



World Council of Churches 9th General Assembly
Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14 – 23 February 2006
'God, in your grace, transform the world'

Interchurch Families – Catalysts for Unity

The workshop organised by Bev and Melanie on behalf of the Interchurch Families International Network took place towards the end of the second week of the Assembly. By that time, some people had gone home and others were beginning to spend less time in workshops! This meant that we welcomed a small group of eight participants, who came from all round the world and from a variety of different Christian traditions:

- An American Presbyterian woman working in her church's Family Life office
- A Canadian RC priest who used to be Director of the Prairie Center for Ecumenism
- A Scottish Presbyterian woman married to a Croatian RC, living in Croatia with three children
- An Egyptian delegate from the Armenian Apostolic church
- A young Finnish girl from the Lutheran church, with a boyfriend who belonged to an American evangelical church (he was not present)
- A Lebanese delegate to the [Ecumenical Disability Network](#), from the Maronite church
- An RC Archbishop from Scotland
- A Singaporean professor of Indian origin from the Martoma church

We started by explaining what was meant by the expression 'interchurch family', which led to a short discussion on the meaning and extent of the word 'family'. For the purposes of the workshop, which only allowed about 45 minutes' discussion, we limited this to the most familiar and traditional sense of a mother and father living with their children and possibly other family members, while acknowledging that there are many other patterns. We were interested to hear why participants had attended our workshop and what experience they had of family and church life.

We were told that the experience in the Lebanon was that of 12 different Christian communities, and of course also a large Muslim population. Marriages between Christians from different churches often met problems, but frequently because the couple was not particularly religious! In Singapore, the experience was of arranged marriages, with families often having to go back to India to find suitable partners, which could then encounter cultural as well as religious difficulties. In fact this meant that interchurch and interfaith marriages were growing in number as people found partners from among their local community. In Croatia, the Scottish woman found she was perhaps the only Protestant in town, but was very much sharing the riches of her own tradition with her husband and their children.

We asked the question 'What makes for a strong Christian family?' The consensus was that regular prayer and worship together was a deeply strengthening element.

Bev then introduced the church of which she is Anglican curate, Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes, planned and built with the new town as an ecumenical partnership between five Christian traditions. She stressed the hard work to keep it going in its shared mission to all Christians, emphasising the necessity of continuous discussion amongst the partners, sharing the building and other resources, solving problems together step by step, showing repentance and forgiveness when things go wrong, welcoming others as one church, but also at its heart sharing prayer and worship and a shared commitment. We tried to point to some of the similarities between interchurch family life day by day, and that of churches sharing their lives in this way. Some time was spent focusing on some of the difficulties which can occur, such as eucharistic sharing and also more mundane day to day practicalities.

We finished the workshop by pointing again to the model of family life being a model also for what a united church could be, allowing for difference of emphasis and disagreements, but needing continuous work, prayer together, repentance when things go wrong. We tried to give some examples from the experience of interchurch families, and from the church partnership in Milton Keynes. We also handed out copies of the entire Rome paper, copies of the French bulletin *Foyers Mixtes*, and prayer cards with the AIF prayer:

*God our Father,
you achieve your purpose through love.
Look not on the sin which divides us
but on the love you have given us for one another;*

*may it be a reflection of your love for us,
so that in love we may be drawn nearer to you,
and be used for the greater unity of your Kingdom.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Amen.*

After the workshop had ended, we spoke further to several of the participants. Many expressed their appreciation of the discussion, and said it had given them much to think about.