

IFIN Theological Working Group: Study on Interchurch Families as Domestic Churches

Report on the AIF groups, Spring 2007

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*How do you as an interchurch family experience unity in your marriage and family life?
How does this affect your understanding of the church(es)?*

Seven groups met in the North, Midlands and South of England in the early part of 2007 to consider these questions proposed by Thomas Knieps; a brief session was devoted to them at the Heythrop meeting of the Association in February, and a few individuals sent in responses. I shall attempt to identify the themes proposed in answer to the questions. I hope that all those who participated in this project will be able to recognise their contribution somewhere within this cloud of testimony.

We are like other Christian families

We are just the same as other couples and families, united by our faith in Christ and our commitment to one another in marriage. We share our lives, our activities, our interests. We work to understand one another and to communicate with one another. We strive for sensitivity and we forgive one another when we fail. We laugh together, and we share one another's sorrows. We respect one another. We grow in love for one another. As parents we do our best to share our faith in Christ with our children. As families we are different from one another, as all families are. What is particular to our situation is that we come from two different churches that are not in communion with one another, and we try to be loyal to both in our marriages and family lives.

We are called to marry

We have a strong sense that it is God who has brought us together. We recognised God's call to us to marry one another, through all the difficulties that families and church communities and clergy placed in the way of some of us. God has united us in marriage and we renew that unity each day by God's grace. God made us one and God is holding us together. We seek to live the marriage covenant in such a way as to make real the sacrament of marriage. We are committed to seeking God's will for each of us individually and for both of us together. This is a spiritual bond that grows and deepens.

We love one another

We are united in mutual love and express this through our physical union and the mutual support we give to one another. Sometimes it is periods of illness that make us realise our mutual dependence and the depth of our love for one another. Sometimes there are other stresses through changed circumstances. We realise that hard times are an integral part of marriage, and that married love means laying down our lives for one another, putting the other first. We live in one another's lives, just as we live in Christ and find our unity in Christ. This brings us to share through the Spirit in the love of the Trinity. Our love grows and develops as we grow together, and is our life-long path to holiness. We constantly find we have to say we are sorry for the hurts we cause one another, and to experience being forgiven. This helps us to grow in love, and to find ourselves within our relationship, in the context of a shared home that is a safe haven where we can be ourselves. Some of us feel that our mutual love brings us to feel 'at home' in both our church communities, experiencing the love of Christ in both.

We are different

We experience our unity through our diversity. We have different personalities. Gradually we learn not to try to re-form our partner into our own image, but to appreciate their strengths and be

compassionate to their weaknesses, which are different from ours. We find we are complementary and this is a great strength. We are both helped to become who we are. More and more we can pull together as equals and form a good team. We have to agree on what is essential for us as a couple, and then accept and value our differences. As interchurch couples we have to work hard at our unity – if something so central as our Christian faith threatens to divide us – and this is a great blessing. We can take nothing for granted. A double spirituality pushes us towards unity. We discover that our diversity is a plus – like bi-lingualism, it is a great enrichment to our family life. It changes us. ‘Without an interchurch marriage I would be more arrogant and far less thoughtful’ said one Catholic husband.

We do things together

As married couples we don’t need to do everything together, but it would be strange if we didn’t enjoy doing many things together. Where our relationship with God is concerned, because this is so central to our lives, many of us find that it is very important to pray and read the Bible together. In this way we experience our unity in our home with an intensity that might have been lacking if we were one-church couples. Being with one another in church worship is vital for most of us too. Here we experience our unity especially when we are able to share communion with one another. Circumstances differ and it can be helpful to receive a blessing, but the real need is to share communion to express and deepen our unity. When we work together to prepare a shared celebration of baptism we feel richly blessed; we probably would not have thought so much about what we wanted for our children had we not been an interchurch family. We need the churches to give us good experiences of unity to support our marriages and family life.

We belong together

It is important that our parents welcome their son/daughter-in-law as belonging to their family, and recognise that the couple also belong to another family, that of their daughter/son-in-law. It is similar with the churches. We are one church at home, and we experience our unity when we are welcomed and affirmed as a family by clergy and congregations, when we are recognised as having another church loyalty also, when we are offered joint pastoral care and understood as being in a special situation. Even if they do not always agree with us, clergy and congregations can be very supportive, and this makes a lot of difference. Sometimes we have to support one another to persevere in spite of hurts, for instance when others judged us as ‘less’ a Catholic/Anglican/Methodist – a kind of traitor – because we are married to an ‘other’.

We are responsible

As partners and parents, we have to exercise the authority that belongs to us as couples, and in making decisions together we experience our unity. In less important decisions one or other of us can make decisions for both, within our agreed areas of competence. But when we make really important decisions about our family life, we have to be sure we both agree on them, and allow the time necessary for that agreement. Then we are responsible to one another for how we carry them out, and can call one another to account. This is so in all areas of our life, including those relating to our church-belonging, which for us is a vitally important part of our lives. One or both of our church communities may not fully approve our decisions, but we are grateful when they accept our authority to make them, and when they support us in them. There may be problems when there is a change of clergy or when we move. We can only make decisions based on what seems to us best for our family at a particular place and time, and in making those decisions we grow together.

We nurture our children

We share our faith in Christ with our children and strive to live in our home that one Church of Christ that is both deeper than, and transcends, our divisions. Intentionally many couples always

refer to their two churches by name, rather than identifying them as ‘Mummy’s church’ and ‘Daddy’s church’. At the same time many of us try to give our children a sense of rootedness in both our church communities. We have found that this does not cause them to be confused, but enriched. Their perceptive questions and comments sometimes surprise us. As they grow older they increasingly make their own decisions and choices about their personal faith and their church-going, and we try to support them together in those choices, confident in the Spirit who is leading them as well as us.

We look outward together

Because we have had to overcome our prejudice and ignorance about our partner’s church, we have developed a more respectful and inclusive attitude to others. Many families have become involved in some kind of ecumenical work. Because we have crossed boundaries in our marriages, we are more willing to cross other boundaries. For one family it is work with refugees and asylum-seekers, for another with world development, for another inter-faith relations. Because our marriages have caused us to go deeper into our faith, for some it is work in the field of spirituality.

Marriage as a model for Christian unity

It seems to us that the churches need to relate to one another in the way that married couples do, if they really want to grow into unity. These are some suggestions we would like to make.

Love one another – in a real and deep and lasting way. Do separate churches really do this?

Get to know one another at a deep level: work at communicating, listening, sharing, praying.

Put faith in Christ first, more important than our differences.

Focus on what unites, learn to recognise and overcome intolerance, prejudice, tribalism, to distinguish essentials from non-essentials, to correct the myths in all churches about the others.

Be committed to unity, and be prepared to go through a painful process out of disunity because **we have to** find a way forward together.

Stay with it, in spite of frustrations and impatience: it takes a long time, but change does happen.

Believe that divisions can be overcome because unity is God’s gift to us in Christ. But don’t expect that we can receive perfect unity.

In God’s eyes we are one; it is people who introduce divisions.

Experience differences as enrichment, value and love the differences, see all that is good in the other. Look at differences together, not from opposite sides.

Be ready to change; institutions tend to be slower than married partners to realise they need to change, if the relationship is to progress. Sticking points can become growing points.

Difference and change need not be threatening if we love one another.

Be open to valuing and liking what your partner likes, though you do not have to like it all. We can disagree without falling apart.

Welcome differences as a stimulus to develop our own faith understanding, to look deeper.

Develop an inclusive attitude, hospitable and welcoming. Do well what you do well, and join in with others when they do things better.

Spend time in other churches; this is valuable for both you and the host community. You will understand more; they will have to watch what they say when they realise you are there.

Think of the ‘other’ in terms of who they are, not in terms of who you are (e.g. why use the blanket term ‘non-Catholics’).

Be convinced that unity really matters now. Responsibility for our children gives interchurch families a sense of urgency about unity. Cannot the churches feel more urgently their pastoral responsibilities for these children, and their urgent need to witness to the world that unity with God and with one another that Christ came to demonstrate and to share with us, the unity for which he prayed.