Interchurch families
Journal of the Association of Interchurch Families

VOLUME TEN NUMBER ONE JANUARY 2002

Living the Path to Christian Unity

This number of Interchurch Families brings you echoes from Edmonton 2001, the first international conference to be held in Canada. Edmonton was the tenth in the series of conferences that began at Rydal in the English Lake District in 1980, and have taken interchurch families all around the British Isles - England, Ireland (north and south), and Scotland - and to the USA. The Edmonton conference was planned mainly by telephone and internet by groups in Montreal, Saskatoon and Calgary, co-ordinated by Ray and Fenella Temmerman in Morden, Manitoba, with on-the-spot planning by Cathy Harvey, Edmonton Archdiocesan Ecumenical Officer. It was an amazing achievement, and interchurch families world-wide are greatly indebted to the Canadians.

In a later number we will offer an overview of the previous nine conferences, and also situate Edmonton 2001 between the World Gathering of Interchurch Families held in Geneva in 1998 and that to be held near Rome in 2003. Geneva was organised by the francophones of France and Switzerland, while the Rome planning group (PREPROMA) is working in English, French, German and Italian. In this issue the Edmonton texts are given as much space as possible. The overall theme is that of the conference: Living the Path to Christian Unity, and the texts (necessarily shortened) are gathered into four sections. We start (as we often do) with interchurch family stories. The second section is a collection of texts gathered round the theme of interchurch family spirituality. We were particularly pleased that Bishop Marc Ouellet, recently appointed Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), came to Edmonton. His text on the potential of mixed marriage families is less drastically abbreviated than any other. In view of its importance in furthering dialogue with the PCPCU. Finally, there is a section on past and future. We are grateful to the authors to be allowed to publish these texts in this form here. Many can be found in their entirety at www.aifw.org, and tapes of the main presentations can be obtained from Ray Temmerman ($40 or £25: for address see back cover).

Pastoral understanding
A communique on Edmonton produced by a small group appealed for 'pastoral understanding' for interchurch families. Pastoral understanding goes much further than pastoral care: it is a two-way process. It implies dialogue, and respect for the conscientious convictions and actions of couples and families in situations where their loyalty to their marriage bond, to their 'domestic church', must sometimes necessarily be held in tension with their loyalty to their wider church communities. But pastoral understanding goes even further. It requires a willingness on the part of those church communities to listen to the experience of interchurch families, to be challenged by it, and to consider its wider implications for their own living of the path to Christian unity. To quote Bishop Ouellet: 'Family is not only a focus of the pastoral care of the Church, but also belongs to the very communion and mission of the Church.' Interchurch families are called to help make visible the communion and mission that our church communities share. RR
Telling our stories

In any gathering of interchurch families, the exchange of family stories plays a large part. At Edmonton we were grateful to two couples who told their stories to the whole conference. Here they are considerably shortened.

Struggles and encouragement in sharing two Christian traditions

Maureen and Darrel are a Catholic-Lutheran couple married for ten years, with three children. Becoming a part of the local, national and international network has helped us to realise that we are not alone. We hope to replace the resentment, anger and loneliness we have experienced with understanding and hope for the future.

Growing up

Darrel: My mom’s Lutheran family attended church regularly. My dad came from a large Roman Catholic family that attended church when possible. When they married, my dad turned Lutheran. The priest discouraged parishioners and family members from attending the wedding. I remember my parents’ frustration and hurt over the way they were treated by my dad’s family. I was confirmed at fifteen, and received communion for the first time. After high school, I continued to participate in the Lutheran church through music and church council.

Maureen: I was born into a loving Roman Catholic family with ten children. I received First Communion at 7, First Reconciliation at 9 and Confirmation at 13. When I was about ten years old I remember asking my mom what a Catholic person should do if their partner is not Catholic and they wish to get married. My mom explained they would have to wait until their partner agreed to turn Catholic. As a teenager, I attended a special retreat for young Catholics and my relationship deepened with God. The local Lutheran church had a vibrant youth group and a few Catholic teens chose to attend. I asked my parents if I could join. They discouraged me, explaining that Lutherans believe differently.

I moved away to study. I met new people and went on dates. I hoped to find someone who shared the same moral values and attended church regularly. I used a prayer each night from a book: a prayer for a special friend. God sent many friends, but only one truly matched what I had been praying for. Darrel and I met within six months.

When we met

Darrel: That was the start of a friendship that took us to coffee shops, and on long walks, sharing our faith in Christ. We knew we were both strong in our different traditions, but it was not an obstacle in our relationship then. The first discussions around our faith were an investigation of the differences. The more we shared the stronger our friendship became.

Maureen: After a few months Darrel asked if I would like to start dating. I was afraid we would lose our close friendship and decided it was best to remain just friends. Our friendship was unlike any other relationship I had ever had. I could confide in him on many levels. I was drawn to him because he had moral values; he was dedicated to those he cared for; he was compassionate and honest; he knew a lot about the Bible; and he was committed to living a life filled with Christ. I began to realise that the values I was looking for were not found in the men I was dating, though most were Catholic. I felt God was calling me to be with Darrel. A few years had passed. Fortunately, with God’s help, we met again.

Our dating years

Darrel: We started dating. Talking about the differences between our churches took us late into the night. Neither of us was going to leave our church to join the other. I wondered how we could keep our own faith yet worship together. I recalled a pastor’s message: ‘The family that worships together, stays together’. The same pastor said you should not marry a non-Lutheran.

Maureen: We discussed the Pope, reconciliation, purgatory, the saints, intercommunion. We struggled with how we would provide religious education to our children. Priests I talked with insisted that the non-Catholic partner must allow the Catholic to assume responsibility for the children’s religious education, or they would encourage the non-Catholic partner to convert. I was concerned I might set myself up for a confrontation that could involve excluding me from the church.

Darrel: Time passed, and our discussions intensified, often ending in tears. We believed we were meant to be together, but were afraid that the doctrine of our churches had a potential of keeping us apart. We continued to attend church together, the Catholic church on Saturday evenings and the Lutheran on Sunday mornings. We hoped and prayed. At one point, we thought of joining a third denomination, but then realised that our separate traditions shaped the kind of person we had become. If we joined another, we would lose part of ourselves. I remember becoming so frustrated that I gave Maureen an ultimatum: either to agree to raise our children Lutheran or I would end our relationship. It hurt me to do this. She reluctantly agreed to raise our children Lutheran. We managed to stay together and our love remained strong.

We still believed that it was in God’s plan for us to spend our lives together. We made a decision to maintain our separate traditions, and continue attending both churches. We decided to develop a better understanding of each other’s beliefs.
Maureen: We attended RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults). Although most couples attending plan to have one partner convert to Catholicism, it is not only offered for this reason. The priest leading the group seemed very supportive of our relationship. He said that if each tradition took the special things they had to offer and put them together, what a wonderful church we would have. It was refreshing.

**Our engagement and wedding**

Darrel: I asked Maureen to marry me; her reply was ‘Yes’, and we went to tell my parents. I knew inside they were not happy that Maureen was Catholic. We followed marriage preparation classes at both churches; they focused on our compatibility as individuals. Interchurch relationships were not discussed.

Maureen: During a private meeting with the priest, to set our wedding date, he asked what our plans were for the religious education of our children. I explained we wanted to share both traditions with our children. I felt obligated to provide him with an explanation to justify my decision. I told him how much the hardship that Darrel’s family had endured affected him, how I did not feel comfortable pressuring him or his family to deal with another Catholic situation. The priest seemed to understand. When the priest met my parents for the first time, he asked me again what we planned to do with children. I felt awkward with my parents near. I remembered the agreement I had made with Darrel in raising the children Lutheran, but in my heart I was not comfortable with it. I felt guilty and struggled inside. I knew that if I pressured Darrel about raising our children Catholic, it would strain our relationship. I did not feel I had a good reason to go against Darrel’s request. All I could tell the priest was that we both knew what each other wanted and we would try to do what was best for our children. I did not speak about our agreement. I hoped that, in time, Darrel and I could find an answer, and Darrel would feel comfortable sharing both traditions with our children. The priest did not ask anymore.

Darrel: We were married in the Catholic church we attended on Saturday nights, and the Lutheran pastor took part and gave the homily. We knew we could not have communion, though we would have liked this on our wedding day. The ceremony was important to us because it was the beginning of our interchurch life together. We knew we had struggles ahead, but we intended to embrace them and journey together in faith.

Maureen: After we married, we attended a course to learn more about the Lutheran Church. We found more similarities between our traditions. I felt pressure to join the Lutheran Church from the pastors facilitating the course. Darrel and I knew that was not my intention, and we explained this. I am not sure they agreed with our interchurch relationship.

Sharing communion

I struggled with the idea of intercommunion. I felt that if you take communion in another church, you are saying you agree with everything that church represents. At the time, I felt I was showing my support for Darrel by allowing him to remain Lutheran, and attending church with him. I chose not to receive communion in his church.

After an experience at Darrel’s grandmother’s funeral, I had a change of heart. The priest allowed non-Catholic family members to receive communion. It was the first time I had seen Darrel receive communion in a Catholic Church. As I watched him, I was filled with an overwhelming sense of happiness. I felt more connected to him. The feelings I had took me by surprise. I realised that being able to commune together was meaningful for us, as a couple. From this point on, I decided to receive communion in the Lutheran Church, as a sign of oneness with Darrel. I feel that my decision is right, but I still have feelings of guilt. I wonder how I will be judged. I don’t completely understand the Catholic Church’s view.

Darrel: For the past few years, I have received communion in both churches. You may wonder how is this possible in the Catholic Church when I am not a confirmed Catholic? I believe that if I were to seek permission through the bishop the answer would be ‘no’. I came to my decision by seeking approval from the local priest. Maureen and I invited him to our house to talk about communion. He was not your traditional priest. He understood our situation and that my belief in Christ was the same as his. We both believe that through a mystery the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Sadly, he died a few years ago. I will never forget him. He lifted a heavy stone off my back by allowing me to commune at the Lord’s table. Today I know he is watching and supporting me. I have not approached the current parish priest. I am afraid he will not see me in the same light and refuse communion. I feel that in my heart I am doing nothing wrong and for this reason I am continuing to commune in the Catholic Church.

Where we are now

Maureen: Over the years, Darrel and I have created a ‘comfort zone’ around the way we deal with the difference in our traditions. We have settled into it to protect us from having difficult discussions with family, clergy, friends and other Christians. It is hard to talk about our interchurch relationship or re-live past experiences. It is easier to keep our story to ourselves instead of stirring up controversy or initiating a confrontation. It is difficult for Darrel and I to discuss, between ourselves, the issues that don’t have black and white answers. We sometimes hesitate to bring up issues with each other because we do not want to upset the life we have created as an interchurch family.

After our first child was born we changed our initial agreement, and decided that I would take the responsibility for the religious education of our children. I have more time to work with them in home instruction. They were baptised...
in the Lutheran Church, and take instruction from the Catholic Church for First Communion and Reconciliation. We have not made a decision regarding Confirmation. We alternate Sundays between churches. We try to maintain a balance as an interchurch family by allowing the children to take part in both churches. They attend Sunday School at a balance as an interchurch family by allowing the children Catholic Church for First Communion and Reconciliation.

At times, we have experienced pressure from our families. We realise as each year passes, that it is our responsibility to make choices for our children. We have become stronger in facing these challenges. The most difficult times for me have been dealing with the feelings of abandonment by my family, and Darrel’s family. I wish I had more support from them because it is important be able to count on family when you are going through struggles in life.

The lack of support I feel I have received from the Catholic Church, in general, and some clergy has left me feeling angry. I have been frustrated with negative interactions I have had with Lutheran pastors. At times I sit in church with tears in my eyes at the thought of our struggle. I don’t understand why what we are striving for should cause such pain. Many couples choose to become one tradition but don’t attend church regularly. Darrel and I have a hard time understanding why two people who choose to attend church regularly and share two traditions should experience such hardship. In times of real struggle, we ask ourselves: ‘How can something so good be so wrong?’

Over the past year, we have re-connected with the priest who facilitated our RCIA classes, and who joined us in marriage. He is now very involved in our recently-formed interchurch family group. We have shared with him about our life thus far. I expected this would be difficult to do, but it was not.

Darrel: Today, we are excited about the journey ahead. It is encouraging to see how much we have grown, individually, and as a couple. The challenge of writing this presentation has motivated us to continue working for interchurch families. Our hope and dream is that one day all Christian churches will forgive each other, and the hurt they brought upon each other.

**Ourselves and our children**

Michele and Craig Buchanan explained how their experiences differ from those of their children. They focused particularly on communion in church and eucharist.

Before we married Michele, who is Roman Catholic, had to promise, in front of the priest and myself, that she would do her best to raise our children in the Catholic Church. When she formally did so, in response I promised to do my best to raise our children in my church. Luckily for us, we had an understanding priest. After 15 years and four children, we have both kept our promises. We attend each other’s church services regularly and our children are active in both communities. Our church situation makes this lifestyle a little easier, because our United Church is also home to a Roman Catholic congregation. These two churches share the same worship space, the same baptismal font, and the same altar. They have developed their relationship to the point that the sign by the church door now reads ‘The Christian Community of St John’s United and St Edward the Confessor’ – ‘community’ in the singular. The sign is not meant to be a theological statement but more the feeling of the people.

The churches have a lot of wounds to heal and differences to resolve. But at local and micro level churches are coming together. Our house church, the church within our home, is living in the unity of Christ daily. Catholic and Protestant under the same roof. It is not a perfect unity, but it is a visible unity. The Christian unity within our family has led my oldest daughter to see herself not just as Catholic or Protestant, but as Christian.

As husband and wife we are one in our marriage. But as the Protestant half of this ‘oneness’, and despite that fact that I attend Mass almost as often as my wife, and certainly more often than many Catholics I know, I still feel like an outsider in the Catholic Church. My wife will never feel completely a part of the United Church. We each have our roots in our own churches. But our children have been raised in both, for them both churches are theirs. Their roots grow out of both. Catholic meets Protestant in literally one body. It is no longer a symbolic image of two becoming one, husband and wife joining together in marriage. Our children have both churches within them.

The Catholic Church in Canada permits the Anglican or Protestant partner in an interchurch marriage to receive communion on occasions of ecclesial or familial significance. I restrict my sharing of the eucharist to significant moments in my faith journey or for members of my family. The last time I had communion in the Catholic Church was at the Catholic confirmation of my third daughter in the spring. I feel that this makes these special times more significant for me. That may be partly because the United Church only has communion four or five times a year. That does not mean that I don’t feel the pain of our disunity every time the rest of my family goes to receive communion. The hurt is there every week. My wife chooses not to take communion in the United Church.

Our children have experienced two Christian traditions since birth and feel truly part of both. After receiving First Communion in the Catholic Church, they all began to take communion in both churches. First Communion is celebrated at eight years old and at that age I don’t think we need to burden them with the doctrinal differences that separate us at the Lord’s Table. As they get older this pattern of participating in both communions continues to be normal for them. They are indeed the ones who can claim double belonging, and in the end I think they are in an even better position to challenge the churches.
A spirituality for interchurch families

The Edmonton conference theme picked up the message of Pope John Paul II to interchurch families at York in 1982: ‘You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity. Express that hope in prayer together, in the unity of love. Together invite the Holy Spirit of love into your hearts and into your homes. He will help you to grow in trust and understanding.’ A number of distinguished ecumenists came to Edmonton to reflect on the theme and to share their experience with interchurch couples. We regret that all texts are abbreviated.

A homily for interchurch families

Fr Ernest Falardeau, SSS, Ecumenical Officer for the Catholic Archdiocese of Albuquerque, focused on the reading from Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11, which, he said, ‘puts us straight on the path to a spirituality for interchurch families’.

Paul reminds us that through baptism we have been buried with Christ and have risen with him to newness of life. Christ is at the centre of our ecumenical spirituality. ‘The closer we draw to Christ, the closer we draw to each other’. The second Vatican Council tells us.

Christian unity is not our doing. Christ prayed for it. He sent his Spirit to achieve it. It is God—Father, Son and Spirit—who will bring it about. Our task is to receive it, to prepare the ground for it. We must eliminate prejudice and stereotypes from our hearts and prepare the way for God’s grace to bring about a profound conversion. Then we will no longer see other Christians as ‘other’ but as ‘like’. In the words of the Council: ‘we will see and recognize other Christians as brothers and sisters in the Lord.’

If we see the Church as Paul does, we will see it as one in spite of divisions. It enjoys a communion ‘real but incomplete’. We are part of the body, members of Christ, brothers and sisters in the one family of God. The spirituality of the interchurch family is an ecclesial spirituality, profoundly affected by love for the Church. Not just the church or denomination in which we were born, but every expression of the Christian tradition has a right to our love. Our prayer is always ‘in Christ’, and his prayer is always ‘that all may be one… so that the world may believe’. We pray with Christ that our love for one another may continue to be as in the early Church—a sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in our midst. Our communion is incomplete. It is being completed by every step we take together; every dialogue, prayer, action that advances the kingdom of God moves us inevitably toward unity.

Paul underscores that in the Church there is no Jew or Greek, free or slave. All are Christians, part of the family. By our baptism and faith we are in real communion. That is why eucharistic sharing is possible for us. Our ecclesial communion leads to eucharistic communion. Our baptism opens the door to our sharing in the life of the Church, the life of Christ, eternal life. We grow in our knowledge of God, that is why we are clothed with Christ. Our Christian spirituality is essentially a growth in the Risen Lord. We put on his mind, share his thoughts, live his life.

And we do this as a family, as domestic church. We are the church in miniature. At the heart of the Church we want to develop a spirituality of love. Love is the great commandment of Jesus, our families are to grow in the love of God and neighbour. If the world is to change it must change one family at a time. If the Church is to grow, it is to grow one family at a time. Let every family share deeply in the life of the Church, in the life of the Risen Lord.

We share the eucharist together. Christ draws us into one body and one Church. The eucharist is a sign of the unity we already share as baptized Christians who love God and one another. It is also a sign of the unity we hope to achieve with God’s grace. It is the means to that unity. Thomas Aquinas says unity is the ‘thing’ (res), the purpose and goal of the eucharist (Summa Theologiae 3, q.73).

The Risen Lord gives us his Spirit, the Giver of Life. The Spirit gives us life in Christ. The Holy Spirit is at the heart of our spirituality as interchurch families. Our task is to follow the Spirit’s lead. All spirituality is ultimately life in the Spirit, allowing the Spirit to live in us as in a temple. Worship must be in the Spirit and in truth.

The bread on the table of our homes is a sign and reminder of the bread we break in the Church. The bread broken on our tables is a prayer that Christ will unite us in the bread broken in his memory. Christ was born in Bethlehem, house of bread. And the Word made flesh becomes our bread of life as we share the eucharist together. We pray that the Risen Lord will continue to draw us together and to himself, until he comes in glory. Amen.

Together in the power of the Spirit

Dr Eileen Scully (Anglican), until recently Associate Secretary for Faith and Order of the Canadian Council of Churches, addressed the conference on the theme of Baptism and Marriage. We give here a section from her address.

Baptism into the whole Body of Christ is baptism into a Body that is wounded. Some of the tissue has been severed in ways that seem irreparable. But it is a Body nonetheless.
Interchurch families know and feel these realities deeply. You live the paradoxical, painful, conjunction of the realities of the brokenness of the Body of Christ, and your knowledge that wounds can be healed, reconciliation is possible, Christian unity can be lived out with integrity.

Baptismal membership is unlike any other kind of membership. Christian unity is unlike any other kind of ‘unity’, say of corporations, clubs, or nations. The Church embraces all manner of people who would not naturally find themselves together. Jesus’ prayer that his disciples be one was for unity so that the world – the whole world – may believe, and so be caught up in the unity of God’s Love through the Spirit. Christian unity – being together in and through the power of the Spirit, is a movement – and energy – that faces the brokenness – that’s the baptismal gift and call: reconciliation for the sake of the world.

Lately, I’ve been trying to explain ‘Full Communion’ (in the context of Anglican-Lutheran relations in Canada). It’s not a merger, like that of corporations or for pragmatic self-preserving institutional reasons – but a sharing of life together, in response to God’s gift of unity, for the sake of the world. I’ve been thinking of ‘Empire’ (whether of states or corporations), where the powerful unite with increasing strength in order to dominate, conquer and subjugate weakness (or perceived weakness) and any form of difference that gets in the way of the increase in power of the already-powerful. The unity of the Spirit is unity in a very different kind of power – one that seeks not to dominate, but to serve; one that is not concerned with institutional, cultural or personal survival (or even religious survival!), but is ready to lay down its life for friendship. We know only too well the tendencies of churches – because they are us, and we too are shaped by these cultural forces – to get caught up in patterns of relationship that look more like Empire than Reign of God. Particularly when we’re under the stress of a secular world, and threatened with the worst of contemporary threats – irrelevance. We might be tempted as individuals and as churches to try to present a unified front against those forces that seem to threaten us. We might be tempted to ignore voices that remind us of our own fragility, remind us that we haven’t got it all completely together.

But the fact of the ecumenical movement is that when we, as Christians from different traditions, walk together – and more, live together in covenant love and raise families together – we enter into a radically different experience of unity in the power of the Spirit. Sin has its roots in the desire to ‘lord over’, and shows itself in the use of power over others that subjugates, dominates, excludes, denies the personhood of another. ‘Lording over’ has many names: patriarchy, colonialism, abuse, racism. But something new is being born in our midst as these many – and other – faces of ‘lording over’ (kyriarchy) are named, and transformed.

I see one of these new things in the celebration of Full Communion between the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This is not a merger, but a much deeper exchange of recognition of friends in Christ by friends in Christ – recognizing each other fully as church, with distinct gifts to offer and to be received by each other. Friendship exists and grows in the free-flowing of gifts of our deepest selves to each other, and it eschews the tendency of one to use power to dominate, assimilate or control the other. Rather, this is a growing under, through and in, the power of the Spirit.

I also see new things being born in the shifting patterns in marital relationships, in relationships between women and men. The emergence of married relationships where the passion, love, and shared life together, are grown from the soil of friendship that seeks the integrity of each person as the foundation of the integrity of the relationship. It’s something that interchurch families show me: in your faith lives, you are living in this power, not where one dominates the other, but where each beholds with deep joy and wonder, as gift, the integrity of the other’s faith life and faith tradition. This is, indeed, love in the power of the Spirit, and a new thing being done in our midst. I read a display in the hallway: ‘Many enter into “mixed” marriages believing that one tradition must dominate the other. We are living witnesses that this need not be the case.’ You are indeed witnesses of something new being done.

Unity in the power of the Spirit carries within itself an energy to reach beyond itself – whether we’re talking about interchurch families or Anglicans and Lutherans in Full Communion – that grace-filled energy to reach out with the ripple-effect real hope for transformation can have. How powerful the witness to this world of friends of Christ who have become friends in Christ!

‘One as We are One’

Brother Gilles Bourdeau, a/h is Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, Montreal. His rich address was based on John 17: 20-26.

With an awareness of your spiritual experience as ‘domestic churches’, I would like to meditate on some questions raised by the last few verses of Jesus’ benediction. Our experiences shed light on Jesus’ words and actions. His presence, his actions and his final words reveal the depth and meaning of our human and evangelical journey, our sincere intentions as well as our ecclesiastical tensions. I believe that the presence you as couples and families are called to welcome and understand is met here in Jesus’ final wishes for the presence, communion and mission of Christ and the Church in the world.

1. ‘He deigned to pray to his Father for us’

Francis of Assisi marvelled at this prayer of Jesus for himself and for his own, saying: ‘He deigned to pray to his Father for us’ (1 Rule 22:41). If there is one thing a Christian home must be aware of, it is the spiritual presence of Jesus praying in each person and in the community we are called to form. It is easy to understand Francis’ ecstatic admiration when he realizes that he and his contemporaries are already held in God’s heart and in Christ’s love and prayer. Daily prayer is simply becoming aware of this presence which gives birth to, accompanies and fulfills all Love in our lives. In the tension of welcoming Christ and
his words, and our ongoing experience of conversion, a strong and profound conviction is forged: He is present today, he was present yesterday, he will be present tomorrow. He prayed for us, he is still praying for us.

2. Those who believe in Jesus ‘through their word’
Jesus is looking ahead to disciples and communities that will receive him by hearing about him through the witness of others. This is our experience. We receive our knowledge of Jesus through others. If we are able to confess that Jesus is Lord, we are also affirming that we have been born in faith through the community, a father and mother, sisters and brothers, authentic representatives of Christian life. Being born again is itself a sign that we receive and meet God through Christ in the Church.

Passing on the faith through the ministry of the word is very relevant to us, when we understand that our experience as couples and families is a special place to seek out God and test him. Here we learn more about his actions and his weakness, to know and love his face and heart. Baptized in water and fire, we understand that the experience of love – our own and others’ – gives God and gives to God. We are sign and word of God in fear and trust.

The word is to be passed on, from one spouse to the other, from one to another within the family and domestic church. Those who love each other are in a ministry situation that calls for discernment and commitment. Passing on the faith in our mixed marriages may become a stumbling block, or it may become the cornerstone of marital communion.

What we experience and what gives us life, how can we not share and pass on to others, not only between parents and children, but also among those around us? Especially when our Christian roots give us life in and through various and similar experiences of church.

3. ‘As we are one’: source and end of all loves
It is obvious that the unity among his disciples that Jesus prays for is infinitely more than concord and tolerance, getting along with each other or even unity in the faith. It is a unity and communion of beings and persons in the image of the unity and communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (17:22). How the divine persons are ‘one’ is a mystery that fascinates our intelligence, overwhelms and inspires it. To have an inkling of what it means, we must approach it from an existential perspective, with faith and simplicity, with the spiritual perception characteristic of those who live in intimate relationship with God.

Believers have always experienced the God of the Bible as a personal God. He creates and watches over creation, protects and preserves it, constantly at work. Because he is personal God cannot be in eternal solitude. Real people cannot exist without being in relationship with others. What makes us more and more human is growing into more and more perfect communion. The opposite, withdrawing into ourselves, leads to death. The absolute Person is absolute communion. Communion between persons is what ensures our unity. In God, the Persons in an eternal communion of love are ‘One’. Their single being, of which the Father is the source, is not divided up into Three. Each Person contains it and expresses it in relation with the other two in an absolutely unique manner. In God, there is absolute unity and absolute diversity.

Communion in God is their unity. Unity in God and of God is the source and end of all communion and all unity. The unity and love of the Father and the Son is what Jesus wants his followers to experience and in it to find a home. In every church, however humble – ‘wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them’ – brotherly love is the fruit and expression of divine love and divine communion. Mutual knowledge and mutual acceptance in love are pathways and conditions that lead to intimacy with God. Fraternal communion continues and reveals Jesus’ presence in the world. If the Love of the Father and the Son, the Spirit, is given to us, it is so that every experience of communion, permanent or occasional, becomes a venue for knowing love and growing in love.

4. Tested in communion
The verb ‘love’ is used only in the final verses (23-24). Yet this is the core of all prayer, of Christian existence. It is understood only at the very end as one of the great works of God and of life. As Jesus sees it, we constantly grow in our knowledge and experience of love (17:26). Communion and love grow unceasingly. To be fulfilled in love is to enter ever more deeply into the love that has no end and which is a gift rather than the result of our efforts, more a grace-filled Pentecost than a demanding Passion. Communion and love are offered and given. After much effort and attention, they can only be received, as a gift from God, and welcomed with joy.

Christian life is contemplation in action, committing ourselves without looking for anything in return, in fraternal love and the eternal love of God. There is a discipline of love and unity for people and communities that have made life commitments. The communion which is the being and action of God calls for our free participation and our co-operation. Like Jesus, his witnesses teach that we have to sacrifice our own inclinations if we want to advance in reconciliation and love. All communion and all unity make demands on us. They bring both joy and suffering. This discipline frees us in the action of the Holy Spirit so that the new creation, clothed at baptism, can manifest itself more and more. There is no way to test this new reality taking shape within us, except our ability and our willingness to love God and our neighbour more and more unconditionally. Especially the ‘neighbour’ who has chosen us and with whom we have chosen to obey the commandment to love.

5. Witnesses of unity
‘So that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (17:21); that is the issue: being recognized, just as I am, as a human being. John’s words are bold; they lead us into a fullness that challenges all commentaries. This is the context in which he places the humble reality of brotherly, sisterly communion in all ‘little churches’. John does not seem very interested in church structures. His thinking is as fully ecclesial and as little ecclesiastical it could be. If small communities have become more meaningful today, it is not because they have some superior status because of the integrity of their lives or because they have a monopoly on
sacrifice or humility. Communities — including all Christian homes — are simply places where we pick up the basin but also allow ourselves to be served.

John’s morality. his thinking about the Church and his concept of human beings are inseparable. God is not without Jesus, Jesus without God or the Church without them, or they without the Church. Proclaiming and living the gospel is about relationships, because God is love. In the early Church “...the whole group of believers were of one heart and soul... everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32-33). That is why great power marked the apostles’ testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

‘As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (17:21). It is to this test of communion, this demand for unity and this witness that we are called by our baptism, as we live out the Good News in our homes.

A family of love

Canon Alyson Barnett-Cowan, Director of Faith, Worship and Ministry of the Anglican Church of Canada, expressed her gratitude for being present at the conference.

I was moved to hear your stories. I heard not so much pain — although that is a part of them — as perseverance and creativity and hope. I was asked why an ecumenical staff person would choose to come to be with this particular group. I replied: “Because you’re the ecumenical movement”. I got the response: “But we didn’t choose to be”.

No, when you chose each other you weren’t choosing to take on the overwhelming task of healing the body of Christ, wounded over countless generations. Yet any marriage brings together separated families, and yours have just been really big separated families. But you did more than choose each other. You have chosen, day by day, to honour each other, to be faithful to your tradition and to that of your partner. You have chosen to create a new reality, a family of love that demonstrates to the churches not only the scandal of our divisions, but the absurdity of them. You have chosen to let your love move mountains — to find ways through, beside, under, over and between the barriers thrown up by centuries of fear and mistrust and mutual condemnation. So God bless you, and your children, and your children’s children who may, God willing, inherit the one church you have helped to create.

To move beyond

Sr Thérèse Jasmin came from a retreat centre at Winnipeg to run a workshop on “Walking the spiritual journey”. Someone described it as an oasis in the conference, a place to which individuals or couples could come for refreshment on their own paths to God. In her comments at the end of the conference Sr Thérèse picked up the theme of the bridge: we had used a meadow bridge as a symbol of the pathway to unity, a “crossing over”. Jay Bréard, who co-ordinated conference worship, invited participants to contribute a “link” to the bridge — a hope, a vision or a prayer. (The bridge has now found a home at the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism in Saskatoon.)

Bridges are passage-ways. Traffic must be kept moving: you don’t stop — or park, or get stuck, or stall — on a bridge. Bridges are for movement to the other side — to move beyond. Likewise religion, churches, doctrines, dogmas, canon law are bridges. They are a means to move into the Kingdom of God, a means to grow into Christ, a means to develop a life in the Spirit.

Even the Word of God is a bridge. As we cultivate the friendship of Christ, a point may come when we move beyond the particular Gospel words so the Person speaking through the text: we have reached the point of spiritual attentiveness. The purpose of any bridge — be it religion, church, Word of God — is to be a person-to-person, being-to-being relationship with Christ. So may our bridges challenge us to move from inter-church to inter-Christian faith families. May we all so contemplate the light, love, life of Christ that we become transfigured into brothers and sisters of Christ.

Live in God’s love

The young people at Edmonton, interchurch children in their teens and beyond, put together their own letter addressed “to all clerical and lay members of the Church”. They took up the theme of John 17, 20-23, and wrote:

To realize this vision, we appreciate that many steps need to be taken. Some of the steps we feel will help are:• Prayer for fellowship in the churches
• Prayer for reconciliation
• Prayer for acceptance
• Prayer for constant focus on God and only God

As you can see, we are building our foundation on prayer. We need to let God move within our churches to bring them together. We remember that all our denominations are based on Jesus Christ. We must break down the barriers that have been formed and live on the foundation of God’s love. We leave you with this: Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters and be eager to show respect for one another (Rom. 12:10).
Living the Path to Christian Unity:
the potential of mixed marriage families

Bishop Marc Ouellet, PSS had only recently been appointed Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and ordained bishop when he agreed to address the Edmonton Conference. His earlier work was as seminary Rector in Edmonton, and before that in Montreal, following seminary work in Columbia. From 1990 he was chair of dogmatic theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family in Rome, and felt that his experience of teaching young couples there 'represented to some extent an asset for initiating a fruitful dialogue' with interchurch families. Families at Edmonton were very grateful indeed for his presence, his participation in the conference and his willingness to listen to what they had to say. Here we give his address, slightly abbreviated.

A sense of momentum is growing among you concerning the contribution you can make to Christian unity. I rejoice about that and I wish to support you as much as I can, by helping you to understand the position of the Catholic Church from the perspective of the family as 'domestic church'. First I will speak of the family seen as an ecclesial category by the Second Vatican Council; then of the impact of the Second Vatican Council on Marriage and the Family in Rome; and thirdly of the potential of mixed-marriage families for promoting Christian unity.

1. The emergence of the family as an ecclesial category

One of the most prophetic teachings of Vatican II was the emergence of the 'domestic church' as a category for affirming the family as the first and primary 'community of love and life' in the Church. The expression 'domestic church' is used explicitly only twice in the official documents, but they are very important references, in n. 11 of the Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, and in the Decree on the Lay Apostolate, 11. These references have opened the path for further development, and a deeper understanding of the family as domestic church.

In the encyclicals Humanae Vitae (1968) to Evangelium Vitae (1995) and especially the Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio (1981) and the Letter to Families (1994), Popes Paul VI and John Paul II have dedicated much attention to the present crisis of marriage in today's culture. The thrust of this teaching goes beyond the realm of moral law. It aims at restoring a Christian anthropology that has been distorted by modern ideologies such as individualism, communism, materialism and consumerism. Most people will recognize that the category of 'domestic church' as expounded in these documents, constitutes a very positive development of the spirituality and the mission of the family. Since the first year of his pontificate, John Paul II has constantly emphasized that 'the family is the way of the Church'. He wrote in his Letter to Families: "We wish both to profess and to proclaim this way which leads to the kingdom of heavens (cf. Mt. 7, 14) through conjugal and family life. It is important that the "communion of persons" in the family should become a preparation for the "communion of saints" (14). As domestic church, the family is a school of communion, based on the values of the Gospel, involving the whole life of the persons in a communion of faith and love which participates in the communion of the divine Persons through the gift of the sacrament of marriage.

This development of magisterial teaching is not something exclusive purely for the confessional Catholic. Already in the thirties. Romano Guardini had coined the concept of an 'awakening of the Church in souls'. Vatican II was a high point of this awakening, by increasing Church awareness among all the faithful and especially by re-introducing the concept of the family as 'domestic church'. This awakening obviously extends beyond the borders of the Roman Catholic Church, since the ecumenical movement, for example, one of the greatest manifestations of this awakening of the Church in souls, was born from Protestant and Orthodox initiatives. As regards further development in the official teaching of the Catholic Church, the conviction now is that the family is not only a focus of the pastoral care of the Church, but also belongs to the very communion and mission of the Church. The family is Church in the first place, as communion of persons united by the bond of human and divine love, sent to the world to bear the fruit of love and life. Familiaris Consortio affirms that the family, born of the sacrament of marriage, is not only a community that is 'saved' by the love of Christ: it is also a 'saving' community that shares with others the love of Christ (49). These perspectives reveal the potential of the 'domestic church' for an authentic spirituality of marriage and the family: they provide the theological underpinning for allowing families - and interchurch families - to commit themselves to bringing about greater unity among the churches and ecclesial communities. Your enthusiasm is a concrete sign that the path already travelled allows us to continue along this way with a deeper consciousness of the gift of God to the family, and thus with a greater hope of contributing more to the coming of the Kingdom.

This positive development brings us to the fundamental question of the unity of the family as domestic church and of the differences among the churches and ecclesial communities of which mixed marriages form a part. The pressure of contemporary culture which challenges family values, makes us realize that only a deeper encounter with Christ can enable the 'domestic church' to bring about unity among the churches. I remember fondly a gift from my students last June at the end of my course on the sacrament of marriage: a reproduction of a mosaic from the famous Basilica of Monreale in Sicily showing Christ bringing Eve to Adam in the garden of Eden. Christ is in the centre of the picture. He holds Eve firmly by the hand.
in front of Adam, who is seated with his finger pointing towards her, as he exclaims in amazement: ‘Yes, this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!’ What is striking is Christ at the centre appearing as Creator and Lord of human love. The message of this picture is important for Christian couples and for interchurch families because it reveals Christ as the best friend of human love and as the key to the unity of the family and the unity of the Church – two inseparable realities. Christ is the One who ultimately shapes and blesses the relationship of man and woman for the sake of the Kingdom. It is this centrality of Christ in the Kingdom that the family is called to put into practice. For this reason, the picture of Adam and Eve is an act of faith by which the two baptized partners give their vows to Christ in the hope of being blessed by him. The Lord welcomes them and blesses them with the gift of Love that binds him to the Father: the Bond of the Spirit. Christ brings Eve to Adam. Christ brings Erika to Andrew, their vows to Christ in the Day of being blessed by him. The Lord in the celebration of the sacrament is poured out upon them as the grace of strengthening, healing, and nurturing their communion all the days of their lives. The family is domestic church precisely because of the presence of the Lord in the communion of the spouses. This presence is a precious gift that belongs to the baptized couple as their ecclesial bond. The marital union and the family life that flows from it are more easily assured when both partners belong to the same faith community’ (cf Directory 144). This gift means concretely that human love and family life are blessed by the grace of strengthening, healing, and nurturing their communion all the days of their lives. The family is domestic church precisely because of the presence of the Lord in the communion of the spouses. This presence is a precious gift that belongs to the baptized couple as their ecclesial bond. The marital union and the family life that flows from it are more easily assured when both partners belong to the same faith community’ (cf Directory 144). The bond constitutes the deepest identity of the married couple, its ecclesial identity; it provides them with a source of holiness and mission which involves the married couple in the mission of Christ and the Church.

II. The impact of the concept of the ‘domestic church’ on the Ecumenical Directory
In chapter 3 of the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism, entitled ‘Ecumenical Formation in the Catholic Church’, the family is given first place among the ‘suitable settings for formation’. The family, entitled the ‘domestic church’ by the Second Vatican Council, is the primary place in which unity will be fashioned or weakened each day through the encounter of persons, who, though different in many ways, accept each other in a communion of love’ (66b). Mixed marriage families share in that primacy in spite of differences in belief and church membership. Thus ‘parents should by their words and example be the first preachers of the faith to their children’ (66a, quoting Lumen Gentium). Moreover, the document continues, in bearing witness to Christ, ‘they have too the delicate task of making themselves builders of unity’ (66b, with a reference to Evangelii Nuntiandi). The rationale for this delicate task is explained in these terms: ‘Their common baptism and the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these marriages with the basis and motivation for expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values’ (66b).

It is worth noting here the great difference between this formulation of the Directory, based on the new Code of Canon Law of 1983, and the language of the old code. The 1917 Code proscribed mixed marriages between Christians: ‘The Church everywhere prohibits the marriage between two baptized persons, one of whom is a Catholic, the other of whom belongs to a heretical or schismatic sect’ (c. 1069). A mixed marriage was generally considered as something evil to be avoided. The 1983 Code reads: ‘Without the express permission of the competent authority, marriage is prohibited between two baptized persons, one of whom was baptized in the Catholic Church … the other of whom belongs to a Church or ecclesial communion not in full communion with the Catholic Church’ (c.1124). Here is an important softening of both language and attitude. The 1983 Code speaks of another communion not in full communion with the Catholic Church but no longer of a schismatic sect. In keeping with the revised Code, the Directory underlines the positive values of mixed marriages and their delicate task of being builders of unity. The ecumenical spirit has already accomplished much, not only in terms of language but also in terms of building a real, albeit incomplete, communion between the churches and ecclesial communities. This is reflected also in changes of the Catholic Church's regulations concerning the education of children and sacramental sharing.

In keeping with her doctrine on religious freedom, the Catholic Church has modified the requirement of a promise by both partners to educate their children in the Catholic faith, previously an indispensable condition for a mixed marriage. The terminology is considerably transformed: ‘In carrying out this duty of transmitting the Catholic faith to the children, the Catholic parent will do so with respect for the religious freedom and conscience of the other parent and with due regard for the unity and permanence of the marriage and for the maintenance of the communion of the family. If, notwithstanding the Catholic's best efforts, the children are not baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church, the Catholic parent does not fall subject to the censure of Canon Law’ (c.366). In other words, Catholic parents are not punished if, out of respect for the other, they fail to realize fully their educational duty. This change of regulation does not mean that the obligation of Catholic education of the children ceases; it remains and must be fulfilled in different ways. But it is important to note that a significant ecumenical step was made by the recognition
that the non-Catholic partner may feel a like obligation because of his/her own Christian commitment', and the fact that 'no formal written or oral promise is required of this partner in Canon Law' (Directory, 150).

The most delicate question is obviously sacramental sharing and especially eucharistic sharing. For many interchurch couples it is the neuralgic pastoral question. The norm of the Catholic Church is often challenged or considered inadequate to the needs of interchurch families. Several factors make it difficult for them to be restricted in this area, for example the pressure of the other partner, the different policy of other churches (except the Orthodox churches). The norm reads: 'Although the spouses in a mixed case the norms concerning the admission of a non-Catholic communion can only be exceptional and in each situation of pressing need as a mean of grace, but restricted to exceptional cases because of the incomplete communion of the churches.

As stated above, the Directory indicates that in cases of pressing need, to be determined by episcopal conferences or local bishops, eucharistic sharing for mixed marriages may be permitted, provided that the general conditions for eucharistic communion are respected. Some episcopal conferences have issued more precise guidelines in that regard, for example, the Bishops of Britain and Ireland in 1998, establishing that on special occasions, such as baptism, confirmation, first communion, ordination and death, eucharistic communion would be commended. The German Bishops' Ecumenical Commission has given a pastoral answer to the interpretation of the term 'pressing need' by saying: 'Since pastorally the establishment of objective criteria for "serious (spiritual) need" is extremely difficult, ascertaining such a need can as a rule only be done by the minister concerned. Does the couple concerned (and any children) experience this separation at the Lord's table, as a pressure on their life together? Is it a hindrance to their shared belief? How does it affect them? Does it risk damaging the integrity of their communion in married life and faith?' These questions require the careful attention of the ministers and should be addressed in pastoral dialogue with the mixed marriage couples. Pressing need may vary from case to case; without allowing a general practice of eucharistic communion. It should be considered in keeping with the two basic principles: commended in particular situations of pressing need as a mean of grace, but restricted to exceptional cases because of the incomplete communion of the churches.

Even if the norm is more open than some interpreters may think, it remains important to accept it and to apply it adequately so that interchurch families may accordingly make their contribution to Christian unity. The Bishops of Britain and Ireland speak of the pain of division which is deeply felt by these families but according to them, the pain of the broken body of Christ cannot be healed simply by removing the pain of not sharing communion (palliative care). Healing is achieved only by dealing with the underlying problems between the churches. The differences at that level are real and do not allow full eucharistic communion on a general basis, even for the interchurch marriages. Interpretation of pressing spiritual desire for sacramental communion must therefore not lose sight of the broader sense of communion that involves the domestic church within the wider communion of the Church.

To be in communion with the Catholic Church means not only to receive grace from the sacramental Body of Christ. It means also to follow Christ and to be responsible for the sacramental unity of the Church which is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. By receiving or abstaining from eucharistic communion, according to personal conscience and to the discipline of the Church, a Catholic Christian manifests his sense of belonging to the Church. The question of sharing communion or abstaining therefrom, can be viewed, in this perspective, as a spiritual way of bearing the pain of incomplete communion. This pain is felt not only by those who abstain but equally by those who receive. The pain is an integral part of the healing process of reconciliation, which requires time, patience, forgiveness, humility, self-sacrifice and acceptance of the limitations of the partners. Conjugal life
invites the partners from time to time to abstain from intercourse for spiritual, moral or health reasons; analogically, the sacrifice of sacramental communion may sometimes mean, paradoxically, a deeper spiritual communion with Christ and the Church. This happens when it is accepted without resentment, in a spirit of respect, obedience, patience and in union with Christ who reconciled humanity with God on the Cross in utter abandonment and desolation. To mixed marriages belongs the difficult and delicate task of building unity through receiving sacramental grace together as a way of exception (Directory 160) and being willing to make this sacramental sacrifice for the sake of ecclesial communion. They do not receive less because they abstain from sacramental communion. When this is done out of love and respect for the Church, they may even receive more by abstaining than by communicating. This sense of spiritual solidarity is crucial today. It entails an understanding of Christian love that goes beyond the ‘psychological or social need’ of not being left out. It requires special care and explicit support of the pastors who are responsible for helping interchurch families to deal in truth and love, with their unity in diversity.

III. The ecumenical potential of mixed marriage families in the process of reception

After a century of existence, the ecumenical movement needs to bring awareness of the achievements of theological dialogue into broader reception by the churches. This process of reception requires at the grass roots level more information, more mutual knowledge on the part of the partners, and more progressive commitment of authorities and faithful together. Mixed marriages are a natural setting for that reception, since they are actually multiplying in our globalizing world and their existence is being progressively recognized as a special contribution to Christian unity. Though they are not the ideal domestic church, they offer opportunities to build up very concrete links and bridges between the ecclesial communities to which they belong. Their effectiveness obviously derives from their profound attachment to the Church and from their taking the means to remain in touch with their roots. Unfortunately, it too often happens that the ecclesial link fades away and mixed marriages end up in distancing themselves from the Church. This is a special challenge for pastors but when the challenge is assumed positively, by pastors and faithful, much can be achieved in terms of uniting different ecclesial communions in and through the unity of the family.

Ecumenical spirituality requires that ‘in the interest of greater understanding and unity, both parties should learn more about their partner’s religious convictions and the teaching and religious practices of the church or ecclesial community to which he or she belongs’ (Directory 149). Mutual knowledge and mutual acceptance of the differences are as important as striving for complete sacramental communion. Mutual knowledge and mutual love grow together and create the conditions for living the path to Christian unity with tolerance, respect and deeper esteem and understanding of the other’s values and traditions. This mutual understanding takes time and energy. It is far removed from the impatience of youth that is often tempted to rush ahead with the sexual expression of love without ensuring that the process of human and spiritual maturity of the partners has taken place. We know, for example, the negative consequences of premature sexual intercourse when the conditions of mutual knowledge and commitment are absent. Instead of unity, this fosters instability, infidelity and insecurity in the relationship. Analogically, the still young ecumenical movement may be tempted to push towards universal eucharistic hospitality, without solving the real problems that are impeding full communion. Therefore, the Directory reminds us of the other means of spiritual growth for interchurch families: ‘They should remember that prayer together is essential for their spiritual harmony and that reading and study of the Sacred Scriptures are especially important’ (149).

Challenge and renewal

The universal and the domestic church are so intimately interwoven that they share and suffer, together and inseparably, the pains and the joys of building unity. John Paul II, Pope of the family, continuing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, has reaffirmed the commitment of the Catholic Church to work for this unity. At the same time, he has warned us that ‘to uphold a vision of unity which takes account of all the demands of revealed truth does not mean to put a brake on the ecumenical movement. On the contrary, it means preventing it from settling for apparent solutions which would lead to no firm and solid results. The obligation to respect the truth is absolute. Is not this the law of the Gospel?’ (Ut unum sint, 79).

The complex and rich experience of mixed marriage families is a challenge and an assurance of renewal for the Church and for the ecumenical movement. I believe that an ecumenical momentum may emerge from the reflection and the discernment in which we are now engaged. What is experienced at the grass roots level and what is discussed in theological dialogue must meet and serve the broader understanding of fuller communion among churches and ecclesial communities. This urgent but grace-filled objective signals the pressing need of strengthening the ties between pastors and faithful. Only together, in deep communion of domestic and world church, may we hope to better answer the prayer of the Lord for a unity of the Church that mirrors the unity of the Trinity: ‘May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you so that the world may believe it was you who sent me’ (John 17:21).

+ Marc Ouellet
Past and future

Ruth and Martin Reardon were founder-members of the British Association of Interchurch Families. They spoke on the past (Ruth) and the future (Martin).

The past

The interchurch family movement began in the new climate created by the Second Vatican Council and the official entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement. I have picked out a few phrases that were important to us, to tell the story around them.

Interchurch families

This phrase gave our identity. We coined the expression interchurch marriages at the first national meeting of ‘mixed marriage’ couples in England in 1968. We shared an amazing discovery. We were not alone; others too wanted to live the unity of their marriage in Christ, drawing their spiritual nourishment as couples from both the Roman Catholic Church and the church of the other partner.

The English and Welsh Bishops referred to the phrase in 1970 in their Directory on Mixed Marriages, their application of the 1970 papal motu proprio that transformed the Roman Catholic legislation on mixed marriages. No longer did both partners have to promise that all their children would be baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church; the Catholic partner only had to promise to do everything possible for this. The papal text even said that some mixed marriages could help in re-establishing unity among Christians. (It was said negatively: ‘do not ... except in some cases’ – ‘exceptional cases’ were recognised back in 1970.) The Episcopal Conference agreed that the term ‘interchurch marriage’ could perhaps be accepted for a mixed marriage in which both partners are practising Christians, but this would only describe a small proportion of them, perhaps one in ten.

That linked up with our experience. Those of us who came together in 1968 and in subsequent annual meetings usually had the experience of being regarded as oddities. ‘I’ve never known a mixed marriage couple like you’, was the reported reaction of many Catholic priests in the early days. Priests seemed to expect (and prefer) the other partner in a mixed marriage to be a non-practising Christian. Some priests made unilateral demands with a pre-Vatican II mentality, and many couples seemed to accept this. We on the other hand wanted to establish the fact that, in the new post-Vatican II climate in which the Roman Catholic Church had recognised the ecclesial character of other churches and communities, interchurch couples could enter marriage on an equal footing. It could and should be recognised that the spiritual life of the family is a shared responsibility of the spouses, and so is the education of the children. So we were happy with the suggested limitation of the term ‘interchurch marriage’ – and pointed out that one in ten of all the marriages celebrated in English Catholic churches add up to a pretty big number each year. For some years we talked about interchurch families and mixed marriages as if they were quite different. Since after a time it became obvious that there was no clear dividing line, we now use the term more widely. However, we have learned that it is important always to distinguish what kind of interchurch family we are talking about. Even among practising interchurch couples there are great differences. Many years ago someone in England suggested that church relationships go through five stages (the 5 Cs); they move from competition through co-existence, co-operation and commitment on the way to communion. There are interchurch families where both partners practise their faith, who would slot in to any point on that ecumenical scale. So I try not to generalise about interchurch families, but to qualify statements by ‘some’. The existence of all kinds of interchurch families, whether they practise or not, or wherever they stand on the ecumenical scale, is certainly relevant for the churches. But there are some couples who consciously assume their two-churchness as an ecumenical reality at the heart of their married life, as a gift and a call from God. We all live it differently – there is no blueprint.

But it is something that we have recognised in one another, within the interchurch family movement, and we have learned together to be more explicit, more articulate about it.

Interchurch family is not an entirely satisfactory term. It has however gained currency quite widely in English-speaking countries. The 1993 Ecumenical Directory keeps ‘mixed marriages’, but has given us an alternative phrase: we are those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’. It points us to a theological reality, the shared covenants of baptism and marriage. At the same time we know this is not always lived as a faith reality; many who still go to church for their baptism and their wedding are seldom seen there otherwise. It seems to me that this makes sense of the way the Directory speaks of ‘exceptional cases’ of need for eucharistic sharing, and that it is important when we talk of eucharistic sharing not to generalise, not to suggest that all mixed marriage couples want it. (The Southern African Directory expresses very well when the need may be felt: ‘when they are in church together’).

Problems are opportunities

We repeated this phrase often. Yes, there are enormous difficulties in being a two-church family, it’s painful, it’s exhausting, but if we stick with it and face all the problems as they come, there are also great possibilities for growth as individuals and as couples. Our own Christian tradition becomes so much more alive to us when we have to explain it to someone who loves us. Entering into another tradition, lived by someone we love, becomes a great enrichment. We realise that to be different is not necessarily to be wrong; that when differences can be lived together in unity we discover a completely new dimension in our lives as Christians. Indeed that is what marriage is about – living difference in unity. And some of our children are now telling us they too have experienced interchurch family life as an enrichment.

The first difficulty we faced in 1968 was the pre-marital promise about the children. The whole mixed marriage situation was revolutionised in 1970 when this was changed. But was it just to mean that if the Catholic wasn’t strong enough to impose the Catholic upbringing of
children, the other partner would bring them up in his or her church without the Catholic being penalised? Even in the latest official Roman texts the idea of competition between the parents is built in: ‘notwithstanding the Catholic’s best efforts’, says the 1993 Directory. But some of us wanted to go deeper than that, and see how we could live together and bring up children together in an equal partnership of love. What about sharing fully the riches of both our traditions with our children? Many people told us it was impossible.

Going beyond
Of course it is impossible at present to be a member of both churches according to Roman Catholic canon law, and the rules of many other churches. But the canonical is not the only – or indeed the most important – level of church life. One of the phrases we have repeated over and over to one another was first used by one of our English Catholic bishops to a group of interchurch families in the early ’eighties. He told them: Going beyond the rules is not the same thing as going against them. The area of ‘going beyond’ is the area of conscience, and we need to work hard on this question of conscience.

There is an imbalance in our marriages because of the Roman Catholic Church’s conviction that it is church with the fullness of the means of salvation in a way that none of the other churches and ecclesial communities of the west would claim. Roman Catholics who remain in solidarity with that church have to decide how to relate to the church communities of their partners. That spouse has to decide how to relate to the Roman Catholic Church and its requirements. But the marriage relationship itself is equal, reciprocal, and it creates its own unity. So the question also arises: how do we relate to our churches? It is very complex. It is the ecumenical movement in miniature, particularly where relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches and ecclesial communities of the west are concerned. Many Roman Catholics look at these communities in terms of what they lack. Interchurch family spouses tend to look at their partners’ churches in terms of their positive values, their fruitfulness.

The impossible only becomes possible when it happens, and after much it is a long time before the possibility is recognised in church practice and law. But law does change; we can chart the progress since Vatican II. I am reminded of one of the stories from the Pope’s visit to England in 1982. At the meeting with British church leaders in Canterbury the Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland told us that he spoke to John Paul II about the needs of interchurch families for eucharistic sharing. The Pope listened with care, nodded his head, and said: ‘It is possible’. Later Cardinal Willebrands, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, commented: ‘If the Pope says it’s possible, it’s our job to make it possible.’ Making the impossible possible contributes to unity.

Double belonging
We have often used this phrase since the early ’eighties to sum up our lived experience in interchurch families. ‘Double belonging’ is experienced differently and to different degrees. But it is this experienced reality that underlies all our efforts for eucharistic sharing, for joint celebrations of baptism and indeed for sharing the whole process of Christian initiation. It is only a provisional stage on the path to full unity, but it is one we experience here and now, on the very small scale of family life.

We live it
Very early on an interchurch couple wrote: ‘Some people play at ecumenism, but we live it.’ It was a phrase echoed by Pope John Paul II on his visit to England in 1982: ‘You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity.’ We have had a great opportunity because we are small and so freer than larger communities, and because we are bound together by our marriage covenant – deeply, strongly, for life. We have our own living experience – positive and negative. It is ours; very few share it. We can now draw it all together, from many parts of the world. We can have confidence in it, because God is in it. It is the most precious thing we have to offer to our churches.

Our future path
The one final solution to the problems of interchurch families is the full communion and unity of our two churches. So our future path will be alongside and in critical solidarity with our churches on their road to closer unity. In England most of us are Roman Catholics married with Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists or United Reformed Christians. Other countries have many Roman Catholic-Lutheran couples also. These are the churches we walk with. Elsewhere different sorts of interchurch couples meet different problems and opportunities. Our future paths will vary according to the different paths that our various churches take.

The world context
The increasing mobility of populations has led to many more mixed marriages. Although the proportion of those who want to practise in one another’s churches while retaining their respective affiliations remains relatively small, we are now on the ecumenical world map. We know there are Roman Catholic-Anglican or -Protestant interchurch families not only in Europe, North America and Australia. They exist also in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Our future path will cover the globe. We are preparing a multilingual World Gathering of Interchurch Families near Rome in July 2003. But what of interchurch families from other countries and continents, and particularly from the third world, whose cultural experience may be very different, and most of whom will not have the material resources to travel to international conferences? This question was already raised by the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in 1989.

Our churches’ path to unity
The churches’ attempts to move forward towards unity have focused on four aspects:
1. structures through which they can meet, talk and co-operate internationally, nationally and locally (World, National and Local Councils of Churches)

2. theological dialogues on points of faith and order on which they have disagreed

3. engagement together, especially locally, in life, work and service to the community

4. Protestant and latterly also Anglican Churches have attempted union schemes of various sorts. For reasons I need not spell out the Roman Catholic Church has not shared in these union schemes, and has only recently joined national Councils of Churches. The priority has been tackling issues of faith and order that have proved obstacles to closer union between Roman Catholics and other Christians: justification, ministry, sacraments, authority.

In 1989 Archbishop Robert Runcie of Canterbury and Pope John Paul II put out a very important joint statement. They said that Christian unity is not only about removing obstacles; it is also about sharing gifts. Of course it is vital to remove the obstacles in church structures and doctrines which have divided us, and we thank God for remarkable progress. But the enthusiasm and motivation of most ordinary folk for Christian unity is more likely to be aroused by the discovery of the positive, values and progress. But the enthusiasm and motivation of most ordinary folk for Christian unity is more likely to be aroused by the discovery of the positive, values and resources which other churches possess, and the desire to share them. As Robert Runcie left Rome in 1989 John Paul II said to him: 'Our affective ecumenism will lead to effective ecumenism'.

We witness by what we are

Marriage is about love, affection and sharing gifts and resources. Here interchurch families can make a unique contribution to our churches' future path to unity if we examine our own experience and vocation, and bear witness to it by what we are, do and say. Our interchurch marriage is our Christian vocation. It is our spiritual path to God. We travel that path together. We come to our marriage with our two distinct Christian traditions and identities. We retain these, but as we grow together we develop in addition a new common Christian identity, in which the gifts and spiritual traditions of our two churches are shared.

The ascended Christ gives gifts to his church to enable the whole body to grow into unity in Christ (Eph. 4:11-13). We learn about growing together into maturity in marriage, though we may never reach it in this life. In a good marriage we begin to catch a glimpse, as far as humans can, of co-inherence, of living in one another's hearts and minds. And in interchurch families this is a healing experience of people from two Christian traditions. We can form a human bridge connecting two churches. It is because of our churchly, sacramental reality that the Roman Catholic Church has gone so far as to include some interchurch families among exceptional cases who may under certain conditions be permitted to share eucharistic communion at mass.

As early as 1974 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which already included Roman Catholics as full members, said in Accra: Mixed marriages, so often regarded as a 'problem', can rather be seen as the connective tissue for excellence between separate Christian communities. Thus the partners deserve to be given all possible pastoral help to share as fully as possible in the life of both communities in which they are involved, and to bring these together. Connective tissue grows over a wound enabling it to heal. Wherever our churches recognise and understand our experience of 'double belonging', there our very existence can prove an effective sign of unity between them. Of course the experience of 'double belonging' of some of our children is even greater, if they have been brought up since infancy to share as far as possible in the life of the two churches of their parents.

Interchurch families ask of our churches to give continuing attention to what can be learnt from other churches' experience of 'double belonging/ participation/ insertion/ solidarity' in the life of two churches means, and our churchly significance for the development of Christian unity.

We witness by what we do

Just as marriage partners live in one another's lives, so we can encourage our churches to live in one another's lives, to pray for one another regularly, to celebrate major festivals together, to participate frequently in one another's worship, and to engage together in the service of the local community. Churches Together in England, the national council of churches, is at present encouraging member churches to participate in a process called 'Together in a common life'. They are beginning to discuss sharing resources. Interchurch families know about that, as did the early church.

Interchurch couples get involved in the ecumenical structure of their churches at local, diocesan/district, national and international levels; we could offer many examples. We need to press our churches gently but firmly to turn such uncommitted experience of 'double belonging' into more commensurate action. We would like to see many more shared celebrations of baptism – not only for interchurch family children. We want to see the churches working together in marriage preparation and support. Marriage and birth are times when many people are open to a sense of God, and call for great pastoral understanding. Sadly for too many mixed marriages these are the times when clergy clumsiness turns couples away from God.

We witness by what we say

We cannot just blame our ministers. They have to spend most of their time in their own churches; how can they have a complete pastoral understanding of interchurch families? We need to witness by what we say; we need to tell our story, to help our pastors and congregations to understand what it is like to be an interchurch family – our opportunities as well as our problems. If none of us talk about our experience, the contribution we can make to the unity of our churches will not be known. To do this effectively we need to learn to express our experience in words that our respective churches will understand. And as we progress in understanding the language of one another's churches we can act as interpreter for others.
**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.

The journal is published by the British 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.

**Subscription rates**
- **£ sterling:**
  - United Europe: £6 p.a. or £16 for 3 years
  - Rest of the world: £7 p.a. or £19 for 3 years
  - Rest of the world: £8 p.a. or £22 for 3 years
- **Please send a sterling cheque or money order, drawn on a UK bank, made payable to the Association of Interchurch Families, to the London address at the foot of the next column.**
- **US dollars:** US$ 15 p.a. or US$40 for 3 years
  - Rest of the world: US$ 17 p.a. or US$46 for 3 years
- **Please send cheques, payable to R & F Temmerman, to the Association of Interchurch Families c/o Ray and Fenella Temmerman, 19 Stephen Street, Morden MB, RM6 1CS Canada.**
- **Austalrian S:** AU$25 p.a. or AU$65 for 3 years
  - Please send cheques, payable to B & K Hincks, to the Association of Interchurch Families c/o Bev Hincks, PO Box 66, Swansea, NSW 2281, Australia

**Editorial correspondence and exchange periodicals should be sent to:**

**Ruth Reardon**

Little School House
High Street
Turvey
Bedford MK43 9DB
Tel. 01234 888 992
Email: aifreardon@talk21.com

**ISSN 0950-995X** © Association of Interchurch Families 2002

---

**AROUND THE WORLD**

The British Association of Interchurch Families is linked with other associations and groups of interchurch families around the world.

A constantly-updated list of contact addresses for English-speaking, French-speaking, German-speaking and Italian-speaking interchurch families in different parts of the world is available on request to the British Association of Interchurch Families at its London address.

A web-site for interchurch families worldwide is run by Ray Temmerman of Morden, Canada. It is to be found at http://www.aifw.org and a listserv at aifw@opca.com

---

**NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES**

- **Germany**
  - Celebrating the Eucharist: theological and pastoral questions
  - Bure Rohdenfeld
  - 8-10 February 2002
- **Northern Ireland**
  - Healing the hurt
  - Derrynord
  - 20-21 April 2002
- **Britain**
  - Vision for the future
  - Swansea, Derbyshire
  - 25-27 August 2002

---

**ROME 2003 Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families**

**UNITE IN BAPTISM AND MARRIAGE**

Interchurch families – called to a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of our churches

Istituto Mondo Migliore
Rocca di Papa
nr Rome

24-28 July 2003

(PREPROMA meets 5-7 July 2002 at Lyon)