

## **INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AT THE THIRD EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL ASSEMBLY Sibiu, Roumania, 5-9 September 2007**

It was at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly at Graz in 1997 that interchurch families really made contact on a European level. The English and French shared a stall in the *agora*, or marketplace, and found themselves next to one staffed by German and Austrian interchurch families. Not far away an Italian couple were present on the ecumenical stand of the Italian Bishops' Conference, who were presenting the joint text on interchurch marriage recently published with the Waldensians and Methodists. This coming together at Graz bore fruit later when the Preproma committee was set up to prepare the Rome Gathering of 2003, using four European languages.

After the Rome Gathering we had more sense of forming an international network, although a very loose one. On a European level a working relationship was established soon after the Rome Gathering, with a very precise object. It came about through an apparently chance meeting in Germany between Jean-Baptiste Lipp of the Swiss interchurch family group and Mgr Aldo Giordano, General Secretary of the Council of European Catholic Bishops' Conferences (CCEE). They spoke of interchurch families, and as a result Jean-Baptiste organised a little group to visit the CCEE headquarters at St Gallen with him in October 2003. Mgr Giordano and other members of the CCEE staff gave us a warm welcome. We took the Rome 2003 paper with us, in four languages. We were from Austria, England and Germany, and kept closely in touch with French and Italian interchurch families. Mgr Giordano spoke to us of the plan for a Third European Ecumenical Assembly, to be held in eastern Europe, probably in Romania, in 2007, and we discussed how interchurch families could best be involved in it. We agreed on an on-going exchange of information, and that Jean-Baptiste should be the link person on our side, since he lives in Switzerland.

Realising that interchurch families relate to the ecumenical scene in Europe through the Conference of European Churches (CEC, which includes Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican churches) as well as through CCEE, Jean-Baptiste and two others went to Geneva to visit the CEC headquarters a few days later. From then on we were in regular contact with both bodies, and followed closely all the stages of preparation for what became the Sibiu Assembly. Thus the European interchurch family network focused on a specific task. We were encouraged by the reference to interchurch families made in the *Charta Oecumenica*, signed jointly by the Presidents of CCEE and CEC in 2001. It was the Graz Assembly that had called for such a work.

The Graz Assembly was much larger than its successor at Sibiu, which was planned as a much smaller gathering than that at Graz, consisting only of church delegates (half Roman Catholics, half from the CEC churches), together with representatives of a very few unofficial groups with an interest in the work of the Assembly. European interchurch families were very pleased indeed to be invited to send twelve representatives to Sibiu, and Jean-Baptiste divided up the places between our national associations. A few others were there as part of denominational delegations, and one of the stewards was the teenage child of an interchurch family. We were able to put up a display between us, and to organise a workshop. The talks given at the workshop can be found in the latest number of *Interchurch Families: Issues and Reflections* (IFIR) on [www.interchurchfamilies.org](http://www.interchurchfamilies.org).

Almost all the delegations were the responsibility of either CCEE or of CEC. The interchurch families group was distinct in that it belonged to both bodies, as it were. For the two representatives from England this worked out very well in the end – there was a mix-up over our accommodation and the rooms intended for us by CCEE and CEC respectively were taken by other participants. But finally – after all the problems – we were put into a very superior hotel in a central location. Quite a parable for interchurch families, we decided!

Since Sibiu both the General Secretaries of CCEE and of CEC have assured us that interchurch families will remain on their agenda.

**Ruth Reardon**

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