

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES: Issues – Reflections – News (IRN) is an email newsletter compiled by Martin and Ruth Reardon two or three times a year. You can subscribe to it free by sending an email to interchurchfamilies-subscribe@yahoo.com. Those who cannot receive email can request paper copies from Ruth and Martin Reardon at Little School House, High Street, Turvey, Bedford MK43 8DB, UK (and email correspondence can be sent to them at aifreardon@talk21.com). IRN is distributed by Ray Temmerman, who is responsible for the international Interchurch Families website. You can find the latest version, and older ones, at www.interchurchfamilies.org/irn/index.shtm. It is written for interchurch families (usually where one partner is Roman Catholic and the other a Christian of another communion) and all concerned for their welfare.

Our intention

This letter continues the work of the [Interchurch Families journal](#) (1993-2004). Longer articles and resources will be placed directly on the website and the letter will draw attention to the new material. There will be theology and spirituality, pastoral and historical studies related to interchurch families, as well as interchurch family 'stories' and news from around the world. The letter will also give information about printed resources published by the [British Association of Interchurch Families](#).

'I cannot invite: I will not refuse'

Sometimes interchurch family spouses are puzzled or even dismayed to get this reaction to a request for admission to communion in the Roman Catholic Church for the other Christian spouse. In the British Association of Interchurch Families we became familiar with it because basically it was the stance of Fr John Coventry, SJ, our Catholic co-chair who was celebrant at our conferences over 30 years.

It was easy to think that admission for interchurch family spouses could become official, once the [1993 Ecumenical Directory](#) had identified those who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage as in possible need of eucharistic sharing, and therefore to be admitted to communion in exceptional cases. This approach would therefore no longer be needed for them.

It was an over-optimistic assessment. For one thing, in many places 'exceptional cases' has become confused with 'exceptional occasions'. It is of course very good that

interchurch family spouses can now officially be admitted to communion on certain occasions (baptism, first communion etc) in many places. This is an enormous step forward that should not be underestimated. However, it is not enough to meet the real spiritual needs of some interchurch families. We are often left, therefore, with the approach of 'not inviting, not refusing' as a pastoral option taken by some clergy. This is also true for the admission to communion of extended families and close friends at 'special occasions' when they are present. The 1993 Directory refers only to requests from *spouses* (those who 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage') as those that can officially be granted. (Episcopal conferences and diocesan bishops are free, of course, to specify other circumstances of need if they wish to do so.)

Anything therefore that helps interchurch families to understand and appreciate the stance of the Roman Catholic Church when the 'not inviting, not refusing' approach is used, is useful to them. We are fortunate that the Editor of *One in Christ* has allowed us to place on the interchurch families website a recent article from the April 2004 number: 'Between the Times, Between Communities: Eucharistic Theology for the Bridge', by Gerald W. Schlabach (OIC 39, 2, pp.3-16). It comes out of the experience of a closely-knit group of 'sacramentally-minded Mennonites and peace-minded Roman Catholics' called [Bridgefolk](#), that has been meeting for some time at St John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota..

It begins with the story of an interchurch family wedding: *'Since the wedding was to be a Catholic ceremony, Mennonite family members were uncertain whether they should take communion. At the rehearsal, one of them pulled the priest aside and asked what they should do. "There are two rules I must observe as a Catholic priest," he told them. "The first is that I cannot invite non-Catholics to receive communion. And the second is that I cannot refuse communion to anyone who comes forward in the communion line." With that he gestured to indicate that the conversation was over. Welcome to Catholic culture – welcomed to the table? Or not?'*

When Mennonites were given a similar message by their Benedictine hosts, some heard hard official words, others saw generous pastoral gestures. Some felt pain from misunderstanding the cues in another's culture; others from understanding all too well how far we have still to go before we share a common theological language, let alone common institutional bonds. Yet Bridgefolk (like interchurch families) are really and concretely already on the way, between the times, living between the 'already' and the 'not yet' of Christian unity. In grappling urgently

with the issue, can they offer a 'fertile test plot' from which may grow learnings of benefit to other Christians?

Mennonites and Catholics have tried, in very different ways, to integrate structure and flexibility. Both (more than many Protestants) retain a deeply communitarian approach to Christianity. Thus, for both, 'group norms carry greater weight than individual preferences on issues that are key to community life'. So for Mennonites as for Catholics, 'the eucharist must always confirm the realities of ecclesial identity and commitment, not simply personal identity and desire'.

But the two work on a different scale, so although they share this common value, their practical judgements on what to do are different. Mennonites need to take seriously the global structure of the Catholic Church, and the priority that Catholics give to the objective over the subjective. Yet there are 'special circumstances', and a need for discernment in particular cases. Mennonites see someone who does not keep a rule as breaking it – which leaves no option but to seek to change a rule outright if it proves unwieldy or unfair. This is relatively easy on the small scale of a Mennonite community. But for Catholics someone who does not keep a rule may simply be making an exception – and a community as large as the Roman Catholic Church must have some way of allowing for exceptions. Mennonites and Catholics can hurt each other by their unexamined assumptions.

There is a story of St Scholastica and St Benedict and the heaven-sent storm that prevented Benedict from keeping his own Rule by returning to his monastery overnight. There is the story of Jesus in the cornfields referring back to David (Luke 6:2-4). Such stories show us 'that there is a precedent for pastoral flexibility buried deeply but integrally within the tradition itself'. And so, concludes the article, 'as bands of people sharing in a journey, like David's companions and Jesus' disciples, on the way and hungry, let us promise one another support as each examines his or her conscience to discern how best to find the nourishment we need to live between the times, on the bridge between our communities.'

When members of [l'Arche](#) and interchurch families met last year to discuss our approach to an invitation by the Bishops of England and Wales to re-think *One Bread One Body* we came to the conclusion that we do not want to ask for *clarity*. How can anything be really clear in the confused situation of partial but real communion between the churches? We decided we wanted to ask for *flexibility*: for an open recognition that there could be more flexibility in the application of the law than that which is implied in *One Bread One Body*.

Interchurch families are unique in being identified as exceptions written into the rule, or at least into the application of the rule as specified in the 1993 Directory. There are other groups and contexts that share something

of their need. Cross-fertilisation of thinking and experience between us is all to the good.

Unity in Difference: Spiritual Challenges in Interchurch Family Life

This is the title of another article that has been placed on the website, by permission of the Editor of THE WAY. He asked Ruth Reardon to write it after reading the appreciation of the contribution made by Fr John Coventry, SJ to the well-being of interchurch families (in the *Interchurch Families* journal, ([10, 2, Summer 2002, pp.10-15](#)). It uses some of the material given in that appreciation, showing how John Coventry helped interchurch families to come to a spiritual freedom in discerning their need for eucharistic sharing.

The article shows how interchurch family spirituality draws both on marital spirituality and on ecumenical spirituality. The fundamental spiritual challenge of an interchurch marriage is for the partners to respond to God's call to be one church at home, while at the same time remaining faithful members of two churches (both in the sense of denominations and of local congregations). The thinking behind the article will be familiar to readers of the *Interchurch Families* journal.

Two Interchurch Family Stories

Simon Quail's story of, and reflection on, thirty years of an Anglican-Roman Catholic interchurch marriage arrived just as the Editor had finalised the copy for the last number of the *Interchurch Families* journal. Sharing of stories has been an important element in the work of the journal, and this will continue on the website. You can find the Quails' story there. You will also find a story from Australia, in the form David and Susan prepared it for an ARCIC study booklet for use in Australian parishes.

A response to Antelias

Following the Rome Gathering 2003 interchurch family groupings world-wide have established a network that allows them to respond on a global level to issues and events that concern interchurch families.

They were pleased to be invited to respond as interchurch families to the Antelias report of the World Council of Churches on the re-configuration of the ecumenical movement. Their response is also to be found on the website.

New on the website:

- [Bridgefolk and the Eucharist](#), from [ONE IN CHRIST](#)
- [Spiritual Challenges](#), from [THE WAY](#)
- Interchurch Family Stories from [England](#) and [Australia](#)
- [A response to Antelias](#) from interchurch families

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