Unusually, three of the contributions in this number of INTERCHURCH FAMILIES are on the subject of interfaith families. One looks at Jewish-Christian marriages from the point of view of a pastor, a rabbi. A second considers Christian-Moslem marriages from the perspective of a participant in interfaith dialogue. The third is written by a practitioner - a Catholic married to a Hindu.

It is not that the Association of Interchurch Families intends to be directly concerned with interfaith marriages. It is an intrafaith movement, working on holding together differences within the one Christian faith. It is however concerned to see interchurch marriages as one example of cross-frontier marriages, of which there are many kinds. This wider perspective can throw light on the specific situation of interchurch families. It can highlight the issues which are common to all, as well as clarify the differences. It can, in addition, help us to see whether some of the lessons learned in the pastoral care of interchurch families over the past three decades can be applied to that of other kinds of cross-frontier marriages, and in particular to interfaith marriages. There are more and more of such marriages in our pluralist society, our global village, and they raise urgent and difficult questions. All three contributions will help interchurch families with this two-fold reflection.

Some interchurch couples will feel a particular rapport with Astrid and Kalpesh because they are "practitioners", themselves involved in the struggle to hold together their two very different faith-communities in their one marriage. Astrid has written: "The more I read your journal the more it strikes me how much we have in common, interchurch families and interfaith families. I draw hope and inspiration from interchurch families. There are times when I get a lump in my throat reading your life-experiences, because my husband and I have known the same pain, our children the same uncertainty. I guess it all stems from our basic need for unity in the family -- "one flesh". Your struggle is our struggle. For us, however, the struggle is wider, as it seeks to place Christ in relation to Abba, to remember that Christ, after all, was theocentric, and being christocentric does not exclude the possibility of being theocentric. As for our families, surely they stand as a sign of God's favour, for they continue to be communities of life and love despite all that tries to break them up."

When she read Fr George Kilcourse's Beatitudes for Interchurch Families in our last number, Astrid immediately set to work to write a version for interfaith families.

Blessed are the interfaith spouses who are aware of the limits of their individual spiritual experience and are open to the God-experience of their partners who belong to another religion; they shall reign with God .... Blessed are the interfaith couples who in humility risk the darkness of moving with the Spirit; they shall inherit the earth .... Blessed are the interfaith parents who dare to teach their children to centre themselves on the "I AM" who goes beyond all human boundaries and limitations; they shall see God ....

As interchurch families let us keep also in our hearts and prayers those couples who struggle in their marriage with the greater interfaith divide.

Ruth Reardon
AIF in England was very grateful to the former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Bishop Alastair Hoggart (who died on 11 January 1998), for consenting to be one of its Presidents. As a President and also as chair of the steering committee of the Inter-Church Process Not Strangers but Pilgrims, he wrote the Preface to Mary Bard’s book about interchurch families, Whom God Hath Joined (1987). Earlier he made a great contribution by his presence at the International Meeting of Interchurch Families held at Dunblane, Scotland, in May 1984. In the Summer 1984 AIF newsletter we printed an address he gave at Dunblane. We share it here, slightly shortened, with a wider audience.

Personal and corporate: the relationship

The relationship between the 'personal' and the 'corporate' in the living of our faith is a relationship we are constantly encountering. For example, in Ephesians 5: 25, we read: “Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.” There you have the affirmation of the corporate. But elsewhere St Paul says: “Christ loved me and gave himself for me.” There you have affirmation of the personal. And, of course, in mature Christian life both are necessary. Or again, in our liturgies, the baptismal creed has always been 'I believe', whereas the eucharistic creed has always been 'we believe', a corporate emphasis recovered in the new liturgies.

It is also in our church disciplines. The Church of Scotland invites to communion 'all who love the Lord Jesus Christ' - the personal emphasis. My own church emphasises the ecclesial, corporate aspect. 'Communicant members of other Trinitarian churches, in good standing, are welcome to share in the eucharist in an Episcopal church, in accordance with the disciplines of their own churches, as they themselves respond in their own conscience to these disciplines.'

For some, 'personal' is all; 'corporate' is of little account. There may be a strong hostility towards the corporate: we say of some Protestants, “They have no ecclesiology at all.” De Quincy, who is buried in the churchyard of St Cuthbert’s at the West End of Edinburgh, declared that he was prepared to acknowledge Christ, “as long as he does not come with his leprous bride, the church”. But, of course, the church is not the leprous bride: With his own blood he bought her, And for her life he died.

On the other hand, the corporate can easily swallow up the personal; there can be powerful devotion to the church, with little devotion to our Lord. One of our hymns, “Firmly I believe and truly”, written by Cardinal Newman in The Dream of Gerontius, moves dangerously in this direction. There can be a kind of “divinising” of the Church. And I hold in veneration For the love of him alone, Holy Church as his creation And her teachings as his own.

And this in a Church of Scotland hymn book!

Some modern liturgies have lost this balance between corporate and personal, and especially in the eucharist. When I kneel to receive the sacrament, I don’t want to hear a theological statement about the sacramental species: “The Body of Christ”; “The Blood of Christ”. I want to hear an affirmation of relationship: “The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given for thee … for thee … and for thee.” Here in the eucharist, at the heart of the most corporate act of the church, we have the affirmation of the “personal”.

Personal and corporate: living the tension

Often we share our experiences, not so much of the affirmation of the personal in the context of the corporate, but of the denial, frustration or putting aside of the personal by the corporate. We can easily become disillusioned by the church, and especially by the leadership in the church, and that’s why I have chosen the gospel you have just heard, the story of Judas betraying our Lord. When Ronnie Knox became a Roman Catholic in the bad old days when what were called “converts” were baptised, he met an Anglican friend after his baptism who said, “Morning, Ronnie. You’re looking very pleased with yourself today.” Ronnie said, “Why shouldn’t I? I’ve just become a member of the true church.” “Oh,” said his friend, “and what does it feel like to be a member of the true church?” “Well,” said Ronnie, “now I know, beyond a peradventure, that I am a member of the same church as Judas Iscariot.”

There is a profound and for me, throughout the whole of my ministry, a sustaining truth in that insight. It is easy to think of the church as the church of the saints and the martyrs, 'all glorious within'. But the reality is not always like that. I am a member of the same church as Judas Iscariot; but Judas Iscariot is not always out there, in someone else; sometimes he is within myself. I also am among those who betray. No one really knows Judas’s motives in betraying Christ; there is no good reason to believe they were base. The thirty pieces of silver are almost irrelevant to the Judas story; he had a better reason than mere gain.

So often the church corporately, as an institution, behaves in ways that are repressive for the person, or the couple, or the family, out of the best of intentions. We must be prepared as an Association of Interchurch Families to live in this tension between personal and corporate. It does not mean that we simply accept everything the church says, meekly and uncritically, taking her teachings, in all things, as her own. But it does mean that we are never disillusioned. We are members of the same church as Judas Iscariot.

We always keep working at the relationship between the personal and the corporate. It has improved enormously; it has enormous potential for further improvement; but if the improvement is going to take place, it is going to take place because we, in the Association of Interchurch Families, stay with the problem, suffer the pain and the frustration; never expecting too much; never being satisfied with too little.

“Christ loved me and gave himself for me.”

“Christ loved the church and gave himself for it.”

Return to Journal index
As the 1998 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity came to a close, we were asked by our Catholic parish priest to share our experiences as a two-church couple with readers of our local diocesan newspaper. As new members of the Association of Interchurch Families we felt that we should also like to share these very positive experiences with readers of Interchurch Families.

I am a Catholic, my husband an Anglican. Until our marriage we were content to attend and be involved in our own churches separately, although we did on occasion attend each other’s churches together. However, as we discussed our wedding service we realised that, for us to be joined together completely, we had to include both Christian traditions. Nervously we explained our needs to my priest and to my husband’s Anglican parish priest. We introduced them and left the rest to God. The result was uplifting and astonishing. A nuptial mass which united Catholic and Anglican bride and groom, families and traditions, with both of us and our families given eucharistic hospitality—all our dreams that we almost dared not dream were fulfilled.

Now, joined together by the sacrament of marriage as well as baptism, attending separate churches was painful, a tear through the heart of our unity as Christian partners in marriage. On discussing the situation with my priest, he welcomed my husband to receive communion when attending mass with me. Only other two-church couples will appreciate what this meant to us. A pattern of worship was established. As a couple, we went together to Catholic and Anglican churches on alternate Sundays. We were both involved in groups in our own churches and supported each other in this.

Nine months after our marriage we were blessed with a daughter. She was baptised in the Catholic church, a baptism separately, although we did on occasion attend each other’s services. We realised that, for us to be joined together completely, we had to include both Christian traditions. Nervously we explained our needs to my priest and to my husband’s Anglican parish priest. We introduced them and left the rest to God. The result was uplifting and astonishing. A nuptial mass which united Catholic and Anglican bride and groom, families and traditions, with both of us and our families given eucharistic hospitality—all our dreams that we almost dared not dream were fulfilled.

The birth of our second child followed. For balance within the family we wished to have him baptised in the Anglican church, but jointly in the Anglican and Catholic traditions. The discussions which followed were difficult, but eventually he was baptised in the Anglican church. The Catholic priest performed the baptism and the baptism was recorded in the registers of both churches.

Such have been the events of three and a half years of a two-church marriage. As members of AIF we are aware that we have been more fortunate than most in the support we have received from all our clergy. In the Association’s newsletter, we have read heartbreaking stories of similar couples who have experienced much pain and difficulty over the baptism of their children and who, despite being united in the sacraments of baptism and marriage, have not been able to receive communion together at Catholic altars. We can only imagine the pain, distress and division that this causes at the heart of a marriage and at the heart of a family. In addition, we are not complacent about the future. We face our children’s first holy communions, confirmations, and eventually a change of Catholic priest (our Anglican clergy may also change, of course). Our main concern is for the Christian upbringing of our children. In our present society, it is difficult enough for a one-church family to bring up their children to follow Christ, but it is far more difficult for a two-church family to achieve that if the child is experiencing tension and division rather than love at the heart of their life of worship.

So we offer this brief account of our experiences as a two-church couple, both to encourage similar couples who may have been less fortunate in the pastoral care, support and understanding they have received, and to remind others in the church of the pain, rather than the love and unity, which many such couples are currently experiencing. This is especially pertinent at this time, when the Catholic bishops of England and Wales are currently considering new and clearer guidelines for the pastoral care of those who may be in need of eucharistic sharing but are not in full communion with the Catholic Church.

Rita and Martin Howell

Christian Unity in Marriage
Two Occasions of need

Beverley Hollins has recorded the story of sharing communion with Paul on the occasion of their fifth wedding anniversary under the title One Special Day. Her experience on Christmas Day 1997 was not so happy.

Because it raised questions for the local communities involved, Beverley wrote an explanatory article for the January number of Contact, the West Slough parish magazine. We reprint it here under its original title, A Christmas Present.

One Special Day – receiving together

We wrote with our request to our Roman Catholic parish priest in July 1996, well in advance of our fifth wedding anniversary, which fell on Sunday September 15th. We had the knowledge and support of Catherine, our Anglican parish priest. We were encouraged by Fr Sean (with whom we had raised the subject in July) of change blowing. The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism (Rome, 1993) specifically mentioned the possibility of eucharistic sharing in mixed marriages between baptised Christians. Although the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conference for England and Wales felt, be sympathetic to an application from us.

A denial of our oneness

So we wrote. As we considered how we would word the letter, it became clear to us that it would be just too painful for us to attend a eucharistic service of any sort on our wedding anniversary unless we could receive communion together. For us that would be a denial of our oneness in Christ. At our wedding the famous words were pronounced above us: “those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder”. (In the order for the solemnisation of matrimony in the Book of Common Prayer these words of Jesus are quoted from Matthew 19:6: Jesus was expanding on the view of marriage as making a couple “one flesh”, which originates in Genesis 2:24.) However hard we consider the history of our churches, it seems to us that the canon laws were written by men and that our division at the eucharist is caused by men, contrary to the expressed will of God. This, it seems, must be borne from week to week if we are not to cause difficulties in our churches and damage the forward progress of ecumenism. But there are times when it simply cannot be borne, and this was one of them.

We planned to investigate where services of the Word were being held in local Free Churches. Some might accuse us of avoiding the issue by going to a non-eucharistic service, but we reasoned that on a special day like our fifth wedding anniversary we had a right to be happy!

Our parish priest passed our letter on to our bishop, who kindly gave a decision quickly, by telephone to Fr Sean.

We felt very loved and supported, and the occasion held us up for many weeks as we settled back into our normal routine of receiving separately at consecutive services.

Like a family

When it was time to go forward for communion voices whispered congratulations as we passed. As the chalice was offered the words were perhaps unliturgical: “The Blood of Christ – Congratulations!” We felt like a family in a way that we rarely do in church. The barrier, just for a day, was down. I felt as though I was floating! The service soon ended and again we were surrounded by a crowd of well wishers, some of them asking why I couldn’t receive communion with them every week, and complaining at the injustice of the rules. Some members of the congregation had not realised that one of us is Anglican, but saw me as a reader and congregation member like them. It offended them too that I am not in communion with them. We felt very loved and supported, and the occasion held us up for many weeks as we settled back into our normal routine of receiving separately at consecutive services.

We still find separation at the communion table hard - perhaps harder than ever, knowing what was on one occasion possible. For us, like some other interchurch families, there is an ongoing need to receive communion whenever we are together at the eucharist. But we have this hope, that in the short term there will be other occasions when our special need will be recognised and fulfilled, and that in the long term the churches will understand that our need as an ecumenical married couple is a model for the churches and that we all need – and will have – communion together, around the same table at the same time.

A Christmas Present

Church on Christmas Day must be one of the most joyful services you can go to. At St Andrew’s on Christmas Day 1997 there was a lovely feeling of celebration, with a good number of people in the congregation, and a lot of excited children bringing some of their presents and delighting in the lighting of candles and sharing in a birthday cake for Jesus. It was a really lovely service. But I couldn’t wait for it to end. For me it was a painful and difficult service. And I know that I was not alone. In churches all over the country (indeed, the world) there were men and women experiencing the same sense of pain as me, because like me they were separated from their marriage partners at a crucial time in the Christian year.
My husband and I are what is known as an interchurch couple – practising Christians with membership of different churches. The key to our pain is that one of those churches is the Roman Catholic Church, which means that when it comes to the vital centre of the eucharistic service, we cannot receive communion together. As a married couple, we believe that we are “one in Christ” and we well remember the moment at our wedding when our hands were bound by the priest’s stole and he said, “Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.” The Alternative Service Book says, “let not man divide”. Yet Sunday after Sunday we are divided at Christ’s table, unable to accept Christ’s invitation to his meal.

The rule is quite simple, at face value: only a Roman Catholic may receive communion at a Roman Catholic mass, and a Roman Catholic may only receive communion at a Roman Catholic mass. There are exceptions involving the Orthodox churches, but we don’t need detail here. There are also exceptions involving people who are in danger of death, and people who are in mixed marriages. In England the latter exception is interpreted differently in different dioceses, but generally is taken to mean that the non-Catholic partner may receive communion at a Catholic mass on occasions of particular need. There is no exception allowing the Catholic partner to receive communion in another church.

This division at the altar is very hurtful. Normally we have to contain our feelings. We have our own marital and spiritual communion, and a hope for the future, and that helps. On Christmas Day 1997, the hurt got out. Perhaps that was a Christmas gift from God to me, a spur to me to do more about changing an unjust situation, and a help to me in my work as an officer of the Association of Interchurch Families. Out of it I offer this as my gift to you, a sharing in a part of our experience. And I ask for a gift from you, too. Please pray for my family, Paul and me and our daughters, and for all interchurch families, as we try to hold to our unity in Christ in a painfully divided church.

Index to volumes V and VI 1997-98

American Association of Interchurch Families
(AAIF) V.i.10, VI.i.9
ARGE: Ökumenische VI.i.8, VI.i.8
Association of Interchurch Families
in the Irish Republic (AIFi) V.i.9, VI.i.9
Australia V.i.9, VI.i.8
Austria V.i.9, VI.i.8, VI.i.8
pastoral guidelines VI.i.13
baptism, shared V.i.14, VI.i.9, VI.i.7
beatitudes VI.i.1, VI.i.1
Becquere, Fr. R. V.i.12
Bennett, Revd Dr J.F. V.i.12-13
Bochman, C. V.i.13
burial VI.i.7
Canada V.i.2-3, VI.i.13, VI.i.8
church see also domestic church
as communion V.i.5, VI.i.4
cogitate nature VI.i.2
membership VI.i.8
church unity see ecumenism
Clements, K. V.i.10
conference addresses
Bennett, Revd Dr J.F. V.i.12-13
Faladeau, Fr E. V.i.5-6, VI.i.4-7
Kontzi, N. V.i.14-15
Oby, Fr. L. V.i.10-11
Reardon, Canon M. V.i.7-9
conferences
Graz 1997 VI.i.3
Lyons 1997 VI.i.3
Swanswick 1997 VI.i.4-7
Virginia 1996 V.i.1-15
violation VI.i.9
cooperate interprofessionally see Italy
Coventry, Fr. J. V.i.5-7, VI.i.9
Cran, L. V.i.14
Croatia VI.i.8
domestic church V.i.5-6, VI.i.5-7
matrimonial spirituality VI.i.11
as symbol VI.i.11
double belonging V.i.15, VI.i.8, VI.i.14
ecumenism
England V.i.7-9
France V.i.14-15
young people VI.i.15
England V.i.7-9, VI.i.8
ecucharist
division VI.i.3-4, VI.i.8
interchurch families’ need VI.i.6, V.i.10-11, VI.i.6-7
ecucharistic belief V.i.2-3, V.i.5-7
ecucharistic sharing V.i.10-11, VI.i.1
Cardinal Hume V.i.2
France V.i.14-15
guidelines
England VI.i.8
Germany VI.i.10-13
Southern Africa VI.i.6-7
Sri Lanka VI.i.9
personal experiences
Cran, L. VI.i.14
Denman, A. VI.i.9
Hollins, B. VI.i.4-5
Paul and Mark VI.i.2
Faladeau, Fr E. V.i.5-6, VI.i.4-7
Familiars Consortio VI.i.6
family stories
Hollins, B. VI.i.4
Howell, R. & M. VI.i.3
Pope, K. VI.i.14
Walsh, S. VI.i.15
foyers mistres see France
France
ecclesiologies VI.i.12
eccumenism VI.i.14-15
ecucharistic sharing VI.i.8-9
Lyons 1997 VI.i.8
young people VI.i.8
Guajrold, A. VI.i.14-15
Nielsen, O. VI.i.9
ecucharistic sharing VI.i.10-13
Greshake, G. VI.i.11
Haggarli, Bashke A. VI.i.2
Hindu-Christian marriage VI.i.14-15
Hoffman, Prof J. VI.i.9
Hollins, B. VI.i.4-5
Howell, R. & M. VI.i.3
Hume, Cardinal B. VI.i.2
interchurch marriage
ecclesiological effect VI.i.12
pastoral perspective VI.i.8
pastoral guidelines V.i.13, VI.i.9
services VI.i.9
intercommunion VI.i.2
see also ecucharistic sharing
interfaith marriage VI.i.1
guidelines VI.i.15
Hindu-Christian VI.i.14-15
Jewish other VI.i.10-11
Muslim-Christian VI.i.12-13
International Academy for Marital Spirituality
(INAMTS) VI.i.11
Irland VI.i.9, VI.i.9, VI.i.9
Italy VI.i.9, VI.i.9
Jewish-other marriage VI.i.10-11
Kilcourse, Fr G. VI.i.1
koilamia VI.i.4
Koziol, N. VI.i.14-15
Lutheran-Catholic marriage VI.i.10
marriage
see also interchurch marriage; interfaith marriage
churches’ understanding VI.i.11-12
preparation VI.i.9
spirituality VI.i.11
Maury, Pasteur J. VI.i.12
Mkapa, President B. VI.i.10
Muslim-Christian marriage VI.i.12-13
Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association
(NIMMA) VI.i.9, VI.i.9
Nürnberg Council of Churches VI.i.10-13
Oby, Fr. L. V.i.10-11
pastoral guidelines
ecucharistic sharing VI.i.10-13
VI.i.6-7
interchurch marriage VI.i.15, VI.i.9
pilgrimage, ecumenical VI.i.14
Pope, K. VI.i.14
Reardon, Canon M. V.i.7-9
Reardon, R.
ecucharistic sharing VI.i.1
interfaith marriage VI.i.1
response to Cardinal Hume VI.i.3-4
Virginia conference 1996 VI.i.11
religious identity VI.i.13, VI.i.14
Romain, Rabbi Dr J. VI.i.10-11
sacraments see baptism; confirmation; ecucharistic; marriage
Southern Africa VI.i.6-7
Spenler, G. VI.i.12-13
spirituality
INTAMS VI.i.11
interchurch VI.i.15, VI.i.7
symbols
church-specific VI.i.15
of many VI.i.13
Tanzania VI.i.10
theology, ecucharist VI.i.5-7
Vogtii VI.i.9
United States VI.i.10, VI.i.9
Walsh, S. VI.i.15
World Council of Churches (WCC)
Faith and Order Commission VI.i.10
young people VI.i.8, VI.i.15
Return to Journal index
Guidelines for Eucharistic Sharing in Southern Africa

In January 1995 the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a Directory on Ecumenism for Southern Africa. It applied the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Rome, 1993, to the situation in Southern Africa. Five sections were on the history of divisions in Southern Africa, how to promote the Catholic Church’s contribution to ecumenism, ecumenical formation, how to promote community life and spiritual activity between baptised Christians, the sacrament of confirmation, and sharing spiritual activities and resources. We give the text of the seventh section, on interchurch marriages. References are to the 1993 Directory on Ecumenism (DE).

6. SHARING SACRAMENTAL CELEBRATIONS

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

6.2 “At the same time, the Catholic Church teaches that by baptism members of other Churches and ecclesial communities are brought into real, even imperfect communion, with the Catholic Church.” (DE n.129)

6.3 Governing Principles

6.3.1 The principles governing sacramental sharing laid down in the Directory on Ecumenism can be summarised as follows:
(a) the sacraments and most especially the eucharist are signs as well as sources of unity and therefore are properly open as a matter of course only to those who are in full ecclesial communion with each other;
(b) baptism creates a bond between all the baptised which seeks its full expression in eucharistic communion (DE n.129).

6.3.2 The general rule flowing from these principles is therefore that abstinence from shared sacramental worship is the normal state of affairs but circumstances can exist in which such a sharing becomes not only permissible but advisable (DE n.129).

6.3.3 The circumstances in which such sharing is justified are (a) danger of death and (b) any other pressing need.

6.3.4 The norms for judging when such a need exists should be laid down by the diocesan Bishop (DE n.130), although the Directory on Ecumenism does single out the situation of spouses in a mixed marriage, bound to each other as they are by the sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony (DE n.160).

6.3.5 The pastoral advisability of permitting sharing the sacraments depends both on the general situation of the local worshipping community and on the conditions to be met by the individual persons concerned.

6.3.6 When such sharing is justified, the following conditions are to be met:
(a) the person admitted to such sharing must seek it of his or her own initiative;
(b) must be unable to receive the sacrament from a minister of his or her own Church;
(c) must manifest Catholic faith in the sacrament;
(d) must have the proper dispositions for the fruitful reception of it (DE n.131).

6.3.7 As regards (b) in 6.3.6 above, this inability need not be one that exists over a period of time but could arise out of the nature of the situation in which the petitioner finds himself or herself (e.g., when spouses in a mixed marriage attend a eucharistic celebration together).

6.3.8 As regards (c) in 6.3.6 above, it is important to recall that there is a crucial distinction between the substance of the faith and the way in which it is expressed. What is required is unity in the substance of the faith. Moreover, in judging whether or not such unity is present, due cognisance must be taken of those ecumenical agreements that display the existence of a substantial agreement in faith. One example of such an agreement is that which was reached by the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission regarding the eucharist. In the light of that agreement, members of the Anglican Communion may be presumed to share the essentials of eucharistic faith with us.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above the following recommendations are made. These are permissive, not prescriptive, since they clarify what can be done within the framework of church discipline.

6.4 Since ‘the salvation of souls is the supreme law’, in danger of death the above norms are not to be interpreted narrowly. Pastoral considerations must predominate, when in such circumstances Christians from other churches wish to receive the sacraments of penance, anointing of the sick or the eucharist.

6.5 In cases other than danger of death, provided that conditions (a) to (d) mentioned in 6.3.6 above are fulfilled, the following guidelines apply:

6.5.1 As regards baptismal celebrations, Christians of other churches who so wish are to be encouraged to participate as fully as possible. Similarly, Catholics are to be encouraged to participate, where invited, in baptismal celebrations of other Christian churches (see 4.1.3 & 4.1.4).

6.5.2 As regards the sacraments of the sick and of penance, the mere request for such sacraments can be taken as evidence of pressing spiritual need and the sacrament may be administered. Special consideration should be given to spouses in an interchurch marriage who may wish to approach these sacraments together, if their situation justifies it.

6.5.3 As regards the eucharist, a special need can be said to exist on occasions when Christians from other Churches attend a eucharistic celebration for a special feast or event. On these occasions eucharistic sharing may be both meaningful and desirable, expressing the degree of unity that the participating Christians already have with each other.
6.5.3.1 It has been a long-standing pastoral practice in the Catholic Church not to refuse someone who comes to receive communion in good faith. However, where possible and according to circumstances, it may be advisable or even necessary to inform such a person afterwards of Catholic discipline.

6.5.3.2 A unique situation exists as regards spouses of a mixed marriage who attend mass together in a Catholic church. The uniqueness consists in the fact that their baptismal unity in Christ has been still further sealed by the sacraminality of their marriage bond. Hence both may experience a real need to express that unity by receiving holy communion whenever they attend mass together. If such couples attend mass together only infrequently, then they may both receive communion on those occasions, provided that it is the spontaneous desire of the non-Catholic partner to do so. In cases where both parties attend mass virtually every Sunday, then the non-Catholic party may approach the local Ordinary through the parish priest for permission to receive communion every time he or she attends mass with his or her spouse. In all the above cases it is assumed that the non-Catholic lives devotedly within his or her tradition. Cases where the only church that the non-Catholic partner attends is the Catholic church must be referred to the local Ordinary through the parish priest.

6.5.4. The guidelines given above must not be allowed to lead to a situation where the divisions between Christians are no longer taken seriously. Catholics must therefore be educated as to the reasons why abstinence from eucharistic sharing is the general norm and why only a limited form of such sharing is possible. Catholics also need to be educated to take seriously the fact that the degrees of visible unity between the Catholic Church and other Churches can differ. In the case where the visible unity is very close - e.g., in the case of the Orthodox Church - less weight (from a Catholic perspective) may be placed on the divisions and more on the unity already possessed, thus justifying a far freer sharing in the sacraments in general and the eucharist in particular. In cases where the visible unity is marred by very many serious divisions, more emphasis needs to be placed on bearing truthful witness to the sad state of the division, thus justifying a more limited form of sacramental sharing.

6.5.5 As regards Catholics seeking to receive the sacraments from pastors in other churches, the same circumstances apply as above (viz., regarding need, substantial agreement in faith, etc.). Catholics must also have due respect for the ecclesiastical discipline that may operate in the church in which they seek to receive a particular sacrament. The Directory on Ecumenism also notes a further condition, viz., that the sacrament be sought ‘from a minister in whose church these sacraments are valid or from one who is known to be validly ordained according to the Catholic teaching on ordination’ (DE n.132). As regards the Eastern Orthodox churches, this condition is already fulfilled. As regards the churches arising out of the divisions that occurred in the West at the time of the Reformation, the matter, from a Catholic perspective, is not so clear.

6.5.6 Where it is not permissible for Catholics to receive the sacraments in another church, they should be educated to take the pain of Christian divisions sufficiently seriously to use that opportunity to pray and pledge themselves to strive for Christian unity.

7. INTERCHURCH MARRIAGES

7.1 Catholics and members of other churches who are entering into the covenant of marriage must be adequately prepared to make an eccumenical partnership of their marriage, as envisaged by the Post-Synodal Exhortation, Familiaris Consortio (FC), while respecting the responsibilities of the Catholic partner regarding the practice of the faith and the education of the children (FC 78).

7.2 Where there are genuine pastoral reasons for the granting of a dispensation from the canonical form of marriage, it should not be refused.

7.3 Pastors should make the fullest possible use of opportunities afforded for ecumenical celebrations for mixed marriages.

7.4 It is against freedom of religion and the dignity of women that a wife should be expected to join the church of her husband or that pressure be put on either spouse to convert, on the pretext of achieving unity of faith.

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST TO INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

Baptism

The celebration:

4.1.3 As regards the minister, the traditional practice of only one minister performing the actual act of baptising (viz., the pouring with water while proclaiming the baptismal formula) is to be retained. However, wherever appropriate a minister of another Christian church should be invited to participate in the other parts of the baptismal liturgy, e.g., readings, prayers, etc. An obvious case where this would apply would be the baptism of a child, one of whose parents belongs to another Christian church (DE n.97).

4.1.4 As regards official sponsors and witnesses, except for Eastern Orthodox Christians, the Directory on Ecumenism forbids members of other Christian churches to be one of the official sponsors at a baptism performed in the Catholic church (DE n.98). However, the permission that is given for others to act as witnesses – provided there is at least one confirmed and practising Catholic acting as an official sponsor – should be utilised to the full. Here too it should be encouraged that wherever appropriate a confirmed practising member of another Christian church should be invited to act as a witness. The names of such witnesses should be entered as such into the baptismal register. We also encourage theological reflection on the extent to which the distinction that is made between Eastern Orthodox Christians and others in this matter should be retained.

Reception into full communion

4.1.6.2 Christians who were baptised in other Christian churches and who seek full communion in the Catholic church, should be examined regarding their motivation, in order to ensure that it is not for purposes unrelated to their convictions of faith. Examples of insufficient reasons are: because it is nearer to their home, because the spouse is a Catholic, because of disputes with their own minister, etc.

Sharing spiritual activities and resources

5.4 The burial of members of each other's churches should be determined on the local diocesan level. In terms of this Directory deceased members of other Christian churches may be buried with Catholic rites, especially in the case of a deceased spouse (DE n.120). Deceased Catholics may in turn be buried with the rites of another Christian church, should there be a justifying reason for doing so.
IARGE Okumene met the Salzburg group, together they contacted other groups. In 1991 the first IARGE meeting in Austria took place. Annual conferences move each year from region to region: local church leaders and theologians, Roman Catholics and Lutherans, are invited to address the participants and enter into discussion. In 1996 the “Salzburg Vision” statement was produced (see Interchurch Families Summer 1997, pp.9-10). At the 1997 conference which took place at St Polten near Vienna, 24-26 October, the 55 participants came from Vienna, Salzburg, the Tyrol, Carinthia, Bad Ischl and Upper Austria (with three visitors from England, and a couple from Germany). The Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of St Polten, the Moderator of the Lutheran Church (whose address on Ephesians was a highlight of the conference), and a Professor from Salzburg University were present. There was a lively Bible study on 1 Cor. 12 led by two women—one a Catholic nun, the other a Lutheran pastor married to a Catholic. Next year the IARGE will consider its future—how best to advance from being an Arbeitgemeinschaft konfessionsverrindener Ehen—a working group for denominationally divided couples—to being a real Arbeitgemeinschaft konfessionsverbindungener Ehen—a working group for couples who bring the denominations together.

In Southern Germany (Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg) weekend seminars for interchurch couples and families have taken place since 1969 in the Benedictine monastery at Neresheim, with the participation of a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor. Rosmarie and Rudolf Lauber have belonged to the planning group since 1986, and we are grateful to Rosmarie for the information given here. Since 1988 similar seminars have been held in the Protestant Centre at Dornstadt on Ulm, with the regular participation of a Methodist pastor and a Catholic priest.

Rosmarie comments: "More important than these seminars is that interchurch couples are received positively by ministers and parishes. Each couple must decide for itself whether to separate to go to one church only, or to go alternately to both churches. Ministers and parishes should accept their decision, reach out to the couple, invite them to work with them and include the partner of the other denomination. Otherwise alienation from the church can occur. Marriage preparation should cover not only church regulations (joint wedding service, baptism of children) but should look into opportunities for dialogue and eucharistic sharing. Over and over again those who take part [in seminars] confirm that there is scarcely any information about the Protestant/Catholic and Methodist/Catholic agreed documents. Rarely are couples told about the possibility of eucharistic sharing which has existed since 1981. The February 1997 letter from the Ecumenical Commission of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference makes it clear that in cases of pastoral need—that is to say, when separation at the Lord’s Table is experienced as a difficult burden—with the agreement of the..
of the priest, an interchurch couple can officially share together at Holy Communion in the Catholic church. For the Catholic partner also to receive communion at the Protestant Lord’s Supper is a matter for his or her conscientious decision (Joint Church Recommendations, 1981).

**Joint Declaration**

In some places however the local churches have got together to encourage eucharistic sharing for interchurch families at local level. A joint declaration was worked out by three ministers and church councils in one locality (Evangelical, Methodist and Roman Catholic). Others have followed suit. Where it has been agreed and signed, this declaration is handed out to interchurch couples on occasions such as weddings, baptisms, parents’ evenings for first communions and confirmations. It was in the context of this kind of local activity that the Nuremberg and Bavarian Councils of Churches raised the question of eucharistic sharing for interchurch families which eventually led to the German bishops’ guidelines of 11 February 1997 (see Interchurch Families, 6, 1, January 1998, pp. 10-13).

**IRELAND**

In December the action of the Roman Catholic Irish President Mary McAleese in receiving communion in a Church of Ireland church received a great deal of media attention. Press and TV approached AIFI for information and comment, and the association was contacted by so many enquirers that it speeded up preparations for a web page which can now be found at www.connect.ie/users/aifi. At the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January 1998 AIFI issued the following statement:

As a voluntary organisation we cannot speak for all interchurch couples - neither do we wish to be drawn into the official dogma or rulings of the individual churches. We simply wish to state that the official Roman Catholic Church ruling on intercommunion creates problems for married couples who are committed in their respective churches but who share a common Christian unity in their marriage and wish to express this in a practical way by partaking in each other’s eucharists. There is, throughout Ireland, a huge variance of approach to interchurch couples - some good, some not so good. It appears to vary with the attitude of the individual priest or minister as to how they interpret the rules locally. We have found that some priests and ministers are more willing to act in a compassionate and ecumenical manner. The attitudes of others persuade many interchurch couples to find their own solutions to the question of intercommunion - some continue to receive separately and some receive in each other’s churches. Interchurch couples live at the “cutting edge” of practical ecumenism. In the light of recent wide-ranging public discussion on intercommunion the Association would appeal to those in authority to consider our position in a more positive ecumenical light. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Association would ask you to remember our members, especially those who may be experiencing difficulties at this time.

AIFI has had to reorganise its base, since Fr Gregory Wingenbach has left Louisville and the Kenluckiana Interfaith Community, and it is no longer possible to use the KIC address. Fr George Kicicourse in Louisville continues to be the spiritual adviser to AIFI. Kay Flowers in Seville, Ohio has become Editor of The Ark, and a winter number appeared in a format similar to that of 1989-91 before it became a pull-out from KIC’s Horizon. AIFI’s national address is now that of the co-chairs, Michael and Barbara Slater, in California. Sarah Bard from England visited them there in the summer of 1997. They report that awareness of AIFI is growing in the USA - they have received enquiries from Texas, Florida, Maryland, Washington DC and New York - all places where there is no AIFI chapter nor a committee member.

**Intermarriage: Orthodox Perspectives**

An important book under this title was published by the Holy Cross Orthodox Press (Brookline, Massachusetts $9.95) in 1997. It includes “The Johnstown Statement” of 1990 issued by the Joint Committee of Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bishops in the United States, formed in 1981 to address pastoral concerns, and a collection of papers given at a conference on the subject in 1994 held at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, supplemented by other studies. Mark Mesley writes:

In his preface Bishop Methodios of Boston says: “Some, unfortunately, consider mixed or inter-cedal or intra-Christain marriages a problem for the church. I consider them a unique opportunity for missionary outreach” – a statement which falls short of accepting mixed or interchurch couples as of value in themselves, but is more positive than many Orthodox statements. Officially, Orthodox Christians are not permitted to marry someone who is not a baptised, Trinitarian Christian; there is no canonical equivalent to the Roman Catholic dispensation on grounds of “disparity of cult”. Intra-Christian marriages (what we would call interchurch marriages) are permitted by “economy” (by way of exception); the wedding must take place in the Orthodox church. In 1992 the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America figures showed that only 35% of marriages were between two Orthodox partners and 65% were mixed. (However, it is interesting that earlier statistics showed fewer marital breakdowns in mixed than in Orthodox marriages.) A chapter by Stanley Haraclas describes the setting up of an experimental community especially welcoming to non-Orthodox spouses; although it was still bound by the canonical discipline restricting communion to chrismated Orthodox, it attracted many families and quickly doubled in size.

Mixing Love & Faith: a Jewish Perspective

Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Romain is minister of the Maidenhead Synagogue. For a number of years he has been involved in the pastoral care of Jewish-Christian marriages. He addressed the spring meeting of the Association of Interchurch Families at Heythrop College, London, in March 1998 on this topic, and he kindly gave us the following text.

Twelve years ago Mary and Daniel fell in love. They shared everything, except religion. When they wanted to become engaged, Mary's parents refused to let her marry a non-Catholic, while Daniel's parents were equally adamant that he should not marry outside the Jewish faith. The couple split up. If their tale had ended there, it would have been a relatively common one, reflecting the fate of many couples from different religious backgrounds. However, although Daniel went away and married someone of his own faith, it proved an unsuccessful match and ended in divorce. He returned to his home town and, to his surprise, found Mary still living there. This time, they allowed no external factors to cut across their togetherness, and they now have two children. Both regard the marriage as blissfully happy, and only regret the twelve years that they needlessly spent apart.

Their story will be seen by some as the triumph of love over tradition. Others will see it as a religious disaster, typical of the demise of the family unit sharing the same faith and passing it on to the next generation. Curiously, even secular parents feel alarmed when their offspring marry out of the faith.

**Blurring distinctions?**

The issue of mixed-faith marriage is particularly delicate for interfaith groups. In some ways it poses a threat to one of the cardinal principles, that mutual respect for each other's faith should not lead to a blurring of the distinctions between religions. We attend each other's services, but there is little attempt to hold joint prayers, with the compromises this entails. If this concern applies to liturgy, it must apply even more to conjugal unions.

At the same time, however, the phenomenon of mixed-faith marriages is an obvious area for interfaith discussion. Here is a practical and immediate issue between the faiths that is crying out for a response. When a couple from two different traditions choose to set up home and establish family life together, a range of complicated problems are encountered. Where better to examine them than in an inter-faith forum? It offers knowledge of both traditions, combined with respect for each other's religious integrity, along with the trust that arises from years of working closely together.

The need to respond to the situation does not necessarily indicate approval. Many religious leaders express a strong preference for a marriage between two people professing the same faith. It ensures a united family sharing the same religious values and participating in the same religious practices. It means there is a likelihood of the faith being handed on successfully to the next generation. It can be argued that it also gives the marriage a better chance of survival, being less prone to the tensions that can arise in a mixed-faith household.

**Jewish concerns**

From a Jewish point of view, there are additional concerns. Judaism, so often described as "a way of life", is intimately bound up with domestic rituals. It is actively celebrated at home, in daily observance of dietary laws and weekly customs associated with the Sabbath. Many Jewish festivals take place as much in the home as they do in synagogue. It can be very difficult to maintain such Jewish practices when only one partner is of the faith.

There is also a problem of numerical survival. The Jewish community in Britain is very small, some 330,000 people. Mixed-faith marriage could lead to a high dropout rate and seriously endanger the continuity of British Jewry. Put dramatically, it could prove to be a kiss of death.

In the past, it was common for Jews who had married out of the faith to be ostracised by their family and the rest of the Jewish community. Typical of many parents' reaction was that of Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, who refused to acknowledge his daughter after she married a non-Jew. Many Jewish parents today feel equally strongly, although they may reluctantly come to terms with the situation rather than lose contact with their offspring.

**An upward trend**

It must be understood, therefore, that for both religious and demographic reasons mixed-faith marriage is anathema to many. However, all the signs are that it is an upward trend. Figures based on the discrepancy between Jews born in the late 1950s and early 1960s who would have been expected statistically to marry in synagogue in the early 1980s, and those who actually did so, suggest that one in three Jews are marrying out of the faith.

Some consider that public discussion of mixed-faith marriage is detrimental in that it appears to condone the trend and encourages others to follow suit. However, such marriages are occurring on a large scale, and have done for several decades. There is no merit in pretending a problem does not exist if everyone knows it does; the only result is to delay the possibility of any solution.

Such an attitude also assumes that people willfully enter such relationships in deliberate rejection of their religious traditions. This is mistaken. Many of those concerned would have been content to have married a member of their own faith. It was a matter of chance that the person they met at college, at work, or at a friend’s party, was from a different religious background. Moreover, they often see no contradiction between their love for a person from a different faith and their attachment to their own religious roots. They are surprised and hurt when told they have betrayed their heritage and can have no part in communal life.
Practical problems

The practical difficulties that confront mixed-faith couples are immense. The wedding preparations are often blighted by the thorny question of where the marriage can take place. Sometimes there are legal obstacles: for instance, synagogues in Britain are empowered by Act of Parliament to marry only “persons both professing the Jewish Religion”, rendering a mixed-faith ceremony impossible a priori. Alternatively, the minister of a church may be unable or unwilling to alter the form of the marriage service substantially, and so some of the liturgy is unacceptable to the non-Christian side. Indeed, the mere fact that the wedding is to be held in the religious building of one partner can be enough to cause threats of a boycott by members of the other partner’s family. The result is that many couples who had always envisaged a “white wedding”, or who, however lapsed, still wanted God’s blessing upon their union, are forced to settle for a Register Office ceremony. Thus they start off with a disappointment and with the religious differences making an early impact.

The arrival of children complicates the situation even further, for immediate decisions have to be made, particularly if the child is a boy – does one baptise him, circumcise him, perform neither ceremony, or both? What should be a joyous event can be soured by the couple, or their families, pulling in different directions. Moreover, it is then that many people suddenly remember the religious images of their own childhood, however limited, and wish to recreate them for their offspring. A mixed-faith couple will have different memories - Christmas trees, or Hanukkah candles, Easter eggs, or Passover meal. Some couples find these mutually enriching, others feel ill at ease and this can alienate one partner from spouse and children.

The religious education of the children presents another quandary. Sometimes it is settled by whichever of the partners feels the more strongly about his/her faith. Alternatively, it is a haphazard mixture of both religions, with the children emerging more tolerant of religious differences, but less certain of their own religious identity. Another parental option is to ban religion from the home on the grounds that it is divisive, with the guilt-assuaging concession that “the children can make their own choice when they are older”. In reality most children never do, for one can only choose from a position of knowledge, not from a vacuum.

The issue carries on till the very end of life. Where are the partners to be buried – separately in the cemeteries of their own faith, or together in non-consecrated ground? Many couples opt for cremation as a way of side-stepping the territorial problem. Even so, who should officiate at the ceremony? The minister from the faith of the partner who died would perform the last rites appropriate to his/her tradition, but the minister of the partner who survived might be better able to help in dealing with the bereavement.

A positive view

Amid all the problems, it should also be noted that many mixed-faith couples do make a success of their marriages. The old warnings that “it will all end in tears” have no statistical foundation. Some unions are blissfully content, others manage as well or as badly as do most marriages, and some collapse under the extra strains. Much depends on the individual couple and the energy and sensitivity that the partners invest in the relationship.

This has been confirmed by many who have attended the annual seminars for mixed-faith couples that I help run at the Sternberg Centre in London. They report that their marriages have a better chance of success than those of many same-faith couples because, unlike them, they have not been able to sail into marriage unthinkingly, but have had to examine every aspect of their life together well past the wedding day - children, relations with in-laws, how they would spend weekends. The result may have been a lot of painful discussion, but also a much stronger understanding of each other and a better basis for the future. Equally common was the remark that: “Our situation has made both of us take our individual religious heritage more seriously - we know it will stand or fall by what we each do. In a same-faith marriage, I would have left it to my partner to provide the religious input. Now I bother too, and do much more than I would have done otherwise.”

In many cases, the lifestyle and attitude of a mixed-faith couple reflects a much more general trend – that religion has become “privatised”, a matter for each individual rather than a family concern. The adage, “The family that prays together, stays together”, is no longer regarded as true. Many ministers know that it is often only one partner in a marriage who comes to worship, with the other partner being indifferent to religion. What difference, then, if that other partner is not doing the shopping but attending a service elsewhere? Indeed, some couples would claim that their religious mix was positively desirable, both enriching their own lives and helping to break down barriers in society at large. If one is commanded to “Love your neighbours as yourself”, they argue, then why not marry them as well?

Couple and community

The dilemmas raised by mixed-faith relationships are shared by ministers. When an engaged couple explain that they are very much in love and genuinely compatible, many ministers feel torn by conflicting interests. They know that the couple may be right and may lead a blissfully happy life together. Yet they also have to consider the wider community and the dictates of their faith. The desire to respond constructively to the individuals before them has to be balanced by not betraying their own principles. This was the stimulus to the recent publication of my book *Till Faith Us Do Part* (Harper-Collins, Fount Paperback, £5.99). It is an attempt to reach out to mixed-faith couples and offer help, encouraging each of them to maintain their religious loyalty without compromising their partner or undermining their marriage. It is honest about the difficulties but positive about the solutions.

No doubt some criticise the book as condoning mixed-faith marriage, but it is a response to an already existing situation, and one that began accelerating as far back as the 1940s. In an increasingly integrated and multi-faith society mixed-faith marriages will continue to rise. Ministers of all faiths are faced with a stark choice: lose touch with growing numbers who no longer feel welcome because they have married out of the faith, or revise the traditional attitudes to mixed-faith couples and find ways of retaining their religious involvement.

Jonathan Romain
Christian-Muslim Marriages

G. Speelman of Utrecht University spoke on Christian-Muslim marriages during the Graz European Ecumenical Assembly in 1997. We are grateful to be able to print a shortened version of her paper.

I have long been involved in interfaith dialogue with Muslims. In dialogue groups, I sometimes meet couples in an interfaith marriage: one partner Christian, the other Muslim. Often they can make a great contribution to the dialogue. I have discovered that couples in an interfaith marriage are living a life of permanent dialogue; because they have to live together, they have to figure out how to deal with the issues.

There are groups of couples scattered through Europe. The oldest is probably the Groupe des foyers islam-chrétiens in France. Founded by three mixed couples in 1976, they meet regularly over the Pentecost weekend. The older participants have grown-up children. They discuss how they deal with their differences, the legal consequences of their marriages, the way they educate their children. I also know of a group of Christian-Muslim couples in Brussels, one in Turin, and one in the Netherlands.

The real experts
What fascinates me when I meet people who are active in such groups is that here you are talking to the real experts on interfaith dialogue. They know what it means if you live in a situation where you cannot escape the questions.

It seems to me that the basic question being asked is: “How can we recognise the other as really other?” One Christian woman with a Muslim partner who spoke on educating children in an interfaith family, said: “(Another speaker) just now said that we, Christians and Muslims, believe the same. I am convinced that what we believe is not the same thing. But I do believe that our faith points in the same direction. I also believe it is of the utmost importance for this world that we learn to accept that we do not believe the same, instead of burying our differences.”

This insight is meaningful for us all, because we have to learn to live together in society in spite of our differences. How can we really accept that which is different from us, accept the otherness of others, without feeling threatened?

A win-win situation?
The same woman spoke of how she and her husband talked before marriage about the religious education of their children. She said: “I thought, well, whether you like it or not, my children won’t get an Islamic education only. And of course he thought, whether you like it or not, my children won’t get a Christian education only. And we were clear on that from the beginning: we promised each other the freedom to express what each of us thought was important for their education, without overriding the other partner.” This formula is not a guarantee of success. The woman described the education of their children as a power struggle, in which each had to fight for what they thought important. The notion of struggle fascinates me. She said that in her case she felt she had won the struggle for the religious education of her children. But this did not bring her total satisfaction. She thought it should be possible to have the sort of struggle in which both partners win.

I think she was right. Interfaith dialogue is not always being polite to each other. It has to do with finding a way to go on living together, in spite of differences. This implies struggle. In that case, an important question is: can we find ways to make the struggle one in which both partners can win? Both partners feel they are being taken into account, that what they regard as central to their life is being respected as sacred by their partner?

A struggle
A struggle implies there are power-factors at work. Let us take the most typical case: that of a Christian, Western European woman, married to a Muslim man with a recognisably different cultural background. Structurally, they both have different power-resources. One is a man, the other a woman. I know that women and men in Western Europe are supposed to have reached equality, but feminist research into Dutch marriages has shown that there is a discernable difference in power between women and men sharing a home; they found a lot of discontent among women.

There is also a power difference when one partner belongs to an ethnic minority. In our typical interfaith marriage, this power difference works the other way round. The Muslim partner is often confronted with what most people around him think is natural, obvious, self-evident; he is the other, the one who has to prove himself. Many partners tell me how they have to defend their faith against attacks which associate Islam with intolerance, backwardness and irrationality. In reaction, many Muslims become very much aware of their cultural and religious heritage. As one Muslim man said: “I would never have known so much about Islam if I had stayed at home and married an Egyptian girl.”

A third factor has to do with the socio-economic situation of the partners. Often the European, Christian partner has the better job, better access to housing and so on, and is also supported by her community. This can cause tensions in the relationship, which are frequently translated into a struggle about religion. When the partner who is the more “other” in the relationship feels he is not respected for who he is, he tries to win back self-respect by stressing what is central and most sacred to him: religion.

Another factor is that interfaith partners are seen as representatives of their communities. The Turkish Muslim represents the “terrible Turks” who have shaped the history of so many Eastern European countries. The German wife is the “imperialist European” whose community has been responsible for so much repression and bloodshed. Many problems in an interfaith marriage are exactly the same as those experienced by many other couples. But in their case, family and friends are looking out for problems; when they occur, they are defined as arising from differences in culture. A Dutch woman told me she did not want to recognise the
serious communication problem in her relationship because she was determined to prove to those who said it would never work that her marriage was fantastically successful. The partners had put off talking about their problems until it was too late.

**Maintaining identity**

But what is at stake in the power struggle is not merely the winning of prestige, or an easy life. Interfaith partners are looking for a way to maintain their identity. In everyone there is an inner core of conviction about who one is, what the world is, how God is spoken of, and how self-respect, the identity chosen for oneself, can be maintained. We all feel a deep need to be recognised and respected at this level. We keep negotiating with others, trying to get recognition for this basic identity. Partners in a mixed marriage feel a deep need to be heard, understood and respected by the person of another faith whom they love.

Loved ones want to be more than merely “that Christian”, or “that Muslim”. Of course, they are also “a Christian” and “a Muslim” – much of what we are ties up with our religious traditions. At this core to which I refer, religious traditions are always reflected traditions: I believe this or that not only because it is in the Bible or the Koran, but also because it is what I really hold and value with my life. If you do not try to understand what I regard as most precious, then you do not respect me, the real me. This is why the struggle of mixed-faith partners can be so deep and prolonged.

**Four strategies**

Is it a struggle which both can win, or can one partner only maintain him/herself by annihilating the otherness of the other? Interfaith partners have to face this question, and it is the most important question in a dialogue between those of different religions. I see four strategies used by couples; I call them *annexation, yielding, ignoring, negotiating.*

**Annexation and yielding** are complementary. When one partner holds particularly strong religious convictions, he or she (mostly he – men have more difficulties in dealing with what is different) tries to convert the partner to his faith and way of life. The other may respond by attempting to annex her/his partner in turn (these marriages are not likely to last long), or by gradually yielding to all the demands.

**Ignoring** is the policy by which both partners, tacitly or not, try to deal with their differences. It may work for a time, but leads to unexpected surprises when there is a family crisis. It may be a sorrowful experience (a parent of one partner dies, a child is born, or one partner has to face unemployment), or it may be joyful (the birth of a first child), but when crises arise, and especially when children come, real and existing differences cannot always be ignored.

The fourth strategy is the difficult and uncertain one of *negotiation*, which is like an open-ended story. Partners keep promising each other things, going back on their promises, bringing their resources into play in order to get the upper hand. But that is not the only story. If marriage was only a power struggle, why be married at all? If interfaith dialogue were only about who gets the upper hand, where would the world end? How can we be truly reconciled to our brother and our sister, and how can partners in an interfaith marriage really found a family if that is all there is?

**Being other; being in relationship**

I return to my first question: how can we recognise the other as really other, and still be reconciled to him/her? Looking for an answer, an answer I have not yet found, I search my own Christian tradition. And I find two pointers. But first I want to affirm that it is not, in our Christian tradition, unacceptable or unnatural to want what the partners in an interfaith marriage want — to be heard and seen for what they are, to refuse to be completely adapted to or amalgamated in their marriage partner. This is the self-respect every human being strives for. And Christian tradition says that this self-respect is due to every human being because we are all recognised and respected by God. That is the foundation of our self-hood, and also of the relationship between human beings and God. As the psalmist says: God is the One who knows us for what we are (Ps 139).

Does this self-respect also lead to respect for the otherness of others? We have learned that there is only one unbroken and indivisible Truth that we should follow. How can we account for the otherness of others?

In Christian tradition, we affirm two things about God that give direction to our thinking about the recognition of the other as other. One is the idea of *incarnation.* I call here as witness the German theologian Ulrich Dietzfelbinger, who described, in a lecture he gave in 1989, his relationship with his Turkish Muslim wife. He describes his tendency to reduce the differences in their beliefs to minor points, the pull to reduce their faith to the lowest common denominator. “After all, we both believe in Almighty God.” In the end, he recognises that this way of reducing their differences is a way of denying them, leaving both partners with very little faith at all. What he learns is that one should not try to make the other the same as oneself. With new eyes he looks at the doctrine of incarnation. It is strange that God has community with a human being (and therefore with all human beings) in such a way that God is in his/her utmost being qualified by that humanity, while at the same time human beings are not defied and God remains God. Is there not in this strange incarnation something analogous to his marriage, where only love is the guarantor that he respects his partner as being inalienably other, different, and yet at one with himself? I just let this question stand.

The second idea is that God is not the unmoved mover of Aristotelian tradition. In the doctrine of the Trinity, Christians affirm that God is essentially a God of *movement,* of dialogue. The theologian Molmann points out the importance of the *perichoresis,* the constant movement within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit towards each other, so much that it is impossible to speak of one person of the Trinity apart from the others. God is a God of relationships.

Here are two pointers for Christians who deal with the otherness of others, directing us beyond the formulation of the lowest common denominator and also beyond the tendency to want to make the other like oneself. 

*Gt Speelman*
The Challenge of being different: a Christian-Hindu marriage

The challenge of an interfaith marriage begins with the decision to love. It is a decision that immediately puts the couple outside the traditional system, forcing them to carve a space of their own, often a space in which they are on their own.

The courtship, more often than not, is conducted clandestinely. Inevitably there is family opposition, and, when the Catholic Church is involved, once again there are no welcoming smiles.

It is ten years now since I went through it all, but when I look back I still feel the pain. I was warned that there was a high failure rate in interfaith marriages. (True, perhaps, but to date no statistics are available.) Further I was advised to marry under the Special Marriage Act (which has “mutual consent” as a ground for divorce), so that we could easily avail ourselves of a civil divorce should things go wrong. (Pragmatic advice, no doubt, but insensitive. And I couldn’t help wondering if entering into marriage with divorce in mind was not grounds for “defective consent”?) Finally, I was given a form to sign which used the words of the outdated Code of Canon Law, making me promise to baptise my children unconditionally, a deviation from the existing code which requires the Catholic partner to promise “to do all in his or her power in order that the all the children be baptised”. When I questioned this, I was told that this policy was laid down by the local bishop to dissuade interfaith marriages.

The wedding ceremony itself poses a challenge. Each family wants its own religious rite, and the Catholic Church insists on only a church wedding. As a result, what normally marks the coming together of two families can become the first sign of division. At the personal level, preparations for the big day are clouded by uncertainties. Although I loved Kalpesh, I remember having many fears. Would I fit into a culture that my western upbringing saw as inferior? Was I willing to accept the joint family and the loss of self it entailed? How would I cope in a community where women were mostly confined to the home? with a different language and strange food and cultural customs? How would our two families adjust to each other?

Then there were the religious expectations. How would I work out the baptism of our children? Despite the reassurances of Kalpesh and his parents, practice of my own religion was in question. I kept imagining myself being marginalised in a Hindu majority. Perhaps Sunday mass would become a mere inconvenience. Maybe I would have to play down religious celebrations. As the first bahu in a household without daughters, I would have certain religious responsibilities. Would that affect my religious affiliation? What kind of family prayer could I look forward to?

One saving grace was that there was no mention of conversion. Not all couples are so lucky. Often Catholic families will insist on the conversion of the non-Catholic partner. Alternatively a Catholic woman by virtue of her second class status may be expected to embrace her husband’s religion as part of her new life with him. It is my belief that this bid to convert stems from an inability to understand the saving grace of God in other religions. It also reflects a fear of losing one’s religious identity, for by crossing religious frontiers interfaith marriages seem to question existing religious boundaries. And of course there is the “power” issue, for interfaith couples enter into religious territory that often is outside the control of religious authority in society and in the home.

New boundaries call for new religious identities, ones which the couple have to define for themselves. When two religions are involved, the old formulas don’t work any more. Every familiar ritual and tradition is strange, sometimes even offensive, to one partner. God has to be discovered anew. Often there is no family or community support. On the contrary, there are many “watchful eyes”, waiting to say, “We told you it wouldn’t work.” Some may see these as problems, or may even use them to exploit more basic differences in a relationship. For those who dare to search, however, an interfaith marriage is a challenge that never fails to enrich, especially if the partners continue to respect and nurture each other’s uniqueness. The key is love, and trust in the Spirit who is an inexhaustible source of energy that continuously makes all things new.

Love and the Spirit have opened many doors for Kalpesh and me. They came in the guise of supportive friends who helped us to explore the challenges ahead, brought about healing and reconciliation, and gave us the gift of a wedding ceremony we will never forget. They were there in the response of our families who were challenged to move beyond their own desires. And sacrament or not, they were there in our midst as our two families took up the offertory gifts, as the Pandit invited my mother to give us her blessings, as Kalpesh and I took the seven pheras around the sacred fire and exchanged rings and sacred vows at the altar. They have wrought a miracle in our lives.

I laugh now when I recall my fear of being a “minority” Christian. My Hindu father-in-law, who mediates every dawn and goes for a daily teaching, makes sure I never miss Sunday mass when I stay with him. There is curiosity about my rituals, and interest in the teachings of Christ. Not a Christmas or an Easter has gone by without phone calls or cards from my Hindu cousins. Christmas cake is much in demand, and Santa Claus has gained an entry into my young nieces’ and nephews’ lives! This year Kalpesh’s parents brought in Christmas with us, and the only “home-made” sweets in our house were those made by my mother-in-law!

My family, not to be outdone, comes laden with sweets to my in-laws’ home at Diwali, even my 86-year-old mother who once objected (because it was Hindu) to a hindu (the red dot on a woman’s forehead, usually a sign of marriage, but also a symbol of shakti, or “woman power”). From a household of carnivores they have been converted into a household that not only appreciates varied vegetarian fare, but one that has learned to cook it to accommodate my Hindu family. Hindus and Christians, we are all more comfortable with each other now. We are no longer concerned about what the church or the community expects, but about how we can express our respect and love for each other.

The biggest catalysts in this transformation have been our
children. My mother-in-law, a strict vegetarian, has been reduced to feeding her grandchildren chicken at a function. And at my nephew’s first Holy Communion, Gayatri, just two and a half years old, drew her Hindu grandparents into the church, made a beeline for the cross, and ordered them to bow and say, “Jai-Jai.” Who could refuse her magnetic charm?

Over the years, my mother has learned to put aside her shotgun and forgive her son-in-law for stealing her daughter. A couple of years ago she accompanied us to Sri Aurobindo’s (Kalpesh’s guru’s) ashram in Pondicherry, and felt at peace. One day at home she watched three-year-old Ashutosh pick up a little book of mantras by Sri Aurobindo and the Divine Mother, and “read” aloud. Some time later her curiosity got the better of her. She picked up the book and browsed through it. “I want a copy,” she said, “I’d like to say them, but to my God.” And to think that nine years ago I was worried about her reaction to the use of Gujarati bhajans in our nuptial service!

Reaching this stage, however, has taken patience, dialogue, evolution over time, and a rootedness in the Spirit who knows no spiritual boundaries. We have been through our fights – misunderstandings, ego clashes, deep-seated prejudices. Like the time when Gayatri, when a four-year-old, dropped a bombshell: “I don’t want to hear stories about Krishna. I only want stories about Jesus.” I like Jesus, because on his birthday Santa Claus brings everyone presents.” Suddenly Kalpesh was accusing, and I was on the defensive. “You know I would never say anything against Hinduism to the children. And I wouldn’t use the time I have with them to brainwash them about Christianity.” But silently I wondered. If I curb my Christian spirit for fear of offending my husband, will I not be depriving my children of a precious part of me? Must I match his neglect with mine, or challenge him to do his bit?

Obviously, if we were to prevent religious freedom from degenerating into religious bankruptcy, we had to grow ourselves, embrace each other and break the barriers limiting us. We had not only to tune in to the revealing voice of God in another religion, but examine our own “truths” by going back to the Source of all Truth, and answer some very basic questions, such as, “Who is God?”, and “What is really essential for my faith?” We had to confront our prejudices. There could be no comparisons (“Mine is the only way”) and judgements (“Idol worshipers”. “You are all obsessed with conversion”), only a respect for the human person. And finally, we had to learn not just to appreciate the other’s freedom without feeling threatened, but to celebrate our differences, for as Bishop Pierre Claverie, a contemporary martyr of Algeria, has said, “If we accept that no one possesses God, then we all have need of other people’s truth.” It is part of a process that may continue throughout our lifetime, one that requires a determined effort. For my husband and me it has meant reading, reflecting, consulting women and men in whom we experience the Spirit, experimenting, and, most important, remaining ourselves always open to the Spirit.

There are still many unanswered questions in our lives. The one that challenges us continually is, “Won’t you confuse your children, exposing them to two different religious traditions?” Interestingly, it is a question posed only by Catholics, never by Hindus. Only time will provide an answer. In the meantime we have learned some valuable lessons, not the least of which version, edited by Christopher Lamb, has been published.

Facing challenges and resolving conflicts has helped us to grow as persons. It has made for a closer and more caring marital relationship. We have learned to be sensitive to each other’s feelings, to be creative in working out alternatives, to be flexible in our demands and often just to be silently patient. As a result, our lives have been enriched with a cultural and religious diversity, and God, divested of so many limiting beliefs, has become truly the Mystery which we have learned to live with humbly.

Sadly, as yet there is no place for inter-religious marriages in the institutional Church. They are discouraged, ignored and pushed to the margins – this despite the fact that such marriages are on the increase in India. In Bombay alone, in 1994 ten per cent of the marriages celebrated in Catholic churches involved a non-Catholic partner. This does not include those marriages not registered in Church because the Catholic partner cannot sign the form requiring a promise to baptise her/his children.

We urgently need to realise that interfaith marriages cannot be governed by the existing rules. The entire context is different. Where traditional marriage encourages a uniformity of worship, interfaith marriages have to make space for religious pluralism and work towards unity in diversity. We have to start from the life experience of couples and evolve new ways of experiencing Christ. We have to provide fresh guidelines that will consider the complex reality of these marriages. It is part of taking seriously our responsibility to provide pastoral care to such couples (can. 1063).

We need to offer counselling, and the opportunity to meet couples in stable interfaith marriages (can. 1064). We need a wedding liturgy that is a call to true evangelicalism, inclusive of God’s presence in other religions. We need wedding vows that are respectful of all the bonds of love uniting the couple – to each other, their families, and their children yet to come. We need to make available spiritual directors who truly know and love the Spirit in other religions. Most important, we need to welcome interfaith couples. Instead of talking to them in hushed whispers, and trying to sweep them under the carpet, let us celebrate God’s gift of love to them and together search for ways of transforming it into the God-experience of a lifetime. It may be one way of making visible the presence of Christ.

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala

INTERFAITH MARRIAGE GUIDELINES
Two documents on interfaith marriages have recently been prepared and published ecumenically.

Marriages between Christians and Muslims: Pastoral Guidelines for Christians and Churches in Europe has been jointly prepared by the Islam in Europe Committee of the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European (Catholic) Episcopal Conferences. An English version, edited by Christopher Lamb, has been published by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (1998, £2.95).
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 seminarists,
- relatives and godparents,
- marriage counsellors and teachers,
- marriage preparation teams,
- baptism preparation teams,
- those preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation,
- in fact, to all who are or expect to be in any way responsible for the pastoral care of mixed marriages and interchurch families in all their variety.

Towards Christian unity
The journal is also addressed to:
- ecumenical officers,
- ecumenical commissions,
- in fact, to all concerned with the movement towards Christian unity, for in interchurch families the pain of Christian division and the celebration of Christian unity is focused at its most local level. An interchurch family is a "domestic church", and interchurch families are the smallest units of "Churches Together".

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

The 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 $15 to cover bank charges.)

THE ASSOCIATION

The Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) supports a 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 had found that the exchange of experience with others in similar situations could help each find its own way forward.
There are local AIF groups throughout England. A national conference is held every year at Swannwick 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 network of informed people who are ready to respond.

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

The Association is a registered charity (no. 283811) dependent on the 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 Council, Dr Kenneth Greet.

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 Association of Interchurch Families in Britain and Ireland includes the four English, Scottish and Irish sister-associations. There are 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
Scottish AIF (SAIF), 14 Sandhead Road, Strathaven ML10 6HX
Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA), 25 Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7FE
Irish Republic
AIFI, c/o Irish School of Eccumenics, Milltown Park, Dublin 6
France
Foyers Mixtes, Centre St-Étienne, 2 place Gantelet. Lyon f 69002
Italy
Coppie Interconfessionali, Giorni Marchesi, via Scipio Slataper 13, 20125 Milan
Austria
ARGE, Okteneinger Wolfgang Hunker, Eenfjeldgasse 34/107, A-2830 Perchtoldsdorf
Germany
Kaiser-Friedrich-Stadt. Seminar c/o Lauber Suedstrasse 22-B 711263
West der Stadt USA
American AIF (AIAF), 16672 Algonquin Street # B, Huntington Beach, CA 92649-3233
Canada
Canadian AIF (CAI), c/o Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, 2065 Shepherds West Street, Montreal, Quebec H3H 1G6
Australia
Interchurch Families Association (Western Australia) (IFAWA), 62 Tweeddale Road, Applecross, Western Australia 6153
Interchurch Families Association, Brisbane (IFAB), 14 Ord Street, Greenslopes, Queensland 4120
New Zealand
Association of Interchurch Families (New Zealand), 6 Beattice Road, Remuera, Auckland 5

http://www.aifw.org/aif.htm

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
at the Ecumenical Centre
Geneva
23-28 July 1998
Interchurch Families and the Churches les foyers mixtes et les églises
Pan 2000 Towards the Millennium
Further information from: Foyers Mixtes, Centre St-Étienne, 2 place Gantelet, Lyon f 69002
FRANCE