For the Association of Interchurch Families in England there have been three outstanding events in 1998. First, Fr John Coventry, SJ, founder-member of AIF in 1968, Co-chair 1986-97 and President 1997-1998, died in April. Second, the first bilingual World Gathering of Interchurch Families was held in Geneva in July, hosted by foyers mixtes but bringing together both French and English-speaking families. Third, the Bishops of England and Wales, in association with the Bishops of Scotland and Ireland, issued their long-awaited guidelines on eucharistic sharing for interchurch families in October, in the context of a teaching document on the eucharist, One Bread One Body.

There are many echoes from Geneva in this number of Interchurch Families. We shall return later to a study of One Bread One Body (AIF’s initial response is available on request). We shall also return to the subject of John Coventry’s contribution to the theology and pastoral care of interchurch families. In the meantime we are glad to print this tribute to him by Fr Michael Hurley, SJ, founder of the Irish School of Ecumenics, who will give the first John Coventry Memorial Lecture at 2.15 pm on 6th March 1999 at Heythrop College, London (details from AIF).

John Coventry, SJ
In October 1969, John Coventry and I were both in Chicago attending a meeting of the International Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists; these take place every two years. Dublin was chosen as the venue for the 1971 Congress with John as President and me as Secretary. That was how John and I came to work closely together.

When the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) began in Dublin the year after Chicago, John gave it every encouragement and support. During the 1970s we so arranged things that, as soon as second teaching term was over at Heythrop and in Cambridge, John would come across and take a short course with double periods on ‘Interchurch Marriage’. John played a large part in the preparations for ISE’s 1974 International Consultation on Mixed Marriage, the proceedings of which were published the following year under the title Beyond Tolerance. He introduced me to Gordon Dunstan of King’s College, London, and to Adrian Hastings, both of whom made particularly significant contributions to the Consultation. John himself contributed two papers, one on ‘Positions and Trends in Britain’ and the other on ‘Baptising the Children’, and he was the principal drafter of the ‘Final Statement’.

It was from John and Gordon Dunstan that the idea originated of an annual ISE London lecture, held at King’s College. This began in 1977 and continued until quite recently; it gave an English platform to some distinguished Irish academics of all religious and political traditions and helped in its own way to give the infant ISE some status and stature in the older, larger academic world.

John’s visits to Ireland were not confined to the South. At the 1974 International Consultation in Dublin he made friends with members of the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) who invited him to address their first weekend conference at Corrymeela in North Antrim in January 1976. For many years afterwards his annual visit to ISE included an overnight stay in Belfast, meeting NIMMA members and saying a house mass for them.

John was generous in sharing himself, his time, his energies, his experience and his expertise. He made a special visit to Dublin in 1993 to help launch the Festschrift which Oliver Rafferty, also of the British Jesuit Province, edited for my 70th birthday. I was very happy therefore to accept the invitation to give the first John Coventry Memorial Lecture and very honoured, of course, to receive it.

Michael Hurley, SJ
Participants in the World Gathering of Interchurch Families were invited to a celebration of the Lord’s Supper held in the Cathedral of St Peter, Geneva, on Sunday 26 July 1998. What follows is a translation of the sermon preached in French by the Revd Anne-Lise Nerjin, pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church, and a member of the cathedral staff. Anne-Lise and her husband, also a pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church, were part of the Swiss group responsible for local arrangements for the World Gathering, and took part in the whole of the conference. One of the English couples present at Geneva wrote: “Sunday morning in the cathedral was magnificent; we could feel Calvin shifting in his chair in the corner.” Others made the point that there was no interpretation or translation of the sermon. So we offer this translation to them, and to all those readers who were not at Geneva, with much gratitude to Anne-Lise.


What were you doing at midnight? There are so many possibilities: you might have been asleep or awake, reading or watching television, taking the dog for a walk or saying goodbye to visitors, engaging in personal reflection or taking a shower. It is not difficult to put ourselves into the situation of the man – one of us, said Jesus – who was disturbed in the middle of the night by a friend. Midnight: it’s the point where time stops until tomorrow begins.

Nor is it difficult to apply this parable to our Christian lives, to the life of our churches, and to say: well, we are interchurch families, we are working for ecumenism, for human rights, for the underprivileged, for so many good causes, and we have knocked at the doors of our institutional churches, and they have told us they don’t want to be disturbed in their sleep! How shocking!

It is not difficult to see ourselves as the friend who came at an inconvenient time and received nothing to eat: I wanted to go to church, to the service, I wanted to open the Bible, to meet a priest or a pastor, some parishioners, and I found nothing, received nothing; I was left hungry.

Nor is there a problem in recognising ourselves in that man who was disturbed at midnight, and we say to ourselves: of course some things are urgent, but a lot can wait until tomorrow; my family and I have a right to our rest if we are to keep going, and people must respect the time for stopping and being quiet.

Yes, it is easy to use the parable to reinforce the feeling that we are right, whichever person it is with whom we identify.

But it is easy too to see that the parable has more than that to teach us. What is it?

There are two things in the text we need to note.

**Human relationships give us no rights**

First, you will have noticed that it is a friend who goes to find a friend because another friend has arrived at his home. So there is a network of friendship. It is strong enough for the friend in the middle to dare to appear in the middle of the night, recognising he has nothing to offer. If he dares to do that, it’s real friendship. But you will notice that the story goes on: if he doesn’t get up because he is your friend, he will get up because you are not ashamed to go on asking. Not embarrassed. Friendship counts for nothing. It gives no right to anything.

The love which unites the partners in an interchurch family, the friendship which links interchurch families together, the friendship which links the members of a group or a parish: it gives no right to anything.

It is not because of our love or our friendship that we can demand to receive bread and to share it. It is not because we love one another with love or friendship that we can demand unity, because unity, or eucharistic hospitality, or the recognition of ministries and theologies is not a right linked to our spirit of concord and our happy affinities with one another.

The man in the parable doesn’t get up because of his friendship. He gets up because his friend is not ashamed to go on asking. Because it is midnight: and here is another point for our reflection.

**The hour of judgement**

Second, it is midnight. What happens at midnight, according to the Bible? Always terrible things. It is when the angel of the Lord passes over the houses of the Egyptians and all the first-born sons die, while the homes of the Israelites are spared. It is when Samson tears down the gates of the city of Gaza.

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It is when young Eutychus, in the book of Acts, can no longer manage to keep awake listening to Paul’s sermon, and falls from the window. And in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, it is when the bridegroom arrives and the door closes.

Midnight: the hour when we are disturbed is important. It is the hour of judgement. It is the hour when one finishes, never to come again, and another day begins, the critical hour at which time is no longer the same. The hour which changes the criteria for action. At midnight, friendship no longer counts. Patience no longer counts. Sharing is decided by other criteria. Even unity changes its category.

It’s no good to say any longer: I’m sorry, I’ve mistaken a fish for a serpent, I’ve mistaken an egg for a scorpion. But all the same, I’m not a bad person.

It’s no good to say any longer: by friendship, do this or that for us. At midnight, we have to let go of our embarrassment, our respectability; we have to knock, demand, seek. And ask without shame for the one thing that we lack: the Holy Spirit.

Our Father in heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask

The Holy Spirit: not bread, not even the eucharistic bread. Not unity. Because unity, and eucharistic sharing, I am convinced, are not ends to be attained, but means.

The end is the life which God gives us, his Holy Spirit who enlightens us, full understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who came to share our suffering, divisions and death, and bring them to an end for ever. Unity, the sharing of bread, are the means by which we declare this reality in our lives.

Using a vocabulary which is special, well-rounded and religious, the apostle Paul says it in his own way: I pray for you without ceasing. Without ceasing. Night and day, midnight and always. Because the Gospel makes progress, grows in you and in the world. I pray for you always.

Prayer too is a means, not an end. It is a means of making known our impoverishment and our needs, until the day and hour of judgement comes. In that hour we shall be without embarrassment and shame in saying to God: “My friend, I need bread, I need unity, I need your Spirit, for myself, for my friends. I have nothing. I depend totally on you. I know you will give me all that I need.”

We shall all return to our homes, be they near or far.

Here the bread and the wine of the Supper are offered to us. It may be that we shall share them. But however that may be, we know that having asked for the Holy Spirit, God will give us his Spirit, and we give him thanks without ceasing. Amen.
We love one another

On Monday mornings it is the custom of the staff of the World Council of Churches and others who work at the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, to meet together in the chapel for worship. Because they were meeting at the Centre, interchurch families joined them on Monday 27th July 1998. A short address was given by Martin Reardon; we print the text below.

Greetings and gratitude to you who work here at the Ecumenical Centre from Associations of Interchurch Families/Foyers Interconfessionnels from countries as far apart as Australia and Austria, as different as Canada, Northern Ireland and Croatia! Gratitude to you for allowing us to meet here — gratitude also for all you do to promote Christian unity. We are nearly two hundred people from marriages where one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a Christian from another confession.

Most of you who work in this building chose to come here because you were committed to the ecumenical movement. We fell in love with one another and found, whether we liked it or not, that we were part of the ecumenical movement. As Pope John Paul II has said: "You live in your marriages the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity."

Love one another

I think you and we can help one another. You help us because there is no solution to our difficulties until our churches are united. We can help you by reminding you and our churches that Christian relationships (God’s love for us, our love for God, and our love for one another in Christ) are at the heart of the ecumenical movement — just as love is at the heart of marriage and family life. Faith and Order is important, Life and Work is important, Solidarity with the poor and the marginalized is important, yes, even institutional unity and church mergers are important — but without love all these are nothing.

This is the message of the two readings we have just heard: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love. What I command you is to love one another." (John 15:9-17)

"Bear with one another, forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same... Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God; and never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus." (Colossians 3:12-17)

Growing into unity

If love is to flourish it needs a stable and growing relationship. That is what the marriage covenant provides. In the Old and New Testament God provides such a covenant with his people. In the Old Testament this has its source in the constant loving-kindness of God towards his people and the Law is laid down to guide his people’s response. Jesus establishes the new covenant in his blood, showing God’s love for us, calling forth our response of love for God and our love for one another in him.

Fifty years ago the member churches of the World Council of Churches entered into a covenant with one another to "stay together". Six years later at Evanston they said they intended to "grow together". Ten years later still the Roman Catholic Church committed itself to the ecumenical movement, though not through full membership of the World Council of Churches. We are deeply grateful for the remarkable progress towards Christian unity during the last fifty years.

And yet when we compare the experience of a good marriage with the relationship between the churches, it raises questions. Where would our marriages be if we did not live together under the same roof, if we did not share all our goods and finances with one another, if we did not eat together day by day, if we did not share together in the education of our children? We are told that marriages where commitment, communication and cohesion are lacking are liable to end in divorce. We want to share our experience of all these wonderful things with our churches, because we fear that if our churches do not follow our example, the ecumenical movement could end in divorce.

We are not confused

Interchurch families/Foyers interconfessionnels are not separate from the churches; we are part of the churches, and we want the churches to listen to our experience and the experience of our children.

When we began to bring up our children in the life of our two churches, many people in our churches said that we would confuse them. It was an anxious time for many of us — could the critics be right? However, as our children grew older they overheard these criticisms and the reply of many of them is devastating. "We are not confused," they say to the churches. "because there is only one God and one Jesus Christ who called us into one flock. It is not we who are confused. It is those of you who continue to believe that there can be separated churches belonging to one God and to one Jesus!"

Martin Reardon

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Participants at the Geneva World Gathering of Interchurch Families were very grateful to Bishop Pierre Duprey, General Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, for coming to Geneva to share with them his ecumenical testimony. He graciously interrupted his participation as an observer at the Lambeth Conference of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion to fly to Geneva to address the Gathering on 24th July, before returning again to Canterbury. Before the Second Vatican Council Fr Pierre Duprey was involved in ecumenical work when he was at the White Fathers’ Seminary of St Anne’s in Jerusalem. During and since the Council he has been engaged in the work of the Secretariat (later the Pontifical Council) for Promoting Christian Unity. The conference was privileged to be able to hear the testimony of someone who has had responsibility for relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches over such a long period. What follows is a summary made from notes taken of his address, which was given in French without a full text.

I want to explain how we work – the spirit in which we work at the Pontifical Council. It was an organism born with the Second Vatican Council, as one of the means by which Pope John XXIII could carry out his intention of promoting Christian unity. The conciliar Decree on Ecumenism speaks of conversion of heart and of the renewal of Christian communities (you can’t promote unity between corpses!). That is the authentic spirit of unity in the Roman Catholic Church.

An irrevocable commitment to Christian unity
It is a spirit which Pope John Paul II has made clear that he shares right from the very beginning of his pontificate. A small incident will illustrate this. After his consecration the Pope was scheduled to meet the leaders of other churches who had come to Rome for the ceremony at a certain time; the Pontifical Council was to prepare the reception. As soon as he heard that there was a problem – some of the leaders were not able to stay in Rome until Tuesday because they had other pressing engagements – Pope John Paul instantly decided: "I’ll meet them on Sunday afternoon". It was an early indication of the strong personal commitment to the deepening of relationships with other churches which has marked his pontificate.

The task of the Pontifical Council is to make the commitment of the Catholic Church to the one ecumenical movement irreversible – in persons, in communities, in the church.

This has been written in to canon law in the 1983 Code: it pertains especially to the entire College of Bishops and to the Apostolic See to foster and direct among Catholics the ecumenical movement, the purpose of which is the restoration of unity between all Christians which, by the will of Christ, the Church is bound to promote. It is a matter likewise for Bishops and, in accordance with the law, for Episcopal Conferences, to promote this same unity (can.755). The fact that this is actually written in to the Code can make a difference to those who are not personally very enthusiastic about the ecumenical movement.

The Ecumenical Directory
An important task of the Pontifical Council was the preparation of the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism. In first place comes a chapter on why Catholics should be in the ecumenical movement – because personal conviction is central to it. Some people only wanted us to produce norms, but we knew it was of immense importance to explain why the Catholic Church is committed to Christian unity.

We are very committed to this with the World Council of Churches. The Ecumenical Directory goes on to talk about practical collaboration, and this is very important too. There may be too many documents around but it can be useful to get commitments written down on paper. The really essential thing of course is to work on the mentality of the bishops and the clergy. The ecumenical dimension of theological education needs urgently to be developed.

Ut Unum Sint
When Pope John Paul II said he wanted to issue an encyclical on ecumenism we reminded him that we had already produced the Directory. "No. that’s not enough for me", was the reply: "I really want to express my own personal conviction about unity. I want to say frankly that I have a personal conviction that as Bishop of Rome I have a special role in the service of unity and want other churches to help me reflect on it. We must find a way of the papacy a service of unity for all the churches."

There have been many valued replies to the encyclical. We were beginning to prepare a meeting at which they could be studied together by representatives of other churches and world communions; sadly the staff-member of the Pontifical Council who was preparing this meeting has died from cancer. It was he (a German) who worked very hard on the Roman Catholic/Lutheran declaration which has just been accepted.
We believe that we have come to a fundamental agreement on the question of justification by faith, a question which was at the root of the Reformation, by going back to the reality, re-examining the technical language which was used at the time of the Reformation. It is in no sense simply a verbal agreement. But now it has to be received by Catholics and Lutherans who have been educated against one another, as it were.

In the Pontifical Council we realise that it is a real sacrifice for the bishops round the world to send good people to us, people they would have wanted to keep in their own dioceses. But we need a really good team, and one which works well together, if we are to fulfil our role in the church.

Collaboration with the World Council of Churches

The first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (from 1948) was Pastor Willem Visser ’t Hooft, and the first Secretary of the Pontifical Council (when it was formed in 1960 as the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity) was Mgr Johannes Willebrands. They were both Dutchmen, and they were friends. Willebrands consulted Visser ’t Hooft about inviting delegated observers to the Second Vatican Council, which in the event had the profound experience of living with observers from other churches who shared in the whole life of the Council.

Our collaboration with the World Council of Churches is highly developed. The Roman Catholic Church is a full member of the Faith and Order Commission, with thirty active representatives. I give two examples of our commitment to working with the World Council. We have been closely involved in work on the "Common Understanding and Vision" of the ecumenical movement, and our comments have been well received by the WCC. We are sending 25 consultant-observers to the eighth assembly of the World Council of Churches which meets in Harare, Zimbabwe in December 1998. The Roman Catholic Church is committed to working with the World Council. We have been separated since the fifth century, the Eastern Churches, and with the Oriental Churches from whom we have been separated since the fifth century, the Assyrians, the Armenians, the Ethiopians, the Malankara Churches of India, and the Assyrian Church. All this work is very slow. People are very much afraid to change a situation which has lasted for many centuries.

The rhythm of ecumenism

I’m not for a slow rhythm – if tomorrow all Christians were united, it would still be twenty centuries late. But we have to take account of the need for a fundamental change in attitudes – we need the reception of what has already been agreed in the ecumenical dialogues. This cannot be imposed; people need to be convinced: this is a New Testament insight. But I am an optimist. Optimism is a psychological consequence of hope, which is a theological virtue. But why put a limit to what God can do? Why put a limit to the reception of what God can do? Our hope in God must engender optimism.

Pierre Duprey
Quite a number of people participated for whom neither French nor English was their first language, and there was a token effort at German as well. It was a profound experience for the couples, priests and francophones—nothing like it had been attempted before, and it was a real tour de force on the part of the French.

A final message
The last morning was devoted to the production of a conference message. Single-language groups of nine were each asked to offer a sentence encapsulating what the group thought to be the most important thing it wished to say. Each had a bilingual contact in a central group, through whom comments and suggestions were relayed between groups. Finally the group statements were woven into a continuous message, which was read to the whole conference, allowing a brief opportunity to make points and suggest amendments. The process was stimulating in encouraging the groups to isolate key issues, but there was insufficient time to get everyone to agree the final message. It should be read in this light. The English translation from the French original was made by Pamela Fievet, and reviewed by Fr Ernest Falardeau, Melanie Finch and Martin Reardon.

1 Our spiritual experience
We as interchurch families live day by day a life of love, seeking after unity. We are therefore able to bear witness to our calling to work towards unity, and to our need to work towards a greater openness to, and identification with, those who do not feel truly welcome in the churches. We believe that the Church of Christ is indivisible and that fundamentally we are one, despite our denominational diversity. We ask our churches to recognise this rich diversity as a gift, as we ourselves have experienced the deepening spiritual enrichment of tolerance and mutual recognition within our marriages. We have welcomed and loved our partners because they are different, and through them we love their churches. This is a Gospel experience.

2 Our role in the churches
As interchurch couples we live a Christian marriage across denominational boundaries, suffering from the divisions between the churches. We respect the fact that our churches are trying to help. We are convinced that there is a need for joint pastoral care of our families. We find that at official levels reactions and behaviour often vary, sometimes due to personal attitudes, but mostly due to insufficient knowledge of what is currently agreed to be possible. The need for the joint pastoral care of interchurch families is urgent. We believe that, with our practical experience and reflection, we, as "laboratories of unity", can make a contribution to catechetics, joint prayer, and to the welcome and support of younger couples through our capacity to network.

3 Eucharistic hospitality
Our Lord Jesus Christ urges us to pray daily for spiritual and material bread. When the church began and for centuries afterwards, this bread was shared at the same table. As basic units of the church, inspired by the original churches meeting in homes (eclesia domestica), we implore our churches to respond to our profound need by a clear invitation to share the Lord’s Supper together, within all our Christian church communities, and thus express the entire church’s hope for unity. Eucharistic hospitality seems to us the only possible way to avoid confusion and the risk of separation from the church (a danger which in continental Europe is often referred to as the “third church”, ie neither Catholic nor Protestant).

4 Our children and young people
We strongly urge our churches to trust our children to find their place. They need to have their hopes strengthened and not to be discouraged by not being listened to. They are searching as we are for a more authentic expression of faith. In their own words: We need actions, not just words. We want to be confirmed as Christians, not as members of a specific denomination. As we are all different from one another, we would need to invent a different denomination for each one of us. Our dream is of a church which welcomes all individuals. Let us not fear change; God is on our side. It will be up to our generation to make the decisions of the church of the future.

5 Four specific proposals
1 We suggest that a prayer for forgiveness for past divisions and a thanksgiving for unity already achieved be introduced into the acts of worship of all our churches.
2 We urge our churches, in the theological and pastoral training of their ministers: to remind them constantly that ecumenism is at the heart of mission; to enable them to get to know other denominations better; to inform them more adequately about the agreed statements that have been hammered out between the churches.
3 We encourage the publication of lists of centres open to ecumenism.
4 We regret having to address two different ecumenical bodies. We call upon the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to be housed together under one roof, with a requirement to work together daily.
INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AROUND THE WORLD

They came to Geneva in July 1998 from Austria and Australia, from Canada and Croatia, from Ireland and Italy, from Sweden, Germany and the USA. Our francophone hosts formed the largest group, especially those from France (the main organising centre for the conference was in Lyon), although the number of Swiss participants was matched by those from England. This coming together from such diverse national and cultural backgrounds had never been attempted before, and it offered an amazingly enriching experience. The mutual exchanges between interchurch couples and families was at its heart. I made lots of new friends and really enjoyed myself, wrote a teenage participant from England, and spoke for many. These exchanges took place in the context of worship. The multilingual Lord's Prayer was a little glimpse of heaven, wrote an older couple.

It was even possible to be linked by email to some of those who would have liked to be there but were unable to come. Greetings came beforehand and daily reports were sent out by Canadian Ray Temmerman, who is responsible for the Interchurch Families web site and for the AIFWorld list service.

An important element in the World Gathering was the five-minute reports from the national groups. We cannot do justice to them all here, and we shall return again to some of their content in later issues.

We are not alone

In a report published in the News and Notes of AIFEngland, Rosy and Martyn Baker wrote: "It wasn’t until one of our small children had a slight accident at Graz last year that we met the Austrian interchurch family group and realised that there were other families in the same situation.” The speaker was Boris, who with his wife Marina and four children came from Zagreb to represent Croatian interchurch families. The sense of not being on our own that so many of us felt on first discovering AIF was reinforced in Geneva by meeting so many different families in so many different situations all linked in their interchurch commitment. Exchanging experiences and getting to know one another across the boundaries of language and culture as well as church tradition will be one of the more lasting memories of the occasion.”

Similarities and differences

A questionnaire sent out by Eric Lombard in preparation for Geneva brought out some differences. For example, about the same proportion of couples alternate their Sunday worship between the two churches of the partners in France, Switzerland and England, but in England, Ireland and the USA some families attend both churches every week – a practice unknown in France. A higher proportion of respondents shared communion in both churches in France and Switzerland than in English-speaking countries, but a higher proportion took part in the life and activities of both churches in England than in any other country. Organising family life seemed more of a priority in England and Ireland, while being a catalyst for unity seemed more important in Canada, France and Switzerland. It was considered more difficult to be an interchurch family child in England, Ireland and America than in France or Switzerland.

Some striking similarities came out of the presentations at Geneva. For example, in both Croatia and Northern Ireland interchurch families cross dividing lines in the community, not only church dividing lines; they can become victims of community conflicts in a way unknown to most others. From Australia, Canada and the USA we heard of the difficulties which vast distances present to the formation and running of national associations. In both Canada and England interchurch families have been working hard at holding their pastoral needs before their bishops. Some interchurch family movements have a long history – the French were the first, but the Germans and the English both celebrate their thirty years next year; others are only a few years old. All have their stories to tell, however. The Brisbane interchurch family group have recently published a collection of their experiences; more on this later. One English comment was that in the workshops it was cheering to find that experiences could be so depressingly the same.

A Free Church participant wrote that it was great to be amongst other Protestants, not just Anglicans. Another wrote that it was stimulating, exhausting, culturally fascinating, exciting . . . very French!

Looking ahead

Fr René Beaudrie, OP, has worked tirelessly for the pastoral care of interchurch families since the early nineteen-sixties, and has devoted much energy to persuading the churches that interchurch families have an ecumenical contribution to offer. He gave the opening address at Geneva and preached at the final service. Reflecting afterwards on the World Gathering, he wrote:

It was very symbolic that interchurch families were welcomed to Geneva for four days, with gratitude and friendship, at the headquarters of the World Council of Churches which brings together Anglicans, Orthodox and Protestants. Now we have to explore how we can effectively collaborate with the WCC – it won’t happen by itself – as well as with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in Rome which is called to mobilise the Catholic world “so that all may be one”. The future belongs to God. We cannot look ahead very far. But it is certain that this gathering has been an important step forward; we hope it will contribute to the renewal of the pilgrimage of the disciples of Christ towards visible unity.
Opening up ecumenical space

Participants at the Geneva World Gathering of Interchurch Families were very grateful to Pastor Konrad Raiser, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, for cutting short his holiday in order to return to Geneva to share with them his ecumenical testimony on 25th July. He spoke in English, from a written text; it has been slightly abbreviated here.

I have been invited - just like Bishop Dupuy yesterday - to share with you a testimony of ecumenical concerns and expectations. In reflecting about an appropriate focus and approach, I thought of the symbolic meaning of the French expression for an interchurch family: foyer mixte. ‘Foyer’ is a term rich in meaning. Originally the place where one makes a fire, it has come to signify the entire house or habitation surrounding a fireplace. In a still wider sense, a foyer is a place where people meet and encounter one another, for example the lobby area of an hotel or a theatre. In a figurative sense, it can be used to indicate the core of a process, the headquarters of an enterprise, or the focal point where rays of light meet and are fractured.

This rich symbolism is very appropriate for the experience of an interchurch family, but it can equally be applied to a place like the Ecumenical Centre and its role in the ecumenical movement. Most of you will be aware that the term oikoumene, from which our words ‘ecumenical’ and ‘ecumenism’ have been derived, literally refers to the whole inhabited earth. It has the same root as economy and ecology, oikos, which means house or household, and thus covers a similar range of meaning as foyer. If we follow this linguistic lead, it appears that our ecumenical calling is related to keeping inhabitable the place which has been entrusted to us, caring for the earth as the household where all the children of God, all God’s entrusted creatures, should find their place and can be at home.

The symbolism surrounding the term foyer helps us see what it takes to provide for this quality of household: you need a fireplace, or something like a round table, around which people can meet and where they feel comfortable; you need an open space which facilitates encounter while allowing differences to be expressed; you need both a clear centre of gravity and an open boundary. In most cultures this quality of the open house as a place for people to meet and to share is the obvious symbol of hospitality.

Interchurch families: household churches

In your experience as interchurch families, the search for this quality of an ecumenical space is particularly important, for in your household two Christian traditions which do not yet enjoy full communion are joined together in the closest form of human community. In many ways, of course, each marriage is an exercise of ‘double belonging’, to use René Beaupère’s very expressive formulation: two family traditions, two life histories come together, while they begin to merge, in many respects their difference never disappears totally.

Each marriage is built on a covenant in which the partners promise to stay together whatever may arrive; they engage together in a process of discovering unity in diversity. The particular identities of the partners, formed before their marriage, do not disappear even though they are being transformed by the experience of common life. The unity of the couple is never simply a given; it has to be built and shaped in a life-long process. The two partners become one, but their very union remains alive and viable only as they grant each other the freedom to remain themselves and distinct.

Double belonging

This experience of a ‘double belonging’ which lies at the core of each marriage is accentuated in the case of an interchurch couple. For any believing and practising Christian, the faith tradition into which he or she has grown is an essential element in forming personal identity. An interchurch marriage where both partners accept and respect each other in their difference while discovering and shaping their oneness in diversity, expresses the very ecumenical challenge in the everyday life situation of a given household. The experience of an interchurch family is therefore not only the place where the separation and dividedness of the churches is most painfully manifested, but it could - and in many cases does - become the ground where a new reality is being shaped, where ‘ecumenical space’ is being opened up.

A foyer mixte does anticipate the unity of the church in the form of a ‘household church’. Our understanding of church is conditioned so much by the institutional forms of ordered church life expressed in dogmatic definitions, canonical rules, ministerial and administrative structures that we hesitate to acknowledge that for generations the early church existed in the form of house churches. In our own time, Christianity has survived in China during and after the time of the cultural revolution through a network of house churches. Could this
become, for our time, the ecumenical space where we discover together what it means to be the church?

Christ is present
Indeed, we have the gospel promise that where two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ, he will be present among them, and we have the teaching of the apostle Paul that in our bodies and our relationships with each other, especially as women and men, we are meant to become a temple, a space for the Holy Spirit. Our married life, the union of husband and wife, can therefore be taken in the letter to the Ephesians as a symbol of the unity of the church as the one Body of Christ.

If this is the promise and blessing that is valid for each couple who live their married life as a life of faith, how much more is this true for an interchurch marriage, binding together into union two distinct church traditions. Rather than complaining about the institutional constraints imposed by divided church loyalties, could we not begin to focus on the promise that rests on each of these ‘household churches’ and trust that they can become an ecumenical space, a foyer, an aires or a household, which manifests the new qualities of community which we referred to above?

Ecumenical space
It is true, there are barriers and problems in sharing the eucharist together or the religious education of children, but at the same time there is the promise and opportunity of being able, under the presence of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to transcend those barriers of the institutional captivity of the churches and to develop a praxis of unity in diversity, to provide an ecumenical space of hospitality in an open house with a round table, or a fireplace, a foyer in the centre.

I believe that here we encounter the specific vocation of interchurch families, of this network of household churches. They could become a laboratory for exploring the dimensions of this ecumenical space, for discovering new symbolic acts which express the unity we already experience, for developing a language of common spirituality and providing hospitality for all who suffer from the situation of continuing division.

Perhaps it is this experience of household churches we need to inspire us to discover new ways of being the church, of building our communion from below rather than waiting for formal doctrinal and canonical agreements from above.

The impression is gaining ground that the organised ecumenical movement concerned with institutional interchurch relationships has reached the limits of what the approaches and methodologies employed so far can achieve. We need to be liberated from the institutional captivity of our church and ecumenical situation. The historic churches have become too heavy, too much tied to their past identities. The call of the Groupe des Dombres for a ‘conversion of the churches’ is more appropriate than ever.

The World Council of Churches
What does this mean for the World Council of Churches (WCC), which is the clearest expression of organised ecumenism? The World Council commemorates this year the 50th anniversary since its inaugural Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. It will be celebrated in the context of the Eighth Assembly which is to be held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in December 1998. In preparing for this assembly under the theme, Turn to God – Rejoice in Hope, the WCC has engaged with its member churches in an extensive process of reflection about a ‘Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches’. It is obvious that we cannot continue with business as usual if we want to respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

Ecumenical organisations themselves are faced with the need to move through a process of de-institutionalising to regain flexibility and liberate themselves from the constraints and complexities of structures and procedures which have grown over several decades. The crucial question emerging in many contexts is no longer how to achieve institutional and organisational church unity, but what it means to be the church in a situation where many institutional expressions of church life have lost credibility or at least do not respond to the search for spiritual meaning and viable community which is alive among many of our contemporaries, not least among the younger generation.

A draft statement of ‘Our Ecumenical Vision’ has been shared with member churches and assembly delegates, and this will serve as the basis of a service of recommitment to the ecumenical covenant on 13 December 1998. It emphasises the ecumenical movement as a process in which we find ourselves as those who have inherited a tradition and legacy from the generations that have gone before us, which deserves to be remembered and to be passed on to a new generation.

The biblical image of the pilgrim people of God, of the disciples moving in the footsteps of Christ under the promise of God’s reign, provides the central focus of this statement which thus echoes, at least indirectly, the assembly theme: Turn to God – Rejoice in Hope.

Rather than staying with this draft statement prepared for Harare, I want to continue the line of reflection opened up in the first part of my address. If the root metaphor for our ecumenical endeavour points to the space of an open house which has a clear centre round a fireplace or a round table, and if the early form of a ‘house church’ may provide a lead in our search for meaningful ways of being the church today, then we might take a new look at the central ecumenical issue of sharing the eucharist at the Lord’s Table. I propose to develop further the motif of ‘opening up an ecumenical space’ by suggesting the further image of ‘extending the ecumenical table’.

Table fellowship
The table, in most cultures, is a symbol of community. While people sit at and round tables to write and work, to take decisions, or to pass judgement, the most common use of the table is to gather a group of people to share a meal. A family or a community sharing the same house gather round the table.
for their common meal. At least in cultures where eating together is still the regular custom. You extend the table when guests are expected and additional space is needed. Most modern tables provide for this need and can be extended at least once, even twice. When the table is extended, this is mostly the occasion for a festive meal, to celebrate fellowship among friends, or a particular moment in the life of a family.

Of course, this imagery will seem remote and idealised in cultures where members of a family or of a household only rarely eat together round a table and where eating has ceased to be an expression of community life. The fast food culture may have difficulties translating the image of the extended table into everyday experience. In other cultures, like in the Pacific and in many African countries, meals have remained very much a community affair, even where they are not taken at tables, but sitting on the floor or on mats. The appropriate image then would be to add another mat to accommodate the guests at the common meal. In any case, the imagery of extending the table points to a widening of the circle of a community, to the deliberate act of sharing beyond the limits of everyday relationships.

Beyond this everyday range of meanings, the image of the table evokes a rich collection of biblical references. There is the experience of blessing associated with the table as in Psalm 23:5-6: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." More important are the many references to table fellowship in the gospels, where Jesus is depicted as sharing table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors, or engaging the scribes and Pharisees in critical dialogue over a shared meal at a common table. Jesus invites himself to the table of the tax collector Zacchaeus. Many parables speak of the kingdom of God in terms of the festive meal around the common table. This is comprehensively expressed in Luke 13:29: "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God." There is no example of a table being extended in the biblical stories, but there are many examples of invitations to guests to join table fellowship with a host, most explicitly in the parable about the festive meal where the original guests all declined and were then replaced by those collected from the street corners. The parables clearly indicate that the extended table in the kingdom of God has its own order of seating which means that there will be a reversal of status and privileges compared to human rules of etiquette. The divine host, in extending the table, is not concerned about propriety, but about opening the house for all ready to accept the invitation.

**Extending the table**

Applied to the present situation of the organised ecumenical movement, the imagery draws attention to the fact that organised ecumenism is indeed an affair only of a minority among the different parts of world Christianity. The membership of the WCC is limited largely to the churches of historic Protestantism and of Orthodoxy. Most Pentecostal churches, Evangelical churches and communities, Independent churches in Africa and Asia, are not members, even though they are part of an increasing number of national and regional ecumenical bodies. Should the WCC seek to extend its membership and to grow in the number of member churches? Should it look at the barriers which its institutional structures may present to some potential member churches, preventing them from seeking membership? Can the WCC maintain its role as the most representative and comprehensive ecumenical framework if, in fact, it only represents a minority among the world’s Christian churches? The theme “extending the ecumenical table” suggests that the 50th anniversary might be the proper moment to consider whether steps should be taken to widen the circle of the ecumenical community.

"Extending the ecumenical table" could, therefore, indeed become a very telling symbol of the ecumenical vision which seeks to manifest more fully that κοινωνία which Jesus practised in offering and seeking fellowship at the table and which is promised to us as the fullness of life in God’s kingdom. The presence of God among God’s people finds its most beautiful expression in the table fellowship with God shared by all. This κοινωνία is manifested for us in the Lord’s Supper in which we commemorate the last meal which Jesus shared with his disciples and anticipate the meal of communion in God’s kingdom. Extending the ecumenical table, therefore, also raises the issue of eucharistic fellowship and hospitality. While sharing together in fellowship at the Lord’s Table remains the hope inspiring the ecumenical movement, it points at the same time to the contradictions in our present ecumenical reality. Can we seriously consider extending the ecumenical table when in fact this table is divided and broken?

**A common table?**

We need to consider further the question of a ‘common ecumenical table’ before we can seriously approach the possibility of extending the table. A brief historical
recollection will remind us that at the Fourth Assembly in Uppsala (1968) eucharistic celebrations were still held separately according to the different traditions. There had been guidelines from the Faith and Order Commission suggesting that at major ecumenical conferences two eucharistic services should be offered, one of which should include an open invitation, but all participants should be invited to both liturgies, and a common service of preparation and repentance should be held prior to the eucharistic liturgies. When in 1982 the Lima texts on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry were made public, they were accompanied by the so-called ‘Lima liturgy’ which served as the basis for the open eucharistic celebration at the Vancouver assembly in 1983 at which the Archbishop of Canterbury presided. This is remembered by many as a unique ecumenical experience and has nourished the hope that in future such common eucharistic celebrations might take place at all assemblies. The fact that the majority of churches of the Protestant tradition have meanwhile entered officially, or at least de facto, into a relationship of full communion has further strengthened this hope. The pain and disappointment felt by many assembly delegates at Canberra in 1991, when they could not share in the communion at the Orthodox eucharistic liturgy shows that it has become increasingly difficult to interpret the eucharistic discipline of the churches which are still divided at ecumenical conferences and assemblies. The doctrinal and canonical reasons are obviously in conflict with a rapidly evolving ecumenical situation and do not respond to the pastoral and spiritual needs of active participants in the ecumenical movement.

The question whether a ‘common eucharist’ could be celebrated at the Harare assembly was seriously considered by the Worship Committee and led to a painful and passionate discussion in the Central Committee. The solution, to celebrate the eucharist at the invitation of four churches of different traditions is an honest response to the fact of basic disunity which still limits the possibilities of hospitality at the ecumenical table.

It should be recognised, however, that in a number of churches and countries a praxis of open or tacit eucharistic hospitality has developed between Protestant and Catholic communities. This praxis tries to address in particular the situation of couples who share in an interchurch marriage, or of ecumenical groups and base communities who have grown together in close fellowship through common ecumenical action. For doctrinal and canonical reasons, the Orthodox churches have rejected both the notion of intercommunion and the praxis of eucharistic hospitality, emphasising that eucharistic communion can only be considered as the sign of full church unity.

Eucharist and church

Under the impulsion of a renewal of eucharistic theology both in Orthodoxy and in post-conciliar Catholicism, an eucharistic understanding of the unity of the church has moved into the centre of ecumenical dialogue. The sharing of the eucharist has become the central symbol for the unity we seek. The more this eucharistic emphasis has shaped ecumenical considerations about the unity of the church, the more the impossibility to share a common ecumenical table has become a symbol of division. We have accepted the eucharist as the touchstone of our ecumenical endeavour to an extent that it has paralysed our ability to engage more fully in the act of breaking bread together.

Sharing a simple meal

Perhaps we need to recapture and remind ourselves again of the praxis of the early Christian communities in apostolic times celebrating the eucharist as part of a common meal, the agape. The eucharist then was not yet set apart as a liturgical act. Paul’s discussion with the congregation at Corinth (I Cor. 11:17 ff.) provides some insight into this situation.

The contradictions of the present ecumenical situation could be eased if we could develop a new praxis of sharing a simple meal to affirm our ecumenical fellowship, to invoke God’s blessing on the food, and to rejoice together. This might also inspire new forms of sharing a meal with the poor in our communities, beyond maintaining soup kitchens. It could integrate the symbol of a fasting meal as a sign of repentance and of opening ourselves to the healing presence of God. Such an act of non-eucharistic breaking of bread together could be a way of respecting the fact that the orders of our churches do not yet allow full eucharistic fellowship, but that the gift of new fellowship which we have received through the ecumenical movement calls for a gathering round the common table.

One ecumenical movement

The very limitations of the ecumenicity of the WCC, as expressed in its limited membership, should of course invite us to think about ways of widening the circle. The constitutional principles of the WCC create barriers which exclude many churches from seeking membership, either because of their limited size, or because they hesitate to accept the commitment of full membership. When, in the early 1970s, the possibility of Roman Catholic membership was discussed, several options of alternative institutional arrangements were considered -- for example, reconstituting the WCC on the basis of national councils of churches, or confessional families. In the end, the Roman Catholic Church decided against seeking membership in the foreseeable future. This situation has not changed, even though the Roman Catholic Church has since joined more than 50 national council of churches and three of the regional conferences of churches. There are no indications that institutional or constitutional changes would facilitate the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into a structured ecumenical fellowship on world level. While conditions are different for the large number of Pentecostal churches, or for conservative Evangelical communities, it does not seem possible to include a larger number of them in full membership.
From another perspective, questions have been raised about the desirability of 'extending the ecumenical table' in the sense of increasing the number of member churches. The Orthodox churches have increasingly expressed concern about the increase in the number of very small Protestant churches being received into membership, while the number of Orthodox member churches remains unchanged. In order to redress the balance and secure a proper place for the large churches of the Orthodox tradition in the fellowship of the World Council, it has recently been proposed to reorganise the WCC according to families of churches, following the model developed in the Middle East Council of Churches. Discussion about this has only just begun; it is too early to anticipate the outcome.

An ecumenical forum?

The image of the guest joining the extended table of an existing community is misleading if it is applied to the present ecumenical situation. The Roman Catholic Church is not a guest coming from outside, but is a full partner in the one ecumenical movement. This is also true for an increasing number of Pentecostal and Independent churches which have joined national or regional ecumenical structures. The more appropriate image would be a room with a number of separate tables at which different parties enjoy their meal. As they discover the links of fellowship between them, they decide to move their tables together to enlarge the circle. It was with a similar intention that the proposal of a 'forum of Christian churches and ecumenical organisations' was launched in the context of the reflection process on a 'Common Understanding and Vision' of the WCC. This proposal acknowledges the fact that the ecumenical movement is a network of a great diversity of partners who all contribute to the one ecumenical movement in distinct ways. They agree and affirm in principle that there is only one ecumenical movement, while in practice they sometimes find themselves in conflict or competition with one another. Since the Canberra assembly, the WCC has been engaged in active dialogue with Pentecostals, Evangelicals and Independent churches, and for more than 30 years with the Roman Catholic Church. These different relationships have so far not been co-ordinated and linked with the ongoing ties of association with national councils of churches and regional conferences. Recently the WCC has recognised the working relationship with a variety of international ecumenical organisations as constitutive partners in the ecumenical movement.

The proposal of an ecumenical forum is intended to extend the ecumenical table in the sense of developing a praxis of fellowship without structural limitations and conditions. The modalities of this proposal are being developed, and the process of exploring its viability with the main ecumenical partners is under way. It might be advisable to start implementing the forum proposal on the regional or even national level before extending it to the global level. In any case, those invited to this extended ecumenical table should go beyond 'heads of churches' and include all parts of the people of God.

There is one convincing example of an extended ecumenical table which has been growing in significance, that is the World Day of Prayer. It has succeeded in bringing together members of all Christian traditions, in their majority women, for concerted ecumenical action and prayer. This suggests that structural arrangements are less important in extending the ecumenical table than are simple symbolic acts which can serve as crystallising foci for the manifestation of ecumenical fellowship.

Harare and after

I have intended with these brief pointers to the present discussion within the WCC in preparation for the Harare assembly to provide some examples of where the search for widening the ecumenical space and extending the table is taking place, and its preliminary conclusions. The WCC as an organisation rooted largely in the historic church traditions is exposed to the same disappointments and constraints that characterise ecumenism in terms of interchurch relationships. The continuing ecumenical movement has drawn its vitality from ecumenical experience and endeavours beyond the formal church structures. Meanwhile the WCC is drawn into the same process of transformation that is beginning to change the religious profile of many countries. In the 21st century, world-wide Christianity will probably be shaped much less by the traditions of the historic churches. In visiting member churches in countries in the southern hemisphere, the priority concern I find myself confronted with is not the question of Christian unity in the traditional sense, but a common understanding and witness over against new religious movements and in a situation of growing religious plurality.

It is against this background that I am convinced of the need to widen the ecumenical space and to extend our ecumenical tables. I believe that the experience of interchurch families interpreted as a 'household church' can indeed provide important insights and encouragement for the wider Christian community. It is in this sense that I express my grateful recognition for the contribution you have already made and will continue to make to the wider ecumenical movement.

Konrad Raiser
In 1996 teenage and young adult members of the Association of Interchurch Families – interchurch “children” – took part in a conference in Birmingham. Here one of them writes about the steps she was led to take after the discussions at Birmingham.

I went to the Birmingham conference in June 1996 and enjoyed a great weekend which, apart from declaring me to be the worst pool player ever, really got me thinking. I went home from the conference very enthused about ecumenism, and joint confirmation in particular – and promptly forgot all about it (the confirmation bit, that is, not the conference).

At the time, it didn’t really apply to me as I was too young to become involved in the confirmation process in my two churches, Anglican and Catholic. I had heard my parents and other AIF adults discussing the problems of getting married, baptism, first communion, and so on, and had even joined in with the older AIF kids in talking about confirmation, but it wasn’t really my problem. Then suddenly the confirmation season arrived, and within three weeks I found myself enrolled in two sets of confirmation classes and becoming the bane of our local priests’ existences. I was about to make a name for myself with the local churches.

Similarities not differences
I attended the classes in both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, and found them practically the same. I had been hoping that the classes would show me the differences between the two denominations, but all that was emphasised were the similarities.

Once I had enrolled, I was very unsure about what to do next. I didn’t really know what I wanted, or what I had a feasible chance of getting during the six months before the confirmation services. My brother had decided to “go with the flow” and be confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church, and I was tempted to do the same. I became a regular fixture in my Anglican priest’s living room, where he helped to fill me in on what the church allowed and rejected. He advised me that I would always be welcome in the Church of England even if I was confirmed as a Roman Catholic, but that it didn’t work the other way round. The Anglican priest was very helpful and supportive, though my Catholic priest was less so. I think he was rather confused about what I was trying to achieve, and wished that I would stop disturbing his careful plans. Who could blame him? I started to invent my own plans.

My “invention”
After a lot of soul searching, and some long, deep, and often surprising conversations with many different people, I decided that I didn’t want just to be confirmed one way or the other. I wanted both, and why shouldn’t I stand up and tell people what I wanted? I realised that a true joint confirmation was not going to happen within my six-month time-scale, so I “invented” affirmation. I went to the top and wrote to both my bishops.

I had to make up a part for myself in the two services. My Catholic bishop was great; when I wrote to him explaining what I wanted, I received in reply a very nice letter saying that what I suggested was perfectly acceptable. I rather flustered our poor Catholic priest by demanding that my name should be included on the list of confirmation candidates, so that he didn’t brush me into a corner. Eventually it went into the programme with the other names, but in its own special “affirmation” category.

The service was really lovely. When the other candidates stood up and renewed their baptismal vows, I joined them. Then we went up as a family to the bishop where my brother was confirmed with the oil and I received a special blessing. In the Anglican church, one candidate was being baptised before being confirmed, and at that time I stepped forward and affirmed my faith. Again I went up to the bishop with the others and was blessed as they were confirmed.

I was really glad that I had made the effort to stand up for what I believe and show that I can fight for things I feel strongly about. It also proved to me that I am not a wimp! I hope that some day it will be possible for me to be confirmed in both churches, but for the moment affirmation is my first step.

Karen McRandal
We sat in our parish priest’s sitting room discussing our wedding celebrations. It was a curious sensation, as we had done this before – twenty-five years earlier. The celebrations this time were for our Silver Wedding.

The actual anniversary was in April. Liz was still recovering from an illness, so it was a quiet family time which meant a great deal to us. Later we began to feel that we should like to do something in the community in which we had worshipped for 25 years. Eventually many things came together to provide a day we shall not forget.

We felt that the Catholic church was the place where we should like to celebrate and part of this celebration needed to be that we both received communion. Two things made this much easier than it might have been. Our recently-arrived parish priest, a man of warmth and enthusiasm, is the diocesan ecumenical officer, and he and Brian had worked together building up interchurch relationships in the neighbourhood.

Secondly, we had already met the new Catholic bishop – he had come to our house to share a meal with the Sheffield AIF, and had listened and responded sympathetically to what we had said. Both he and our priest were happy for Liz to receive communion. Sadly, but not unexpectedly, they felt that they could not extend this hospitality to other non-Catholics.

We chose to celebrate during the 9.30 a.m. Family Mass which we had always attended. Our priest responded warmly to this – far from feeling that this was hijacking the Mass he felt it was an opportunity for the parish to join in affirming the value and joy of Christian marriage. He produced a newly-published liturgy for such occasions.

Brian was concerned that the interchurch nature of our marriage was in danger of being left out. We decided to ask Ruth and Martin Reardon to join us. Our priest knew Martin and was happy to welcome him to take part in the service and to preach. After that things began to fall into place, although there were far more decisions to make than we had anticipated: writing prayers, choosing music, asking people to be involved.

We invited all the congregation to join us afterwards for a drink and light refreshments in the church hall. We invited friends from our Anglican church, from other local churches and, of course, AIF friends. Our caterer responded optimistically to our total uncertainty about numbers (Liz wondered if it was like this at the marriage at Cana of Galilee?).

Most wonderful was a sense of our friends supporting us – they provided the music, read the lessons and the prayers, decorated the candle for the liturgy, served coffee and wine, prepared and cleared up the hall, travelled distances, delayed again a symbol of our unity in baptism.

Afterwards Brian wrote to the bishop to thank him and tell him of the event. He finished, "Our prayer and hope is that love could break down barriers. This response is continuing. One parishioner spoke to us of a liturgical breakthrough; many felt a great joy which the parish could celebrate in this way. Some Christian friends had never been in a Catholic church before, and there was a real sense of Christian hospitality.

For us there has been a continued sense of blessing. None of this could have taken place without relationships which already existed and without the openness and support of all those involved. For years we have attended our churches, feeling inevitably that we did not quite fit the mould. This time the mould fitted round us. This made the celebration of our marriage within our Catholic community, with AIF involvement to the fore, more of a joy than it is easy to express.

Afterwards Brian wrote to the bishop to thank him and tell him of the event. He finished, "Our prayer and hope is that what can happen now only on a special occasion may soon become something that can happen on every occasion." In a warm response, the bishop wrote that he had already heard from the priest what a moving occasion it had been.

He joined in our prayer. 

Liz and Brian Dwyer
THE JOURNAL

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is a twice-yearly journal which discusses the theological and pastoral issues raised by the existence of interchurch families (especially families in which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a Christian of another denomination). It shares the experience of these families with a wider public, and helps readers keep abreast of developments which concern mixed marriages and interchurch families, in the context of the wider ecumenical movement.

Pastoral care
It is addressed to:
- interchurch couples,
- clergy and ministers,
- theological students and seminarians,
- relatives and godparents,
- marriage counsellors and teachers,
- marriage training 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,
- local groupings of churches,
- in fact, to all concerned with the movement towards Christian unity, for in interchurch families the pain of Christian division and the celebration of Christian unity is focused at its most local level. An interchurch family is a "domestic church", and interchurch families are the smallest units of "Churches Together".

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

The 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 £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.)

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THE ASSOCIATION

The Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) offers a support network for interchurch families and mixed marriages and a voice for such families in the churches. Most members are interchurch couples and 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 Swanwick in Derbyshire.

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

Commitment to change
AIF members are also ready to work for increased understanding by all churches of the pastoral needs of interchurch and mixed marriage families, at local, diocesan, national and international level, as their 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. 253811) 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 Greer.

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

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

AROUND THE WORLD

The Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families in Britain and Ireland includes the four English, Scottish and Irish sister-associations, together 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
The Scottish AIF (SAIF), 14 Sandhead Road Ste. Hilda Building ML3 0HX
Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA), 28 Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7E
Irish Republic
AIF, c/o Irish School of Ecumenics, Mallowton Park, Dublin
France
Foyers Mixtes Centre St-Joseph, 2 place Gailleton, Lyon F 69002
Italy
Coppie Interconfessionali, Gianni Marcheselli, via Scipio Slataper 13, 20125 Milan
Austria
ARGE Okumen, Wolfgang Hinter Rennerfeldstrasse 34/102A, 2-380 Perchtoldsdorf
Germany
Neresheim/Domstadt Seminar, c/o Lauber, Sudeinstr. 23 D-71263 Weil der Stadt
USA
American AIF (AAIF), 16672 Algoquin Street RD, Huntington Beach, CA 92649-3233
Canada
Canadian AIF (CAIF), c/o Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, 2003 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec H3H 1G6
Australia
Interchurch Families Association (Western Australia) (IFWA), 4 Daik Place, Roeaumgran, Western Australia 6154
Interchurch Families Association (SA), 28 Bedford Street, Remuera, Auckland 5
Interchurch Families Association (New Zealand), 6 Beattie Road, Remuera, Auckland 5

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

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONFERENCES

Germany:
Neresheim 23-25 April 1999
American AIF:
Omaha 9-11 July 1999
Italian/French/Swiss:
Torre Pellice 9-12 July 1999
England:
Swanwick 28-30 August 1999

Details from addresses above.