement than before of the way interchurch families live out their faith in their church communities, and to a wider recognition of their situation by their respective ministers. It hopes that as we move forward in mutual exchange the eucharistic sharing for which they long will be offered ever more willingly by the Roman Catholic Church to interchurch families.

A SIMILAR APPROACH IN AUSTRIA
In June 1997 a text on "Sharing Communion in Interchurch Marriages and Families: Pastoral Guidelines for the Archdiocese of Vienna" applied the German guidelines to the Archdiocese of Vienna.

It explained that each year about 600 interchurch marriages which are valid in the eyes of the church take place in the Archdiocese of Vienna. At the Diocesan Forum the question of their pastoral need was raised and their sacramental unity in baptism and marriage was emphasised.

The Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission studied these questions and asked the Archbishop to publish some pastoral guidelines. It was in broad agreement with the statements set out in the pastoral document of the German Ecumenical Commission of 11 February 1997, so, with the agreement of Archbishop Dr Christoph Schönborn, the German guidelines were issued as pastoral guidelines for the Archdiocese of Vienna.

COMMENT
It is interesting for the Association of Interchurch Families in England to note that what the Nürnberg Council of Churches asked for was a blanket invitation to communion for all partners in interchurch families; what was given was a clear acknowledgement that such partners could be admitted, on request, but only on a case-by-case basis after pastoral discussion. This bears out the interpretation of the 1993 Ecumenical Directory from Rome which we have been struggling towards as we have tried to understand its import over the last five years.

We find at present that the situation in England is as uneven as that described in Germany (see the end of section 1 of the 1995 Report). We get the impression that there is more and more discreet eucharistic sharing around the country, and that wedding anniversaries are becoming public "occasions" when it becomes possible for parish priests who are sufficiently confident to be able to explain to congregations why they are giving communion to the other baptised Christian spouse. On the other hand, some couples are being told that admission is not possible (or not publicly possible).

We realise that the Directory is permissive and not prescriptive, and that pastors can refuse admission. We need, however, a public recognition in this country that admission to communion is possible for some partners in interchurch marriages, in certain particular cases and under certain conditions. Otherwise high-profile families in public life or in church life are unduly penalised in their local situation. Their pastoral need may be as great as that of others.

We know, of course, that it is not just a question of what is possible according to the Directory, and that there are many theological and practical issues to be faced when it comes to eucharistic sharing. Perhaps we need now to encourage the churches to work together seriously on the theological and pastoral issues raised by the question of eucharistic sharing in interchurch families, as they have done so effectively in a part of Germany in which large numbers of mixed marriages between baptised Christians take place. RR
Methodist Leslie Cran is an unmarried member of the Association of Interchurch Families. In summer 1997 he travelled with an ecumenical party of pilgrims from Rome to northern Ireland to commemorate the arrival of St Augustine in England and the death of St Columba, both of which happened in 597. Leslie asked that one of the four communities he represented as a pilgrim should be AIF. He writes: “The Association of Interchurch Families is of first importance to me in explaining my position in the church. All major denominations are my parents; God has blessed me through them all. Those to whom I feel closest are the children of interchurch couples who ask for double belonging. ... It was so often a point of starting a conversation and I also felt I was travelling under my true colours and not hiding my wider belonging. I took my two passports as well (I hold both British and Canadian citizenship) which I used from time to time to parallel how I feel I belong in the church.”

A sense of wider ecclesial belonging within a concrete community (such as that found in travelling together on pilgrimage) can intensify — as for interchurch children — a sense of need for eucharistic sharing. In a report for AIF, from which we give extracts below, Leslie focused on the pilgrims travelling, eating, sleeping, praying, talking, relaxing, living together in community. He writes:

In all our variety I felt a oneness in that all belonged more in the united church of the future than in the present separated denominations. The exception where we did not live as a community was at the Table of the Lord. Some memories:

**Assisi, Sunday**; at midday mass in Latin and Italian a whispered message is passed along that we can receive communion, and nearly all go forward. The mass ends; the choir stands to give, in best Italian, the Hallelujah Chorus. We British stand too, with tears and jubilation. Applause at the end, and I exchange the “thumbs up” sign with a gentleman in the back row of the choir.

**Caunes, the Anglican church** — a eucharist before we sail out to the site of the late Roman monastery on the nearby island where Augustine’s party is said to have halted. We all extend our hands and arms in sharing the Peace. Some, but not all, Roman Catholics join with their Anglican and Protestant brothers and sisters in receiving the elements.

**Taizé, 7.30 in the morning, the crypt**. It is a week predominantly of German young people and the Roman Catholic mass is in that language. Not all of us are here, but a good representation of both Catholics and Protestants. We are a community in welcoming all around us in the Peace. Certainly some Protestants did not receive, but delighted in being there.

**Taizé, an hour later**, the first of the three times of prayer every day. The brothers, of various denominations, gather with their visitors. Young people sit or kneel in the soft light, the quiet and the gentle singing. Bread blessed at the earlier mass is available to all. This sharing of blessed bread is the nearest the Brothers experience to being one at the eucharist.

**The Romanesque village church at Taizé**, an Anglican eucharist for our coach party in the afternoon. Perhaps half of us are here; some Roman Catholics stay at the back while their Anglican and Protestant fellows go forward to receive. Boulogne, the yard at the back of the seamen’s hostel where we are staying overnight, a Methodist service of Holy Communion in celebration of Wesley day. We stand in a circle after prayers and hymns and give the bread and wine to one another. All there receive, but not all attend.

**Hardebot, near Boulogne**, from where Augustine’s party is said to have embarked for Kent, Sunday morning, the Roman Catholic church, where there is a special welcome to us pilgrims at mass. We share the Peace among us and with those in the church. There is no special invitation and Protestants sit while their brothers and sisters receive the elements.

**Chester Cathedral**, Sunday, the Roman Catholic priest in our coach uses a side chapel to say mass so that the obligation can be fulfilled.

**Lancaster**, a sunlit afternoon on the hilltop where the Priory church adjoins the castle. The coach chaplain offers an Anglican eucharist; the Roman Catholic priest says it is his turn to experience the pain of separation, and goes forward for a blessing. Before the separation we are united in the Peace.

We often discussed the eucharist. In Florence we talked of ecumenical groups and of experiencing a community that feels the need to be drawn into one by all receiving communion. On the French border, before our midday prayers under the pines at a service station, a few Protestant pilgrims talked of how hard it is to understand the doctrine of the Real Presence when it is explained in the traditional terms of substance and accidents, technical terms of mediaeval science. At Taizé some of us found our eyes meeting across the Protestant/Roman Catholic divide with a shared urgency for full communion. We knew the denominational (“tribal, or ‘ethnics) divisions in various places in Europe. If we allow ourselves to be separated at the Table of the Lord we also allow the killings to continue elsewhere.

One evening before reaching Canterbury, after chatting uninhibitedly with a Roman Catholic, I felt I was expected to listen without responding while the Real Presence was explained to me, a Presence only able to happen through the succession of laying on of hands from Christ. Later I had the same experience with another pilgrim. I attempted to respond with my experience of looking for the presence of God in all people, the Quaker view of the equal sanctity of every meal.

In Christ the Cornerstone ecumenical church in Milton Keynes we were led in meditation to consider the divided world and God’s invitation to all to be one at his Table. I was moved to ask for interchurch families to be remembered in their separation at this Table.

At Whithorn, walking along the beach to St Ninian’s cave, I shared with another pilgrim my concern that it was as if this separation at the Lord’s Table was agreed to be ignored by those arranging the pilgrimage. From Canterbury to Derry, outside every cathedral we entered, Protestants from Northern Ireland objected to our association with St Augustine. What did their open separation from us have to say to our unacknowledged internal separation?

Let us not use traditional theologies of the presence of Christ in the eucharist as an excuse for not being one at the Table of the Lord. Intercurch families, and others who feel a double belonging, are as well placed as any to contribute to a new unified understanding.
Young people and the Ecumenical Movement

At the Churches Together in England Forum held in July 1997, Beverley Hollins was asked to speak on how young people can be encouraged to participate in the ecumenical movement. We give extracts from her address below.

When you talk about young people 16-30, give or take a year or two – I’d like you to remember just where they are coming from, and what are the experiences that have shaped them.

A different generation

We’re not a post-war, post-ration book generation. We are a post-cold-war, post-materialism and boom and recession generation. Our experience, and therefore our outlook on life, what we want from church, and what we ask of life, is different. First of all, it is no longer just as it is for URC members of my age group. So I suggest that any Presbyterian, Congregational, or Church of Christ baggage or memories carried by older members of their church just don’t exist for these young people.

My first example: In 1972, the United Reformed Church was born out of the death of three other denominations. No offence, but I was three at the time, so for me that’s history, just as it is for URC members of my age group. So I suggest that any Presbyterian, Congregational, or Church of Christ experience tells us that in Christ we are all one, and we can look for unity (as opposed to Christians looking for unity), their hearts are not going to be in it. But don’t believe that they don’t care. They may not be thinking about ecumenism, but they certainly think ecumenically, and do ecumenically.

So it is not surprising that our experience of church, and what we want from church, is different. First of all, it is no longer a social requirement to go to church on Sundays. And because most of our parents did not go to church, we have little offence, but I was three at the time, so for me that’s history, just as it is for URC members of my age group. So I suggest that any Presbyterian, Congregational, or Church of Christ baggage or memories carried by older members of their church just don’t exist for these young people.

My second example: As a young Anglican who started going to “grown-up” services only in the late 1970s, I have no experience of the Book of Common Prayer. I know some Church of England churches do use it, but for me the assumption that Anglicans love it and are familiar with it is a novel and perhaps unwise assumption that Anglicans love it and are familiar with it is a problem. I grew up with the Alternative Service Book. I love it and find its language rich and helpful. So for me and my peers a new prayer book in 2000 might be harder to accept than some people might imagine.

My third example: Young Roman Catholics in my age group were not born when the Second Vatican Council met. Many (most perhaps) will never have heard a Latin mass, girls will never have worn a veil to mass, and most will find it unusual to be offered communion in one kind only. These Catholics have always had the freedom to say the Lord’s Prayer with other Christians, to go to school assembly with them, to go into their churches without asking permission. So some of the psychological and historical barriers between older Catholics (and other Christians whose churches imposed restrictions) and their fellow Christians just are not there.

Add to that the ecumenical chaplaincies, and the growing number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and you’ll be less surprised that young people sit lightly to denominations. It’s not just that we go for the local church that suits our temperament best (though for many that’s true too), but that our experience tells us that in Christ we are all one, and we can move amongst our sisters and brothers in Christ without too much difficulty.

Ecumenical young people

To state the obvious, if young people are not committed to denominations, then when it comes to any talk of churches looking for unity (as opposed to Christians looking for unity), their hearts are not going to be in it. But don’t believe that they don’t care. They may not be thinking about ecumenism, but they certainly think ecumenically, and do ecumenically.

If you want to find them, you’ll have to go looking. You could start at Iona, or Spring Harvest, or Taizé, or Greenbelt, or with the Jesuit Volunteers, or Time for God, or YWAM (Youth with a Mission), just to begin with. Left to their own devices, young people will look at the task, or the mission field, but rarely at the denomination. And young people want to do, to share their faith, to feed the hungry. They’re not normally all that interested in sitting around committee tables.

But if you ask nicely, explain the whys and wherefores, and offer suitable training, preparation and/or financial support, we will come to ecumenical meetings. There are a few of us here! Just ask! Thirty young people are preparing an Interchurch Forum for September with great enthusiasm. They do want to be a part of the ecumenical movement. Perhaps, though, with our background, we need a little more explanation of what it’s all about.

Interchurch families

But I should like to suggest to you that these truly ecumenical young people that I have been describing, a vibrant part of the church of today, are a sign of unity. Some do sit lightly to denominations, and to them especially joint youth and Sunday school work must be addressed – denominational work may not hold them. Others are committed to their churches – I know, for I am one. But I am one part of an increasing breed – an interchurch family. My generation, remember, is free of many of the laws and prejudices that restricted marriages across churches in the past. So you’ll find a lot of us about. Alongside us is a maturing second generation of interchurch families, the children of interchurch families. These young people are a sign and symbol of what church means, or should mean, to my generation, my sisters and brothers, and I hope yours. They are interested in their churches (otherwise they would not be interchurch), but they see no problem in holding two or more churches together in one person. They are a place of peace and reconciliation, a place of freedom.

They are what ecumenism is about.

In Christ we are freed from the laws that men create - we have freedom to follow Christ and obey his command, which is to love. I refer you to Galatians, 5: 1-6, and remind you now of verse 6, because in it you can meet with young people, where their priorities are, and where we can work together. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Beverley Hollins
THE JOURNAL

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is a twice-yearly journal which discusses the theological and pastoral issues raised by the existence of interchurch families (especially where 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,
- those preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation,
- in fact, to all concerned with the movement towards Christian unity, for in all countries families are the smallest units of the “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 annual subscription (Europe) to INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is £5 sterling or $US 5 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 $US 28 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 $15 to cover bank charges.)

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 families; 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 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 international 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 level, 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 contributions of members and the donations of others who wish to support its work.

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

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

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE at the Ecumenical Centre

“Towards the Millennium”
Meetings information from: Genevère Meslin, Centre internationale 2 Place Castellion CH-1212 Fribourg EPEACI