

Interchurch Families Meet in Virginia

Ten years ago I traveled to Virginia Beach/Norfolk, VA for a meeting of interchurch families. Fr. George Kilcourse had invited me to make a presentation as part of the program for that meeting. Fr. George and I had worked together for a number of years on a standing committee of the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers (NADEO) and interchurch families were often in our discussions and writings. Interchurch families are defined as a husband and wife from separate Christian traditions who both desire to remain active in their respective churches.

At the meeting in 1996 the American Association of Interchurch Families was established (The Canadian Association was also founded at that same international meeting of 1996.) Since that time I have had the privilege of attending national and international meetings as well as the world congresses (Geneva, 1998 and Rome, 2003). These gatherings have helped me to understand how the division of the churches has an impact on the daily lives of interchurch families. Pastoral concern for the parents and children in such families has made many of the clergy sympathetic to their need for help and guidance.

Conference at Virginia Wesleyan College

The site of the meeting in 1996 and again this year was Virginia Wesleyan College whose campus is in Norfolk just short of the Virginia Beach city line. It is a lovely campus with very modern dormitories, chapel, library and meeting rooms. It was an ideal setting for our meeting of July 21-23, 2006.

The format for this year's meeting followed that of other such gatherings. There were four major presentations. The first was by Richard McCord, Executive Director of the US Conference of Bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth. Rick spoke on *Being Church Together: a View from Within Marriage and Family Life*. Rick is a layman with excellent theological credentials, and has a family of his own; he is an excellent listener. He provided the kind of forum the interchurch families were looking for, and from which Rick could draw information for his work.

The leadership of AAIF wanted to meet near Washington, DC, in the hope a representative of the US Bishops' Conference might be able to join us for an exchange of ideas. At the international and global meetings interchurch families have had similar exchanges with representatives of the World Council of Churches and from the Vatican.

On Saturday, July 22nd, Fr. George Kilcourse gave a report of a meeting between the International Association of Interchurch Families and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in October, 2005. The Vatican is very interested in the experience of interchurch families. Pope Benedict XVI in a speech in Poland later referred to them as "*laboratories for Christian unity*."

On Saturday afternoon the conference heard Dr. Phyllis Rodgerson Pleasants of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, VA speak on "*Focus on the Center*", and participants were pleasantly surprised to hear her synthesis of Hans Küng's *On Being Christian*. She reminded her audience that Protestants are fond of Küng, even though some Catholics may find him somewhat problematic.

Later in the afternoon two lay persons and I formed a panel on the topic *Listening, Learning and Leading: Interchurch Families and Pastors Working Together*. In the evening members shared their stories and experience as interchurch couples and families. Such sharing is always an important part of our meetings.

I had the privilege of celebrating the Eucharist at the campus chapel on Saturday Evening. On Sunday morning participants went to Holy Apostles Church in Virginia Beach, VA. It is a very unique place and was created by the decision of the Roman Catholic Bishop and his Episcopal colleague. They believed they should try to implement in a concrete way Vatican II's desire to bring the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion into fuller communion. Holy Apostles is served by a Roman Catholic and Episcopal co-pastor, the pastoral council/vestry is composed of both Roman Catholics and Episcopalians. The parish is very open to interchurch families and serves many of them. Holy Apostles is undoubtedly a sign of things to come. More information on interchurch families may be found online at aifusa.org.

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