What do we mean by interchurch families?

Who are they?

You will find a number of different definitions and different views in this number of the Interchurch Families journal. We would not want to claim a monopoly for any one of them, but each time we say "interchurch families" we do need to be clear what sort of interchurch families we are talking about.

First, we have some testimonies: from a couple preparing for marriage, of life in a "domestic church", of the celebration of baptism for an interchurch child, from an interchurch child coming to confirmation. These are from couples and families where both partners and the family members are committed to life within two church communities, which in all cases span the Reformation divide. These would tend to represent the activists in associations or groupings of interchurch families.

The Roman Catholic/Uniting Church report from Australia envisages this kind of family, but also those where the spouses do not feel involved in one another’s church communities, where only one of the partners is practising, or where neither appear committed to the church in which they were brought up. However, given wise pastoral care and encouragement, it judges some of these to be "potential interchurch marriages" - as against those it calls "mixed". I am reminded of a Protestant pastor in France, shaking his head as he looked at the gathering of Catholic-Reformed couples in front of him, eagerly discussing the difficulties of double belonging.

"I'm not worried about your problems", he said: "What worries me is all those couples who don't even know that they are Voyes mixed."

Professor Lawler's report on interchurch marriages ranges even wider. He is dealing with all kinds of marriages where two denominations were involved in some way when the couple met - not necessarily Roman Catholic/other, and not necessarily couples who have remained two-church during their marriage. His concern is also for the provision of better pastoral care.

"Interchurch families" are thus of many different kinds: each sort requires marriage preparation and support adapted to its special needs. And within each group, each couple is unique, and true pastoral care will treat them as such.

The interchurch family triptych (the picture described in the final article) expresses the vision of interchurch couples and families who feel called to live in their "domestic church": as far as they possibly can, as a sign and an anticipation of the unity in Christ which is both a gift and a call to the churches. They are seeking - in however imperfect and partial a way - to express in their daily lives the unity that will finally be given to all when the marriage supper of the Lamb is celebrated in our Father's house.

RR
John (Roman Catholic) and Julie (brought up in the Lutheran tradition but now a member of a “non-denominational” Protestant church) married in autumn 1999. They live in Denver, Colorado. Julie wrote this article when they were looking forward to their marriage.

I believe God guides our steps if we seek his will. That is why I believe God has called us to marry.

Our common bond in Christ

For a long while, John and I had serious doubts as to how this could ever work out. He had an incredible faith in God, that if it were God’s will it somehow would work out. For me, if I couldn’t see it, how could it happen? To this day, I’m not exactly sure. I only know that it was God. That it was through much prayer, much agonising, much hard work, the desire to make it work, the desire truly to understand each other.

The one aspect that gave us hope and drove us to persist, was our common bond in Christ. One of the first things I noticed and loved about John was his deep faith. So I knew we had that common bond in Christ. That, more than anything else, drew us together. We had other common interests as well, our common faith in Christ and his high importance in our lives is our foundation.

But it wasn’t all that simple.

The struggle

On the top of my list was a man who loved God. John fulfilled that hands down. However, included in that was the assumption that we would grow together spiritually, worshipping together, members of the same church. For us to go our separate ways each Sunday was not an option, and I couldn’t imagine being married to someone with whom I could not take communion. That would not strengthen our marriage – rather, it would gnaw away at it over time. We didn’t even want to consider the implications for raising our children. Who could bear the thought of your spouse teaching your children that you and your church’s beliefs were wrong?

In the beginning there were lots of tears. John one day commented: “You hate my church” and admitted, “and I hate yours.” Not entirely true. We just had a few strong disagreements and many misunderstandings. We went to each other’s churches because we truly wanted to understand each other better. I wanted to try to understand why being Catholic is so important to John, he wanted to understand why my form of worship (non-denominational) is so important to me. We both made it abundantly clear that “converting” was not an option.

I remember how hopeless it seemed. We’d argue till we wept, our hearts breaking in two, wondering if this was the end, yet being unable to accept that either. And we’d pray. Constantly. John would say “God got us into this, God’s gonna have to find a way out.” His faith never wavered. Mine did. Perhaps this wasn’t God’s will after all.

We love one another

Our hearts bonded amazingly fast. Delving right into all the issues we knew we’d have to work out if we were to ever consider marriage, we got to know each other at a deep level fairly quickly. To this day, I believe God developed a strong emotional attachment right in the beginning to be the glue to make us stick it out. We could both see very early on that we could marry if it was not for our different faith traditions or “flavours”, as I liked to call them. But it was difficult. Very difficult.

As time progressed, we opened our hearts more to learning and trying to understand each other’s churches and beliefs better, as well as our own. As we continually went before God in prayer, He softened our hearts, chipped away at our blinders and gave us understanding, acceptance and humility. Over and over we found ourselves forgetting that we wanted to understand the other, and realised we were really just trying to “make them see”. It’s hard. We had to keep re-adjusting our attitudes. For me this meant reminding myself that my goal was not to make John understand, it was for me to understand him. And John’s goal was not to make me understand, but to understand me. That helped.

We made an agreement. If we find ourselves in an argument (not a loving constructive discussion) whoever notices this first is to call a halt so that we can take a Prayer Break. (It’s a variation from another acronym we made up: a PHB – a Pentecostal Prayer Break. The “Pentecostal” part was because we came up with this idea on Pentecost Sunday.) We have found that when we come before God in prayer together, we have to humble ourselves before God, which is the best remedy for those situations, because we realise that when we get to that point we have ceased to be humble or loving towards each other. And taking a break, to come before God, and to remember our love for each other really helps to soften our hearts.
One Church at Home

We found a way forward

We realised there was a solution for the Sunday morning dilemma – we could go to both churches. We had already begun doing this because we wanted to learn more about each other’s churches and try to understand what it is that makes our churches such an integral part of who we are.

Of course we had doubts. How feasible was this? Sure we could attend both for now, but how realistic would that be long term? How could we be involved in both churches beyond just the Sunday morning services? And we heard these same doubts expressed by some of our well-meaning friends. It couldn’t work.

It’s working amazingly well. We even came up with an acronym for our Sunday morning ritual: MBC – Mass, Breakfast, Church. We’ve both become quite comfortable with this schedule. And we’ve found we can be and are active in both churches. It takes learning to be able to say “no” and perhaps a little extra time management, but we’re finding a niche for ourselves in both communities, and we’re reaping the blessings of having two church homes. Some find it odd at first, but we have begun to feel pretty well accepted in both churches. There are times we wonder if people are thinking the other is going to “convert” (I use this for lack of a better word; as we have the same Christian faith, there really would be no conversion), because they see our commitment and involvement in their church. But we hope in time we will be better understood and accepted fully.

Excited and sobered

At times I’m excited, thinking about how God can use us in promoting unity between our churches, but other times I’m sobered, realizing how much it took to bring me to where I am today. Those not involved in an interchurch marriage do not have the same benefits, nor the incentive that we have to work toward that unity. But we know this is God’s desire for his children — that they love one another and thus show the world our Father’s love: “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:23)

Why are we so convinced our marriage is God’s will? Because we could see no way for this to work, and God miraculously opened our eyes to see doors where there were none and changed our hearts without compromising our faith. God is in control and we wouldn’t want it any other way.

Julie M. Siebert

What follows is a brief testimony given at Torre Pellice in July 1999 by one of the representatives of AIF England. Patricia is a Roman Catholic married to an Anglican.

For us, being a Domestic Church does not mean saying prayers together, it is simply living together in love. We share our food, we share our lives. Everything we do, everything we say is a prayer because we know we have the Lord present among us. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them.” We are like a very small Taize and we would like to be accorded the same respect and the same eucharistic privileges as larger ecumenical communities.

We have never disagreed with each other on religious matters – we want the same things, We share our Christian faith, but we are each loyal to the churches we were brought up in.

To me, being a member of a church is not to be a member of a club, it is to be a member of a family. When you marry another person, you become part of their family too, but you don’t leave your own family. Our children belong to both my husband’s family and mine. They feel they belong to my husband’s church and mine. To tell them they cannot receive communion is like telling them they can’t eat when they go to Nanny’s house.

“If you do not change and become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt.18:3) I believe that if we listen to our children and follow their example we will soon find the way to Christian unity. They are not cluttered with history, theology and the prejudices that come from them. They know Jesus, they love him and they try to do as he would.

A few weeks ago my 8 year old son came into the kitchen while I was preparing Sunday lunch. I asked him about the TV programme he had been watching. He said it was a cartoon about the Last Supper. When Jesus said: “This is my body, this is my blood”. Matthew asked: “What do you mean?” Jesus replied: “Mmmm”. Matthew persisted: “Do you mean literally or metaphorically?” Jesus replied: “Mmmm”. “Lord, don’t you understand that there will be war, people will die, the church will divide if you don’t say what you mean?” “Mmmm.”

I asked my son what he thought. He replied: “Maybe Jesus was saying the questions don’t matter much, the important thing is that we receive the eucharist because he said that when we do this, he will be inside us.”

Patricia Sears
Saturday, 3 April 1999, was a day that Richard and I had never thought would be possible. Long years of waiting for a child, the loss of our first through miscarriage, and a difficult pregnancy all meant that we dared not hope too much. But on 3 April our dreams finally came true and our baby, Ruth Helen Connell, was baptised.

What did we want?
Last summer we purchased the AIF Baptism Pack to start preparing for the baptism of our child. In 1982 I had taken part in a national conference on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, and some of my thinking was influenced by that, so I was quite prepared to wait until the baby was older before having him or her baptised. Richard, on the other hand, was determined that the baby should be baptised as soon as possible after birth. I challenged him to convince me this was the best idea.

Richard argued that, as well as conferring the benefits of the sacrament, baptism is an important witness to other people of the significance we accord to our faith. For us it is more than "getting them done". I admitted that while I feel that adult baptism is the norm, I accept that the early church did also baptise the babies and children of Christian parents.

Having established that we were both in favour of baptism at an early date, we then moved on to the logistics. In line with my thinking, I suggested that the appropriate time would be the Easter Vigil, and since we always go to the Vigil in the Catholic church, it seemed logical to hold the baptism there. I then put it to Richard that I would like the baby to be welcomed into the Anglican church too (I am the Roman Catholic) and that it would be wonderful to have the baptism registered in both churches.

Baptised at the Easter Vigil
I asked my parish priest if he would be prepared to do the baptism at the Easter Vigil with the participation of the Anglican minister. He was surprised and admitted that he had never before baptised a baby at the Vigil, but could see no reason why not. He also asked: "Won't the vicar have his own service to do?" When I checked it out, the vicar responded, "No problem; that's what curates are for!"

At the end of December our baby was born and plans for her baptism began in earnest. My mother was asked to prepare the baptismal gown that she had originally made for me almost 43 years ago. For godparents we chose a friend of ours from the Catholic church, an eighteen-year-old whom we have known since she was a little girl, and an interchurch couple who attend both our churches. My parish priest agreed to put all three names on the baptismal certificate, which is a source of great joy to us. Richard's vicar started to prepare a service of welcome for Easter Sunday morning.

The congregation of our Catholic church, with our two families, a few friends, and Richard's Anglican vicar gathered on Holy Saturday at 8 p.m. The fire was lighted, and the clergy processed out. My parish priest welcomed everyone, including the vicar. After the readings and prayers, we processed into church.

With everyone's candle lighted, the Liturgy of the Word began. Richard read the first reading, from Genesis. In the litany of the saints, both St Ruth and St Helen were invoked for their prayers. When we came to the affirmation of our baptismal faith, the parish priest asked the questions, our baptismal party responded first, then an adult candidate, and finally everyone else.

When he blessed the water, the parish priest invited Richard's vicar to place the Easter candle into it. Ruth was baptised by the parish priest, and the vicar presented her with the white garment and the baptismal candle.

Sharing communion
At communion, the parish priest announced that Richard had asked the Bishop if he might on this special occasion receive communion, and that the Bishop had been delighted to give permission. It was a most wonderful moment when Richard and I received communion together, the first time ever in that church.

After the service, Richard's vicar thanked me for asking him. "I'm so glad I was here. It was lovely to have part in a service in your church, as you always worship with us."

Welcome on Easter Day
On Easter Sunday morning Ruth, Richard and I and Ruth's godparents, our families and friends met again at St Peter's. I read the first reading, with some competition from Ruth. After everyone had renewed their baptismal vows, we were invited to come forward along with another family who were having their baby dedicated. The vicar said prayers of thanksgiving for the safe arrival of Ruth, and for my return to health. He re-lit Ruth's baptismal candle from the Easter candle and presented it to Richard with the words, "Receive this light again on Ruth's behalf." This little piece of symbolism showed that both communities were prepared to help us in raising Ruth in the Christian faith. Then he prayed for a blessing for Ruth.

Richard's vicar had put together the service of welcome, and we both thought it looked very good. On Easter Sunday morning, as we were setting off to church, I said to Richard, "Bring the candle." When we walked up to the nave altar with the candle, the vicar leaned forward and asked, "What do you want me to do with the candle?" Richard and I smiled and said, "Well, you might light it from your Easter candle." Afterwards he told us it was such a good idea that he wished he'd thought of it himself!

Helen Connell
Hi, my name is Linda Buchanan, and I was born into an interchurch family. I live in Montreal. My Mom is Roman Catholic, and my Dad is Protestant (United Church of Canada). I am ... well, I'm Christian, at least that is what I would say if you asked me. I have been brought up in both churches, and I go to both services every Sunday, and I'm very involved in both. I am a reader in the Catholic Church, and a Sunday School teacher for the little ones in the Protestant Church, as well as assistant director for the Junior Choir. I was baptised in the Roman Catholic Church, and made my First Communion in the Catholic Church as well. I now take communion in both churches.

Dual confirmation
At the age of eleven I was confirmed in the Catholic Church, and at that time I didn’t think it would be a problem to be confirmed again in the Protestant Church. I continued to believe this until I went to the World Gathering of Interchurch Families in Geneva in 1998. There I heard the stories of other young people who had grown up in interchurch families, particularly Anglican/Roman Catholic families, and all the problems they had had. I began to think that making this link in my beliefs might be impossible. But last February I asked my minister if I could be confirmed in the Protestant Church, and I could hardly believe it when I heard him say: “Why not?” I went to the preparation classes with two other friends that I had grown up with in the church, and in May 1999 I was confirmed in the United Church family. I talked to my Catholic priest too and at first he was not too happy about it, but he saw how important it was to me and said that he could not stand in my way. The Roman Catholic Church does not officially recognise the Protestant confirmation. My Protestant minister said I would just be re-affirming my confirmation, but in front of my other Christian family. Both my parents were very happy about it; they knew I was not denying my Catholic confirmation, but expressing the richness of my Christian life.

In the Catholic Church we re-affirm our confirmation every Easter, so I guess it was a bit like that when I re-affirmed my confirmation in front of my other church family. I didn’t find the main part of the confirmation very different. What was different was that I was a little more mature, since I was fifteen instead of eleven. In the Catholic Church I learned what the church believes. In the Protestant Church I learned what I believe. But I’m not saying that I believe in the Protestant Church more than the Catholic Church.

Sharing a building
I guess it was easier for me because of my particular church families. They share one building, and both worship in the same place. The story of how it came to happen is that there was one church that did not have a building to worship in, and another who could not afford their building. So now they worship in the same building, at different times. So my two church families are aware of my and my family’s situation, and indeed we are not the only family that worships in both. The two churches also do things together, like Sunday socials, Palm Sunday brunch and the young people’s Good Friday Passion Play, just to pick out a few.

Confirmation into the Christian Church
Although I am confirmed in both of my churches, my wish and my dream is a confirmation that has nothing to do with denominations. A confirmation into the Christian Church. I know that this will not be easy, but I want somehow in my lifetime to help take a few steps in that direction. Then after a few generations when the family religious history consists not just of two but of many denominations, they won’t have to decide a denomination, just a religion. Maybe one day all the people who make up the Christian family will break down the walls that the denominations have built up. Then we can all live as one, big happy family, sisters and brothers.

Linda Buchanan
Reflections Over Thirty Years

Fr Peter Hocken was present at the first gathering of English interchurch couples, held at Spode House in November 1968, and at several more Spode conferences in the following few years. Since then he has been based in the United States, but has recently returned to England where he is chaplain to the Bishop of Northampton. He addressed the annual conference of the Association of Interchurch Families, which celebrated its 25 years at Swanwick in August 1999.

I am not going to reflect on the Association of Interchurch Families over thirty years, in view of my long absence. I shall reflect on how my ecumenical experience of the last thirty years has reshaped my thinking, and where possible to relate this to the AIF. My ecumenical experience of the last 25 years has been almost entirely in the charismatic context, though I have sought to keep in touch with the wider ecumenical movement.

Relationships based on experiential starting-point

One obvious difference between my ecumenical experience of relationships in the charismatic movement and my previous ecumenical experience in more mainline church relationships is that the former are based on common or shared experience, rather than on church membership, theological convictions or ecumenical vision. Their basis is in effect the recognition and acceptance of the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in one another, however strange and unfamiliar their denominational or connexional affiliations and doctrinal positions. You will see how this starting-point has led me to see the importance for all ecumenical relations of a recognition and acceptance of the work of the Holy Spirit in other Christians and their traditions. It does not require much effort to see the relevance of this to interchurch marriages. Christian marriage demands an attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in each partner, and interchurch marriages require an attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in each partner understood in relation to his or her church affiliation.

Some Characteristics of Charismatic Ecumenism

I will list several characteristics at random:

The importance of testimonies

The mutual acceptance as believers moved by the Holy Spirit owes much to testimonies of one’s experience of God, of knowing Jesus Christ, and experiencing the leading and the power of the Holy Spirit. Testimonies break down suspicion and opposition as effectively as anything. I know of a European country where relations between the Catholic Church and the Free Churches have improved in an amazing way due to the Catholic archbishop in effect giving his personal testimony to the Free Church leaders.

The Centrality of Praise and Worship

Worship is the ordinary context of charismatic testimonies, which in turn are expected to issue in praise and thanksgiving. If God is to be central, worship has to be central. For it is in worship that we express our deepest convictions about God and come before and into God’s presence. This has shown me how important it is to experience one another’s worship, for it is in its worship that each Christian community expresses its deepest reality and self-understanding. This thought links up with much that the Methodist Geoffrey Wainwright has emphasised, for example in his book Doxology. This affirms a basic instinct of interchurch couples that it is important to take part in the worship of the communities of both partners. It also emphasises the importance of family worship, with the many challenges this poses for interchurch couples.

Gifts and Ministries

The charismatic movement has seen an explosion of gifts and ministries that is I believe very significant for church life and ecumenical relations. We find coming alive the lists found in Eph 4: 11 (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher), in 1 Cor. 12: 8 - 10 (including gifts of healing, of prophecy, of discernment, of speaking in other tongues), in Rom 12: 4 - 8 (less well-known, but including prophecy, service, encouragement, helping others in need, leadership, showing mercy). We also find other ministries and services appearing not found in those lists, e.g. of intercessors.

The re-emergence of a wide variety of gifts and ministries contrasts sharply with the prevailing model of a “jack of all trades” ordained ministry, where the priest/minister is expected to do everything that is regarded as “ministry”. I think the prevalence of this pattern across the churches encourages the emphasis on “validity” - do I do my church have the right kind of ministry? An awareness of the great variety of giftings and ministries across our churches can lead to another source of enrichment through interchurch marriages.

I would mention in particular that there has been an extraordinary blossoming of intercessory prayer in the last fifteen or more years. I see this as highly significant. I do not believe that major break-throughs in problem areas happen without significant prior intercession and prayer. This may be a question for you to take up in AIF within next year’s conference theme of spirituality in interchurch families.

Relating the Charismatic to the Received Heritage

For me, entering into a charismatic pattern of faith-experience introduced a new awareness of immediacy in relation to God, Jesus, Spirit. But as a Catholic, it was necessary for me to relate this to all the forms of mediation within the Church, especially its sacramental life, and through fellow-believers. Here it seems to me important to affirm both the necessity of a directness of relationship to God (we are God’s sons and
daughters) and the necessity of mediation (in our bodiliness). It is important to avoid a false dichotomy. On the one hand, only directness is valued and mediation is regarded as “merely human”; this devalues the Incarnation which is the model for direct and mediated relations and leads to superficiality when the “spiritual life” is not earthed. On the other, direct relationship and communication is held to be impossible and we only go to God through others on earth, through signs etc; this leads to spiritual aridity and deadness.

I mention this particularly here because I have sometimes found that groups that gather together on the basis of shared human relationships (such as all groupings for married couples) can easily emphasize more the encounter with God through the other. This is indeed real. But the direct encounter of both with God in the risen Christ (which I believe grounds couples) can easily emphasize more the encounter with God through the other. This is indeed real. But the direct encounter of both with God in the risen Christ (which I believe grounds the Christian character of the “horizontal” encounter) needs to be given its due place.

The Necessity of Repentance

I think that one of the major reasons for the sense of impasse and lack of dynamic movement forward in the ecumenical movement is a lack of repentance by our churches towards each other. There can be no fundamental change in any relationships without repentance for the sins that have spoiled and damaged the relationships.

In Jeremiah, we read (twice in effect: 6: 14 and 8: 11): “They dress the wound of my people as though it is not serious.” This would seem to be applicable to many of our church attitudes within the ecumenical movement. We have been divided so long that it seems normal. We do not think of our churches as having wounds in need of healing.

The need to say “Sorry!” to each other is a normal part of healthy family life. In our churches we need to take responsibility for our wrong directions, our distortions of the Gospel, our prejudices, our grave neglects. For example, the Catholic Church needs to say sorry for our neglect of the Bible, for our fearfulness in allowing the faithful access to vernacular Bibles, for all the theology that owed little to biblical inspiration. I am conscious that three major areas associated with strong Catholic distinctiveness—the eucharist, the papal primacy and Mary—were all given as gifts for unity.

Yet we have made them subjects of scandal and causes of division. An acknowledgement of this and a heartfelt apology for it would liberate other Christians to address these areas/gifts without fear and suspicion. Interchurch couples can explore their particular role in a growing expression of church repentance for our past sins, sins of which perhaps they as interchurch couples are especially conscious.

The importance of the Jewish people for ecumenism

As I have come to understand more about the irreversibility of God’s covenant with the Jewish people (see Romans 11: 29), a position now expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, I have seen that the God-given foundation for unity was the union of Jew and Gentile into “one new man” (Eph 2: 15), in which the Gentile believers become “co-heirs, co-members of the one body and co-sharers in the one promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3: 6). In this perspective, it becomes apparent that the loss of the Jewish church, indeed one may say its suppression, was a major wound in the body of the Messiah, the wound that opened the door to the wounds of all subsequent divisions.

It would seem that the union of Jew and Gentile as the foundation for unity gave the church a kind of bipolarity, with each pole oriented towards the other. Jews were oriented towards the Gentiles because it was intrinsic to the Jewish calling that they were to be a blessing to all nations, Gentiles were oriented towards Jews because it was only through being included in Israel and their Messiah that they became part of the people of God. It would seem then that the loss of this bipolarity created the possibility of patterns of unity with only one pole that became oppressive, dominating and self-regarding.

Eschatology

I have increasingly been led to see that our lack of a living eschatology—lack of a vibrant hope for the coming of the King and of the Kingdom in its fulness—is a major weakness in the life of the churches and in the ecumenical movement. I was led to see this I believe by the very dynamic of the Holy Spirit who is given to us as “first fruits” to awaken the taste and the longing for the fulness to come (see 2 Cor 1: 21 - 22; 5: 1 - 5). It also becomes obvious when we understand that the hope of Israel is still the hope of Israel (see Catholic Catechism, heading of para. 674).

In Ephesians, Paul speaks of the “one hope” (Eph. 4: 4). I believe that this has to be one of the strongest reasons for eucharistic sharing—because the eucharist is preparing the one future for all God’s people. Without a strong faith in the God-appointed and God-promised hope of the Lord’s coming, the Church lacks a strong forward dynamism and easily looks back more than it looks forward.

Eschatology is also important because it is only with the Second Coming that our salvation will be complete with the resurrection of the body, and the new heavens and the new earth. There is a strong connection between Israel—church—body—resurrection. There must be many ways in which these connections ring bells for married people, especially those concerned with the relationship between marital union and ecclesial union.

Peter Hocken
INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AROUND THE WORLD

AUSTRALIA

Brisbane
In 1998 we reported that interchurch families in Brisbane, Queensland, were busy writing their stories in the hope that these would be useful to other couples, and to those working with couples (6, 1, January 1998, p.8). A year later an attractive illustrated 16-page booklet appeared, entitled Stories of Interchurch Families: Living the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian Unity (Aust 55). The introduction explained that the Interchurch Families Association, Brisbane (IFAB) was formed in 1993 for the mutual support of interchurch families who face special problems because of the couple’s commitment to two churches. Such problems “don’t exist if both or one of the partners in a mixed denominational marriage doesn’t have a strong commitment. These problems are more apparent when one partner is a Roman Catholic.” Help is offered to couples contemplating a mixed denominational marriage, whether or not it will be an interchurch marriage. Six authentic family stories follow, without using the couples’ real names, illustrating a range of backgrounds and experience. Some refer to the “Blessed and Broken” guidelines on eucharistic sharing issued by the Archbishop of Brisbane in 1995 (see Interchurch Families, 4, 2. Summer 1996, p.8) and say “what a difference these have made to their family lives.” “We sought permission, in line with these guidelines, for Hilary to receive holy communion each time she accompanied her family to a Catholic mass, on the basis of our interchurch marriage. Receiving this permission was another marvellous step on our journey.” “The priest was aware of the guideline and willingly supported Kev receiving communion at mass.” Peter and Donna write: “For couples in our position the new guidelines allow us to be a clearer sign of what future unity promises for both our denominations.”

Pat and Debbie Mulhins have replaced Peter and Monica Sharwood as co-organisers of IFAB, and the group has been working on the question of baptism in interchurch families.

Melbourne
Marga Dahl and Jeff Wild, who co-ordinate a group of interchurch families meeting quarterly in Melbourne, Victoria, and their prayer chain, are especially pleased to welcome the joint report summarised on p.13. Marga is a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia and Jeff is executive secretary of the Commission for Ecumenism of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Newcastle and Hunter
The interchurch families group in Newcastle and Hunter, New South Wales, remains small but enthusiastic: “it is not a numbers game”. Following Bev Hinck’s address in May to the New South Wales Ecumenical Council about the role of interchurch families at the Harare Assembly of the World Council of Churches, she was asked to speak in Sydney to the New South Wales Faith and Unity Commission of the Uniting Church. This led in turn to an invitation from the New South Wales Synod of the Uniting Church, where the interchurch families video made in England in 1992 was shown; the Revd Christine Sheppard, a Uniting Church minister who is also a member of the group, led a discussion. They were particularly interested because of the on-going dialogue on interchurch families that issued in the report summarised on p.13. The video has also been used locally, and this has led to more invitations.

Bev Hincks is also glad to report that the Roman Catholic diocese of Broken Bay (which covers the northern part of Sydney adjoining the Roman Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle) has recently produced a document entitled One Body Broken – Pastoral Guidelines for Eucharistic Hospitality. This is very similar to Blessed and Broken, the guidelines for the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The Anglican diocese of Newcastle covers parts of both the Catholic dioceses, and the Anglican bishop relates to both Catholic bishops in a series of public events called “Two Bishops Dialogue”. At a recent meeting one of the topics for dialogue was Interchurch Families; the Anglican bishop asked Bev “to respond to a particularly searching question, since he had no lived experience such as the Hincks did”.

Perth
ALF Western Australia met in May and decided to attempt a “coalition” of Australian groups. This has not happened formally yet, but a radio programme on interchurch families that went out from Brisbane on 7n November gives evidence of a cross-Australia network. Fiona Sharwood (an interchurch child from Brisbane who recently spent a term at the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin) spoke on the programme, as did Mardy and Jeff from Melbourne. There were problems beforehand in Perth because of the time difference, but Mary Paton reports that eventually she and Ian were able to join in, as was David White of Perth. The Perth group were visited recently by both the Wild-Dahts from Melbourne and Bob and Margaret Wood from England – “so we feel a bit more on the map now, here in Western Australia”, writes Mary Paton.

At the ARGE-Ökumene conference held at Salzburg in autumn 1998 a decision was taken to bind the local groups together in a national structure with an elected committee, membership subscription etc. John and Vita Jenkins and Claire Malone-Lee from England were at Salzburg, and the Jenkins were at the 1999 annual conference held at Puchberg, Weds 22-24 October. A representative from an ecumenical organisation in Hungary was also there. The theme was: Two Churches – One Path to Salvation? One of the speakers was Silvia Hell, author of a book on interchurch families: Die konfessionell verschiedene Ehe: Vom Problemfall zum verbundenden Modell (Herder, Freiburg i.Br. 1998, 498 pp.) A major focus at Puchberg this year was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification later officially signed by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on 3i October 1999 at Augsburg. There were both academic theological lectures on the justification theme, and also small discussion groups on “the personal path to salvation”.

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The Calgary group meets regularly on the last Saturday of each month. Ray Temmerman in Morden, Manitoba continues his great work for interchurch families world-wide by organising the aifworld web site (see back page) and the aif list service. The Canadian groups are closely linked by their preparations for the international interchurch families conference to be held in Edmonton 1-6 August 2001. Cathy Harvey, Ecumenical Officer for the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton, Alberta, with her husband David, is taking an important role in the preparations, and has involved both the Family Enrichment Centre and the Ecumenical Commission in hosting Canada Officer for the Catholic Anglican of Edmonton, Alberta, Temmerman at temmerm@mtl.is for further information.

The Cardinal's support was impolant that H Hume died in June 1998, became a President of the Association of Interchurch Families almost which had been the presence of the World Gathering of interchurch families in Geneva in July 1998. After they returned home Boris had great hopes that the Ecumenical Co-ordinating Committee of Churches in Croatia would put the pastoral challenge of interchurch families on its on-going agenda. He is disappointed that this has not happened, but ecumenical issues are "still not a part of our common awareness, let alone experience". There are now plans to launch a subsidised ecumenical magazine with wide circulation, aimed at inspiring and encouraging lay people to take initiatives across denominational boundaries.

Cardinal Hume

Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, who died in June 1998, became a President of the Association of Interchurch Families almost as soon as he was appointed to Westminster in 1976. The Spode 1973 annual conference had realised that it would help the Association to become better known if it could obtain the agreement of the leaders of the main churches in England and Wales to become Presidents of AIF; their names would carry weight on its newspaper and publicity materials. It was agreed to await the appointment of a new Archbishop to Westminster, and to approach him first.

Martin Reardon and Fr John Coventry SJ as AIF co-chairs sent a letter explaining this and asking the Archbishop to do the Association the honour of accepting the title of President at the beginning of April 1976. Basil Hume replied almost by return of post. Yes, he agreed to be President. He did not know too much about AIF, "but what I do know of it makes me think that you are on to a good thing".

The Cardinal's support was important for the Association. It reassured Catholics who wanted to understand the pastoral needs of interchurch families, but found them alarming and even threatening, that AIF was working within and not against a Catholic perspective. This was important in the days when the Catholic Church in England and Wales had not yet officially committed itself at national level to working with other churches within a single ecumenical body, in the 1970's it decided not to become a member of the British Council of Churches. It is a tribute to the Cardinal's ecumenical perspective that at Swanwick in 1987 his appeal to the churches to move "from co-operation to commitment" was a decisive factor in the formation of the new ecumenical instruments of the 1990's. The Catholic Church in England and Wales now participates fully in Churches Together in England, CYTUn and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

At the request of Fr George Kilcourse, the Cardinal, as a President of AIF in England, sent his best wishes on the inauguration of the American Association of Interchurch Families in 1989 (see the newsletter Interchurch Families, 22, Winter 1989-90, p.2). By that time he undoubtedly had reservations about the importance that some interchurch families gave to shared celebrations of baptism and especially to eucharistic sharing. He feared any blurring of the fact that the churches are divided; any weakening of the Catholic witness to the inseparable communion and ecclesial communion. He wrote: "The pain is real, because the divisions between the churches are also real. But through their experience of carrying that pain, interchurch couples take a part in drawing us all further on through the healing power of Our Lord into a vision of fuller unity, which is to be found for us all in Christ."

It was very difficult for the Cardinal to conceive that that "healing power" might perhaps be evidenced already in the Catholic Church's pastoral opening up of eucharistic sharing for some interchurch families, so that they might actually become concrete signs of that fuller unity in Christ. Those present at his meeting with AIF members in February 1997 clearly saw his struggle and his own pain (see Interchurch Families, 5, 2 Summer 1997, p.2). They were immensely grateful to him for sharing so much of himself and his own spiritual life with them. AIF remembers Basil Hume, our first Catholic President, with the greatest affection, respect, and gratitude.

30 years of AIF

The AIF annual conference held at Swanwick over the late August Bank Holiday weekend in 1999 celebrated 30 years of AIF under the theme Growing Together in Love and Unity. It focused both on growing together in marriage, and on growing together in the life of the churches. There were three visitors from Canada: Ray and Pemella Temmerman and Linda Buchanan. This overseas participation was very welcome, as had been the presence of Rudolf and Rosmarte Lauber from Germany at the 1998 conference.

After 30 years Ruth Reardon has retired as honorary secretary of AIF. The Association is grateful for funding which has allowed it to appoint Keith Lander, a member of AIF since the mid-1970's, to the new post of executive secretary. Ruth Reardon remains editor of the journal Interchurch Families, and co-ordinator for Education and Representation, one of the six AIF Areas of Work.
Traditionally the interchurch family movement in France has not been expressed in the form of an “association”, but groups in different parts of France and Switzerland have been linked together by the quarterly review *Foyers Mixtes*. This has existed since 1968, published by Fr René Beaupère OP, from the Dominican Centre St Irénée in Lyon. The correspondants of the review come together every two years in Lyon to exchange news and plan ahead.

French-speaking interchurch families

French and Swiss interchurch families formed a committee to prepare the first bilingual World Gathering of interchurch families, which took place in Geneva in July 1998. Following Geneva the committee stayed together and has constituted itself as the Comité francophone permanent (CFP).

It published its first *Lettre aux amis* at Ascensiontide 1999. This aims has been translated into English as *A Letter to Friends*.

The aims of the CFP are set out as follows:

1. To help to co-ordinate the movement in French-speaking areas, particularly in France and French-speaking Switzerland.

2. To strengthen links with similar bodies in English-speaking countries: the Associations of Interchurch Families in Britain and Ireland (AIFE, SAIF, NIMMA, AIFL), the American Association of Interchurch Families (AAIF) in the USA, the Canadian Association of Interchurch Families (CAIF) in Canada, and with any future German-speaking bodies which may emerge.

3. To work with the ecumenical movement, and in particular with the two bodies which are responsible for this movement on an international level (the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity); might it be possible for interchurch families, a part of the wider international ecumenical movement, to have a place in the Forum planned alongside but independent of the WCC?

The Letter to Friends, to be sent out two or three times a year, will complement the work of the review *Foyers Mixtes*. It will provide information, not on a local, but on a national and international level. “It will be sent to all our friends, and especially to church leaders and those working in the ecumenical movement who seek to go a little way alongside interchurch families on our common pilgrimage towards full Christian unity.”

The CFP has two addresses: the Centre Saint Irénée, 2 place Gailleton, F-69002 Lyon; and Eric and Pamela Fiévet, 9 rue du Bourbonnais, F-92600 Asnières (email Eric.Fiévet@wanadoo.fr)

French-speaking conferences

A first francophone conference was held at Versailles in November 1995, and a second at Lyon in June 1997. Three visitors went to each from AIF England. The third francophone conference is planned for Melun, near Fontainebleau, 6-7 May 2000. The theme is: *In my Father’s house there are many rooms: the fear and the joy of difference.*

Interchurch families from other countries are welcome, and for those who can stay on for a day, tourism in Paris is proposed for 8 May. Details from the Fiévets, address as above.

Interchurch family seminars

Thirty years of interchurch family seminars have been held annually at the Benedictine Abbey of Neresheim in Bavaria were celebrated at the conference held there 23-25 April 1999, with the theme: *Searching for paths of faith for us and for our children.* Pater Bernd Müller, a monk of the Abbey now in his mid-eighties, was co-leader as usual, and this time he had with him Pfarrer Peter Hopma, a Protestant minister who had been present at some of the earliest seminars. Because of contacts made by Rosmarie and Rudolf Lauber with overseas interchurch families at the Geneva World Gathering in 1998, Fr René Beaupère, OP from Lyon and Claire Malone-Lee and Martin and Ruth Readon from England were there. The single-eucharist pattern at the weekend was the one that had been worked out over the years: the Protestant pastor preached a Catholic priest presided, and the pastor administered the chalice. It was the last of this series of seminars in their present form; it is proposed now to run marriage preparation seminars for interchurch couples, at which married couples will contribute from their own experience.

Since 1988 seminars for interchurch families have also been held annually in the Protestant centre at Domstädt on Ulm, with the regular participation of a Methodist pastor and a Catholic priest. The 1999 seminar took place 8-10 October; its theme: *Salt in the Soup: What role can interchurch families play in their parishes and congregations?* One of the suggestions was that house-calls might be made by interchurch couples to other, inactive interchurch couples. A French/American couple from Cologne who discovered interchurch families through the internet were delighted to be there. Vincent Randy writes: “My wife and I were struck by how successful these families have been in creating a truly positive way of living out their mixed religious traditions in their homes, in spite of the difficulties.”

A network of interchurch couples and families

Both at Neresheim and at Domstädt there was excitement about proposals for the formation of a network that would offer a national forum for interchurch families. This Network for Interchurch Couples and Families in Germany was officially launched on 30 October 1999 at Augsburg, the day before the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed there by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. Interchurch families received a mention at this ceremony itself, when a leading Lutheran in his opening speech of welcome expressed the hope that the Joint Declaration would lead to a practical outcome. “Our expectation from the signing of the Joint Declaration”, he said, “is for an improvement in the situation in the parishes and especially for interchurch families.” One of the intentions of the network is to keep in close touch with other national associations and groupings of interchurch families. There is an interesting development of terminology following the new Austrian practice (see *Interchurch Families*, 6,2 Summer 1998, p.8). Whereas the Neresheim weekend was for *konfessionsverbindernd* (bringing the denominations together) couples and families, the network is for *konfessionsverschiedene* (of separate denominations) couples and families, the network is for *konfessionsverbindernder* (bringing the denominations together) couples and families. An explanatory leaflet has been produced, and the secretary is Rosmarie Lauber. The network is associated with the AOEK, the national Council of Churches in Germany.
The sixteenth Italian-French-Swiss conference at Torre Pellice near Turin was hosted by Italian couple interconfessional. The theme was "interchurch families: domestic church," as introduced, as usual, by Fr René Beaupère, OP from Lyon. A special note was added by Pastor Bruno Rostagno by his focus on the Holy Spirit as Comforter in interchurch families. For the third time running AIF England was represented at Torre Pellice; in 1999 by Alys Blakeway and Patricia Sears (see p.3). There was the traditional visit to the Waldensian Museum (see Interchurch Families 4.1, January 1996 for an account of Waldensian history). "Patricia and I came away feeling deeply moved by the past sufferings of the Waldensians, and aware that it is now time to concentrate on the very different problems of indifference and materialism faced by the church as a whole," wrote Alys. As usual the gathering split up to join local churches for Sunday worship, one group going to the Waldensian community at Pomaretto and the other to the Catholic church at Mentoulles. The same "Message" from interchurch families was read out in both. It is hoped to hold another Italian-French-Swiss gathering in 2001.

NEW ZEALAND

Inspired by a talk given by Mgr Brian Arahill from Auckland (who was present at the 1988 international conference of interchurch families at Lingfield, Sussex, England), Sue Devereux, Director of the Catholic Family Life Office in the Archdiocese of Wellington, began a group for interchurch couples in Wellington. A year ago she wrote: "I began this group after seeing 68% of our couples getting married going into interchurch and interfaith marriages and subsequently about 80% of these couples giving up their association with church as it was too hard to deal with. I have learned so much from them, and they thoroughly enjoy being together. What I learned most was the reluctance of all our hierarchy to accept this group. They were really frightened about radicals trying to change history overnight. I have spent a lot of energy changing the thinking to one of pastoral concern for these families. Our clergy come on board wonderfully after they think about it, and support is growing." Diana Simons from AIF England met some of the group when she was in New Zealand. Recently Sue wrote: "Our group is growing in numbers but more importantly, the members are growing in confidence. At present they are putting on paper their thoughts about being an interchurch family and ways in which the churches could help all interchurch families. This exercise is motivating everyone to be more supportive of each other and of other interchurch families who are not part of our group. The document just published by the Australian Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches on interchurch families [see p.13] is so close to home that we know it will promote dialogue in this country which we welcome."

UNITED STATES

The first biannual national conference of the American AIF was held in 1997 in Louisville, Kentucky; the second was hosted by the Omaha chapter of AAIF and took place in Omaha, Nebraska 9-11 July 1999. The theme was A Celebration of Unity. Nine states were represented at Omaha, from Virginia to California, and one couple came who had been involved in an interchurch family group in Kansas for some years, but did not know until two months earlier that any group like theirs existed anywhere else. Several families among the 100 or so participants came to the suggestion either of their Diocesan Ecumenical Officer or of their Family Life Office, not having had previous links with AAIF. Ray and Fenella Temmerman from Canada were also able to participate in the conference.

Two local speakers addressed the gathering: Professor Michael Lawler on the results of his research (see p.12) and Sr Barbara Markey, Associate Director of the Creighton Center for Marriage and Family, on conflict resolution in interchurch families. The second was an interactive presentation, offering practical actions that served as tools for bridging the gaps between partners. It was encouraging for participants to learn that interchurch couples who make a real commitment to their marriage by worshipping in both churches have a high degree of probability of having their marriages endure. Sr Barbara commented that interchurch families need to work harder at their marriages, but if they do they also reap more ample rewards. There was also plenty of time to share experiences informally with other participants, and this was much appreciated.

Since Louisville 1997 much work had been done on a constitution for AAIF (Bonnie Mack) and on the by-laws (Tom Mack and Peter Glauber). These were approved at Omaha, and Barbara and Michael Slater were elected national co-chairs, with Mary Jane Glauber secretary. Now that AAIF has a constitution, the newly-elected treasurer will work on getting charity status, so that the Association can apply for grants and ask for donations. Fr George Kilcourse and Fr Ernest Falardeau, SSS were appointed spiritual advisors, and it is hoped that clergy of other traditions will join them later.

The constitution requires a bi-annual meeting, so the next general meeting and conference will fall in 2001 – the year already fixed for the international conference of interchurch families in Edmonton, Canada. It was decided, therefore, to give the fullest possible support to the Canadians planning for Edmonton, and to hold the AAIF general meeting there, at the time of the international conference.

The children and teenagers at Omaha enjoyed the conference and many friendships were made. At the closing mass they presented candles to each couple; they had decorated them, and written on them the traditions from which the couple had come. Finally Fr George and Fr Ernie gave a special blessing to the newly-elected board of AAIF and asked everyone to pray for them.
Ministry to Interchurch Marriages

We are very grateful to Michael Lawler, the Amelia and Emil Graff Professor of Catholic Theological Studies at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, and Director of the university’s Center for Marriage and Family, for the following summary of the findings of a major piece of research undertaken by the Center. This follows on from earlier research (see Interchurch Families, 4, 2, Summer 1996, pp.10–11).

It shows the need for marriage preparation and support that is more adapted to the needs of interchurch couples, for there are very many of them. The Center for Marriage and Family is currently working on marriage preparation and enrichment materials specifically designed with interchurch couples in mind: BRIDGE (Building Religious Interaction, Decision Making, and Enrichment).

According to a recent national, ecumenical study conducted in the United States by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University a significant number of couples (32%) are in interchurch relationships at the time of their engagement. “Interchurch” relationships are those in which each partner affiliates with a different Christian denomination, e.g., Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican. Such marriages are carefully distinguished from “interfaith” relationships, those in which each partner affiliates with a different religion, e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Islam. Findings of the study reflect the reality of marriages in contemporary society: couples are increasingly likely to ignore or cross denominational boundaries in their marriages. The positive relationship between religion and marriage has long been recognized by researchers, but how this relationship is experienced by interchurch and same-church couples, and what this implies in terms of church ministry to interchurch and same-church couples, has just begun to be explored.

Levels of religiosity

Level of religiousness or religiosity was a major focus of this study, and it yielded two important insights. First, interchurch individuals had, on average, lower levels of religiosity than same-church individuals on every measure of religiosity: personal faith, personal church involvement, joint religious activity of the spouses, sense of belonging to a church, strength of denominational identity, religion as a strength in the marriage, and emphasis on religion in raising children. Secondly, however, neither interchurch nor same-church comprised a homogeneous group. There were interchurch individuals of high religiosity (15%) and same-church individuals of low religiosity (40%), and interchurch and same-church individuals of low religiosity. Those seeking to minister to both interchurch and same-church couples need to take this heterogeneity into account. Not all interchurch and not all same-church individuals are alike. As has been consistently reported in previous research, women had higher average scores than men on several religiosity measures.

Interchurch marriage does not cause divorce

Another major outcome of the study was the falsification of the common wisdom that interchurch marriage causes divorce.

Whether or not both partners belonged to the same or different denominations was not related to marital stability. What spouses did together religiously, whether or not they made religion a bond in their marriage by fashioning a joint religious life, and whether they managed their differences, including their religious differences, were the major predictors of marital stability. Marital stability was not related to the religious affiliation of each partner. Less disagreement over children and their religious upbringing were also associated with higher marital satisfaction and lower likelihood of divorce. Divorce rates in the study, which included only those who claimed affiliation with a Christian denomination, were dramatically lower (6–20%) than those reported (40–60%) for all marriages in the United States.

Becoming same-church families

Almost 44% of individuals who were in interchurch relationships at engagement eventually became same-church when one or both partners changed religious affiliation. The main reasons for changing religious affiliation were marital or familial, not denominational. People judged their marriage and family would be stronger if both spouses belonged to the same denomination. This suggests that marriage and family, not denomination, are primary concerns of interchurch couples. Individuals who changed affiliation were more likely to report both increased church attendance and stronger denominational identity.

Raising children in both churches

The study provides additional significant findings. The majority of interchurch parents are raising their children exclusively in one parent’s church, but a noteworthy 12% are raising their children in both parents’ churches. This is a significant number, to which the churches might need to lend support in a difficult enterprise.

Ministering to interchurch marriages

Interchurch individuals were also less satisfied with clergy than same-church individuals, because they judge that clergy are not very aware of their specific needs, are not sensitive to people of other denominations, and are not very committed to helping interchurch couples. There is important information here for clergy to ponder if they would minister fruitfully to interchurch marriages. Interchurch individuals were also less likely to have had marriage preparation through a church and less likely to have found marriage preparation helpful than same-church individuals.

The findings of this study point ministers toward strategies to help interchurch couples, and all married couples, build successful marital and religious lives in the contemporary culture of divorce.

Michael G. Lawler

The 220-page report Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: a National Study (US$10 per copy) can be obtained through the web site: http://www.creighton.edu/MarriageandFamily/ or an order with payment can be sent to the Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178. For costs to mail outside the USA, call (402)281-2085 or email mail@creighton.edu. A 16-page Summary Report is also available.
Challenge and Significance

In October 1999 a report on interchurch marriages by the bilateral dialogue group between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia was published. It had been approved by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and by the UCA Assembly Standing Committee on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly. Its full title is: Interchurch Marriages: Their Ecumenical Challenge and Significance for our Churches (93 pp, St Pauls and Uniting Church Press, Aust $6.95).

The title itself is a landmark. This is the first official church report to be published, so far as we know, that focuses not simply on the pastoral care of interchurch families, but on the "ecumenical challenge and significance" that the existence of such families presents to the churches. There was a hint of it in the title of the report published by Churches Together in England in 1994 (see Interchurch Families, 3, 1, Jan.1995, p.4): Churches Together in Marriage, but as the sub-title indicated, its main focus was the Pastoral Care of Interchurch Families.

Official recognition

This Australian report is to be warmly welcomed, therefore, as a sign that official church bodies are beginning to take up the theological perspectives that have been worked on for some years within the interchurch family movement. Early on the report quotes from the 1968 editorial in One in Christ that was seminal for the development of the Association of Interchurch Families in England. It makes particular use of George Kilcourse's Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity, published in the United States in 1992. It is in Australia, however, that these perspectives have first been presented at such an official level, just as it was in Australia that the first post-Directory episcopal guidelines on eucharistic sharing appeared offering real pastoral help for interchurch families (see Interchurch Families, 4, 2, Summer 1996, p.8).

It may be that the two things are linked. Perhaps it is only as the pressure is gradually taken off interchurch families, notably in the area of eucharistic sharing, that it is possible for them to be more clearly seen as having a significant ecumenical role. There is a hint of this in the Introduction to the report: "With dispensations, and with regulations being understood in more sophisticated ways, interchurch marriages have ceased to be the major irritant in relations between our churches which they were. Rather, interchurch couples, that is couples committed to their own churches and also to the ecumenical ideal, need to be seen as God's great gift to the churches' search for unity."

The Catholic/Uniting Church dialogue began in 1978, not long after the inauguration of the Uniting Church. It thus continued the previous Catholic/Presbyterian and Catholic/Methodist dialogues. Work focused on the subject of interchurch families began in March 1993. (Interchurch Families reported earlier that when the dialogue group met in Brisbane in November 1992 it invited two Catholic/Uniting Church couples to talk about their experiences – see 2, 2, Summer 1994, p.9). The report is thus the fruit of six or seven years' work.

Potential interchurch marriages

Chapter 1 on "The Phenomenon of Interchurch Marriage" states that in Australia there is a relative scarcity of marriages and families that would fulfil all the requirements for a marriage or family to be truly called "interchurch". Here it follows George Kilcourse's definition of two baptised Christians each actively participating in his or her church, with both taking an active role in the religious upbringing of their children. Varieties of "mixed" marriages are described, and some of these are judged to be the "potential interchurch marriages". Surveys carried out among Uniting Church parishes and Roman Catholic priests indicated a low level of pastoral care for those interchurch families that do exist. However, "there were many expressions of regret or unease about this situation"; pastors said they would welcome help and guidelines in ministering more effectively to these couples and families.

There are six further chapters on Marriage, Belonging, Baptism, Eucharistic Hospitality, Pastoral Care, and Topics for Further Dialogue. A Conclusion expresses the conviction that the "presence [of interchurch families] in our churches needs to be and celebrated ... and we need to do everything possible to assist them by promoting ever closer unity in Christ."

The churches recognise that, while broken-ness, separation and alienation are part of the world, there is a need to challenge this situation. To make a strong witness to Christ in the next century, Christians need to be prophetic. An ecumenical baptism may be such a prophetic act, which challenges our preconceptions and which allows the Spirit to create a wondrous diversity from our sinful division. Denominational sessions which may occur about baptism at the birth of a child are confronted by the triumphant assertion of the interchurch marriage. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder! (p.54)

Requests for eucharistic hospitality coming from interchurch families are recognised as in a special category. Should an individual repeat such a request frequently, it is a case for joint pastoral care by both churches. The pain of these people in their need for the eucharist calls for recognition and challenges both churches to do further work towards overcoming obstacles. There can be a serious crisis of conscience and pastors of both churches need to show sympathetic understanding. Pastoral approaches to eucharistic hospitality form part of a necessary overall joint pastoring for interchurch families. (p.63)
Interchurch Families – a Triptych

In 1998 a picture was painted (in oil on wood) for the Association of Interchurch Families by one of the sisters of the Benedictine Community at Turvey in Bedfordshire, Sr Regina. AIF has reproduced it for our publicity leaflets; we have also produced post-cards and full-size posters from it. It has proved to be a useful visual aid in trying to explain to others what interchurch families are all about, what they stand for.

Because it is a work of art, it is an aid to reflective prayer; the lines, colours and symbols can constantly open our minds and hearts to new meanings, to a deeper significance. You can always see new things in it, and it speaks to different people in different ways. I am looking at it here in a way which comes naturally to me; others will use another language and speak of it in other ways. 

Baptism and marriage

Our picture is a triptych. If you look at the left-hand panel you will see that it shows a couple. There stand a man and a woman who have come from two different churches, both in the sense of denominations and of local congregations. They represent two distinct church traditions, but they share one baptism – they have both been baptised into Christ by water and the Spirit. The flowing water represents the waters of baptism; the heavenly dove the Spirit. But our couple, both baptised Christians, are committing themselves to share the marriage covenant together – represented here by the water jars of Cana, where the first miracle that Jesus performed according to St John’s Gospel took place at a wedding celebration, when water became wine (John 2). Thus the two partners together “share the sacraments of baptism and marriage” (Ecumenical Directory, 160); the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon each of them in their baptism, is again poured out upon them, this time as a couple, in their marriage. They are still distinct individuals, but as married partners they are no longer separate individuals. They are bonded together as a couple in communion. In their “intimate community of married life and love” (Gaudium et Spes, 48) they have become one in Christ, by entering into that "one-flesh" relationship which St Paul takes as worthy to represent the Christ-church relationship (Eph.5).

An interchurch family

The middle panel shows an interchurch family – it is based on the AIF logo which was drawn by the same Sr Regina and which we have used ever since the Association began in 1968. Here you see the family as a “domestic church” (Lumen Gentium, 11), and behind them two church buildings that symbolise the two church traditions which nourish the one Christian family. The married couple have become parents, “receiving from God the gift of a new responsibility” (Familiaris Consortio, 14). Together the two parents have the mission of nurturing and educating their child, their children, in the faith of Christ. They are the first teachers of their children; this is “a true ministry, through which the Gospel is transmitted and radiated so that family life
is transformed into a journey of faith and the school of Christian life" (General Directory for Catechesis, 227). The golden circle represents a wedding ring, the sign of their marriage covenant from which springs this responsibility. The white circle within the ring represents the eucharistic Bread which the family needs to sustain, nourish and build up their domestic church. For they are truly "the church in their home", as the American bishops put it in the pastoral letter they issued for the International Year of the Family in 1994. "The Christian family is called to experience a new and original communion which confirms and perfects natural and human communion. ... The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in each other in the unity of the Church of God. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realisation of ecclesial communion, and for this reason can and should be home", as the American bishops put it in the pastoral letter they issued for the International Year of the Family in 1994. "The Christian family is called to experience a new and original communion which confirms and perfects natural and human communion. ... The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in each other in the unity of the Church of God. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realisation of ecclesial communion, and for this reason can and should be called 'the domestic church'" (Familiaris Consortio, 21).

The marriage supper of the Lamb
Originally we had thought that the third panel would show the City of God, with interchurch families on their pilgrim way to the Father's house in company with all God's people. But then it occurred to us that it is the image of the marriage supper of the Lamb that has often been used by interchurch families over the years, to express their longing for the final consummation when God is All in all. Then all will eat together at God's one table, as one family. So the third panel represents the marriage supper of the Lamb, which every eucharist foreshadows (Happy are those who are called to his supper, we say just before communion in the rite of the mass) and to which the whole church is called, to which the whole church looks forward. It shows the marriage supper of the Lamb, but not as a Lamb standing on an altar, surrounded by crowds of worshippers, as in the famous painting of Van Eyck in Ghent Cathedral. Here it is pictured as the Russian painter Roublev does in his even more famous icon – in the form of the three travellers on their holy journey to Mamre. This has been taken in Christian tradition as an image of the marriage supper of the Lamb that all will be united in the Kingdom of God, in the Holy Trinity. This ultimate unity is present at every family meal. The eucharist is immensely important for the domestic church – for interchurch families most of all, perhaps – as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb, when all will be united in the Kingdom of God, in the Holy Trinity. This ultimate unity is given to us in the Holy Spirit, experienced and expressed in our everyday lives. In the account of the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel, the words of institution used at the eucharist are replaced by the foot-washing. Above all, we are called to humble, self-giving service in our everyday lives, laying down our lives for one another, as Jesus laid down his life for us all.

Ruth Reardon

A eucharistic reference
There is a eucharistic reference in every panel.

The first has the water of baptism and the wine of the eucharist – the Blood of Christ representing the life of Christ which flows into our lives. The theme recalls the sermon preached in 1987 for John and Nicola Austerberry at their wedding by John's father (an Anglican priest): "Water into Wine". The full text can be found in the sheet "A wedding in Manchester" in the AIF Getting Married Pack. He told them to pour all the treasures of their baptismal experience into their water jars together, because only when they had done this would they be able to draw out at Jesus' command, and taste the water turned into wine. "Then will our shared baptismal experience be turned into a shared eucharistic experience and we will realise that we have left the best wine to last."

In the second panel we saw that the white circle within the wedding ring represents the host – the Bread of Life which binds the Body of Christ together (we are the Body because we eat the Body). The family needs the eucharist to build up their one "little church" at home – represented in outline around the ring. For the eucharist "is the very source of Christian marriage ... in it Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed" (Familiaris Consortio, 57).

The icon of the third panel clearly has a eucharistic reference. Roublev actually painted a Lamb in the chalice, although it cannot be seen in small reproductions. Here is the theme of self-sacrificing love at the centre of the life of the Trinity – the Lamb of the Apocalypse “slain before the foundation of the world”. But there is more in the third panel. Below is an ordinary interchurch family at table; they are called in their everyday lives to make visible that unity, that communion in the marriage supper of the Lamb to which all are called. This juxtaposition of the Trinity and any ordinary interchurch family at table reminds us of the Quaker conviction that God is present at every family meal. The eucharist is immensely important for the domestic church – for interchurch families most of all, perhaps – as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb, when all will be united in the Kingdom of God, in the Holy Trinity. This ultimate unity is given to us in the Holy Spirit, experienced and expressed in our everyday lives. In the account of the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel, the words of institution used at the eucharist are replaced by the foot-washing. Above all, we are called to humble, self-giving service in our everyday lives, laying down our lives for one another, as Jesus laid down his life for us all.

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Full-colour posters of the triptych are available from the Association of Interchurch Families at Inter-Church House, 35-41 Lower Marsh, London SE1 7RL, price £6.50 + £1 p&p. Post-cards of the triptych are available at 25p each. 5 for £1+20 p p&p (postage discounts for quantities), as are post-cards of the central panel alone.
THE JOURNAL

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

Pastoral care

It is addressed to all who are or expect to be responsible for the pastoral care of mixed marriages and interchurch families in all their variety.

Towards Christian unity

The journal is also addressed 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 welcomes contributions and editorial help from all parts of the world.

The annual subscription (England, Scotland, Wales and N.Ireland) is £5 p.a. or £15 for three years; for the rest of Europe it is £6 p.a. or £17 for three years; for other parts of the world (sent airmailed printed rate) it is £7 p.a. or £22 for three years. Subscriptions can be sent in sterling to the AIF London address given at the foot of the next column, in American or Canadian dollars to B and K Hincks, PO Box 66, Swansea, SW 2281 Australia.

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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 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 ready to respond to enquirers.

Commitment to change

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

The Association is a registered charity (no. 283811) dependent on members' contributions and the donations of others who support its work.

Presidents are:

- the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Moderator of the three Churches 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. Contact:

AIF Conference at Scottish Churches House, Dunblane, 8-10 September 2000

Russia

First meeting of AIF in Moscow

FINLAND

International Conference: Interchurch families: living the path to Christian unity

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

Germany

Are we a burden or a promise for the churches?

Domburg, Freising. 29-30 January 2000

France

Third Meeting of foyers mixtes francophones

"In my Father's house are many rooms": the fears and joys of difference

Melun, nr Paris. 6-7 May 2001

England

Seeking God Together: the experience of spirituality in interchurch families

Swanwick, Derbyshire, 26-28 August 2000

Scotland

AIF Conference at Scottish Churches House, Dunblane, 8-10 September 2000

Canada

International Conference: Interchurch families: living the path to Christian unity

Edmonton, Alberta, 2-6 August 2001

Rome

Second World Gathering/ Rassemblement Mondial Rome 2003

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