

Interchurch Families International Network November 2009 Newsletter

Dear friends

Here is some of the news over the past year from groups and associations of interchurch families around the world which are part of the Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN). Follow the links in brackets to reports from several different countries.

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Australia

A little while ago, Bev Hincks sent details of research carried out by Siobhan McHugh, doctoral student at the University of Wollongong, NSW, into the historical background and experiences of Australians in mixed marriages. The Hincks were among couples interviewed during the research. This has resulted in two radio broadcasts recently, based on the interviews, and there has also been a very readable article in the *History Australia* journal, published by the Monash University e-press, including audio clips, which you can access online on <http://publications.epress.monash.edu/toc/ha/6/2>. Siobhan continues to work on her thesis, which she hopes to complete by March 2010. She also eventually hopes to publish a book on the subject. The National Library of Australia believes that her collection of interviews on the theme of mixed marriage, sectarianism and the divisions between Catholics and Protestants of earlier times fills a significant gap in Australian social history, and they are going to archive the collection after the book is published.

Bev also reported on a recent conference she attended in Brisbane, Queensland. She flew 800 Km from Newcastle NSW to attend, and was able to highlight the work of IFIN while there and also to meet with some ecumenical leaders. She returned much encouraged by ecumenical work currently being done in Australia. You can read her report here. [\(1\)](#)

Austria

Klemens Betz reports that the Austrian interchurch families group ARGE-Ökumene held its annual conference from 23 - 26 October. As usual this started with a conversation with different church leaders. The keynote speaker on the Saturday was Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi with the theme *Interchurch Families as Domestic Church*. Workshops followed, in which the theme was extensively explored. To commemorate the start of the Calvin anniversary year, the shared worship on Sunday took place in the Reformed church with its clergy. An outing over the Hungarian border deepened mutual friendships. The last day included reports from the different regions, looking back on past activities and looking into the future.

Klemens says that in Austria there is a long tradition of different ecumenical activities: shared acts of worship, Bible study, marriage preparation, the World Day of Prayer, etc. Members of the ARGE group have worked on ecumenical commissions in nearly all the Austrian dioceses. There is a good ecumenical climate in Austria. However, individual churches are so busy with maintaining their structures in the light of growing secularisation (fewer priests, smaller congregations, etc) that hardly any new ecumenical initiatives are underway.

Canada

Canadian interchurch couples are busy in several provinces. Darrel and Maureen Chastkiewicz recently led an archdiocesan workshop on Marriage Preparation in Regina, Saskatchewan, to introduce a new programme *For Better and For Ever*. They were pleased to meet Fr Rob Ruhnke from Texas, author of the programme, who

displayed the www.interchurchfamilies.org website as part of the presentation and said it was a great resource of information.

Ray Temmerman recently attended the *Call to Action Conference 2009* in Milwaukee, and reports here [\(2\)](#)

France

The latest edition of the Newsletter of the Association Française des Foyers Interconfessionnels Chrétiens (AFFMIC), which can be seen on their website www.affmic.org under 'Actualité/Newsletter', contains reports on several conferences attended by AFFMIC members. In February in Lyon, a conference studying Calvin with views from both the Reformed and the RC perspective took place. Again in Lyon, in July, the 13th Assembly of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), entitled *Called to One Hope in Christ*, and celebrating 50 years since the formation of the CEC, brought together members of Protestant, Orthodox and Old Catholic churches. The retiring CEC President, Jean Arnold de Clermont, reminded participants that *'In the ecumenical movement, the real gift is that of our presence together, one with another.'* In October members of AFFMIC shared in a 'Calvin week' to celebrate 500 years since his birth, in several parts of the country. AFFMIC also organized a stand at the *Protestants en Fête* exhibition in Strasbourg in late October, where up to 10,000 participants were expected.

In March, AFFMIC organized their own conference *'Interchurch Families and Ecumenism: Where are we coming from? What are we living? What do we hope for?'* The venue was the French Reformed church of Beaumont-les-Valence, a historic building with great ecumenical significance, since in 1806 a wall was constructed in the church dividing the chancel from the nave, creating two worship spaces, one used by Catholics, one by Protestants - an early example of church sharing. On the 200th anniversary of its construction in 2006, the two congregations determined to open this wall, and now both are able to use the whole building and there is an ecumenical committee overseeing the church.

Père René Beaupère, who has for decades been at the forefront of ecumenical work in France, and first arranged meetings of interchurch families at the Centre St Irénée in Lyon in the early 1960s, is due to retire from his post as the Director of the Centre. He will continue to publish the bulletin *Chrétiens en Marche*, and to run the library and the archive of the Centre, but it is likely that the actual building will no longer be used, as financial resources are limited. The Lyon group of foyers mixtes will continue their activities, supporting local families with regular meetings, organizing ecumenical religious instruction for children with the help of their parents, holding ecumenical services, with the support of local Reformed and Catholic parishes, and in close contact with other groups of foyers mixtes in France through AFFMIC.

Germany

The German Netzwerk Konfessionsverbindender Familien has been very busy organising exhibition stands at conferences around the country. Their own annual conference in February was held for the second time in the eastern part of the country, in Rudolstadt in Thüringen. You can read a report here [\(3\)](#) The 2010 conference will be back in the west in Braunfels bei Wetzlar near Frankfurt, 26 - 28 February.

Representatives from the Netzwerk spent 5 days at the Protestant Kirchentag in May, and their stand received many visitors. In 2010 the second ecumenical (Protestant/Catholic) Kirchentag will be held in Munich. (The first one was in Berlin in 2003.) The Netzwerk will have an exhibition stand and lead an ecumenical act of worship, as well as take part in various workshops and discussions. Up to 300,000 participants are expected! Other weekends for interchurch couples are planned in 2010, in different regions of the country in June and October. The Netzwerk was also represented at a recent national meeting of *Together for Europe: Conference of Christian Communities and Movements*, held in Würzburg. Previous international conferences in this series also attracted many thousands of participants, from all over the European continent and beyond.

Italy

A message came earlier in the year from Andrea and Maria Aprile Lari who were Italian linguistic coordinators for the Rome 2003 Gathering, that as far as they know, the only active group of interchurch couples and families seems to be the one in Milan, which they attend. They are still meeting to pray and talk together, and they are growing in terms of church belonging (the group now including Catholics, Reformed, Waldensian and Orthodox). The Council of Christian Churches of Milan has appointed Francesco Braschi, a Catholic priest, and Ulrich Eckert, a Lutheran pastor, as responsible for the pastoral care of the group. This is very important, as it helps members to feel supported by the churches, though they still lack an Orthodox pastor. Orthodox communities are growing in Italy, and in Milan in particular, as a result of immigration from Romania, Moldova and other Eastern European countries. Shared Catholic/Protestant marriage preparation courses have been held in Milan and in Pinerolo, which recognise the need for the specific needs and situations of such couples.

Kenya

David and Joyce Makumi send greetings and warmest regards from Nairobi, and report that although they have not been active recently in formal ecumenical activities, they have had informal contacts with families and others who are preparing to entering into interchurch family life. They get calls from time to time from folks who want to know 'how they go about it'. They are certainly happy still to be connected to the listserv, reading about the challenges for many others in similar situations around the world.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) has been unique among groups and associations of interchurch families in combining its work in support of marriage and family life and talking to church leaders with significant community work, and progress during a time of frequent violent disruption caused by centuries-long deep divisions between the Protestant and Catholic communities. NIMMA has achieved particular success in the fields of integrated schooling and public housing, where earlier in its history total segregation was the norm. From its early days, when members had to be discreet and often only used their first names when doing outreach work, NIMMA is now recognized by community and church leaders, and quoted as an authority on interchurch work in general. There are still wounds which need healing in the community, and the work goes on.

A report summarizing the research of American academic Jayme Reeves: *Celebrating the Work - Evaluating the Impact*, which highlights NIMMA's work and impact over nearly 35 years, was launched in September by the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Naomi Long, who described it thus: 'a valuable piece of social history which, while documenting the past, lays down guidelines for the future. The report deals with the actual experiences of individuals, who have put love before traditional tribal allegiances, highlights the impact of "The Troubles" in their lives, and celebrates the progress made in a society where one in ten marriages is now mixed.' Congratulations were sent on the launch by many significant members of the Church hierarchy, political leaders and academics. Friends within IFIN are very proud of their colleagues, whose utter determination and faith in the value of diversity and community cohesion has achieved so much beyond their call to united family life.

Read more here [\(4\)](#), and contact nimma@nireland.com if you would like to see the full report, or find out more about the Association.

Switzerland

Members of the Association des Foyers Interconfessionnels de Suisse (AFI-CH) have also been active during this Calvin anniversary year, and in different parts of the country ecumenical services and meetings have been held. They are planning the next interchurch families francophone conference for 18-19 September 2010, to be held in Vaumarcus in the north-east, entitled '*Turning back to our denominations?*' A warm welcome to the conference is extended to all visitors from other countries! See their website www.afich.ch.

United Kingdom

Members of AIF continue to provide a voice in the churches of the UK, sometimes representing AIF and sometimes acting individually, often seen wearing their distinctive AIF polo shirt or sweatshirt. Many of them are on local, regional and national ecumenical and other church councils. They regularly mount exhibitions round the country, and they occasionally write to the church press (and are published). In January Ruth Reardon attended a conference on *Receptive Ecumenism* held in Durham. You can read her report here [\(5\)](#).

A steady stream of enquiries comes to the London office and the website, and AIF continues to offer support and information to couples and families who need it, or endeavours to pass them on to contacts who can help, although local groups meeting together are few compared with some years back. Secretary Keith Lander works tirelessly with some voluntary help from among the membership to keep on top of the administration needed to run the Association, which is a registered charity.

There was the usual London day conference in March, and the annual weekend conference at Swanwick in August. Read the report here. [\(6\)](#) These are held by most AIF members to be the most significant means of support couples offer to each other, to which some excellent visiting speakers are welcomed. AIF is delighted that the Association's Anglican President Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has agreed to address the next 2010 John Coventry Memorial Lecture in London on Saturday 20 March 2010, in the series of lectures organized by AIF in memory of its founder Fr John Coventry. This lecture is expected to attract more than just AIF members. The 2010 Swanwick conference is entitled *Interchurch Families as Prophets*, and will be held from 28 - 30 August.

For more details of AIF activities, consult the website www.interchurchfamilies.org.uk or contact the Secretary on info@interchurchfamilies.org.uk. Friends from round the world are always welcome to visit!

United States

The American Association of Interchurch Families (AAIF) now has a video of its work, which it uses when giving presentations. In April, Fr George Kilcourse, the Association's pastoral advisor, recently visited Rome and was able to meet Mgr Mark Langham at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, continuing the positive relationship which IFIN has had with the Council for some years now. In May, Mary Jane Glauber, former Co-Chair of the Association, mounted an exhibition stand and attended the National Workshop on Christian Unity in Phoenix, Arizona, as she has done for several years.

AAIF will be holding its biennial conference from 9 - 11 July, in Madison, Wisconsin, and visitors from overseas will be made very welcome.

Conclusion

Thank you very much indeed to all who have sent reports. Some are in translation, so please contact me if you would like the original version. It is good to keep in touch, so please continue during the year to try to send in reports of activities which might interest and inform others. You can find further useful information on the international website www.interchurchfamilies.org with details of international contacts, and links to websites of several national groups and associations. Please continue to pray for interchurch families and their priests and pastors.

Melanie Finch

Coordinator, International Links

Association of Interchurch Families UK

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