

AIF 40th Anniversary Conference, Swanwick, August 2008

In 1968 a young couple asked a question in connection with difficulties they were experiencing regarding bringing up their children in an interchurch relationship. They met Martin and Ruth Reardon who understood and were in a similar situation which reduced their sense of isolation. Later that year about fifteen interchurch couples and a few clergy met at Spode House to seek answers and to support each other, and one year later AIF was born. Forty years on, although a lot of progress has been made, people are still asking questions and seeking solutions. In August 2008 157 people, including visitors from six other countries, gathered at the Hayes Conference Centre at Swanwick to mark the 40th anniversary of that first meeting.

Surrounded by displays, photos, and other memorabilia, and letters of congratulation, the sessions took place in the impressive Derbyshire Suite. Each session was opened with prayer and a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit permeated the whole weekend.

The First Session, entitled 'Reflections on an Ecumenical Journey' covered the early years. Peter Bentall and Ruth Reardon, who were at the first meeting at Spode, gave us a picture of the pain and problems experienced by interchurch (i/c) families at that time and the exciting impact of Vatican II. Peter paid tributes to the tremendous inspiration of Martin and Ruth Reardon, Fr John Coventry and Chris Bard, the latter two endorsed by Ruth. These sentiments were echoed throughout the Conference. Video clips of AIF couples being interviewed by Mary Bard gave some important insights and revealed how bishops and clergy also need support and how interchurch couples, families and local groups can be of influence and provide the leaven to bring about the unity of the churches from the bottom up.

In The Ecumenical Journey – the Wider Scene various AIF members gave an account of work done by them in a variety of ecumenical bodies: Ian and Adrienne Gordon – their role as County Ecumenical Officers; the impact of Martin Reardon's Lent 1986 book, 'What is the Church For?' which brought Christians together in groups and on local radio; Helen and Richard Connell on the CTE Spirituality Forum where Christians share views on ecumenism; Gill Walsh on the British Methodist / RC Committee helping to get Catholics and Methodists closer together; Margaret Nicol doing ecumenical work with women and Interfaith groups and Pauline Johnson, a member of the Enabling Group on Churches Together in England.

We were fortunate enough to have four eminent guest speakers over the weekend, three of whom were themselves part of an interchurch couple. They were: Revd Fr Gerard Hughes SJ, well known to us all; Revd Canon Bob Fyffe, of the Scottish Episcopal Church and General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland; Revd Canon Gregory Cameron, Deputy Secretary of the Anglican Communion; and Thomas Knieps Port-le-Roi, a German lecturer in the Theology Faculty at Louvain University, Belgium. We were also fortunate to have with us Fr Robert Kaggwa, lecturer and RC chaplain at Roehampton University and Dr Mary Tanner, a long-standing friend of AIF, and Chairperson of the Faith and Order Commission and European President of the World Council of Churches.

The topic addressed by the first three speakers was: 'Where Interchurch Families have made a difference', and some of the main ideas were as follows:

Fr Gerry Hughes:

told us that Interchurch families are forced to look at the essentials of faith rather than the details. As a body they have a very important teaching role especially to those in authority. But are they listened to? He then questioned the meaning of authority and what it is for. Today the churches are emptying but he felt it was the mission of i/c families to teach the authorities for the sake of the world.

Regarding intercommunion – we must keep looking at it, he told us, and keep asking questions. Is it divisive or a source of unity? The sacraments celebrate our awareness of what God is like. God is universal and totally inclusive, and is not as fussed about denomination as we are.

Revd Canon Bob Fyffe

I/c Family pain is not necessarily negative: it can spur us on. In 1987 the leaders of the Swanwick Declaration were totally committed to the idea of churches and Christians doing together what they could but they have not realized that vision. I/c Families, however, have played a crucial role. They bring a passion not otherwise there in church bodies.

Revd Canon Gregory Cameron

I/C Families have had the courage to ask questions and not back down and others have benefited from this. In 40 years we have achieved solidarity, visibility and advocacy but there is a generation of leaders who need to hear our stories. Local meetings are important. The sacraments should be inclusive and not divisive. We should not take 'no' for an answer. The essence of our faith is our loyalty to Christ and not to denomination.

After an update of an International nature entitled, Interchurch Families in the World, Melanie Finch introduced the fourth speaker, Dr Thomas Knieps Port-le-Roi, who addressed us on the subject of 'Interchurch Families as Domestic Churches'. This was a fascinating and detailed account of the concept of the Christian family being a small church, a domestic church, something Ruth had referred to earlier. This was a concept which caught the imagination of many members but space does not permit doing full justice to this talk and it is suggested that reference is made to the fuller report when it appears on the Internet. However, one or two points are worth mentioning here: the concept goes back to the origins of Christianity but after Augustine was lost until the Second Vatican Council. This Council referred to the Church as 'The People of God' and in looking at their role in sacramental life it focuses on the role of the parents as the first teachers of the faith to their children and the individual vocation of each lay person in the church. It was pointed out that ordinary daily life makes family church, not just going to church and praying. This applies to both married and single celibate people. The image of the church could change if one was to start with the domestic church but there would be a need to resolve other questions such as the dualism of the hierarchy and the laity and the question of Eucharist. Thomas then raised some further unresolved questions which will no doubt be looked at a later date. I/c families are more advanced than same-church families and offer the churches an alternative way of coping with painful divisions. Interestingly it was noted that younger people do not see divisions which do not make sense so will happily take communion together.

Interspersed with the talks, the AGM etc, were small groups where people informally shared their stories and experience; various workshops and then there was a splendid 40th anniversary dinner with beautifully decorated tables, a special meal with choice of menu and wine. A speech and toast were given by Dr Mary Tanner. This was followed by a 40th anniversary Ceilidh which took the form of a Barn Dance enjoyed by all from 3 to 83+ years, married, single, visitors, those running the children's programme, etc. – a happy, totally inclusive occasion.

Three worship services were held as usual over the weekend: a Roman Catholic Mass celebrated by Fr Robert Kaggwa, followed by a Reflection on the life of Chris Bard led by Helen Mayles; a 40th Anniversary Thanksgiving communion celebrated by Fr Malcolm Bowers with the address being given by Canon Gregory Cameron and a closing All-Age Worship in the Free-Church tradition celebrated for the first time at Swanwick by newly-ordained Revd Gill Walsh. Various groups of young people, along with their helpers contributed with flags, song and dance, a reflection on colours in our faith which was followed by a thoughtful sketch performed by two members of YAG. YAG also focused our attention on caring for the world and presented each couple/family with a Fair Trade cotton bag, containing information and Fair Trade samples to

encourage us all to care for the environment. These services are rich sources of grace and, for some couples and families, the only opportunity they have of sharing communion together.

The final session before the Closing Worship was, perhaps, the highlight of the weekend. It was an extraordinary session which came about because of a brave change of plan. It was scheduled that the Speakers would offer reflections on the weekend and make suggestions as to how i/c families should continue to *Make a Difference in the World*. However, Father Gerry suggested an alternative. We entered the Conference room to find the seats arranged in a circle. It was suggested that, instead of a cerebral session, we sat in silence for about 3 minutes and let our feelings come to the surface and share them as the Spirit moved us. Out of the silence came an amazing sharing: a great deal of pain but also hope, joy, love; celebration of the family in the immediate and in the wider sense, including an awareness of the presence of those who had been so involved with us in earlier years like Fr John, Martin and Chris; the communion of our marriages and the sharing of Christ in our homes, the encouraging concept of the Domestic Church; a profound sense of unity, friendship caring and support, God at work in love, in those who love each other, not just blood relatives; being surprised by joy and hope, a sense that our children would not have to suffer what their parents have suffered; a rich harvest. Our speakers added their own thoughts and feelings. It was an amazing Spirit-filled session. Fr Gerry left us with this thought: what were our wildest dreams: what would we like to be and what would we like the world to be and asked that we do not let reality spoil these dreams.

Leslie and Elaine Leach
September 2008

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