

# MAKING A MARRIAGE: SEEKING UNITY

On 2 October 1993 the Marriage and Family Life Commission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and the Diocesan Commission for Christian Unity jointly sponsored a day workshop on *Interchurch Marriage - an Undervalued Resource*. The Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, together with the Anglican Bishop of Lewes and the Methodist Chairman of the London South-West District, formed a church leaders' panel to answer questions, wAles of three interchurch couples shared the joys and difficulties of living their marriage and bringing up their thin two church communities.

*The day began with the following address by Canon Peter Chambers,  
Director of the Board of Social Responsibility in the Anglican Diocese of Guildford.*

Marriage Doctrine: finding common ground Marriage belongs in the natural order -the order of creation. Marriage is a creation ordinance, yet we need to be careful not to say "therefore each person should marry".

Monogamous marriage requires mutual commitment to the relationship and its duties, fidelity to one partner, and the permanence which ensures security for partners and offspring. The Christian doctrine of marriage builds on these characteristics. Marriages are by intention lifelong; no marriage ought to be dissolved. Jesus spoke of the laws of divorce as a temporal response to human hardness of heart. The Church has consistently maintained that marriages should not be dissolved. In the Middle Ages the Catholic theologians went further and argued that a marriage properly made between baptised Christians cannot be dissolved. One divergence we can see in our traditions is between the Catholic jurisdiction over marriage and the Orthodox and Reformed churches' recognition of the State's jurisdiction.

The churches across the traditions sometimes speak of the family based on marriage as a microcosm of the church, the little church, the domestic church. And a recent ecumenical Study Guide embraced family life in its diversity of forms with the concept of "living in covenant with God and with one another". It is a theme which translates the Old Testament understanding of Israel as the "Bride of the Lord" and St Paul's description of the mystery of Christ and the Church.

In marriage, heterosexual love finds its proper expression in a relationship "in which the natural instincts and affections, implanted by God, should be directed and hallowed aright". It is linked to the readiness of the spouses to be open to children.

There is a potential to marriage; through this covenant a man and a woman discover within the discipline of marriage the true measure of each other's dignity. In the relationship in which each recognises self in the other, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh", there is a discovery of all that the Creator has made and seen to be good. But we also come closer to that knowledge of our own selfishness, that which obstructs the sharing of love. And because this hurts so much, we need and accept forgiveness. Bonhoeffer wrote of this forgiveness at the heart of marriage: "the heartbeat of every marriage, as a Christian sees it, is forgiveness" [quoted in John Austin Baker, *The Whole Family of God*].

Two churches, two individuals An "interchurch" marriage is the union of two baptised Christians of different traditions, with each spouse (i) actively involved in his or her church (and to various degrees in one another's church) and (ii) taking a conscientious role in the religious education of his or her children. Such marriages are also called ecumenical and "two-church". and they are distinguishable to a degree from those which involve partners from different churches with both either nominal adherents or one partner committed and practising but the other not (for the present at least). The important point is that there are no blueprints; marriages, all manages, can become afflicted by the blight of idealism, and stunted by a pre-occupation with being normal. What we must recognise is the experience of a couple saying together, "there are two churches in our marriage and we both want to express that truthfully".

Now as I learn about the trials to which people are put in maintaining and expressing these loyalties, I also hear a voice at the back of my mind saying, "Well, so what? Isn't this the kind of testing that all marriages face, as each partner brings her or his convictions and habits of kinship to their life together?" It is not uniquely interchurch marriages that have to cope with loyalty to two sets of values, two familiar patterns of living. That struggle is not just a little modern difficulty; it is natural to marriage. Husbands and wives do not just fit each other like pieces in a jigsaw. It is a cause of inconvenience and pleasure in marriage that spouses choose each other with their obvious differences.

These differences, when valued, assist the making of a marriage. A person who has arrived at a sustainable level of maturity and self-worth will confidently maintain his or her individualness in relationship; that personal strength in each person is an asset in marriage, and it is devalued when partners deny that individualness. "One flesh, separate persons" (the title of an early book by Robin Skynner) is a key phrase in an understanding of the way marriages work. Intimacy, which is the basis of marriage as a relationship (and of friendship), is all the stronger when partners respect their need to go apart and enjoy the very things that emphasise the difference between them. And so relations between the sexes may work better when a society gives scope for men and women to enjoy the company of their own sex. I say "may work better" because much depends on the way these single-sex groups behave. Chauvinism causes poor relations between the sexes, just as racism engenders strife between peoples. Where those women's and men's activities are a strength, where national celebrations are wholesome, is when they increase a person's sense of worth without denigrating those who are different. Tribal kinship is a great resource; tribalism is a destructive force.

One kinship: God in the midst The experience of many interchurch couples indicates the chauvinism, the tribalism of our Christian traditions. The Anglican theologian David Jerkins expounded this theme in a bracing way [*The Contradiction of Christianity*, SCM Press, 1976] twenty years ago, and I suggest that it may help us to recognise a purpose in the struggle of interchurch marriage. There is still much in the institutional form of our church life, and in the conveyed attitudes of our denominations, that is a defence against knowing the truth. The truth is, "God with us", transforming the world by the renewal of personal lives. But our traditions have faltered at the comprehensiveness of this truth. It has become God with us, and, therefore, not with you; and by that you are diminished. That is the lie which is fostered as this tribalism is perpetuated from generation to generation by hardening the differences; and in the process that untruth is defended from the Spirit that leads us into all truth. The intimacy of marriage, the bond between parent and child, both allow the unguarded moment in which we human creatures know "the One who is in the midst of us". That is the potential of marriage as a means of God's grace; it discloses the truth. And to those who want to maintain the lie about Christianity, marriage itself is subversive and "marrying out" is a betrayal. Marriage is subversive because marriages gain an autonomy; with good authority, couples may challenge the teachings of their churches or pastors.

What is particular about an interchurch marriage is that in the church where each spouse is looking for reassurance and affirmation as they risk this journey in marriage, as they nourish their children by giving themselves, there they can find themselves most alone. And they want to say to their churches, "You ought to be with us, not making things harder for us. In our marriage, can you not see the coming together of our two churches? Can you not see the kinship that will supplant our tribalism? We want to bring up our children to regard and value both traditions of Christian faith; why will you not let us prepare for that in the way our children are initiated into the Christian Church and let their Baptism be celebrated in a rite which shows that?" Where they look for affirmation, they meet with discouragement. That may not be so much conscious rejection as apathy. It may be less the outright rejection of their marriage as the disinterest shown to their aspirations that is most discouraging. It would be overstating it to say that interchurch partners have chosen their partners out of a desire for ecumenism; rather, the experience of their marriages fosters the urgency of ecumenism.

### **Who prepares whom for pilgrimage?**

Having spent some years learning about how the churches and the clergy engage in marriage preparation, and having tried to write and say a bit about it all, I have now reached a stage of thinking that most of the time we are not very good at it. I think we ought to ask the couples themselves to do it. While we might be earnestly wanting to induct them into this holy estate of matrimony, equipped with all the survival skills they can carry, I think the partners themselves may be more preoccupied with preparing their families and the church for their marriage. For that is the point, is it not? This couple is not about to enter on a new relationship; it is a relationship they already enjoy. What they need to do is to tell everyone else to take it seriously, because that is what they want to do. And so the preparation that is needed is for the families, and everyone else affected, to adjust to that, get used to the idea, and come and celebrate it. It is the burden of that which can make getting married such a hassle.

Two-church couples seem to have more hassle than most. And that is odd; these partners have all the right connections. Yet at the very time when they might call on the combined resources of two traditions, the line goes dead. Of course, the right way for the churches to do it is obvious. The respective ministers get in touch, have a friendly chat, and decide how they can best help the couple and the families to prepare the nuptial celebration. It should all be easy because the church says that it is the partners themselves, not the priests or pastors, who are the true ministers of the marriage. Enough said, I hope; more will be needed and the first job of the clergy is to sort out the preliminaries and legalities constructively. But the change will only come when as churches we think it is worth it. And we might reckon it worth it if we took more notice of what is happening in marriages; not what we like to think is happening, or think ought to be happening.

### **Scenes from a marriage: glimpses of the Church**

Here are some of the things I see and hear happening in marriages. I see a man and a woman deepening their friendship and consciously searching for each other, looking at each other and enjoying each other. And then I see a man and a woman, both avoiding each other's eyes, gazing with a mixture of fear and fantasy at the people around them. I hear a wife and a husband discussing with strength and fling the way they need to manage their resources and each make sacrifices, and coming to a decision they will both respect. And I see a wife and a husband each competing with the other for their share of the family means, each controlling what they have acquired. I perceive a spouse who is learning what the other believes to be precious and is growing to value that same thing. But I also see a spouse who is afraid of what the other finds precious and will not let that spouse speak of it, enjoy it, or share it.

And in these scenes I catch sight of the little church. I feel at ease with two friends who can so act together that others feel safe and welcome in their presence; friends whose hospitality and charity is such that a community is the better for their being there. I see a man and a woman full of the will to make a good life together for all their family; each becoming aware of what matters most in that enterprise. But they do not always see the same priorities. They are learning how to say what they feel and believe in, to each other, and because neither mocks the other, they do not have to defend their views, only explain them the better, knowing that the other is listening.

Now I would expect to notice glimpses of these things in a conversation with any couple. And part of a preparation to marry might be for the couple themselves to affirm such of these strengths and virtues as they see for themselves and to bring them to the wedding feast like bread and wine. But I also glimpse some of these things in the habits of church life; it does not require much imagination to look at those scenes from a marriage and recognise them as pictures of our churches in their relationships with their neighbours. And that is the point: how can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the pit? As churches we are learning to be good partners in pilgrimage; let us engage with those who are the little church, the domestic church. In making marriage they are seeking unity, and are exposing the tribalism of our churches *Peter Chambers*

*From a report of the day by Elaine Gibbs, Co-ordinator for Marriage and Family Life in the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton:*

### **Church leaders panel**

The question which occupied the panel for most of the time was that of "intercommunion" and for many of those present the pain which they felt was eloquently expressed by a Methodist participant. He had received communion together with his Catholic wife at their wedding but never since in the Catholic Church. His "understanding" of communion he felt to be at one with that of his wife, so why could he not receive communion with her? In reply Bishop Cormac explained the principles which underlay the discipline of the Catholic Church regarding admission to communion as outlined in the recent *Ecumenical Directory*. As Bishop he would apply these with particular concern for the situation of interchurch families.

Methodist Chairman Martin Broadbent expressed his sympathy with people in this situation; he had had to come to terms with and resolve his feelings upon his own marriage to a Catholic 30 years earlier. Painful times had also been times of growth. He thought it very important that Protestants should understand the Roman Catholic attitude to the eucharist; he had recently come to value the Roman Catholic stress on eucharistic communion as a sign of the unity of the Church. On eucharistic belief he said that if transubstantiation means that "God comes to us in the eucharist and joins his life with ours", then he accepts it. Charles Wesley wrote:

"Thy life infuse into the bread  
Thy power into the wine."

Anglican Bishop Ian Cundy said that the churches have much to learn from interchurch families: "You throw up in stark relief *our* problem - that we are divided."

### **The lay panel**

"What is the importance of accepting and valuing what my partner finds precious in his/her faith?", was one of the questions tackled by the panel. It is a good question for churches together in pilgrimage to address; since church unity, like marriage, is about relationships.