

BEING ONE AT HOME INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AS DOMESTIC CHURCH

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My paper has two parts. In the first part I intend to introduce the concept of “domestic church”. I will do so by briefly referring to its origins in the NT and in the early Church and by focussing more extensively on its retrieval in the recent magisterial teaching of the Roman Catholic church. I will also ask in which areas of theology and faith practice the concept may be fruitful and where its possible shortcomings may lie. In a second part I want to explore what the significance of the concept could be for interchurch families and, vice versa, what interchurch families’ specific contribution is to further developing the (idea of) domestic church.

1. Family as “domestic church” – opportunities and shortcomings of a theological concept

1.1. A forgotten concept and its recent retrieval

Originally, the vision of the Christian family as “domestic church” is an ancient one shared by patristic fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom and Augustine. For instance, at the end of the fourth century John Chrysostom urges his congregation to make their homes “churches” – an exhortation which is received “with great delight” (*In gen. serm.* 7,1). The bishop of Constantinople is convinced that

“If we regulate our households [properly]...we will also be fit to oversee the church, for indeed the household is a little church.” (*Hom. in Eph.* 20)

This analogy between family and church has its roots already in the NT. The author of 1 Timothy describes the bishop as someone who

“must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way – for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church?” (1 Tim 3,4f.)

The quote reflects the situation of the early Christian communities which had been founded by St Paul. Lacking any social infrastructure in this early phase, the newly converted

Christians used to gather in private houses. Thereby, they could fall back on the established order of extended households which played an important role in the social and cultural setting of the Greco-Roman world at the time. Most probably the conversion of an entire household and the consequent formation of a house church formed a key element in Paul's strategy to spread the Gospel. These "house churches" to which Paul refers repeatedly in his letters (cf. 1 Cor 16,19; Rom 16, 3-5; Phil 1-2), served as a building block for the early church at any given location by providing a support base for missionary outreach, a gathering place for worship and prayer and a classroom for catechetical instruction.

As the church grew over time in number and strength, the domestic character of its primitive communities gradually disappeared and a new system of organization, based on larger territorial structures, came in its place. The close connection between family and church, so obvious for the Pauline communities, weakened and another scriptural tradition, one that was much less family-friendly, gained ground. There is indeed a strand in the NT which upholds that all kinds of blood and kin relationships or any other preferential social relationship are irrelevant, if not an impediment, for those following Christ. According to Jesus' own command in the Gospel of Luke the terms of discipleship require that

"(w)hoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." (Lk 14,26)

Historically, this rigid position with regard to the family must be linked to Jesus' first Jewish disciples who followed their master's example and preached the Gospel as itinerant missionaries. Dashing around the country, their vocation did not in fact allow them to settle down, take a wife and found a family. Here we find the scriptural roots of a tradition that regards celibacy and childlessness as the ideal of Christian discipleship and that will ultimately dominate the history of Christianity for the longest period of its existence. The idea of a "domestic church", taking initial shape in the Pauline literature and only sporadically lit up by some patristic authors, falls into oblivion in the church's theological tradition and faith practice for many centuries. It is only very recently that the idea and concept enjoys growing popularity among church leaders and theologians, initiated mainly by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council who, quite unexpectedly, retrieved the term from its long forgotten sources.

A short review of some relevant passages in which the term is used in the conciliar and more recent magisterial teaching, may help us to gain further insight into the theological concept.

As we will see, all references indicate in a somewhat nuanced way why and in what way the family can be called a “church in the home”.

(1) Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, the council fathers develop the idea of the church as “people of God” and indicate for a number of sacraments how they constitute a perfect illustration of the priestly character of God’s people. This is also the case for the sacrament of marriage, out of which the family comes forth:

“From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic church (*in hac velut Ecclesia domestica*). In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state.” (LG 11)

This passage can be regarded as a seed text since in it the term “domestic church” appears for the first time in an official church document. The text clearly focuses on the role of the parents who are described as “first preachers of the faith to their children”. In a previous text version the family’s entitlement to the dignity of “domestic church” had been justified by presenting it as a place where sacred vocations can develop. This aspect has not totally disappeared, as can be seen from the end of the quote, but the final version ultimately speaks in a much broader sense about the parents’ task to encourage children in their individual vocation and only subsequently to pay special attention to a religious vocation. Compared to the previous draft, the final text also insists that the religious education by the parents takes place “by word and by example” thus underlining the integral nature of faith formation. Notwithstanding these amendments, the definitive version still persists in describing the family as a place at which the church regenerates and perpetuates itself by providing it with dedicated new Christians.

(2) Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975)

Pope Paul VI published his postsynodal exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) on the tenth anniversary of the closing of Vatican II. When reflecting on “the evangelizing action of the family in the evangelizing apostolate of the laity” (EN 71) the pope recalls how the family has been given “the beautiful name of ‘domestic church’” by the council. This means for the pope

that “there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church” and that

“(t)he family, like the church, ought to be the place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply received by them.” (EN 71)

Of course, given the emphasis on evangelization in his exhortation, the pope especially focuses on the proclamation of the Gospel within the family: it is precisely in proclaiming the Gospel that the family resembles the church. Noteworthy is also the powerful assessment of the active participation of children within the domestic church: not only the parents have the task of transmitting the faith to their children, but also vice versa, the children teach their parents in matters of faith.

Interestingly, the pope also explicitly refers to interchurch families in that very same context:

“Families resulting from a mixed marriage also have the duty of proclaiming Christ to the children in the fullness of the consequences of a common Baptism; they have moreover the difficult task of becoming builders of unity.” (Ibid.)

(3) Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*

The tone is different again in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam actuositatem*, another document promulgated by Vatican II in which different fields of apostolate are presented and among them family life. Here we find the expression *ecclesia domestica* paraphrased in the sense that the family not only receives the divine mission “to be the primary living cell of society”, but also “to be like a domestic sanctuary in the church” (*tamquam domesticum sanctuarium ecclesiae*):

“The family received from God the mission to be the primary living cell of society. It can fulfil this mission by showing itself, in the mutual loyalty of its members and in shared prayer offered to God, to be like a domestic sanctuary in the church; when the whole family is involved together in the liturgy; and when it offers generous hospitality and promotes justice and other good works in the service of the needy.” (AA 11)

The analogy between family and church is no longer based merely on the task of evangelization, but expands into a number of characteristic features in which the family shares in the life of the church as a whole: in both instances, there is supposed to be loyalty and communion between the members, a shared life of prayer and worship, practice of

hospitality and commitment to justice and charitable works. The family is church in that it does what the church as a whole has to be and to do.

(4) John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Familiaris consortio*, 1981

Also in the more recent magisterial teaching the term is frequently used. In his Apostolic Exhortation on the family of 1981, John Paul II sets out to

“examine the many profound bonds linking the Church and the Christian family and establishing the family as a ‘Church in miniature’ (*Ecclesia domestica*), (...) in such a way that in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church. (FC 49)

While the conciliar documents had spoken about the domestic church with some reservation, using Latin particles like *velut*, “so to speak” (*in hac velut Ecclesia domestica*) and *tamquam*, “to be like” (*tamquam domesticum sanctuarium ecclesiae*), John Paul II bluntly calls the Christian family “a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion” which “for this reason too...can and should be called ‘the domestic Church.’” (FC 21)

1.2. Promise, inconsistencies, and shortcomings of the concept

As may be clear from the previous quotes, official documents such as *Familiaris consortio* in fact make a pretty provocative claim about the ecclesial character of ordinary families.

As the US Bishops put it in their 1994 pastoral letter to families, *Follow the Way of Love*:

“The profound and the ordinary moments of daily life – mealtimes, workdays, vacations, expressions of love and intimacy, household chores, caring for a sick child or elderly parent, and even conflicts over things like how to celebrate holidays, discipline children, or spend money – all are the threads from which you can weave a pattern of holiness...The point of the teaching is simple, yet profound. As Christian families, you not only belong to the Church, but your daily life is a true expression of the Church.” (*Follow the Way of Love*, 8)

What is officially acknowledged here, is that Christian families become Christ’s body and form his church. In and through their family life they make Christ present to the world, according to Christ’s own words that “where two or three are gathered” in his name, he is present among them (cf. Mt 18,20). The idea of domestic church articulates something new and unparalleled in the history of Christianity in that it establishes the ordinary family life

as a sphere of grace and as a medium of encounter between humans and God. Thus, it puts an end to a longstanding tradition within Christianity (at least until the Reformation) which regarded marriage and family life as the second best option for Christians and promoted celibacy and childlessness as the more valuable spiritual way and as a precondition for ecclesial ministries and offices. Herein lies undoubtedly a promising opportunity for further profiling the role of the family within theology and church life.

On the negative side, however, it has to be noted that the term and concept of “domestic church” so far have been used mainly within the Roman Catholic tradition. Although present as a prominent theme in Orthodox theology and practice – one of the highlights of an Orthodox wedding is that the bride and groom are adorned with crowns which is meant to remind them of their role as rulers or leaders of their own domestic church –, it seems largely absent from Protestant theology and church life.

What is more disturbing, however, from a theological point of view is that despite its frequent use in the magisterial, scholarly and edifying literature the concept itself still lacks clarity and distinctiveness. Mainly two central questions have remained unsolved in the field of theology: (1) what exactly qualifies the family to form the smallest unity of the church?, and (2) what type of family is actually required to fulfil this role? I will shortly look into both aspects.

If one asks what it is precisely that qualifies the family to form the smallest unity of the church, one gets divergent answers. Some theologians argue that Christian or sacramental marriage is at the basis of the family being a realization of church; since marriage between two baptized Christians is an image and a reflection of the communion between Christ and his church, sacramental marriage renders the church present in the form of its smallest unit. Yet others emphasize the Christian family’s baptismal and vocational character which makes it an ecclesial reality only to the extent that it fulfils its mission of evangelization and transmitting the faith; rather than marriage, the baptism of the family members and their baptismal vocation is therefore the necessary qualification for becoming a real church community.

In both cases, the domestic church rests on a sacramental basis which qualifies it for its ecclesial title: the spouses through the sacrament of marriage, the family members, parents and children alike, through baptism. In both cases, a static or even magic understanding of sacrament would be totally misplaced: as if once sacramentally married, the couple forms a

domestic church; or as if baptized people once living together in a family constitute a little church. There is a broad agreement, that in either case the sacramental basis needs its unfolding and a subsequent engaged faith life: a committed, faithful and fruitful couple relation in the first instance and an active commitment to one's baptismal vocation and to one another in the second place. Yet, the distinction between baptism and marriage as potential grounds for the domestic church has far reaching implications in another respect: if not sacramental marriage, but baptism qualifies for the domestic church, then one could conclude that also today's new forms of family life (i.e. those not or no longer based on marriage) have a right to this title; that leads us to the second open question: what type of family is actually required to fulfil the status and role of domestic church?

It is obvious that any theological reflection about the family cannot simply bypass the multi-coloured reality of contemporary family life. Consequently, there is also discussion among theologians about which family type counts for domestic church. Whereas for some a normative concept of the family, i.e. based on formal marriage between two heterosexual spouses is needed to bring out its authentic theological nature, others opt for recognizing the diversity of contemporary households and trust in the quality of interpersonal relationships lived out in them, whether they are based on marriage or not.

Moreover, there is also scepticism among theologians and church leaders when it comes to test out the pastoral viability of the concept of domestic church. Some argue that for us today it is much more problematic to take the family as an image for what the church as a whole might be like. Contemporary families have turned out to be fragile and prone to the influences of a growing individualization and pluralisation, as the alarming statistics about marriage and subsequent family breakdown, the increasing number of single parents and the evidence of domestic violence show. So, is it realistic, let be desirable, to expect a renewal of the church(es) by resorting to one of the institutions which is hardly able to resist the present trends of social decomposition?

Moreover, do we not risk to raise only a specific type and ideal of family to the dignity of emulating the characteristics of the church, while others which do not fully correspond to that ideal are left to further disregard or even discrimination? One may become particularly alert here with regard to the Roman Catholic church's explicit preference for a family model that is grounded in marriage. Does the idea of domestic church not discourage instead of encouraging present day families to become aware of their vocation?

But even if such a division into first and second class families could be avoided, one may still wonder whether we do not ask too much of contemporary families and put an additional burden on their shoulders when expecting them to become “churches in miniature”? Is it not high time for the churches to encourage and support families in their daily needs and sorrows instead of asking of them evermore engagement with regard to the transmission of faith and to serving as the last remaining bulwark of Christianity in the present context of secularization?

1.3. Conditions and requirements for implementing the concept

I do not agree with most of this scepticism because it seems to me that its adherers remain attached to and inspired by the kind of hierarchical and juridical thinking which the idea of domestic church has the potential to overturn. The habit of looking at the church in a dualistic way by distinguishing between the hierarchical ministry and the laity is still dominant in many Roman Catholic minds. Just as many lay persons and their families still want “to be told what to do”, many a church leader finds it hard to believe that the family *is truly church* while its proclamation of the Word is not officially authorized and while it does not celebrate the Eucharist in union with the bishop as the local parish does. However, with Vatican II, leadership and ministry are no longer rooted in the hierarchy, but in the entire “people of God”. The ministry and leadership of the church now become “shared” leadership and ministry of all the people of God, including what we still call the “laity”. Therefore, the very idea of domestic church would be distorted if interpreted as the smallest possible unit of the universal church, still smaller than the local parish, but always part of that institutional structure warranted by the hierarchical ministry. It would then anyway end up in becoming a prolongation of the large church into its marginal edges, always at risk of being downgraded to an incomplete realization of church.

A previous draft of Vatican II’s constitution on the church, where it speaks of the domestic church, contained a quote from St Augustine who had described Christian heads of households as having an “episcopal function” similar to his own:

“Take my place in your families. Everyone who is head of a house must exercise the episcopal office and see to the Faith of his people...Take care with all watchfulness for the salvation of the members of the Household entrusted to you.” (*Sermo* 94)

The draft text at least stated that *both parents* “almost exercise an episcopal function” (*quasi munus episcopale*) – and not the father alone! Luckily, however, this quote was dropped

altogether in the final version of *Lumen gentium*. Still, a similar attitude of spelling out ecclesial structures down to the smallest community may continue to inspire a certain vision of the domestic church, not without discrediting the idea as such, in particular for many families themselves.

In that regard, I understand and share the concern which was expressed by one group in the consultation process of the American Association of Interchurch Families (but which is equally pertinent for same-church families):

“...a woman from another group pointed out that we need to think of the family as “church” – but not in an institutional sense. Her group agreed that interchurch families experience a distinct sense of “unity” in their home that is different from the church-as-institution. Ecumenical couples (and their children) *do* talk about religion, morality, and God in the setting of their home in ways that are different from how these are discussed in the institutional church, Sunday school, or parochial school. (*The Domestic Church*. Report on Conversations by AAIF (The American Association of Interchurch Families) for IFIN (Interchurch Families International Network) Research- / Study-Group, November 2007, by G. Kilcourse, nr. 5)

This quote makes clear that the very idea of domestic church ultimately revolutionizes our common understanding of church and Christianity. I will point to some areas and issues to stimulate your imagination and show what this reversal of perspective could mean:

- Whereas in the traditional view individuals physically and emotionally separated themselves from their families in order to live a truly spiritual life and serve the Lord without distraction, in the new scenario we have to imagine that God will be encountered and served more readily in ordinary life, among members of one’s household with its particular, everyday ties, duties and responsibilities.
- “...natural leaders (celibate or not, male or female) who emerged within household communities could be approached by diocesan leaders and asked if they would be willing to be prepared for ordination ‘with the clear prospect of continuing the same functions in the same place, but with the added impetus of ecclesial recognition.’ Dioceses and religious orders would still provide for training and ordination of the ‘comparatively mobile type of apostle’ (probably celibate) who would plan for a life of ordained ministry and who would be available to fulfil needs beyond the reach or resources of the household church” (quoted from F.C. Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered. Christian Families as Domestic Churches*, Notre Dame IN, 2004, 37).

- From the new perspective, the enclosing of our liturgical celebrations into a particular building (church, monastery, sanctuary etc.) and in a particular time (Sunday mass, breviary, liturgical year) would appear artificial; instead, our homes would become places of daily worship, of shared prayers and meals; and the life cycles of the family with birthdays, wedding anniversaries, commemoration of dead family member etc. would structure our religious calendar.

- Likewise, natural friendships and gatherings of children within a household would appear as the setting for religious education rather than Sunday schools and classes for catechetical instruction.

To whom this scenario with liturgical and educational household gatherings appears too elitist and too far away from the reality of today's families, one may respond that since early times Christian communities have always needed an elite group and parishes and other church organizations still need them today; but there is reason to believe that in the smaller home setting it would be less likely that the "vaguely committed" would feel neglected or excluded.

Moreover, when it comes to issues that impact on families, the church's preoccupation often seems to be posing definitions, criteria, and standards – of completing requirements, of being in good standing, of validity etc. – to which families are asked to measure up. Does your family come to mass every week? do you pray together as a couple and as a family? have your children attended religion classes? do you use the correct form of birth control? etc. In her monograph on the domestic churches, Florence Bourg rightly argues that "standards or expectations such as these can have a legitimate purpose, but their existence creates an environment in which it is easy to feel inadequate or guilty for falling short." Whoever complains that contemporary families' might not be up to be church at home, should seriously review the presuppositions which underlie this perception. The very idea of domestic church should stir up our imagination and make us look at what families actually "achieve" in terms of education and care, in taking responsibility for each other, in enduring in situations of hardship and suffering, but also in providing good examples of a marital and family spirituality that many in the church are still unaccustomed with.

2. "Domestic church" and interchurch families

I have presented to you two different angles from which to look at faith and church life, here the conventional, all-pervading institutional perspective – there the perspective from a home and family setting which most of us are still unfamiliar with. I will ask now what role interchurch families can play in all this. I will develop my argument in two theses.

My first thesis is that interchurch families are more advanced than same-church families in adopting a “domestic church” perspective.

It struck me that Ruth Reardon’s report on the consultation of the English Association of Interchurch Families starts out with the self-assured statement that interchurch families regard themselves as “just the same as other couples and families”:

“We are just the same as other couples and families, united by our faith in Christ and our commitment to one another in marriage. We share our lives, our activities, our interests. We work to understand one another and to communicate with one another. We strive for sensitivity and we forgive one another when we fail. We laugh together, and we share one another’s sorrows. We respect one another. We grow in love for one another. As parents we do our best to share our faith in Christ with our children. As families we are different from one another, as all families are.” (*Study on Interchurch Families as Domestic Churches. Report on the AIF Groups, Spring 2007, by R. Reardon*)

What an amazing sign of normality, so long desired and fought for; and what an impressive testimony of maturity, a maturity which, as is well-known, was not reached in one day but engaged at least two generations of interchurch families over the last half century in their struggle with the church authorities, just as it engaged numerous individual couples in their daily struggles of family life. But it is exactly this maturity that qualifies interchurch families more than same-church families as protagonists of a church that is built up from the home rather than from organizational structures. The reason is simple: interchurch spouses do no longer take for granted their church of origin with its specific structure of authority, way of worship, church life, doctrine and spirituality. Unless one of the partners gives up on his or her religious affiliation or the spouses decide to worship in their churches separately, they have to form a religious community of its own right and shape.

The 2003 Rome Document *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* has described the different stages of a learning process which interchurch spouses and families have to go through and in which they develop a number of competences which make them look at their own and the partner’s church in a different light. I summarize them briefly:

(1.) To improve knowledge and gain understanding of and respect for the other and his/her religious affiliation.

The documents explicitly points out that “as marriage partners they (= interchurch couples, TK) 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” (B 3). Thus, in a process of exploring and of getting to know the other in his/her ecclesial involvement, ignorance and prejudice toward the other church are said to be overcome and mutual respect to take place. Likewise, the process of exploration pertains also to the partner’s church community in its concrete reality including “ways of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority, and ethics” (C 2). This can lead to “a mutual appreciation of the positive gifts of each other’s churches and a mutual understanding of their weaknesses” (C 2).

(2.) To overcome “cognitive egocentrism” and empathize with the other and the other’s church by assuming his/her perspective.

In a spirit and practice of “mutual immersion and participation in the life of their two church communities” (C 1) the spouses are enabled “to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being” (C 2). The document distances itself from a form of perception and judgement which is determined by one’s “own values, emphases, use of language and structure of thought” and has been characteristic for a past polemical mentality “in which one church often defined itself by what another was not”.

(3.) To transcend one’s own and the other’s position and attain a perspective from which initially perceived divergences appear reconcilable and new sense is generated.

Interchurch families report on their coming to understand “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 penetrate into its reality” (C 2). Through their way of living in each other’s religious tradition “they realize that all differences are not church dividing, but many are complementary and can lead to the enrichment of diversity” (C 1). The relevance of this ability can hardly be overestimated when interchurch families are to develop a shared religiosity rather than leading a religious life in parallel. To do so, a fourth and final competence is needed which quits the realm of pure cognition and turns into practice.

(4.) The capacity for self-conscious ethical decision making and action.

Interpersonal identity development requires that a person who has got insight into the relativity of his/her own and the other's perspective is able to suspend and revise his/her previous reliance on and trust of external sources of authority and the value systems connected to them. Successful interchurch families will automatically develop a critical judgement vis-à-vis particular beliefs and practices of the denominational churches if they are to construct a shared religious identity. The Rome document welcomes this last competence for instance when interchurch couples are granted the right "to forge their own particular family traditions which may incorporate much of the (=Christian spiritual, TK) traditions of the two families in which they were brought up, but now fused into a new pattern" (B 2). It is taken into account that "(t)here can be a clash between what they (= interchurch families, TK) 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" (B 5). In cases of conflict, the principle is recognized "that to go beyond the rules is not always to go against them" (B 5).

These specific competences seem to me particularly useful in developing what I call a "domestic church perspective". One of the problems of the concept of domestic church when used in a same-church context is that families find themselves trying to model themselves on how they perceive church and on what they understand by church or on what is theologically understood by church. They are not encouraged to recognize the proper theological status of their own domestic and familial experience which is a gift (and sometimes a critical gift) to their church. Interchurch families, however, do not have a blueprint of how the church should look like in which they could be living in. Therefore they have to trust much more than same-church families in the community they are concretely forming in their homes and in the way they live their spousal and familial relationships both within and across the divided ecclesial bodies they belong to.

Ironically, the fact that the one church of Christ, uniting all its members without divisions, does not have a concrete visible shape so far, can help interchurch families to build Christian communities at a grass-root level which foreshadow Christian unity more than the denominational churches are ever be able to do. Understood in this way, there is little reason to fear that "[f]or too many interchurch families, this terminology of 'domestic church' can carry connotations of *domesticating* their families according to some preconceived, canonical paradigm that accepts the scandal of our division and only grudgingly affords possibilities for fuller communion, e.g. in 'exceptional' Eucharistic sharing" (G. Kilcourse, "The Domestic

Church: New vector or cul-de-sac for interchurch families?”, in *AIF Journal* 3/1, January 1995, 7-9, at 8). On the contrary, rightly understood, the terminology carries a liberating undertone in that it acknowledges as genuine the ecclesial communion of the interchurch home and their role as “builders of unity” in an area which is largely uncharted terrain for the confessional churches.

That leads me to my second thesis: Interchurch families offer to the Christian churches an alternative way of coping with their painful divisions.

In numerous publications by theologians and ecumenists and also in more recent official or even magisterial statements, the role of interchurch families as “builders of unity” has been highlighted. All these statements agree in principle that interchurch families have a particular role to play in bringing the divided Christian churches closer together and, ultimately, to the unity urged by Christ himself. The reality in the official church bodies, however, looks differently. I have tried to show in a study that the official stance of the Roman Catholic church views interchurch families as a subset of the larger problem of Christian division and thus along the same lines as it understands its relationship with non-Catholic churches: as real but imperfect communion (T. Knieps-Port le Roi, “Interchurch Marriage – Conjugal and Ecclesial Communion in the Domestic Church”, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43, 2008, forthcoming). In this institutionally oriented approach, couples from different denominations seem to be able to realize spousal and familial unity only to the extent that the concerned church bodies are willing or able to admit ecclesial communion among their respective communities.

An alternative view on Christian unity would be at hand, however, if the churches adopted a domestic church perspective. What this were to imply, has been illustrated in a compelling way by Rosemary Haughton in her book *The Knife Edge of Experience* in which she has dedicated a chapter on the experiences of families. Although her vision dates from the 1970’s, it has not lost any of its relevance for today:

“[A] household of the open kind will often include people of different denominational origins. But even if older members of the family are aware of this as a problem, it must always be more natural to include these people in all that goes on, including the liturgy, rather than excluding them. Exactly how the mixing goes on is bound to vary, but mixing there is and will be. But where the present younger generation is concerned there is very little awareness of divisions, at least as a problem. The young Christians who take their faith most seriously are the ones least likely to see any sense in denominational divisions. If they find themselves in a group of other Christians they will normally worship together if they worship at all, and that includes taking communion, if a Eucharist is celebrated. This is not an act of defiance, it

is simply that the arguments against it, and the prohibitions, make so little sense to them that they set them aside without noticing it, and without any sense of rebellion. But whereas in a ‘proper’ church building this must seem to others an act of aggressive defiance, in a home it is scarcely noticeable.” (R. Haughton, *The Knife Edge of Experience*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972, 118f.)

What I find so compelling in Haughton’s view is that it is not tributary to any ideological agenda, not even an anti-dogmatic or anti-institutional one. It is the logic itself of small communities, like families are, to deal with differences and otherness of its members – be they related to gender, ethnicity, religious convictions or church belonging – just the way it is described here. If our Christian communities were able to retrieve and validate this kind of experience which is daily practiced by and in families, along with the common sense that goes with it, much would be gained in understanding and building the church that Christ has willed and which many African and Asian Christians these days find no better name for than “family of God”. The lesson we may learn from Haughton and so many other theologians of the 20th century is not that experience, and more particularly family and interchurch family experience, should come in the place of theology, but that it should be taken seriously as a genuine source of theological reflection.

It will therefore require not less, but more theological reflection to fathom the ecclesiological implications of what interchurch families are already living and witnessing to as “domestic churches”. One clear message of their testimony, however, is that the churches need to relate to one another in the way that interchurch families do, if they really want to grow into unity. A kind of “road map” for this journey into Christian unity has already been suggested by the UK groups of interchurch families:

“Love one another – in a real and deep and lasting way...

Get to know one another at a deep level: work at communicating, listening, sharing, praying.

Put faith in Christ first, more important than our differences.

Focus on what unites, learn to recognise and overcome intolerance, prejudice, tribalism, to distinguish essentials from non-essentials, to correct the myths in all churches about the others.

Be committed to unity, and be prepared to go through a painful process out of disunity because *we have to* find a way forward together.

Stay with it, in spite of frustrations and impatience: it takes a long time, but change does happen.

Believe that divisions can be overcome because unity is God’s gift to us in Christ. But don’t expect that we can receive perfect unity.

Experience differences as enrichment, value and love the differences, see all that is good in the other. Look at differences together, not from opposite sides.

Be ready to change; institutions tend to be slower than married partners to realise they need to change, if the relationship is to progress. Sticking points can become growing points...

Be open to valuing and liking what your partner likes, though you do not have to like it all. We can disagree without falling apart.

Welcome differences as a stimulus to develop our own faith understanding, to look deeper.

Develop an inclusive attitude, hospitable and welcoming. Do well what you do well, and join in with others when they do things better.

Spend time in other churches; this is valuable for both you and the host community. You will understand more; they will have to watch what they say when they realise you are there.

Think of the ‘other’ in terms of who they are, not in terms of who you are.

Be convinced that unity really matters now. Responsibility for our children gives interchurch families a sense of urgency about unity. Cannot the churches feel more urgently their pastoral responsibilities for these children, and their urgent need to witness to the world that unity with God and with one another that Christ came to demonstrate and to share with us, the unity for which he prayed.”

(Study on Interchurch Families as Domestic Churches. Report on the AIF Groups, Spring 2007, by R. Reardon)