What is the significance of interchurch families, in which Christians of different traditions and communities (often a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another communion) try to live out their lives as couples and families within both their churches? It is simply, as Pope John Paul II said to them, that they "live in their marriages the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity".

They are dealing with all the big issues that face the churches as they grow together towards that unity which Christ willed, but they are doing so on the scale of a single human family, one domestic church. Because they are small-scale communities, it is often easier for them to put into practice agreements and initiatives that the churches are still talking about. The spouses do this as equals in marriage, putting into practice as best they can the "par cum pari" (on an equal footing) of the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism (9).

Much of this issue deals with Christian initiation in interchurch families. It includes a preparatory paper for the annual conference of the British Association of Interchurch Families, which is to focus on this theme (see pp.8-12).

For a long time there have been remarkable instances of shared celebrations of infant baptism in interchurch families, documented by the Association of Interchurch Families. May we not hope that the churches will increasingly share together in the celebration of the one baptism?

This number breaks new ground in showing how a few interchurch families are beginning to cope with a situation in which the traditions of infant baptism and believers' baptism co-exist within a single family. Are not interchurch families, as Bishop Crispian Hollis says, "at the cutting edge of the ecumenical enterprise"? (p.13) If families can begin to find a way forward together, does it not allow us to hope that the churches will be able to hold both traditions together as well?

Please note the correction on p.12.

RR
Baptism into Christ and the Church in an interchurch family context

The Question of Baptism was written by John Coventry, SJ and first published as a ‘Centrepiece’ to the AIF Newsletter in 1980. It was a foundational document of the British Association, encapsulating the reflection and experience of the first decade. It was reprinted in 1984 and again in 1989, each time with an additional reference to new interchurch family baptism stories. It was sent out to hundreds of enquirers, and became the backbone of the Baptism Pack that AIF first put together in 1994-95 and has added to in subsequent years.

Infant baptism
The Question of Baptism focused entirely on the baptism of a baby, since that was the focus of attention of AIF couples in the early years, and of those who wanted information from the Association about what might be possible. Many parents found it an agonising question: how could they baptise their baby in a way that respected and involved both the church communities to which they were related as a couple, and intended to be related as a family? It can be noted, however, that Fr John Coventry himself always felt that the sacrament of marriage already sanctified any children born of the marriage. He never tired of pointing out that what mattered most to the child was not how she was baptised but how she was brought up.

But baptism mattered a lot to the parents who felt they needed to mark their child’s birth in the context of their two church communities. Most churches practised infant baptism, and the challenge of the new charismatic/baptist churches had hardly been felt. However, not without heart-searching and pain, some parents were prepared to delay baptism until they could arrange a celebration that would fulfil their aspirations as far as possible. One of our ‘baptism stories’ is about a baptism at home when the elder of the two children involved was old enough to reprove the Catholic priest for spilling water on the carpet! (Interchurch Families, 1,1 January 1993, p.3).

A broader perspective
It was only in later years, as we explored further the whole question of Christian initiation, that we began to focus on the question of infant baptism and believer’s baptism, and the different roles that they play in the process of Christian initiation into Christ and his Church. It helped that we had the Revd Ruth Matthews, a Baptist minister, as our first Free Church co-chair. In August 1995 the theme of the AIF annual Swanwick conference was ‘Growing in Christ’. The keynote speaker, Sr Cecily Boulding, OP spoke of the process of initiation: We agree that Christian initiation is an on-going process, but the churches to which you adhere are not always in agreement about the liturgical shape of that process. Should infants be baptised? Or should conscious, responsible believers seek baptism for themselves? If baptism is given in infancy, how do we understand confirmation? And how do we handle questions about membership of the visible church that this raises? (IF 4,1, January 1996, p.15).

It so happened that for the first time a young Roman Catholic-Baptist couple, expecting a baby and seriously exploring the question, came to the 1995 conference. Following discussion there and to help further reflection, a paper on possibilities for Catholic-Baptist couples was written and added to the AIF Baptism Pack. We reproduce it here. It is a theoretical outline of a possible approach to the initiation of the children of Catholic-Baptist parents, taking account of the traditions and structures of both church communities.

Three stories
Following that document we give three stories of what has happened in three different interchurch families belonging to the Association. The first couple, Lionel and Lindsay, intended to baptise their children as infants, but because they could not arrange a shared celebration in the way they wanted, delayed baptism until this was possible. In the event the celebration surpassed all that they could have envisaged or hoped for when their first child was born, and she was able to answer for herself when as a 6-year old she came to be baptised, along with her younger sister. (This event took place in September 2002 and was mentioned briefly in the January 2003 journal, p.8.)

The second couple, Jim and Pamela, are the Catholic-Baptist couple who attended the 1995 AIF Swanwick conference. They had made a decision together to delay baptism until their child could express his own personal faith and ask for baptism. They wanted to make their commitment to the Christian upbringing of their children in the context of both church communities, and they tell their story of how this was done.

The third couple, Stephen and Marian, both belonged to a charismatic community church, which practises the baptism of believers, so their children were not baptised as infants. Then Stephen felt called to become a Roman Catholic. The painful changes involved were faced as a united couple and family, and happily the pre-teen boys had no objection to participating in the life of two congregations - they enjoyed it. The older two wanted to receive communion in the Catholic Church, as their contemporaries were doing; this of course raised the question of baptism. After much thought, discussion and prayer a celebration of baptism, to take place at home and involving both the Catholic priest and a minister of the charismatic community, was planned for summer 2003.
What about the child of a Roman Catholic-Baptist couple?

(A slightly revised version of a paper written by Ruth Reardon in September 1995)

It is generally agreed today that Christian initiation is a process. Where parents are both Baptists, the beginning of this process is generally marked by a dedication service soon after the birth of a baby. The parents commit themselves to the Christian upbringing of their child, and the local church community accepts its responsibility to support the parents in this task. Then after some years the growing child is baptised as a believer; in some countries this happens when the child is as young as 7 or 8, but in England often at around 12-14 or later, depending entirely on the particular individual. Soon after baptism the young person is welcomed into the membership of the local Baptist church. This tradition can be asked the question: what is the relation of the unbaptised child to the church?

Where parents are both Roman Catholics, the process of initiation is generally marked by infant baptism, followed by First Communion and confirmation for the growing child. In England the order and the usual age for these sacraments, which complete the process of initiation, differ from diocese to diocese. This tradition can be asked the question: if baptism makes the child a member of the church, what does confirmation add in terms of membership?

However, it is now generally recognised in the Roman Catholic Church that the baptism of adults is the norm (even if it has happened less often than the baptism of infants throughout long periods of Christian history). It is in relation to the baptism of adults that the baptism of children should be understood. The Second Vatican Council prescribed the revision of the rite of baptism of adults and decreed that the catechumenate for adults, divided into several steps, should be restored. By this means the time of the catechumenate, intended as a period of instruction for an adult looking forward to baptism, would make a lot of sense in the development of a growing child. The second big stage, the Rite of Election, would need to take place at a time when the child was more immediately preparing for baptism.

First step: acceptance into the order of catechumens

There would seem to be some striking similarities between the status of an infant whose parents have brought him/her to a dedication service in a Baptist church and a person who has been accepted into the order of catechumens in the Catholic Church. This acceptance is a public ceremony witnessed by the church community. The candidates declare their intention of proceeding to baptism, and the Church accepts them as persons who intend to become its members’ (RCIA 41).

‘The rite consists in the reception of the candidates, the celebration of the Word of God, and the dismissal of the candidates’ (44). ‘It is desirable that the entire Christian community or some part of it, consisting of friends and acquaintances, catechists and priests, take an active part in the celebration. The presiding celebrant is a priest or a deacon. The sponsors should also attend’ (45).

‘After the celebration of the rite of acceptance, the names of the catechumens are to be duly inscribed in the register it of catechumens, along with the names of the sponsors and the minister, the date and place of the celebration’ (46). ‘From this time on the Church embraces the catechumens as its own with a mother’s love and concern. Joined to the Church, the catechumens are now part of the household of Christ, since the Church nourishes them with the Word of God ... One who dies during the catechumenate receives a Christian burial’ (47).

Of course the Rite of Acceptance would have to be adapted to replies given by parents rather than by the candidate, e.g. ‘What is your name?’ would become: ‘What is your child’s name?’ and ‘these candidates’ could be replaced by ‘this child’ in the question: ‘Are you, and all who are gathered here with us, ready to help these candidates find and follow Christ?’ and the question could be asked of parents and sponsors together.

This is not just a liturgical matter, and an underlying question is whether the Catholic Church would give the status of catechumen to the child of Catholic-Baptist parents who asked for this.

Further stages

The catechumenate is an indeterminate period; the Presentations of the Creed, the Lord’s prayer and the Ephphatha Rite can all take place during this period, and would make a lot of sense in the development of a growing child. The second big stage, the Rite of Election, would need to take place at a time when the child was more immediately preparing for baptism.

This might be a possible way forward for parents who want to respect both their traditions. It would mean that their child could be welcomed into the church community and that the community could accept responsibility for contributing to his/her nurture in the Christian faith. It would also mean that their child could have the experience of being baptised as a believer who had made a response in faith to the call of Christ. The age at which baptism should take place would not be pre-judged; it might be at the time when the child’s contemporaries were celebrating their First Communion; this would depend on the child’s own faith journey.
This was how our Catholic parish priest opened his meeting with us to discuss Bethanie’s baptism, writes Lindsay, an Anglican.

Bethanie was then nearly a year old. When she was born we had celebrated thanksgiving services with our families both in England and France, but had waited for baptism as we were moving house. We had been in our new parish about six months and had found the priest very warm towards us, so his words came as a complete shock. The meeting did not go well. Our priest had many historical, theological and personal problems and hurts with regard to the Anglican Church, and talked to me as if I were an official representative. I did not feel at all equipped to reply to his questions and problems. At the end of the meeting, we all agreed that it would be best to wait. A shock. The meeting did not go well. Our priest had following this discussion our priest decided to give me At the end of the meeting, we all agreed that it would be best to wait. A shock. The meeting did not go well. Our priest had following this discussion our priest decided to give me

We continued to wait for five and a half years. During that time our second child, Grace-Marie, was born. In this time of waiting we prayed that God might change us and our priest. We realised that it would not be right to try to persuade or force our priest into doing something which he clearly thought would be wrong. But we prayed that God would open his heart towards, and change his understanding of, the Anglican Church enough for him to be able to welcome our vicar to stand alongside him at the baptism.

We also realised that we ourselves were not in agreement in our understanding of baptism and of what the baptismal service would be. In the years of waiting, we listened carefully to each other. We asked for God’s light and help to come to a place of unity over it, and we tried to live as a Christian family, bringing our children up in the faith and praying with them. It was a great joy to both of us when Bethanie, aged four, wanted to make her own commitment and ask Jesus to come into her heart.

We have generally found it to be a blessing and source of enrichment to belong to our two churches, and have tried as far as we can to be a sign of unity in them.

Early in 2002 our priest approached Lionel, wanting to reopen the discussion about our children’s baptisms. We immediately took him up on this offer, and I wrote to him to explain something of my background and Christian commitment, and something of what I felt God had done in my life through attending the Catholic Church. I tried also to address some of his personal problems with the Anglican Church — but left aside the historical and theological ones! Our priest responded to my letter by asking us to discuss with him what kind of service we would like. Lionel then started a process of talks and negotiations with him (Lionel took my views to the priest, and brought back his to me). For each of our suggestions, the priest needed time to think.

Bethanie professed her faith After five and a half years of waiting, we were quite clear about what we wanted: a Catholic full-immersion baptism, performed in the Catholic church, by the Catholic priest. (Unusually we have a baptistery in our church, so we can have baptism by immersion for those who want it.) But we wanted our vicar to be able to share in the liturgy and to preach. We wanted to have a joint music group, liturgical dance, and some way of allowing Bethanie to profess her own faith before her baptism, and we wanted the ‘feel’ of the service to reflect something of the style of our Anglican church.

In the end, the priest agreed to everything apart from our vicar preaching, and we set the date and started the preparations.

Over the summer, we were shocked to hear that our priest was leaving the parish before our baptisms! We did not understand why this had happened, but trusted that God was in control.

For the baptisms, another priest came from a neighbouring parish. He was really open, and ecumenically minded. He sincerely wanted to do these baptisms, and was completely happy about our vicar doing everything we asked for, including preaching the sermon.

The baptismal service was all we had dreamed of, and more. The ministers worked together really well and made the service a most wonderful celebration of unity. There were a large number of people there from both our church families, and, to our joy, many members of the Association of Interchurch Families who had come to support us. Both our children responded beautifully, and certainly for Bethanie it was a very important and memorable occasion!
A blessing for our children

As a Catholic-Baptist couple, we were always aware that the question of how we should approach the issue of whether or not to have any children baptised as infants was going to present interesting challenges. At the time of our engagement and marriage we were asked: ‘But what will you do about the children?’ Whilst unable to give a specific answer to what was then a theoretical question, we felt interesting challenges. At the time of our engagement way, if and when it arose.

It did arise, in the spring of 1995, when I (Pamela) became pregnant with our first son, Thomas. We had just become members of the Association of Interchurch Families and, in the months that followed, we received much support and encouragement as we began to actively explore this issue.

As a Christian within the Baptist tradition my understanding and experience of baptism is of an immensely rich and powerful statement of commitment to follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord. As a child I watched many baptisms. I heard the testimonies of those who had met Jesus, had responded to his call to discipleship and were very clearly and vividly declaring this by being baptised. I sensed both the seriousness of repentance, of counting the cost of following Christ, and the immense joy of forgiveness and new life in him.

As I prepared for my own baptism I learned more of the rich meaning it expressed; the washing away and cleansing from sin; dying to self and being united with Christ in his death; coming out of the water and being raised to new life in Christ, a new creation, clothed in Christ and filled with his Holy Spirit. I wanted our child to have a similar experience of baptism.

Although from a very traditional Irish Catholic background, Jim understood a great deal of my perspective on baptism. Jim’s view from the time of our decision to marry was that it would be fundamentally wrong in our circumstance to have any resultant children baptised as infants, since this practice runs totally at odds with ‘what makes a Baptist a Baptist’. The once-traditional Catholic idea that unbaptised children who died were cast into limbo was not something that Jim subscribed to. He has too much faith in the mercy of God! As a couple we therefore decided that we would delay baptism until any children could express their own faith in Christ. We felt we wanted to give our children the opportunity of being aware of the significance and richness of their own baptism when it happened. Having made this decision we then began to explore the possibility of a service similar to a Baptist dedication, but one that involved both our churches.

Waiting and hoping
During the months leading up to Thomas birth in January 1996 we received much practical support and encouragement from the Association of Interchurch Families. Our situation was not one for which there seemed to be any precedent in the Catholic Church. However, various ways forward were explored. It was suggested that perhaps a child could be welcomed into the Catholic Church as a catechumen preparing for baptism, in much the same way as an adult is in the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults. The Catholic priest who had so willingly facilitated our wonderful joint Catholic-Baptist wedding service had, by now, been moved to a different parish. The new priest expressed sympathy with our situation but was very cautious and felt such a proposal would have to be approved by a higher authority within the Catholic diocese. Consultations eventually resulted in this being refused. Thomas was, by now, four months old.

Although the catechumenate proposal had proved, at least at that point in time, to be unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church, we continued to receive unstinting support and encouragement from AIF. A second possibility was found in the form of an approved Catholic liturgy entitled, ‘A Service of Blessing for a Child not yet Baptised’. This seemed to us a very good way forward. We showed the service to our parish priest, but once again he was very cautious and said he would need permission to perform such a service for us. At that time our bishop was in poor health, so the matter of permission remained unresolved. During this period we had conversations with one or two other senior clergy within the diocese. These were not fruitful and at the time I felt our child was being rejected by the Catholic Church: if he was not to be baptised as a Catholic in the usual way he had no part in the Catholic Church and they would not even pray for his blessing.

In addition to this sense of rejection, as a new mother I was also increasingly feeling a great sense of loss. The precious early months of my new baby’s life were already gone. It was especially in those early months that I had longed to come into the presence of God, surrounded and supported by our two church families,
and praise and thank him for the wondrous gift of new life which he had given us, and to pray for his blessing on the life of our child. My sense of awe and deep gratitude to God was intensified by the fact that I had undergone a long and traumatic labour ending in an emergency caesarean section. I reflected upon the fact that, had I been living in another place or time, it is likely that both my baby and I would have died. I felt a sense of grief that those powerful emotions had never found expression in the appropriate place, the Church, at the appropriate time. I course the gratitude remains, but the intensity of feeling associated with those early months does fade and is not easy to recapture.

Thomas passed his second birthday and still we had had no service of any kind. We could, at any time, have had a dedication service at the Baptist church. But we felt strongly that we wanted any service to reflect and embrace our child’s Christian heritage and belonging in both churches. And so the issue remained unresolved. The pain and disappointment perhaps faded a little, but it never went away.

**A shared blessing**

By this time we were expecting our second child. Ellen’s birth happened to coincide approximately with a change of parish priest. We then discovered that the experience and outlook of an individual priest could make an inestimable difference to a situation such as ours. Our new priest had an entirely different attitude, saw no problem in our having a simple Service of Blessing for our children, and warmly welcomed the full participation of the Baptist minister and congregation. When Ellen was six months old, and Thomas by then turned three, we celebrated a service of blessing for both of them, which we planned ourselves. It took place in the Catholic church and involved participation from the Baptist minister and congregation as well as friends from the Association of Interchurch Families. The Baptist church hosted a tea afterwards. There was a special sense of unity and we felt our children embraced and welcomed by both churches.

Two years later our third child, Charlie, was born with severe heart defects. The first year of his life included two major heart operations. His little life was drenched with the prayers of more people than we can number and God graciously answered them beyond all expectation. And so when Charlie was fourteen months we held a similar blessing service. Congregations from both churches, friends from AIF and also representatives from the hospital where Charlie was treated joined to celebrate, in wonderful unity and great joy, all that God had done in Charlie’s life.

Reflecting on these events several years on we are aware that the issue of our children’s formal relationship to the Catholic Church is not resolved. At the time of Thomas’ and Ellen’s blessing, the great warmth and understanding of our current priest, in comparison to that which we had previously experienced, and our joy at celebrating the gift of our children jointly with both churches, seemed to eclipse the need to be too concerned about the exact formal relationship of our children to the Catholic Church. When Charlie was born we might perhaps have returned to the issue. However, in our overwhelming joy that our child, with only half a heart, had survived two major operations and was leading an apparently completely normal life, the matter was, again, not at the forefront of our thoughts.

Thomas, Ellen and Charlie are now aged 7, 4 and 2. They attend both churches with us, participating in the children’s liturgy group at the Catholic church and the Sunday school at the Baptist church. They experience the richness of both formal liturgical worship and informal charismatic worship. We know that they are welcomed, prayed for and greatly loved by both our local churches, and that this is but a small expression of God’s very own love and commitment to them.

In our home, our own domestic church, we pray with and for our children; we read Bible stories and talk with them about God our Father, Jesus our Saviour and the presence of his Holy Spirit with us in our lives. We pray that increasingly they will know and love Jesus for themselves and be baptised. This prayer was expressed very beautifully in words written for the Blessing of Thomas and Ellen in April 1999. We, of course, now include Charlie in that prayer.

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Baptism of believers

Steve and I (Marian) both had Anglican backgrounds but we met in a charismatic evangelical church. Within this context we married and had our three boys who were all blessed during individual dedication services. We both agreed that baptism would be when they asked for it. We had put no age on this, but wanted to be flexible as their individual spiritual journeys unfolded.

Enjoying diversity: a sense of humour helped

Then, three years ago, Steve felt called to the Roman Catholic Church. Huge adjustments had to be made in family life and expectations. We decided to face the challenges together as a family. This involved continuing our membership of Community Church, as well as entering into the life of the Catholic parish all together. The boys enjoyed the diversity of the two church communities and their perspective on our new situation and sense of humour was a big help in finding our way through. We were now an interchurch family. After the initial shock, we were well supported by the leaders from Community Church and our Catholic parish priest. We were relieved to have discovered the Association of Interchurch Families and to have its support as we moved towards the next challenge – the baptism of our boys.

In summer 2002 our two older boys, Daniel (8) and Matthew (7), both independently made personal decisions that they wanted to be baptised and to make their first communion. This is considerably younger than is usual in Community Church, so we expected problems. Daniel said to me one morning after Mass: 'Mummy, why didn’t you just have me done when I was a baby? It would have saved a lot of trouble!'

Baptism in the context of our domestic church

We prayed and heart searched. We were moving house, and Steve came up with the idea of having the baptisms in our new home, in the context of our domestic church. Perhaps in the bath? Home being the place where we are united in our Christianity! The boys jumped at this idea. We invited the Catholic parish priest first. He came for tea, and we put the idea to him. He admitted that he wasn’t quite sure what we were going to say to him, but he certainly hadn’t expected a baptism at home with the pastor of Community Church! However, he thought it was a wonderful idea and an excellent way forward for us and agreed to it instantly. We suggested that he performed the baptism and asked for lots of water – not just a sprinkling – the boys are expecting immersion. He put their names down for the First Communion course and we stressed that this was also preparation for baptism.

A baptism recognised for life

Then we approached the pastor from Community Church. Steve took him out for lunch and I communicated with him about the baptism by email and telephone. He checked out the idea with the other leaders, and they responded with approval so long as it was what the boys wanted, and so long as we agreed about it as a couple. Their main concern was that the boys would be able to make a profession of faith, and that their baptism would be recognised for life in every corner of the Christian world (even in staunch Protestant circles!).

The pastor came to tea. Fortunately he has had a lot of involvement with Protestants and Catholics coming together in France. He talked to the boys, and they explained what they wanted without any prompting from their parents. He agreed as well. We asked him to host the service and do most of the talking. He was happy with this, but we had to stress that had he been doing the water part, the Catholic Church would still find it acceptable. He needed this reassurance.

Big-heartedness all round helped us find a way through

Our friends are overwhelmed by the big-heartedness of both sides and in awe of how we have been able to find a way through. We always attribute it to the help we have received from the Association of Interchurch Families. We decided that for practical reasons the bathroom would be too small, so we arranged to borrow the baptism pool from Community Church and have the ceremony in our new garden. This would enable us to invite more friends, from both church communities and from AIF, as well as our families.

Alongside the First Communion preparation, we have arranged for the boys to see one of the children’s workers from Community Church a couple of times to help them to be able to make a simple profession of faith. They are really enjoying the input and Steve and I are hoping that it will all go well...
Christian initiation in interchurch families

(4 preparatory paper for the British interchurch family conference, Swannick, August 2003, written by Martin Reardon and Beverley Hollins)

This paper sets out some of the issues that face interchurch families (both parents and young people) as they consider what to do about baptism, confirmation, communion and church membership. It also gives a brief account of some of the ways some families have dealt with these issues.

BAPTISM

The theology of baptism

There is widespread agreement between churches on the theology of baptism. 'Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people. Baptism is a gift of God, and is administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ... The churches today continue this practice as a rite of commitment to the Lord who bestows his grace upon his people ... The New Testament scriptures and the liturgy of the Church unfold the meaning of baptism in various images which express the riches of Christ and the gifts of his salvation. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom.6:3-5; Col.2:12), a washing away of sin (1 Cor.6:11), a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a re-clothing in Christ (Gal.3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5), the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Peter 3:20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor. 10:1-2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal.3:27-28; 1 Cor.12:13). The images are many but the reality is one ... Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity' (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order paper no.111, WCC, 1982, paras. 2, 3 and 6).

The practice of baptism

Virtually all churches agree this theology of baptism, but Baptists generally do not recognise the practice of churches who baptise infants as expressing this theology, since an infant is unable to make a personal profession of faith.

Although baptism is normally performed by an ordained minister, no church regards this as essential. This makes it possible for most of the churches in Britain and Ireland that practise infant baptism to recognise the validity of one another's baptism. This means that a person baptised in one of these churches would not normally be baptised again if he or she desired to become a member of one of the other churches. There is in fact a Common Certificate of Baptism (printed by SPCK) that lists those churches who have agreed to accept it as evidence of Christian baptism.

This, however, should not be understood as evidence that all these churches recognise someone so baptised as being a canonical, formal or full member of their church. Nearly all churches have other requirements also for what could be called denominational membership.

As different churches have revised their baptismal rites in recent years, many of these rites have become more and more similar.

Baptism in interchurch families

Before marriage the Roman Catholic partner is asked 'to promise sincerely to do all in his/her power to see that the children of the marriage be baptised and educated in the Catholic Church. The other partner is to be informed of these promises and responsibilities. At the same time, it should be recognised that the non-Catholic partner may feel a like obligation because of his/her own Christian commitment. It is to be noted that no formal written or oral promise is required of this partner in canon law' (Ecumenical Directory, 1993, 150). 'If, notwithstanding the Catholic's best efforts, the children are not baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church, the Catholic parent does not fall subject to the censure of canon law' (Directory, 151).

Orthodox Churches require that the children of interchurch marriages that include an Orthodox partner be baptised and brought up in the Orthodox Church. They recognise, however, that this requirement cannot be enforced.

Most other churches do not formally have such a requirement, but some ministers, grandparents and relatives may well try to persuade parents to have their children baptised in their denomination. Where opposing pressure is brought on the parents from both churches and both sides of the family, this can lead to serious tension within the marriage.

Some interchurch family parents are happy to agree that their children will all be baptised in the church of one partner, and not the other. Some have one child baptised in the church of one partner, and the next baptised in the church of the other.

Many interchurch family parents, however, desire to include both their children in the baptismal celebration of their children, and invite both ministers to take some part in the service. Normally one minister will both say the baptismal words and pour the water or immerse the child, but the other minister can be invited to participate in other parts of the service. Where this happens, and where members of both congregations are present, both parents feel supported in what is primarily their joint responsibility, the Christian upbringing of their children. Where the baptism is celebrated exclusively by one church without any participation by the other church, one parent can feel excluded and to a greater or lesser extent bereft of the child.
Because the baptism and Christian upbringing of a child is so central to Christian family life, it is very important that an interchurch couple consider this very carefully before marriage. But it is almost impossible for such a couple to know how they will feel when the baby actually arrives, nor can they be certain about the circumstances they will be in when the child is born. For this reason many interchurch families would strongly advise couples not to make a firm and final decision about the baptism of their children before marriage. It is important for Roman Catholic partners to recognise that the promise required of them before marriage by the Roman Catholic Church is not an absolute promise, and should not threaten the unity of the marriage. According to the Revised Directory on Mixed Marriages promulgated by the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales (CTS 1990), the declaration and promise should be: ‘... I sincerely undertake that I will do all that I can within the unity of our partnership to have all the children of our marriage baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church’.

A shared celebration of baptism

Inspired by the vision of Fr John Coventry, SJ many interchurch couples want their child to be baptised into the one Church of Christ as it exists in their two, as yet separated, churches. They therefore want the celebration of the baptism of their child to be shared by both their churches. Very many such shared celebrations have taken place in recent years, and Alf’s experience of this is growing.

A couple wanting such a baptism need to be aware of several factors before they approach their churches about it. The most important thing is that they know why they want it, and that they can get across to their ministers their particular personal and pastoral needs. This is best expressed in human terms. There is no generally accepted theology of a shared celebration of baptism, and quoting precedents from other places in detail can be counter-productive. Some terminology can produce a negative reaction. Asking for a ‘joint baptism’, for example, can mean to a priest that you want him to pour the water while the other minister says the words, or vice versa. Such a practice is traditionally regarded as invalid and therefore unacceptable.

Couples should also realise that a shared celebration of baptism will be a strange new idea to many clergy. They may tend to react negatively at first; attitudes and circumstances vary considerably from congregation to congregation and diocese to diocese. Couples may have to be patient. Many who have had such a request refused at first, have succeeded later (sometimes years later) when their clergy have seen them to be faithful and regular worshippers.

The form of shared celebrations that seem to be most readily acceptable from the Roman Catholic point of view are baptisms performed by the Catholic priest in the Catholic church. This can include the active (and often quite substantial) participation of an Anglican or Free Church minister, often using words or ceremonies familiar in their own tradition. There have however also been cases of a Catholic priest assisting at a baptism performed by an Anglican or Free Church minister in an Anglican or Free Church, and of an Anglican or Free Church minister being the celebrant of baptism in a Catholic church.

Many interchurch families have been satisfied, often delighted, with such shared celebrations of baptism, especially when representatives of both congregations have been present together. This has also often improved relations between the two local churches. In a few cases where there have been particular difficulties about arranging a baptism in church, two ministers have shared in the baptism of a child at home. This has the disadvantage that it is less evidently a public act, but some representatives of the two congregations can be invited. It has the advantage of emphasising the domestic character of the church.

Dual registration of baptism

Some interchurch families have wanted to go further and have the baptism registered in both churches, to signify clearly that both churches have recognised their pastoral responsibility for the child. This has sometimes proved possible, and sometimes not. The easiest way to achieve such a dual registration in an Anglican-Catholic family seems to be for the baptism to be performed by a Catholic priest in an Anglican church. The Roman Catholic priest can register it as the officiant, and the Anglican as a baptism performed in the parish church. It has also been possible to have the baptism in one church, followed by a ‘reception’ in the other.

Where one parent is Baptist

A special challenge faces interchurch couples where one partner is Baptist, that is to say, believes that Christian baptism can or should be celebrated only when the candidate makes a personal profession of faith. This belief is held not only by member-churches of the Baptist Union, but also by a very large number of independent, pentecostal and black-majority churches. In these circumstances there is likely to be very strong feeling that can lead to tension between the couple themselves, as well as deeply entrenched positions in their churches and extended families. For centuries many churches have pressed parents to bring their children to be baptised very soon after they are born. Baptist churches have been equally adamant that baptism must be delayed until the candidate is old enough and willing to make a personal profession of faith. In Britain the early teens has normally been regarded as the earliest age.

This challenge makes the interchurch parents consider carefully the meaning and significance of baptism. Two particular considerations may help them come to an agreed solution. Some Baptists, but by no means all, would now be willing to accept that a person baptised in infancy who later makes a formal, public and genuinely personal profession of faith is in the equivalent state to someone baptised upon a personal profession of faith. On the other hand, many churches that practise infant baptism are less insistent than they used to be upon the necessity of early baptism. They recognise that such saints as Ambrose, Augustine and Basil the Great were not baptised until they were adults, even though one or both of their parents were practising Christians. On one occasion a shared service of dedication and blessing has taken place in a Catholic church with the participation of the Catholic priest and the Baptist minister. More consideration needs to be given to this practice. For example, would churches, which normally baptise infants, be prepared to consider a baby, who has participated in such a service of dedication and blessing, as in the same position as a
catechumen, and thus having a formal relationship with the church. It should be emphasised that all shared celebrations of baptism and services of dedication are pushing at the boundaries of ecumenism. No priest or minister is obliged to participate in such a service.

FIRST COMMUNION

After infant baptism or dedication the primary responsibility for continuing Christian upbringing rests with the parents. Churches that practise infant baptism vary in the order in which they complete the initiation of these children into the Church. The traditional order required a candidate to be confirmed before proceeding to receive eucharistic communion. This, until very recently, has been the invariable rule for Anglicans.

For many years, however, the normal practice in the Roman Catholic Church has been to admit baptised children to First Communion at about the age of seven, to be followed by confirmation later (although in a very few places confirmation has been brought back to an earlier age to precede First Communion). Anglicans have very recently allowed children to receive communion before confirmation under certain conditions. Many Free Churches have also begun to allow their local churches to decide whether or not to admit children to communion before confirmation or reception into church membership. Giving children communion before confirmation, however, is not by any means the general practice in Anglican and Free Churches.

When children in an interchurch family arrive at the age of First Communion in the Catholic Church, they and their parents are faced with a choice. This choice is not made in a vacuum. It grows out of all the other choices the parents have made for their children previously, about baptism, about participation in public worship, about schooling. If at baptism the decision was taken that the child would be brought up in the church of one parent, rather than in the other, then the child will probably follow the tradition and practice of that particular church. If, however, the parents decided to bring up the child so far as possible to worship in both churches, then a further hurdle may present itself at First Communion time.

A Roman Catholic priest has the responsibility of trying to ensure that children baptised in his church make their First Communion. Where there is a Catholic school, this will often be prepared for at school, and it may be customary to do this in a particular class or age group. Where there is no Catholic school, it will be the responsibility of the Catholic priest to make other arrangements. The decision about First Communion, however, always rests ultimately with the parents.

Traditionally in Anglican and many Free Churches, preparation for communion has been included as an integral part of preparation for confirmation, and Holy Communion has been received first by the candidate at or soon after the confirmation service. In most of these churches confirmation has taken place in early or middle teens, and has been preceded by a period of preparation the length of which has varied considerably from local church to local church.

Where a child has been brought to worship in the churches of both parents, there has often been a problem. If the child begins to receive communion in the Catholic church at about seven, he or she may wish also to receive communion in the Anglican or Free Church of the other parent at the same age. If this church does not normally admit children to communion before confirmation, then either the interchurch child for a number of years is in the anomalous position of receiving communion in one church but not the other, or, if a special exception is made for the child to receive communion before confirmation, then the other children in the congregation may be upset.

These anomalies have been overcome in many local situations. Few priests and ministers have sought to create serious difficulties for the young children of interchurch families who want to receive communion in the churches of both their parents. There may be several inter-related reasons for this. One may be that confirmation/reception into church membership has customarily been thought of in the West as the point at which people formally decide for themselves on their church affiliation, and clergy have felt that that was the time at which to face young people with this issue. There is a pastoral concern that to face a child with a need to choose the church of father or mother at the age of seven might be catastrophic for their Christian development, bearing in mind Christ’s words about young children (Matt. 18: 5f; 19:13f). Another reason might sometimes be that the priest or minister does not realise that child is receiving communion in the other church, or chooses to turn a blind eye to it, regarding it as the moral responsibility of the parents.

Whatever is decided, it is important that children are properly prepared for First Communion. Some children who have begun to receive communion in both churches at about the age of seven have been prepared for it by both churches.

CONFIRMATION

There is nothing called ‘confirmation’ in the New Testament. Confirmation has its origin in the early church where new Christians were initiated into Christ and his Church in a single but complex process. This process required someone to sponsor the candidates, most of whom at least in the early days, were adults. After a period of preparation in the Christian faith, they renounced Satan, professed their faith, were baptised by immersion, were anointed with oil as the seal of the Holy Spirit (chrismation) and signed with the cross by the bishop, and then received communion.

As the church grew and became established, the majority of those being initiated were infants. The same rite of initiation was used, but the profession of faith was made by the sponsor on behalf of the infant. As dioceses became larger the practices in East and West diverged. In the East the same single rite continued, but the chrismation was performed by the local priest, using oil of chrism blessed by the bishop. This is still
the practice in the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental churches.

In the West the bishops wished to retain their personal contact with each candidate, and so baptism (performed by the local priest) was separated from chrismation (performed by the bishop). Because of the large number of candidates, especially infants, and the increasing size of dioceses, a new rite, called confirmation, was carved out of the originally single initiation rite. Confirmation was eventually recognised as a distinct sacrament, whose minister was normally a bishop. When the bishop was able to get round his diocese he confirmed children who had already been baptised as infants. As soon as they were confirmed, they could receive communion.

**After the Reformation**

Anglicans and Lutherans kept confirmation, using it as an opportunity to educate young people in the Christian faith. Anglicans reserved the ministering of confirmation to the bishop, while Lutherans gave the ministry to the local priest or pastor. Anglicans, like Roman Catholics, regard the bishop as the representative leader of the diocese and therefore his presence is a sign that the candidate is in communion with that particular church. Most other Protestants at the Reformation ceased to have confirmation as such, but many had a rite for people to be accepted into full membership of the church, with all its privileges and responsibilities. The Methodist Church now has a rite which includes in one service both confirmation and a formal reception into membership. Many Free Churches have other requirements for membership too, for example, sometimes the church meeting has to agree to receive a new candidate as a member of the local church. Reception into membership is often symbolised by giving ‘the right hand of fellowship’.

**What is confirmation?**

Confirmation has sometimes been called ‘a rite in search of a theology’. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that it is a rite to which various theological meanings have been attached, with differing emphases in different churches. Among those meanings are three which can all be held together.

1. A gift of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is generally associated with baptism in the New Testament; but it is not limited to baptism, and it is widely taught that God strengthens/confirms the candidate with the Holy Spirit at confirmation. Many confirmation rites (e.g. Catholic, Anglican, Methodist) refer to the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit.

2. A personal profession of faith. Confirmation provides the candidates with the opportunity personally to confirm the profession of Christian faith made on their behalf by their parents and god-parents at their baptism.

3. Church membership. All traditions regard baptism as the time when candidates become members of Christ and his Body the Church. Some traditions see confirmation/reception into membership as the time when candidates accept for themselves the full privileges and responsibilities of church membership. Some people today describe confirmation as a commissioning for Christian mission and service.

Two further meanings have been attached to confirmation with perhaps less theological justification. Their source is rather social and cultural.

4. A rite of passage/coming of age. Because confirmation provides an opportunity for young people to make a personal profession of faith and to take upon themselves the full privileges and responsibilities of church membership, it has often been treated as a spiritual coming of age ceremony. While there is nothing wrong with this in itself, it has tended in the past to bring undue pressure on young people of a particular age to be confirmed, whether or not they are ready for it.

5. The occasion for a candidate to make a particular denominational affiliation. As we have seen, many people have treated confirmation as the definitive moment at which a young person is received as a full member of one particular denomination to the exclusion of others. In some traditions in the past, a candidate, who had previously belonged to another denomination, was required formally and publicly to repudiate that membership. Happily such public repudiations are generally no longer required, as our various churches are learning not to define themselves negatively by their differences. It would indeed be ironic if we were to use a rite dedicated to the gift of the unifying Holy Spirit of God as the occasion to affirm our division from one another. Nevertheless many people still see confirmation as a denominational affiliation.

**Confirmation in interchurch families**

Many children of interchurch families have had a shared celebration of baptism, and been brought up in two churches. They feel that they belong to both. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of them want both ministers to participate in their confirmation, so that they may be recognised as members of both churches.

Until recently most churches have said that this is not possible. However, in some Local Ecumenical Partnerships, Anglicans and Free Churches now hold joint confirmation services that recognise those confirmed as members of both churches. These joint services witness to the increasing communion and growing unity that exists between these churches. The Roman Catholic Church does not admit this practice, thus witnessing to the lack of full communion and unity between Catholic and other churches.

In these circumstances what options are open to the young members of interchurch families as they approach confirmation?

1. Not to be confirmed at all, thus witnessing to the wrongness of denominational divisions and looking forward to their healing and the possibility of confirmation in a united church. Many young people have taken this option.

2. Confirmation in one church only, thus witnessing that ultimately there is only one confirmation, and that to be confirmed in one church only does not cut a young person off from participating in the life of the other church. Many young people have taken this option.

3. Confirmation in one church, followed at a later date by confirmation or reception into membership of the other church. This option may appear not to take the divisions of the churches and the once-for-all character of confirmation seriously enough. However, it may make more sense when the rite of confirmation in one church emphasises the gift of
the Spirit, and in the other focuses on membership of the local community of Christians.

4. To ask representatives of both churches to take as full a part in one confirmation service as possible. This requires considerable persistence on the part of the young person, and exceptional pastoral understanding on the part of the two churches and their ministers. We know of one example of this in Britain.

5. To have a joint service of affirmation. This too requires persistence by the young person, and understanding by the two churches. We know of one example of this in Britain.

6. To make an affirmation of faith in the context of two separate confirmation services, receiving a blessing (rather than confirmation) from both bishops. We know of one example of this in Britain.

German guidelines on eucharistic sharing: a correction

It has been pointed out to us that we gave a misleading title to a document that we published in Interchurch Families 6,1, January 1998. We apologise for any confusion caused.

The heading read: ‘Eucharistic Sharing in Interchurch Marriages and Families: Guidelines from the German Bishops, February 1997’. In fact, as our introduction made clear, the text that we printed was issued by the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops’ Conference. It was not issued as a document bearing the authority of the whole Bishops’ Conference, unlike some other guidelines (for instance, the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Directory and the British and Irish Bishops’ One Bread One Body). It was issued on the authority of the Ecumenical Commission.

The German Bishops’ Conference is now preparing a text that will have a similar degree of authority to those of the Southern African and British and Irish Bishops. We quote a passage from the press statement given by Cardinal Lehmann (President of the Episcopal Conference) at the end of the plenary assembly held 15th-18th February 2002 in Stuttgart-Hohenheim.

We have asked the Ecumenical Commission to work to produce a statement on the theme of ‘Church and Eucharist’. In this connection the question arises as to whether Protestant Christians could be admitted to share in Holy Communion at the Catholic eucharist. This is not about reciprocity in eucharistic sharing, which raises fundamental difficulties concerning church and ministry. It is about admission to communion; on this the existing church discipline at world level has been the subject of lengthy discussion. The outstanding question for our church is that of the situation of mixed marriages or – as one more frequently says nowadays – interchurch marriages. Clearly we cannot deal with this simply by recourse to the recognised situations of need: notably danger of death, or imprisonment. Mixed marriages have to be seen as a particular life situation for Christians, whose communion in marriage is grounded in baptism and rooted in the sacramental nature of their Christian marriage. There must be further exploration of how far the profound ecclesial character of communion in marriage may justify exceptional admission to the eucharist. This is not so much a matter of unique occasions celebrated in the life of the family, such as First Communion, but more a matter of the constant striving of the couple to live their path of faith together. The pastor who accompanies a couple has a particular role here.

If possible we would like a text to be issued before the Ecumenical Kirchentag in 2003; however, because it will be strictly limited to mixed marriages, it will have no direct connection with Berlin 2003. Because a central theological, ecumenical and pastoral problem is at stake here, the plenary assembly is convinced of the need for very intensive work to be done.

As we go to press, there is as yet no further news of the expected document.
The path of Roman Catholic and Anglican Unity

The British Association of Interchurch Families was delighted to have Bishop Crispian Hollis, Roman Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth and a member of the new International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM), as its fourth Coventry Memorial Lecturer in March 2003. He spoke under the title: The Mississauga Initiative and its significance for the path of Roman Catholic and Anglican Unity. Dr Mary Tanner chaired the lecture. Three years ago she gave the Second John Coventry Memorial Lecture, at a time when she was preparing for her role as consultant to the Mississauga (Toronto) meeting of Anglican Primates and Presidents of Catholic Episcopal Conferences that took place in May 2000 (see Interchurch Families, 8,3 Summer 2000 pp.10-13).

Interchurch families were encouraged to find themselves referred to twice in the report of the Mississauga meeting. First, in the statement ‘Communion in Mission’. ‘Though interchurch families can be signs of unity and hope, one pressing concern has to do with addressing the need to provide joint pastoral care for them. Sometimes those in interchurch families experience great pain, particularly in the area of eucharistic life.’ Second, in the ‘Action Plan’ to implement ‘Communion in Mission’, the IARCCUM mandate includes the direction: ‘To examine the range of possible ways, within current canon law provisions, to deal generously and pastorally with situations of interchurch marriages involving Anglicans and Roman Catholics.’

We were glad to learn from Bishop Hollis of the working of the section of IARCCUM based on England (preparing the Joint Declaration on Faith). Since the three sections are working independently at present it was not possible to have news of the progress of the others (the ‘reception’ group based in Australia and the ‘practical outcomes’ group in the United States). Interchurch families will particularly hope that IARCCUM will not only take account of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARClC)’s agreements in faith, but will also take account of the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on the Theology of Marriage and its Application to Mixed Marriages. This body was set up in 1967 alongside the Preparatory Commission that produced the Malta Report of 1968, and produced its own report, Anglican-Roman Catholic Marriage, in 1975. There are valuable recommendations in it that have not yet been implemented.

Here we have shortened the text of Bishop Hollis’ John Coventry Memorial Lecture. It will be printed in full in One in Christ, as was Mary Tanner’s 2000 lecture (see OIC, 36, 2000 no.2, pp.126-32)

Introduction
In my experience, communities and organisations often define themselves almost unconsciously by the ways in which they describe their view of the environment in which they live and work. The Association of Interchurch Families is no exception. I was particularly struck by the following words in the Preparatory paper, which is part of the documentation for your Congress in Rome later this year.

Interchurch families are by definition bridge-builders. They are concerned not to cause scandal (in the deepest sense of turning others from the way of faith), but to work in harmony with the ministers and congregations where they worship, in response to Christ’s prayer that they all may be one. They often find themselves therefore in the tension between the ‘already’ of the unity of their domestic church and the ‘not yet’ of the continuing separation of the two church communities of which they are members. (Interchurch Families, 11,1 January 2003 p.3)

You see yourselves, rightly in my view, at the cutting edge of the ecumenical enterprise. You are driven by a holy impatience while, at the same time, living and experiencing in your own hearts that longing for unity, a unity that deeply respects and values what the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs describes as ‘the dignity of difference’.

John Coventry SJ: a prophet
I am delighted to be with you today and I feel especially honoured that you should have invited me to give this Fourth John Coventry Memorial Lecture.

I did not know John well but I knew enough about him to know and appreciate what a significant contribution he made to the ecumenical debate in these islands and beyond, and I know, of course, of his particular commitment to the work of your Association.

Some may have been tempted to think him something of a maverick or ‘loose cannon’. I prefer to think of him as something of a prophet. He was always deeply immersed in the Catholic tradition and he always called us to be faithful to our traditions and to our roots. At the same time, he probed and challenged all who would listen to question any interpretation of our tradition, which simply locked us into the past. He was a constant searcher for new and creative ways of recognising the fundamentals of our Christian faith, so many of which we share today.

I believe that he would have warmly welcomed the Mississauga initiative of which I speak to you today. He would have rejoiced to hear of what has been proposed. I suspect he would have badgered, pestered and challenged us to implement the hopes and proposals as fully and as quickly as we could.

Malta and Mississauga
Much of what Mississauga advocates is already to be found in the official record of the first post-Conciliar dialogue which took place between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church and which comes to us in the so-called Malta Report of 1968. And this, of course, did not come out of the blue but was a direct consequence of the Second Vatican

We are still struggling with many of its recommendations, but perhaps the most important outcome of Malta 1968 was the definitive establishment of the ARCIC process of dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church, a dialogue which has achieved much and which is still ongoing today.

If Malta outlined a future agenda, Mississauga has been able to draw on those forty rich years of growth, which have flowed from the initiatives it proposed. Like Malta, Mississauga is looking to the future but it does so in the light of much common endeavour, common prayer and richly developed and good relationships.

**Mississauga 2000**

The Mississauga meeting took place in 2000 and was convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Cassidy, then President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Cardinal Walter Kasper, the current President of the Pontifical Council, was also present.

Mississauga is near Toronto in Canada and the gathering was made up of Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops, paired and from 13 different countries. The meeting, as the official report describes it, ‘was grounded in prayer and marked by a profound atmosphere of friendship and spiritual communion.’ (‘Communion in Mission’, The Mississauga Report, no.3) It was not my privilege to be a participant in the meeting but many of those with whom I am now involved in dialogue were, and it is clear that this occasion was both very moving for all who took part and full of significance for the future.

The final communiqué spells out the way ahead. ‘We believe that now is the appropriate time for the authorities of our two communions to recognise and endorse this new stage through the signing of a Joint Declaration of Agreement. This agreement would set out: our shared goal of visible unity; an acknowledgement of the consensus of faith we have reached, and a fresh commitment to share together in common life and witness. Our two Communions would be invited to celebrate this Agreement around the world.’ (no.10)

**IARCCUM’s three tasks**

The recommendations that followed the final statement are now in process of being implemented. They include the establishment of a Joint Commission, of which I am now a member and which has given the world a new ecumenical acronym – IARCCUM – the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission. The work of this Commission is ‘to oversee the preparation of the Joint Declaration of Agreement, and promote and monitor the reception of the ARCIC agreements, as well as facilitate the development of strategies for translating the degree of spiritual communion that has been achieved into visible and practical outcomes’.

The IARCCUM Commission is made up mainly of Bishops drawn from both Communions and appointed by the central authorities of both Communions. The co-chairs are Archbishop John Bathersby, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, and Bishop David Beete, the Anglican Bishop of the Highveld in South Africa. There are four more Bishops on each side and they represent the worldwide nature of both communions, coming as they do from Australia, Nigeria, Hong Kong, the United States, Ireland and England.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is represented as is also the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and there are expert theological consultants from both sides. Two women are included.

The first meeting took place in November 2001. It started with a day of prayer at Lambeth Palace, combining with a meeting with Archbishop George Carey, after which we transferred to Rome to begin our discussions and meet with Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Kasper.

The Commission met again in November 2002, appropriately in Malta, where we lodged in the same Retreat House – Mount St Joseph’s – that hosted the meeting that produced the Malta Report of 1968.

**Work in three groups**

In line with the mandate we were given by Mississauga, our work divides in three ways and we are grouped into three sub-commissions. The Malta meeting saw the work of those three sub-commissions beginning to emerge and take shape.

One group, of which I am a member is concerning itself with the drafting of the Joint Declaration of Agreement – we were particularly helped and encouraged by the assiduous and penetrating comments on our first draft by Cardinal Kasper who attended the Malta meeting for a couple of days.

The second group is concerned with the reception, promotion and monitoring of the existing ARCIC documents and is responding to the feeling within the Commission that the focus at this stage should be on growth in mutual understanding and study, rather than the process of formal response.

The third sub-group concentrates on visible and practical outcomes of spiritual communion with proposals for pastoral and practical strategies to help both Communions in the present stage of real but imperfect communion. This group also gives special attention to the question of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations in Africa where there are large numbers of both denominations.

It is clear from what has been said to us by both Communions that IARCCUM is not a permanent Commission, at least not in its present form. It has a particular mandate, which I have already outlined, and we have given ourselves a provisional timetable. As you will understand, much of the work goes on outside the plenary meetings, and all the sub-groups will hope to make substantial reports at the next plenary in Ireland in June 2003. The meeting after that will be held in Hong Kong in February 2004.
The timetable for the Joint Declaration of Agreement

Hopefully, the summer’s work will produce a final draft of the Joint Declaration, which will need further fine tuning and further group meetings. Our dearest wish is that the final version will be ready for the Hong Kong meeting in February 2004. No doubt further fine-tuning will be required but we hope to have a document to present to both Communions for informal consultation by Easter of 2004. Once further revisions have been made, the final Joint Declaration will be formally presented to the highest consultative processes of both Communions. We have always kept the Lambeth Conference of 2008 as a very significant date and, who knows, that Conference might see the formal acceptance of the Joint Declaration, followed by its signing and celebration at the highest level within the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church.

We are under no illusions that the way to achieving and completing our mandate will be anything but slow and demanding. We hope to produce quite precise expressions of agreement in major matters that we hold in common, but, at the same time, we will need to acknowledge those areas where there is still considerable work to be done.

Reception

The group working on the promotion and study of the already agreed statements of ARCIC I and II, is also facing a daunting task. It was noted that the experience of many of the bishops, who met at Mississauga, was that they were quite unfamiliar with the work of ARCIC and its achievements. If that is true for bishops, how much more will it be true for the faithful of both communions? ‘Reception’ will therefore be a major challenge if the eventual Joint Declaration is to be rooted in the life and practice of the Christian people who form our Communions.

Spiritual communion

The whole process has to be accompanied by prayer because that goes hand in hand with the ongoing search for doctrinal unity. Ecu menical awareness and activity cannot be separated from prayer and ongoing conversion. It is difficult, therefore, to exaggerate the importance of the work of our third working group. As Cardinal Kasper has written, ‘pre-eminence among all ecumenical activities belongs to spiritual ecumenism’. If the pace of the ecumenical movement seems to some to have slowed down, then it may be because we have ceased to hold on to the priority of prayer in our work of dialogue. The Cardinal writes, ‘we can say that it is not more ecumenical activism and action that is required but more ecumenical spirituality’. (Priests and People, January 2003 p.8)

He goes on: ‘We need new ecumenical enthusiasm. This does not mean devising unrealistic utopias of the future. Patience is the little sister of Christian hope. Instead of staring at the impossible and chafing against it, we have to live the already given and possible communion, and do what is possible today. By advancing in this way, step-by-step, with the help of God’s Spirit, who is always ready with surprises, we will find the way towards a better future. In this sense, we hear again the Lord’s invitation: Put out into deep waters! (Luke 5:4).’

The way ahead

Malta came at the beginning of the formal ecumenical process between our two Communions; Mississauga comes on the back of and as a result of the considerable work of ARCIC I and II. As a result of that process of dialogue – not yet finished – substantial agreement has been reached in crucial areas, such as the Eucharist, Ministry, Authority, the Moral Life, Justification and, still in the discussion and drafting stage, the place of Mary in our respective traditions.

The Joint Declaration is going to be an important marker on our ecumenical journey, but we do not have to wait until it is signed and received by our Churches. Work can begin, or continue to flourish where it has already begun.

Mississauga calls for joint meetings between bishops, for common prayer, for concerted joint initiatives in the world of social action, justice and peace. We have a common view of the rights and dignity of the human person and we are united in the many areas of challenge that face us in public life today.

It is not, therefore, a question of waiting for the Declaration to begin this process of convergence. The process is already at work and is moving forward. It now needs new impetus, new enthusiasm and new life. The following up and implementation of the work of Mississauga is what we need now to move us forward.

We have a vision of what can be; we know, without a shadow of doubt, what is the Lord’s prayer for the company of His disciples; we hear his call to us to be one. Mississauga challenges both our Communions to renew our trust in God ‘whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to Him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.’ (Eph.3:20-21)

Conclusion

It has been an enormous privilege for me to be involved in this crucial dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. I was not part of the Mississauga process but the enthusiasm and commitment that flowed from that meeting has made its way very significantly into IARCCUM and it is infectious! I am optimistic about the outcome of our dialogue and I believe that, in God’s time – perhaps not ours – the unity for which the Lord prayed so earnestly will come to pass.

When that day comes, many like yourselves, who live in the midst of all the tensions and promise of the ecumenical journey, will be seen to have played a very important part. You, who have committed your Christian lives and work to the achieving of the unity of Christ’s Church, will be richly rewarded. Never lose heart because the Lord is on our side and ‘if God is for us, who can be against us?’ (Rom.8:31)
In all its activities, the Association of Interchurch Families is working to strengthen marriage and family life and to promote Christian unity.

It offers a support network for interchurch families* - for partners and parents for growing children and young adults - and an information service to all concerned for their welfare (clergy and ministers, relatives and others).

It gives interchurch families a voice in the churches: this is done by articulating the experience of these families in all their diversity: by focusing attention on interchurch couples’ need for pastoral care and understanding which takes seriously both their marriage commitment to one another and the fact that two churches** are represented in their family: by affirming at local, national and global level the gifts of interchurch families and their potential as a catalyst for wider church unity.

It undergirds all its activities with prayer and worship.

* Where the partners belong to different denominations - often a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another communion.

** both in the sense of denominations and local congregations.

The British Association is a registered charity (no. 283611) dependent on members’ contributions and the donations of others who support its work. Friends of Interchurch Families give regular support.

 Presidents are: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the Free Churches Moderator, Dr Kenneth Greet, Canon Martin and Dr Ruth Reardon.

Members receive the Journal, AIF News and Notes and The Interdependent (written by and for interchurch children). Details of membership, Friends, resources (publications, leaflets, AIF video), and a constantly up-dated list of Local Contacts throughout Britain are available on request. Contact:

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The British Association of Interchurch Families is published by the British Association of Interchurch Families, but other Christian of another denomination. 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 views expressed in the journal are not necessarily those of the Association of Interchurch Families.

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 worldwide. It welcomes contributions and editorial help from all parts of the world.

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