

Report from Association des Foyers Interconfessionnels en Suisse

Interchurch Families in Switzerland

The third Annual General Assembly of AFI-CH was held on 10 March 2007 in Lausanne, on a freezing cold but beautiful sunny day, on the same day as the national gathering of those planning to attend the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu later in the year. This gathering was organized by the Joint Working Group of the Christian Churches in Switzerland.

The President of AFI-CH reported at the AGM that 2006 was a year of consolidation for the Association. It plans to produce an information brochure to be distributed among members during 2007. A website is being set up. Chaplains to the Association, Pastor Jean-Baptiste Lipp and Fr Gérald Voide, regularly write articles to make it more widely known, and also prepare the page in the Foyers Mixtes bulletin produced at the Centre St Irénée in Lyon.

At the end of the meeting, after reporting on aims for 2007 and approving the accounts for 2006, members enjoyed a convivial apéritif with specialties from all corners of the country, and then went to join 1100 other people for an ecumenical celebration in Lausanne cathedral, on the theme: 'Christ, Light for all'. This was a wonderful time of spirituality, two hours long, with Bible readings, moments of silence and music, songs and hymns from the Reformed, Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical traditions. We experienced the *lectio divina*, a practice designed to put the Gospel back in the centre; after the reading and the commentary on the biblical text, we sat in silence to listen to Christ's word to us.

Numerous clergy and church leaders attended this celebration, from the President of the RC Bishops' Conference to the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Diocese of Switzerland, from the President of the Conference of European Churches to representatives from the free evangelical churches, the Salvation Army, the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Lutheran church, the Anglican church, and so on.

Also attending were the 40 delegates who will represent the Swiss churches in September 2007 at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, and two more, the delegates from AFI-CH, chosen to be part of the international delegation of interchurch families with others coming from all over Europe: our chaplain Jean-Baptiste Lipp and his wife Dominique, a committed and enthusiastic interchurch family! These delegates were given an official send-off by the authorities, and children from different backgrounds gave them candles, symbolizing the light of Christ. This little light was then shared with all the participants, linking us all to the gathering in Sibiu, in union with all the Swiss churches.

The conclusion by Pastor Rüdi Heinzer, council member of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland: 'The light of Christ is indispensable in a Europe which is diving more deeply into the darkness of secularity.'

Cécile Girod

.....

Conference 22 – 22 April 2007

I have long wanted to attend one of the Swiss conferences, having heard about them from Ruth and Martin. After all, what beautiful surroundings to hold a conference, and with wine-growers and farmers among the members, what wonderful apéritifs they can put together! So I was delighted to be able to go this year, and was very warmly welcomed by Jean-Baptiste and Dominique Lipp and their lovely family. The conference was held at a centre within Lausanne, a green space in the city. It was lovely to

recognize the little oil lamp of the Scripture Union, who run the centre. We had excellent facilities and food, and the usual opportunities for talking informally over the meals and washing up.

There were many families with young children, and the children's programme was excellent, culminating in a wonderful presentation in brightly coloured crepe paper costumes during the final act of worship, where the story was told of four differently coloured communities who didn't know anything about each other at the beginning, but cooperated in perfect unity at the end. The weather was perfect and there was plenty of space to run about, so the children were in their element.

The theme of the conference was 'My identity or our identity? How do we create 'identity' based on our humanist, ecumenical or confessional values?' Speakers were Fr Louis Christiaens, Jesuit and former special advisor to the Bureau International du Travail, Pastor Florence Foehr from the Protestant church of Geneva, Mgr Pierre Farine, auxiliary bishop (RC) of the diocese of Lausanne, Hans Ucko, specialist in interfaith dialogue at the World Council of Churches, as well as several representatives from Reformed churches of various different Swiss cantons.

A highlight for me personally was the introductory session where we were invited to group and re-group ourselves repeatedly according to various categories: whether we lived in the country, the town, or the mountains; whether we worked with people, machines or ideas; whether we found interchurch differences a scandal, an opportunity, or we didn't much notice them. Finally we divided ourselves up into four character types based on the four elements: air, fire, water, earth. The children joined in enthusiastically as different animals representing these elements were named, and various characteristics of each given. I think some spouses disagreed with each other about each other's predominant characteristic! This led to much discussion later in the conference as we continued to relate these characteristics to the way we led our lives of faith.

On the Saturday, Hans Ucko spoke of the European identity, which is changing so much with migration and family patterns, examining its social, political and historical aspects. He commented that Jesus doesn't say 'I HAVE the Truth', he says 'I AM the Truth', and said that identity is not a possession, but has to be worked on, and this is an invitation to discipleship. Group discussion afterwards in the sunshine examined our identity as interchurch families: are we 'victims'? is there an 'enemy'? Does our identity as interchurch families create barriers, or does it help us to cross them? How has it evolved over time? How does it help us to understand how others see themselves, without trying to make them 'the same as me'? What changes are we being invited to make as a result of a growth in the number of different religions around us? It reminded me of the last Swanwick conference where we were considering looking through another's eyes.

On the Sunday, Fr Louis Christiaens invited us to 'take the masks off', and gave a very affirming and encouraging address. Small groups afterwards, only two couples in each, talked about what improvements they would like to see in their ecumenical engagement together. These were most intimate discussions, and because I wasn't in a couple, I found myself with three assorted members of the clergy, which was extremely challenging!

I hope more visitors from overseas will be able to go to the next Swiss conference, if your French is reasonably good, as it was a really enriching experience. And there was lots of wine, cake and singing! Thank you so much to the Lipp family and others who welcomed me with open arms.

Melanie Finch

[←Previous](#) | [Next→](#)

Return to [IFIN Index](#)