



## INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AND CHRISTIAN UNITY ROME 2003



*This paper was formally adopted by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held at the Mondo Migliore Centre near Rome, 24-28 July 2003. It is the work of representatives of associations, networks and groups of interchurch families in various countries: English-speaking groups in Britain and Ireland, Australia, Canada and the United States; French-speaking groups in France and Switzerland, German-speaking groups in Germany and Austria, together with Italian groups. Some of these associations and groups were founded in the 1960's; others have been formed more recently.*

*In different countries and in different languages we tend to describe ourselves differently. In Italian-speaking regions we are 'famiglie miste interconfessionali'; in French-speaking regions 'foyers mixtes' or 'foyers interconfessionnels'; in German-speaking regions 'konfessionsverbindende Familien'; in English-speaking regions 'interchurch families' or 'mixed marriages'. These different names however describe very similar realities and experiences.*

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

We believe that, as interchurch families, we have a significant and unique contribution to make to our churches' growth in visible Christian unity. Many people in our churches have told us that we are pioneers. As two baptised Christians who are members of two different, and as yet separated Christian traditions, we have come together in the covenant of marriage to form one Christian family. As we grow into that unity, we begin and continue to share in the life and worship of each other's church communities. We develop a love and understanding not only of one another, but also of the churches that have given each of us our religious and spiritual identity. In this way interchurch families can become both a sign of unity and a means to grow towards unity. We believe that interchurch families can form a connective tissue helping in a small way to bring our churches together in the one Body of Christ.

### **B. HOW INTERCHURCH FAMILIES SEE THEMSELVES**

In order to witness to our experience, we have to try to explain how we see ourselves. What is an interchurch family?

#### **B,1 Mixed marriages and interchurch families**

An interchurch family includes a husband and wife who come from two different church traditions (often a Roman Catholic married to a Christian of another communion). Both of them retain their original church membership, but so far as they are able they are committed to live, worship and participate in their spouse's church also. If they have children, as parents they exercise a joint responsibility under God for their religious and spiritual upbringing, and they teach them by word and example to appreciate both their Christian traditions. It is such interchurch families that we represent in this paper.

There is however no blueprint for such an interchurch family. Each one is unique, and makes its own conscientious decision about the extent and manner in which it will live out its two-church character, sharing in the richness of the traditions of both communities.

There are of course many other mixed marriages that do not, or do not yet aspire to such an interchurch relationship. It may be that one partner or both do not attend church worship and are nominal in their church affiliation. It may be that one or both partners practise their Christian faith but have decided to worship entirely separately within their respective church communities. These mixed marriages cannot properly be described as interchurch in a full sense. Some have been discouraged from becoming more fully interchurch – or even from practising altogether – by the difficulties they have encountered from relatives, congregations and ministers without ecumenical understanding or commitment. Such mixed

marriages can be regarded as potential interchurch families. One of the aims of associations and groups of interchurch families around the world is to encourage other mixed Christian marriages, who would like to become more fully and intentionally interchurch marriages, that this is possible and can be deeply enriching.

### **B,2 The marriage covenant between two baptised Christians**

When two Christians from different ecclesial communions come together in marriage they already have in common a vast and very rich resource as children of the one Father, disciples of the one Lord Jesus Christ, and recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit. They also share the sacrament of baptism that is mutually recognised by most churches (although there are exceptions). In marriage they bind themselves in a life-long covenant to love and serve one another in what becomes their shared journey together to the kingdom of heaven.

In addition to this common heritage they also come to marriage with distinct identities. One partner is male and the other female. Each partner has been brought up in a different family with its own particular ethos and traditions. This is true of all marriages between Christians.

What is distinctive in an interchurch marriage is that the Christian identity of each partner has been formed in a different ecclesial communion, with its own particular traditions of spirituality, worship, teaching and authority. By 'ecclesial communion' we mean those autonomous, international or national churches that are variously described as 'denominations', 'confessions', 'communions' or 'churches'. They are not at present in full communion with one another, and some of them do not at present recognise others as being, in the full sense, church.

In this situation of diversity and inequality the married partners are called to treat each other as equal persons with equal rights and a shared responsibility for their family life.

As husband and wife begin to live and grow together they have to forge their own particular family traditions, which may incorporate much of the traditions of the two families in which they were brought up, but now fused into a new pattern. This bringing together of two family traditions will inevitably include Christian spiritual traditions that formerly were distinctive of one or other ecclesial communion. Some particular ecclesial traditions on the other hand may not be incorporated as being unacceptable to one (or both) of the partners. In this spiritual mutuality a new interchurch family grows and is enriched, renewed and purified.

### **B,3 The 'church-belonging' of an interchurch family**

Like every other Christian family, an interchurch family represents the Body of Christ in the home, and can, therefore, be described as a domestic church. However, although it is one church at home, the partners remain faithful members of two as yet divided church congregations in their neighbourhood, and two as yet divided ecclesial communions in the world. As marriage partners they want to share all that is of value in each other's lives, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial communions. This cannot include what some ecclesial communities define as formal and canonical church membership, since this is not permitted or allowed for in many churches, although there are exceptions.

Where possible, interchurch family partners join in the life and worship of their partner's church as well as in that of their own. In doing this many, probably most, interchurch family partners come to appreciate the distinctive witness of their partner's church community and begin to feel welcome and at home in it. They often find themselves accepted as part of the fellowship of the community that worships and belongs together there, as well as remaining a full member of their own church.

Indeed some have accepted a particular office or responsibility in the congregation of their partner's church (e.g. teaching the children, leading youth work, singing or playing music, joining the welcome team). Interchurch families describe their experience of participating in the life of two ecclesial communions as 'double belonging', 'double insertion', 'double character' (*'double référence'*) – or, as a Polish bishop suggested, 'double solidarity'. We recognise that this description cannot be understood as a canonical category of dual membership, but as a lived reality of experience.

Interchurch families have also been careful to avoid becoming what some have described as a 'third church'. When interchurch families meet together and worship together this is not in order to establish a

new Catholic/Protestant church. Interchurch family partners, by their own self-definition, retain their own church affiliations and so 'live in their marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity' (Pope John Paul II, 1982).

#### **B,4 The 'church-belonging' of interchurch family children**

The primary responsibility for the Christian upbringing and education of children rests with their parents. They are together their first teachers. It is natural that both parents will want to share with their children the treasures of the particular ecclesial communion in which they personally are members.

There is therefore a substantially different experience of 'double belonging' (or whatever it is called) felt by the partners in an interchurch marriage from that felt by their children. For the most part the parents of an interchurch family started by belonging to one ecclesial communion and have had to make a conscious choice to experience regularly the life and worship of their partner's church. They continue to feel themselves rooted in one tradition. Their children however will normally have been brought up to feel at home in the traditions of both their parents. This may be the case when their parents made a clear decision to have their children formally baptised and brought up in one church rather than the other. It is even more likely where they did their best to bring them up in both communities, inviting the ministers of both churches to share to some extent in their baptism, and later, perhaps, encouraging the children to attend catechism classes or religious education programmes in both churches. These children, of course, like their parents, cannot as yet have formal and canonical membership of two ecclesial communities, but it can be very difficult for them to make a decision to be confirmed or to make a personal profession of faith in one church rather than the other. To make such a choice can feel like cutting themselves off from one of their parents and from one of the church communities in which they feel they have their roots and to which they belong. It may also seem to them like going against the Holy Spirit who is the creator of unity and not of discord.

It is partly for this reason that very many ministers and some interchurch family parents counsel that the decision about the ecclesial communion of which the child will become a member is taken before baptism to avoid confusion later on. Such a choice need not prevent the young people from making their own decisions when they have grown older. However, we need to listen to the words of some of our teenage young people who say: 'It is not we who are confused in refusing to choose one church or the other. It is you of former generations who have been confused in accepting and perpetuating the divisions of the churches. Christ willed only one church.'

#### **B,5 Authority and conscience in interchurch families**

Interchurch families are by definition bridge-builders. They are concerned not to cause scandal (in the deepest sense of turning others from the way of faith), but to work in harmony with the ministers and congregations where they worship, in response to Christ's prayer that they all may be one. They often find themselves therefore in the tension between the 'already' of the unity of their domestic church and the 'not yet' of the continuing separation of the two church communities of which they are members. There can be a clash between what they wish to do and judge to be right for their family life and its unity, and the (often conflicting) attitudes and rules of their respective two ecclesial communions. There can be a tension, for example, between their authority and responsibility for the Christian education of their children, and the authority and leadership of their two churches for the teaching and governance of their respective communities.

It is not always easy in these circumstances for interchurch families to distinguish between what they want, or what they would find easier for themselves, and what God is calling them to do through an informed conscience. Many of the rules and attitudes of our institutional churches were formed before the ecumenical movement acquired momentum and they fail to take it fully into account. Interchurch families gratefully recognise the principle that to go beyond the rules is not always to go against them. They have been particularly grateful when the concerns and needs of interchurch families have been taken into account by the churches, as, for example, in the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 1993. We also recognise the reason for insisting that the norms should be applied to particular pastoral cases, since, as we have already noted, not all 'mixed marriages' have the same concerns, church practice and aims as those who can be described as more fully 'interchurch'.

## **C THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES TO CHRISTIAN UNITY**

In his testament Cardinal Mercier wrote: 'In order to unite with one another, we must love one another; in order to love one another we must know one another; in order to know one another we must go and meet one another.' Interchurch families in particular know the truth of these words.

### **C,1 Interchurch spouses live in one another's traditions**

The gifts given to all married couples are mutual love, a marriage covenant that supports it and helps it to grow, and a mutual knowledge that can be discovered only through living together in the closest proximity over a very long period. The further gift given to *interchurch* couples is their mutual insertion and participation in the life of their two church communities. The value of this experience is inestimable.

When an interchurch couple first meets, the two individuals often share the mutual ignorance and prejudice of their fellow church members. They can easily assume that the differences and tensions between their two ecclesial communions, which have been causes of separation in the past, are irreconcilable. But because they love and respect one another, and try to forgive each other's weaknesses, they soon grow to love and respect each other's churches. By learning to live in the traditions of one another's churches they realise that all differences are not church dividing, but many are complementary and can lead to the enrichment of diversity.

The partners start with two separate identities. They retain these all their lives, but by living together and mutual sharing they gradually build upon these a new family identity that their children inherit. This common identity will be rooted in God the Holy Trinity, the source and pattern of all loving relationships in Christian family life. It will include elements, traditions, attitudes and practices that they have found valuable and helpful from both their ecclesial communions. They may or may not have theological expertise, but their concrete experience of the life and worship of each other's local communities is likely to be unsurpassed.

### **C,2 Growing mutual understanding**

The committed mutual love of the partners encourages them to explore each other's church communities. This leads to a growing understanding between them, and includes their respective ways of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority and ethics. This can, and often does become both a mutual appreciation of the positive gifts of each other's churches and a mutual understanding of their weaknesses.

It can also go much deeper. This immersion in the ethos of a partner's community can enable a spouse to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being. The churches at large have failed to receive the convergence and consensus texts hammered out in recent decades by their officially-appointed theologians. Separated Christians have read these texts in the light of their own values, emphases, use of language and structure of thought inherited from their own church's history. These come from a past polemical age in which one church often defined itself by what another was not.

Interchurch families learn concretely that the same truth can be expressed in a variety of forms, and that very often the more ways in which it is expressed, the deeper we can penetrate into its reality. They have the time and disposition to learn that what at first appears to one partner to be wholly unacceptable in the other's church community, may have a positive aspect when seen from a different point of view. They learn that ecclesial communions that are not in serious dialogue with one another, but still have a polemical mentality, are very likely to be right in what they affirm about themselves and wrong in what they deny about others.

### **C,3 Interchurch families as signs to the churches on their way towards unity**

The very existence of interchurch families provides a *visible sign* of unity to their churches. Interchurch families claim no credit for this. Interchurch couples do not get married in order to provide such a sign!

In the past mixed marriage was such a sensitive point of dispute in relations between churches that saw themselves as over against one another that it was considered to be a countersign to true unity. The developing understanding of many churches that they are already in real but not fully realised

communion (koinonia) has helped them to see interchurch families more positively, as a sign of God's grace, a gift to the churches on their way to unity.

Among the characteristics of Christian family life that interchurch families offer as a visible sign to the churches on their own pilgrimage towards closer unity, are the following:

- i A love that is not simply content with a parallel separate existence, but which yearns for, and therefore promotes, growth into deeper and deeper unity.
- ii The marriage covenant which gives formal expression to this love, and provides a support and framework that encourages it to grow.
- iii Actual living together under the same roof, which enables the couple to enter into each other's everyday life and activity, to get to know one another at a deep level.
- iv Sharing resources, and making decisions together on how they are to be employed in careful stewardship for the benefit of the whole family and their neighbours.
- v Mutual penitence and forgiveness when things go wrong.
- vi Sharing responsibility for the children's education, and celebrating their Christian development (baptism, first communion, confirmation or profession of faith) in as united a way as possible.
- vii Being hospitable to others, and sensitive to the particular needs of each, so that nobody is obliged to act against their conscience.

Interchurch families invite the churches to reflect upon these signs and to consider how to take them, *mutatis mutandis*, into their relationships with one another.

#### **C,4 The practical engagement of interchurch families as a means of bringing their churches closer together**

Because interchurch couples love one another and bring up their children in that love, they are deeply motivated to enter into one another's church traditions and so to contribute to the healing of the divisions between their churches and to their growth into unity. They do this in several ways.

First of all, they meet members of their partner's church community, and so an inter-personal bridge of understanding and trust is gradually built up. Moreover members of their partner's congregation discover that someone who is a member of another ecclesial communion is happy to worship with them and become part of their community to the extent that this is permissible. They become also one of 'us', believing much as we do, not simply one of 'them'. Indeed, spouses quite often hold some office or responsibility in their partner's church.

Secondly, they become ambassadors whose voice can be heard and understood by their friends in the other community. A Baptist wife, for example, can explain to members of her husband's Catholic congregation what Baptists believe about baptism, and vice versa. Because of their presence, those who preach have to be careful not to caricature the belief and practice of the other ecclesial communion.

Thirdly, because of their motivation interchurch couples are more likely than single-church couples to keep abreast of developing dialogue between their two churches, and can share this with others in their separate congregations. At a time when ecumenical leaders complain that the convergence dialogue reports are not being received by their churches, their contribution can be invaluable.

Fourthly, interchurch family members are proportionately far more active in ecumenical structures such as Councils of Churches and bilateral committees than one-church family members.

Fifthly, and perhaps most significantly, when an interchurch family has an important celebration, they will often invite both ministers and both congregations to participate. This can be a catalyst that moves others to see the importance and the joy of Christian unity. It can happen, for example, at their wedding, at a baptism or dedication of a child, a first communion, a young person's confirmation or profession of faith, a wedding anniversary, a funeral.

In these and many other small ways interchurch families can contribute to the formation of a connective tissue which supports, connects and heals parts of the Christian body that have been cut or broken in our sinful divisions.

## **D PASTORAL CARE AND UNDERSTANDING**

Leaders of our churches have emphasised that growth in the visible unity of the Church of Christ is not an optional extra but integral to the life of every Christian. Interchurch families cannot fulfil their vocation to be a sign and means of visible unity within their churches unless they are welcomed, understood and supported by their extended families, their local congregations and their pastors.

### **D,1 Pastoral understanding**

In the past interchurch families were often treated as a problem. This was particularly true on the part of those called upon to exercise pastoral care. Pastors are called to exercise oversight over their own flock, applying the teaching, rules, values and attitudes of their own ecclesial communion. In interchurch couples they found partners or prospective partners from different churches, whose expectations, particularly over such issues as the religious upbringing of the children and admission to communion, often appeared to conflict with their own church's law or existing pastoral norms. Interchurch families presented problems that were ultimately insoluble, short of the reunion of their churches.

In the face of this some pastors presented their own church's rules in an unsympathetic, offhand and unhelpful manner. As a result many couples turned away from the churches. Happily an increasing number of pastors are now sympathetic and begin by trying to understand the hopes and expectations of couples and then to do what they can, within the discipline and self-understanding of their own churches, to meet the couples' needs. Even when the ultimate decision (for example over admission to communion) may be negative, it is striking how much difference sympathetic listening and understanding by the pastor can make to a couple. It can be the crucial factor that enables the couple to continue to worship (and become a truly interchurch couple) or, if it is lacking, drives them away from the church altogether.

If interchurch couples are received in each other's churches with an understanding welcome, then their interchurch character and commitment can become a gift and visible sign of hope for their churches on their path to unity.

### **D,2 Pastoral policies that welcome, respect and liberate interchurch families**

Interchurch families look for ways to participate in the life of their two communities so that their own two-church gift and calling may be recognised, respected and welcomed. This is not simply for the benefit of the interchurch family itself, but also for the life of their two ecclesial communions. The regular attendance of a spouse in his or her partner's church life should not be interpreted as a step on the road to his or her 'conversion', let alone be used as an opportunity for proselytism. Partners should be welcomed and respected for what they are, and neither cold-shouldered as a foreign species, nor overwhelmed immediately with requests as if they were ecumenical experts.

In our church life the disciplines and traditions that structure our respective communities frequently create points of tension for interchurch families. Interchurch partners want to participate in the life and activity of their spouse's church to the extent that time and conscience permit, and certainly do not wish to cause scandal and problems.

We invite the churches to explore ways in which we can contribute positively to our church communities, and ways in which we can be nurtured by them as together we journey towards deeper unity. As a contribution to this dialogue we raise the following issues.

### **D,3 Joint pastoral care**

Interchurch families recognise that in the busyness and complexity of contemporary society it is not always easy or possible for the pastors of both their church communities to meet together with them and exercise pastoral care jointly. This may be particularly difficult during marriage preparation when the two partners come from widely separated places. Nevertheless, whenever and wherever it is possible, it remains the ideal. Experience shows that where this happens it can benefit not only the family but also the ecumenical relationship of the two pastors.

It should of course be *care* and not simply pastoral instruction directed at the couple from the point of view of the discipline of one or other church. *Care* has to take account of the situation of the couple and their freedom of conscience both as individuals and as a couple having to make decisions together.

Because of the couples' mutual responsibility, pastoral care which concerns both partners or their children should be exercised with both of them present and, when appropriate, their children, and not through one of them as intermediary to the others.

#### **D,4 Marriage preparation**

Most churches arrange some form of marriage preparation for couples intending to marry. Originally this was organised by churches of particular ecclesial communions only for those to be married in their own churches. The general character of such preparation is similar in many church communities, although there are different emphases, and obviously there needs to be relevant preparation for the particular wedding service of the church where it is to take place.

However, the rapid increase in the number of mixed marriages between Christians of different ecclesial communions in the last century has meant that these now exceed the number of marriages between same-church couples in some places.

There is an obvious advantage for mixed marriages if much of this marriage preparation is done jointly by the local churches working together. The 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. In some places interchurch couples help in this marriage preparation.

#### **D,5 Bringing up children in an interchurch family**

One of the most difficult responsibilities for parents to fulfil well in modern society is the religious and spiritual upbringing of their children. For interchurch families there are added challenges and it is right that prospective partners should be faced with them before they marry. Experience suggests, however, that they should not be pressed to make a final decision on the baptism and religious upbringing of future children before marriage. It is not unusual for one or both partners to change their minds on this when children arrive. A decision taken in abstract before marriage can appear quite different when there is a real baby in a particular environment some years later.

We are glad that many churches are increasingly ready to respect the conscientious decisions made by the parents together. Interchurch families are grateful for the changes made in Roman Catholic canon law and its application since the Second Vatican Council on the nature of the promise to be made on the religious education of the children. They are also grateful for those guidelines that stress that the promise is not an absolute one, and that the partner who is a member of another church may also feel a conscientious obligation to bring children up in his or her church. It is also pointed out that the unity of the marriage is paramount, and that if this is threatened the Catholic partner will not be penalised if children are brought up in the other church.

Despite these changes, however, the issue of the children's religious upbringing is too often still presented in a confrontational way. We question whether the use of the word 'promise' is helpful. It seems to many interchurch families that the most that should be required is that the pastor should ascertain that the partner who is a member of their church seriously desires to share his or her faith with his or her children. The decision about baptism and religious upbringing should be left with the parents in their children's early years. As they grow up children make their own decisions based on their own experience during their upbringing.

Christian initiation is a developing process understood differently in different ecclesial communions and often marked by the stages of baptism, profession of faith or confirmation, and first communion. What many interchurch parents – and many of their children as they grow older – want is that these stages should be marked as far as possible as ecumenical events in which both churches play at least some recognisable part. They know that there is already partial communion (*koinonia*) between their two churches, and they hope this will progress to full communion in their lifetime.

#### **D,6 Shared celebrations of marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation and funerals**

One of the most encouraging developments for interchurch couples in recent decades has been the increasing willingness of pastors of all churches to share publicly together in interchurch family weddings. This has been helped by the western church's understanding that the ministers of marriage are the partners themselves, and that the pastor's primary role is as a witness and leader of prayer on behalf of the church. This helps towards the positive recognition of the marriage by the two church communities concerned, and provides a precedent for other shared celebrations in the future.

Most churches that practise infant baptism recognise one another's baptisms, but surprisingly few celebrations of baptism take place with ministers and members of different ecclesial communions sharing together in them. Most of these shared celebrations are of the baptism of children of interchurch families. Normally only one minister will perform the actual baptism, but the minister of the other church may perform other parts of the rite. Sometimes the fact of the baptism is recorded in the registers of the two churches of the parents. In some countries a Certificate of Christian Baptism has been produced listing the churches that have agreed to accept it as evidence of Christian baptism.

Because the mutual recognition of baptism is so fundamental to the ecumenical movement, interchurch families would like to see the churches build on this foundation. Despite the obvious practical problems, could not churches of different traditions share more frequent celebrations in which they baptise others beside interchurch families? Could these celebrations also be occasions when all Christians re-affirm their baptismal promises together?

There is also an increasing number of marriages between members of churches that baptise believers only and those that also baptise infants. Some of these interchurch families would like to see shared services in which they could give public thanks for the birth of their children, pray for their upbringing in the life of their two church communities, and dedicate themselves anew to God for this purpose. There are significant examples in early church history and also today of Christian parents delaying the baptism of their children until they were of age to make their own personal profession of faith, and though unusual it may be permitted, even encouraged, in such families.

Because of the fact that not all churches recognise the validity of one another's ministries, there is not a general mutual recognition of confirmation. In some countries this presents some interchurch family young people with a considerable challenge. Even if it is not permissible to have a joint confirmation, it should be possible for the minister and community of one church to take a significant role in a confirmation in the other church.

Even where eucharistic sharing is only permitted on special occasions, there is often a deep spiritual need for the parent of one church to be admitted to communion in the other when a child of an interchurch family receives first communion. Both parents will have helped to prepare the child for this occasion, and some children will feel hesitant and unsupported if both parents are not able to receive communion with them. The catechesis of the eucharist presented to our children tells them that Jesus calls them to his table, and so they rightly question why their baptised parent from another ecclesial communion is excluded. It is at such times that the scandal (in the New Testament sense) of our divided churches becomes all too apparent to our children and can be a stumbling-block to them. Their questions do not go away, of course, once the ceremony is over.

Funerals are other occasions 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 partner or parent who has died, to commend him or her to God, and also to minister to those left behind.

#### **D,7 Eucharistic sharing**

In the past most ecclesial communions have limited eucharistic sharing to their own members, or at most to members of those church communities whose beliefs and practices were substantially similar to their own. Gradually, however, most Protestant and Anglican churches have, with various limitations, permitted other Christians to receive communion with them.

Many interchurch families, particularly where one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other partner a member of another Christian community, experience a serious spiritual need to receive communion together in order to strengthen the spiritual unity of their domestic church. Because such families already share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, the Roman Catholic Church has begun, in the years following the Second Vatican Council, to recognise some such families as being in possible need of eucharistic sharing. Such eucharistic sharing in the Roman Catholic Church remains exceptional, and is permitted only under certain conditions and in particular cases.

Not all partners in interchurch marriages wish to share communion in each other's churches. Some have very different eucharistic beliefs which they fear would be compromised if they received communion in their partner's church. Some may think of communion as expressing a spiritual relationship between an

individual and God without any particular communal significance. But many interchurch families not only wish to share communion, but feel a serious spiritual need to do so. Though grateful for any occasion on which they may share communion together, many feel the need for eucharistic sharing every time they are at mass together.

Some Roman Catholic authorities have recognised this need and are finding ways to respond to it. In other places Roman Catholic authorities have confined such sharing not only to particular families, but also to particular occasions, apparently on the grounds that it would not otherwise be 'exceptional'. However, many interchurch families would plead that they are exceptional as *cases*, and that they do not additionally have to be confined to rare *occasions*.

The Roman Catholic Church does not however give permission to Roman Catholics to receive communion in other ecclesial communions whose ministry it does not regard as valid. For this reason it is not able to give permission even in particular cases or on particular occasions. Christians of other ecclesial communions who are concerned for Christian unity will recognise that progress towards it will not be helped by expecting Roman Catholic bishops and priests to give such permissions.

On the other hand it is not excluded that Catholic spouses in an interchurch marriage, following their own consciences, and recognising the fruitfulness of the ministry and sacraments of their spouse's church, could find in their own particular situations reasons that make such sharing of eucharistic communion spiritually necessary. Such sharing would not observe the norm that confines eucharistic sharing of communion to ecclesial communion, but it would not jeopardise membership of their own church, nor be regarded as a denial of the faith of that church. Interchurch families have been particularly happy when Catholic bishops have made this situation clear, and would appreciate other Catholic bishops doing the same.

## E. CONCLUSION

Interchurch families are greatly encouraged when their ecclesial communions see them not as problems, but as pioneers of Christian unity. They are called to witness by their lives, their actions and their words to the fundamental and growing unity of all Christian people, and to share a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of our churches.

## NOTES

**B3** 'Domestic church': see Vatican II *Lumen Gentium*, 11. Dr Konrad Raiser in an address to the first world gathering of interchurch families in Geneva in 1998 referred to them as 'household churches'.

**B4** line 1 see Vatican II *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3, followed by *Familiaris Consortio*.

**C** Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines, presided over the Malines Conversations between members of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, 1921-1925.

**C1** 3<sup>rd</sup> para. 'All differences are not church-dividing'. See *Unity of the Churches: an Actual Possibility* by Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner 1985, trans. *Einigung der Kirchen – reale Möglichkeit* 1983.

**C1** 3<sup>rd</sup> para. John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

**C4** 7<sup>th</sup> para. 'Mixed marriages, so often regarded as a problem, can rather be seen as the connective tissue par excellence between separate Christian communities. Thus the partners deserve to be given all possible pastoral help to share as fully as possible in the life of both communities in which they are involved, and to bring these together.' *The Unity of the Church: the Goal and the Way*, Faith and Order, Accra 1974 (in Günther Gassmann, *Documentary History of Faith and Order, 1963-93, Geneva, 1993*).

**D** *Ut unum sint*, 1995. *An Appeal to All Christian People*, Lambeth Conference, 1920.

**D7** para 1. *Intercommunion Today*, Church Information Office, London, 1968

**D7** para 2. Vatican II *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8; *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* nn 131, 159, 160

**D7** para 4. *Note on Eucharistic Hospitality* by the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity of the French Bishops, 1983: text in *Foyers Mixtes* 71, April/June 1986, pp.36-38.

**D7** para 6. The same *Note* quotes the Synod of the German Dioceses of Wurzburg in 1976.