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OUR SHARED JOURNEY

Joy and Édouard Bédard now live in Pointe-Claire, QC. Joy completed a Masters and Édouard a Doctoral degree at the University of Toronto. Édouard maintains his psychotherapy practice while Joy is involved in music education. They enjoy their extended family and friends while living life to its fullest.

We are part of God's Story as you are part of The Story which unfolds daily. We are privileged to share significant highlights of the hope and pain of being an interchurch family. Interchurch families are practising Christians married across denominational or confessional frontiers. Each of us retains his/her original church membership and is also committed to live, worship and participate in the other's church.

Originally, our interest in issues of developing countries brought us together when a meeting of various local church representatives was convened by Joy. At that time, several of our national churches worked cooperatively outside our country while at home divisions among denominations dominated peoples' impression. At that meeting, Joy represented the United Church of Canada, the tradition in which she grew up; while Édouard, born and educated as a Catholic from primary school through graduate studies, came at the request of the local Bishop. Édouard's conquering smile and enthusiasm are Joy's recollection of that first meeting while Joy's able leadership skills and warmth as chairperson impressed Édouard! At that time we were each enjoying successful professional careers and satisfying personal involvement. Following the initial meeting we remained in touch through various community projects. In time, we grew fonder of each other!

Some time later we were engaged in the romantic seaside village of Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, in a tiny Anglican church on the edge of the harbour. Placed prominently in the sanctuary are two murals by the renowned artist, William DeGarthe. To the left one can be swept up in the panic of the tempest on the Sea of Galilee while to the right is peace as Jesus calms the sea. The parallel between these seascapes and our lives deeply moved Édouard for he envisioned our life together as being between these two extremes. According to the tale, December weddings are made in heaven, we wed in a winter wonderland of fluffy snow, magical mist, and glistening ice on the brink of thundering Niagara Falls. Participation in blessing our marriage vows was requested and willingly assured by Édouard's Roman Catholic priest and Joy's United Church minister whose home was 1,000 km distant.

Before our decision to marry we were well aware of the many differences in our ecclesial communities while in every other aspect of our lives, we were blessed and unhindered by divisions. In reference to communion sharing, a heart warming moment came during a discussion with Father Charles Gagné who qualified this decision as a matter of conscience between God and ourselves. The pastoral guidelines for sacramental sharing published recently by the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, Australia, and approved by Rome also denote some sensitivity: "The traditional practice in the Catholic Church is not to refuse someone who comes to receive the Eucharist... An explicit prohibition on receiving the Eucharist or an explicit

invitation should not be given, particularly on occasion when Christians of other denominations may be attending.” (1) Through the years, each of us has considered it more important to worship together rather than focus on differences.

At each international conference of interchurch families there have been “AHA!” moments for us. Navan, Ireland offered our first opportunity to participate in such a gathering. In addition to smiling Irish eyes, we were impressed by a British teen who confidently responded to a Bishop’s comment that a child who participated in both parents’ churches would become confused. “Excuse me, Sir,” was her intervention. “You do not mention knowing such a young person. I **am** an interchurch teen and I do not feel confused – rather, I feel the love in each of my churches.” At that same conference, Fr. George Kilcourse of Bellarmine College, USA, introduced the concept of “the averted glance” which presiding priests might employ at the time of eucharistic sharing. He also labelled the Interchurch experience one of “domestic church” in which parents assume responsibility for the faith nourishment of their children.

The first multilingual world gathering of English, French, German, and Italian speaking interchurch families from 11 countries was convened at the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Konrad Raiser, Secretary General, in discussing eucharistic hospitality envisioned an extending Communion table, one which could gather and welcome all comfortably. At the conclusion of the conference we were hosted at different city venues – the church of Martin Luther, and of particular significance to us, The Reformers’ Wall – a magnificent granite wall into which is carved the name and life size likeness of each reformer. This experience helped both of us to understand from whence came the many Christian churches!

Children need to be strengthened in their aspirations because they, like adults, are searching for a more authentic expression of faith. A quote from the young people in the final statement at Geneva reads: “We need actions not just words. We want to be confirmed as Christians, not as members of a specific denomination. As we are all different from one another, we would need to invent a specific denomination for each one of us. Our dream is of a Church which welcomes all individuals. Let us not fear change, God is on our side. It will be up to our generation to take the decisions in the churches of the future.” (2)

The Edmonton conference was thrilling for Canadians and families arriving from six other countries. We appreciated the organizational skills of the Temmermans in assuming this role and of those who supported them. Fine leadership was offered and friendships were deepened. It was the first opportunity for Canadians to meet together. One Dad motored from Montreal to Edmonton, a distance of 6,000 km with 4 daughters ranging in age from 6 to 18. Mom arrived on the plane before them and experienced their jubilant arrival! Cardinal Marc Ouellet PSS, presently Archbishop of Quebec City was a theme speaker. Br Gilles Bourdeau, OFM, then Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism ministered to us pastorally and addressed the conference.

On the first evening, the youngest children led us from evening prayers to the campfire while pulling a symbolic handcrafted miniature bridge on their little red wagon. We all exited, singing: “Walk with me, I will walk with you, To build the land that God has planned where love shines through” * and “Build a bridge because you love and really care, Walk across, stand with your neighbour there A bridge is hard to build” **

Interchurch teens brought all participants to their feet at the Second World gathering south of Rome, on Lake Albano across from Castel Gandolfo. They had experienced a stimulating

programme parallel to the adults' which included an all night prayer vigil for Christian unity. Their finale was a song and dance presentation which encompassed their realization that LOVE is supreme. It was there too that Canon Martin Reardon shared what their children had said to the churches: "We are not confused because there is only one God and one Jesus Christ who called us into one flock. Those of you who continue to believe that there can be separated churches belonging to one God and Jesus are confused." We cherish vivid memories of being invited by the Austrian delegation to join in liturgical dance. What a time of sharing and praise!

And in 2005, the theme was "Living the Dream Down Under" – joy, love, acceptance – the Australian way! Those who designed and animated the conference were dedicated ecumenists and friends of AIF. Their understanding enfolded all participants in gentleness and challenge. The Awabakal people, the first nation, welcomed us with a candle and a beautiful bouquet of native flowers. These words, "Come into this place in faith, brothers and sisters, For all the earth is a dwelling place for God" (3) began our communal prayer. Times of presentation and contemplation were opportunities to revisit, extend, and personalize the articles of Interchurch Families and Christian Unity (the Rome document) which succinctly presents valuable information on interchurch families. We highly recommend it to you, to church leaders and their constituency.

We were described as pioneers who had been shaped by the differences in our churches. We live with that tension because the unity we know as Christians is divided by the institutional churches which have governed the debate. Over and above this is an inner appeal to deepen our spiritual maturity. A covenant image describes some of what we experience. The deep core relation between God and us is dynamic and makes us feel reconciliation is possible. This enduring quality is of the Spirit which comforts, disturbs and encourages us. Rather than searching for ecclesial identity, we should come to dialogue through our spirituality and faith sharing.

Was it coincidence or God's intervention that "Noah's on the Beach" was the conference site? Could it be divine design that we, like Noah, are summoned to hear and act upon God's will? If we wish to live what God intends, we must listen with the ear of the heart.

OUR PRIVILEGED SITUATION

We were fortunate to discover upon arrival in Pointe-Claire, QC, the Christian community of St John's United and St Edward the Confessor Roman Catholic Mission. Worshipping under the same roof helps us in our Christian development, increases our tolerance of different traditions, brings us awareness of what unites rather than divides and provides an opportunity to work together ecumenically with our neighbours. Frequently the statement of Father Philip Thibodeau, former Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism: "You should do alone only that which you cannot do together" encourages us to search out those opportunities.

In each faith tradition we are influenced by friendships, active involvement and the Sunday service – the hymns, Bible readings, sermon and prayers – and its relevance to our faith journey as well as by the vigour of the community that attends. Our joint spirituality is very much reflective of our private spiritual lives. We have always been more comfortable praying in our own manner and we pray together throughout the day. Most often, our prayer takes the form of gratitude for God's many blessings and petition for God's guidance and compassion for people in our lives who struggle. Both Édouard's presence on the Board of the Canadian Centre for

Ecumenism and Joy's involvement with the World Outreach committee, self-named The Hope Bunch, are stimulating.

Our adopted El Salvadoran family of five are practising Roman Catholics, the church of their birth. In 1985 the parents were refugees from a terrifying situation in their homeland. They left their six year old son with his Grandma for fear he would be kidnapped along the way and sold as an orphan. To pay for a trip back home to visit him, Marina worked on a mushroom farm. By the time of her second trip, their legal papers had progressed sufficiently that he could accompany her to Canada. Not long after, their second son arrived prematurely in a modern Canadian hospital where both he and his Mom received the special care required.

In addition, we are blessed with an interchurch goddaughter, Victoria, whose "double belongingness" was obvious through the shared celebration of her baptism by the local priest and United Church minister. The service was conducted between the Mass and the regular service of worship. Along with their extended families, friends of each church community praised, sang, and welcomed our newest wee Christian to the world! Since first communion is the next "event" of significance in the Roman church, she participated in that preparation. At the time of confirmation, she chose to join her friends in her Protestant church for study and commitment. She feels welcome in both churches and will eventually make other significant decisions. What is much more important than "membership" is the nourishment of her faith. Her younger sister was baptized in an ecumenical service a few years later and made her own decision not to attend First Communion classes. Interchurch friends with children of similar age have sometimes faced initial rejection but rather than give up, they have pursued their desires for their children with different clergy and on occasion, the Bishop. Usually, a satisfactory compromise has been attained.

Family history reveals that the church wielded influence in our ancestors' lives. About 1644 the Huguenot family of Isaac Bédard, Édouard's ancestors, setting sail from France to "New France," were forced to abjure their religion before sailing if they were to benefit from their promised land deal in the new world. Much later, Joy's Dad did not have the privilege of his Mother's attendance at his wedding because he, a Roman Catholic at the time, was taking a Protestant as his bride. His Mother had been instructed by the priest not to attend and she, in respect of her church, sat mournfully at home while her youngest son was married. What heartache for all, including the young bride who had never imagined such a thing!

Eighty years ago, the United Church was established in Canada by the union of three ecclesial communities: Congregationalists, Methodists and some Presbyterians. Joy's maternal grandmother, a widow with three young children, was faced with an overwhelming decision whether to leave the established church of her birth and that of many neighbours or to embark in faith on a uniting vision. In our view, The United Church tends to see itself on the cutting edge of issues rather than resting in a comfy position. Not always easy! A top priority is "the search for justice for God's creatures and healing for God's creation" and "joining with other persons of goodwill in the search for justice, wholeness and love."⁽⁴⁾ Its focus on God's presence in the world, its dynamic involvement in current social issues, and its warm welcome to all at the communion table are attractive features of this lively Christian denomination.

Living faith takes form in the lives of human beings. It offers us the opportunity to focus on God's peoples and to build real links with those in developing countries that we may continue God's covenant with all. Just recently this has meant meeting and establishing bonds with our Muslim neighbours in the community as well as participating in a partnership program with

families and children in Third World countries in order to alleviate their suffering from the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Édouard's background in the Roman Catholic tradition has offered him the stability of tradition, the importance of sacramental life and the freshness of Vatican II thinking and implementation. With the Roman Catholic church being universal in nature, Third World Outreach is also vital. Édouard experienced living and working in partnership with developing countries for several years.

The possibilities of the internet have been masterfully exploited to the benefit of thousands around the world. The interchurch family site which provides geographical, historical, visionary, and current information was established and is managed from Winnipeg by Fenella and Ray Temmerman to whom we offer our appreciation. Through the listserv, immediate communication is available for Interchurch members and others interested in pursuing matters of interest in depth or just touching base with each other. From our member, Tim, in Singapore to those in other countries, the exchange is insightful and current.

Through interchurch contacts we have become aware of bilateral dialogues among ecclesial communities. The Lutheran-Anglican talks have been fruitful. However, with other dialogues, dissemination of valuable studies, advances and decisions seems limited. There are questions to ponder about these ongoing efforts. How are time lines established to ensure visible forward movement and positive outcome? How is access to valuable publications managed and communication maintained with the grassroots?

At the 2005 conference, Bishop Graeme Rutherford of the Maitland-Newcastle Anglican Diocese, Australia, was correct in saying "The time has come for less thinking and more thanking." He also made mention of the overwhelming feeling of love experienced in our seaside meeting room – so much so that he wished to get home to hug his wife! Now that impressed Roman Catholic Bishop Malone too – but, what to do? He could not return home to hug his wife nor could he go hug Mrs Rutherford! What fun and what real bonds are quickly formed through the presence of the Spirit.

PASTORAL CARE AND UNDERSTANDING

Interchurch families wish to be welcomed and respected for who we are and neither cold-shouldered as a foreign species nor overwhelmed immediately with requests as if we were ecumenical experts.

Whenever and wherever possible, the pastors of both church communities should meet together with Interchurch couples and exercise pastoral care jointly. Experience shows that when this happens it can benefit not only the family but also the ecumenical relationship of the two parishes.

There is an obvious advantage for interchurch marriages if much of the marriage preparation is done jointly by churches working together. Local churches also find it helpful to share resources in this way, using both lay people and ministers who can focus on their respective expertise. Occasionally interchurch couples are invited to assist in marriage preparation.

What many interchurch parents and many of their maturing young people want is that the stages of baptism, first communion, and profession of faith or confirmation, be marked as far as possible as ecumenical events in which both churches play at least some recognizable part.

They know that there is already a partial communion (Koinonia) between the two churches and they hope this will progress to full communion in their lifetime. “There is an increasing willingness of pastors of all churches to share publicly together in interchurch family weddings. Other occasions of shared celebrations are funerals when the bereaved interchurch family has a deep spiritual need for the ministers and congregations of the two churches to come together to give thanks for the life of the deceased, to commend him/her to God, and also to minister to the living.” (5)

The fact that “Eucharistic sharing in the Roman Catholic church remains exceptional and is permitted only under certain conditions and in particular cases” (6) causes us much pain as an interchurch family. We feel a serious need for eucharistic sharing every time we are at mass together. Each of us has been baptized in the Christian faith and this unity is further sealed by the sacrament of our marriage. In order to express that unity we experience the need to share the Eucharist together. Father Ernest Falardeau of the U.S., a friend who has accompanied interchurch families internationally, has written an update on eucharistic sharing accessible through the Canadian website.

Among the topics set forth for the debate of the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist (Rome, October 2005), is that of “intercommunion” and eucharistic hospitality. In a preliminary paper, Cardinal Scola says that “not being allowed to eucharistic concelebration and eucharistic communion by Christians from different churches and ecclesial communities and the exceptional quality of eucharistic hospitality, are not only the cause for suffering, rather, they must represent the permanent prodding for the continuous and common search for the ‘mysterium fidei’ that urges all Christians to unity in the integral profession of faith.”(7)

There are riches to be mined! We ask guidance in reaching out to new families in order to establish ties, credibility, and support. Interchurch families have limited visibility in established churches because they ostensibly fit in, keeping their irritations and loss of comfort to themselves. Despite efforts by each spouse to maintain active association in their own ecclesial community, they are no longer seen as “authentically” of this denomination. It’s the square peg in the round hole syndrome. The fit is skewed from the norm. The pain is overwhelming and they may drift toward one denomination or, more frequently, none. Thus, one partner may lose the inner connectedness to his/her church practices and friends while having foreign elements imposed. The extended family is very much affected because a similar feeling of loss is inflicted on them.

As an interchurch couple, it is not easy for us to justify some things. The ongoing discussions and dialogue affect and pain us yet we continue them as a way of deepening our love for each other and for God. We hope that our experience can contribute to the ecumenical vision of the future. “We pray to be a sign of unity and a means to grow toward it, a sign of God’s grace and a gift to the churches on their way to unity. We believe that we can form a connective tissue to help in a small way to bring our churches together in the one Body of Christ.” (5)

THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION

Our interchurch involvement has been local, national and international. Locally, families met and forged bonds at the initiative of Father Thomas Ryan, former Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal. He also travelled across Canada, through the network of ecumenical centres, with the purpose of alerting families to the possibilities of celebrating our “Interchurchedness.”

Father Ryan was followed by our British ambassador – an interchurch teen, Ellen Bard. To finance her travel, she managed part-time jobs after school and sought the moral and financial support of both her Bishops. In addition to living in an interchurch family, she researched and developed a paper on the subject for one of her classes. Ellen met informally with families from Montreal to Saskatoon. Those same people were the foundation of the proposal that Canada should host an International Interchurch Conference in 2001. Canada did! All ages came for a glorious time in Edmonton!

Through the tireless efforts of people in France and England, the foundations of the Association of Interchurch Families were laid and international links were forged. These people became mentors to others. They diligently searched and pursued even grains of hope and maintained contact with those who would discuss and examine encouraging possibilities.

One couple, Ruth and Martin Reardon of England met at l'Université Catholique de Louvain where she was completing her doctoral thesis in Theology. Martin, an Anglican priest, arrived just in time! Ruth has profound faith, tremendous foresight and analytical skills in addition to a powerful pen and illuminating smile which she can deftly flash in a room of theologians. Martin had the skills of a diplomat, profound faith, influential ties and enormous patience. In 1968, they co-founded the Association of Interchurch Families along with Fr. John Coventry S.J. Working closely with Churches Together in England they later researched and edited CHURCHES TOGETHER IN MARRIAGE, Pastoral care of Interchurch Families. (8)

Fr René Beaupère has worked tirelessly for years in the Centre St. Irenée of Lyon which edits and distributes FOYERS MIXTES, a valuable resource on pastoral care of Interchurch families. (9) Rosmarie and Rudolf Lauber in Germany have been actively involved for many years. Representatives are recognized in Singapore, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, Italy, U.S., Northern Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Kenya, and Canada. It has been a privilege for us to host several interchurch friends thus benefiting from their charm, vision and enthusiasm as well as their personal stories. We firmly believe that our vocation is to raise awareness of the issues faced by interchurch families and to support those who are suffering the pain of division. The Canadian Association of Interchurch Families, founded in 1996, offers a support network for partners and their maturing children and an information service for all concerned about their welfare. If you personally are in an interchurch relationship, have you contemplated:

How to design a ceremony respectful of each of your beliefs?

Where to have your wedding?

How to arrange baptism and shared nurture of your children?

How to pray and worship together?

If ever you could share communion?

For an occasion to talk matters over, please contact an interchurch family near you. Active groups are found in Montreal, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Calgary, and Edmonton. There are associations and caring individuals in more than twelve countries linked in hope through the internet.

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** Composer unknown

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Falardeau, Ernest SSS: Eucharistic Sharing: Recent developments
<http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/articles/euchshrdmnts.shtm>

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