

***Interchurch Families in the UK: Living as Domestic Church, not expecting too much; never being satisfied with too little.***

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I write this reflection as a lay person working with interchurch families for whom ecumenism is not a distant concept, but a key factor in the way that they live their married lives as “domestic church”. Raised as an interchurch child myself, I am an Anglican married to a Roman Catholic and I have the privilege of working for the Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) in the UK. Each interchurch family is unique but here I am referring to those couples who retain their original church membership and as far as possible also actively participate and worship in their partner’s church.

In this paper I will briefly outline the experience of the synodal process as reported by interchurch families in the UK including some of their hopes and their assessment of how far these hopes have been met. I will then conclude with some brief comments on what might be the hope for the future. In preparing for this paper I have consulted with a number of members of AIF who have shared their experiences and to whom I am very grateful.

The Synodal process of 2014 and 2015 was experienced in markedly different ways by members and by AIF as an organisation. When listening to the individual voices of AIF members it was clear that many had heard nothing about the Synod at a local parish level and that their only knowledge of the consultation exercises undertaken in preparation for both synods was through communications from AIF. Many people felt that, although there was an effort to engage with church members through a consultation process, the questions posed both by the Vatican and then the Bishops of England and Wales were so difficult to understand that the consultation was somewhat removed from them as individuals and was best left for organisational responses, such as those submitted by AIF. Despite the questions, the consultation exercise left some feeling encouraged by what they saw as a more open and less judgemental attitude to those who did not fit in the standard model for the family. However, following the Vatican’s direction that the results of the consultation for the 2014 Synod should not be made public, some were discouraged and so did not participate further as individuals.

On an organisational level the synodal process had a much more energising effect and it was viewed as a positive opportunity for AIF to speak for the many interchurch families in the UK. Pope Francis wanted to hear people’s views; he was listening and this had the impact of raising expectations that the views of those in interchurch families would be heard. We were further encouraged when our Anglican President, Bishop Tim Thornton, was invited to attend the 2015 Synod as the Anglican Fraternal Delegate. The hope, rather than the expectation, was that issues, particularly pastoral issues, affecting interchurch families (many of whom have never made contact with organisations like AIF) might be recognised as important and thus be discussed at the Synod.

AIF worked as part of the Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN) to prepare responses to the Synod on behalf of associations of interchurch families worldwide. A paper was sent in April 2015, explaining how interchurch families see their vocation and mission, and spelling out the pastoral issues that would need to be faced if they are to be helped to fulfil that mission. These included marriage preparation and follow-up, the pre-nuptial ‘promise’ still required on the baptism

and upbringing of children and the hope of respect and support for parental decisions, the experienced need for on-going Eucharistic sharing in some cases, and a hope for the kind of pastoral care that will welcome them as families, while recognising that they also have loyalties to another ecclesial community. A shorter paper was sent in August 2015, directly responding to the Synod's working document.

In September when I was in Rome at the INTAMS Symposium there was an air of cautious hope, which reflected the feelings of many interchurch families. In reality, few expected a huge sea change but many were hopeful that the views of interchurch families would be included amongst the voices of families in a range of situations, and that they would be heard by the Church.

To date, it is not known how far the hopes expressed at the INTAMS Symposium have been met and, like others, we wait for the authoritative document on the family that Pope Francis will be issuing in response. What is known, however, is that although no interchurch couple was invited to attend the 2015 synod, there were a several references made to interchurch families in some of the group discussions - though it would appear that other, more pressing demands for the delegates' attention prevented much substantive exploration of the issues.

The Association of Interchurch Families was greatly encouraged that the issue of the language used when discussing marriage between a Catholic and a Christian of another denomination was raised at the Synod. At several points it was noted that the language used in talking about such couples needs to be more positive and to recognise interchurch couples as *opportunities* for the Church rather than simply problems to be solved.

The Final Report of the synod discussions urged Pope Francis to write a document "so that the family, the domestic Church, might increasingly radiate Christ, who is the light of the world" <sup>1</sup>. For many interchurch families the most important outcome of Pope Francis's initiative has been his establishment of a listening synod, a development which seems to have produced the most positive and open experience within the Catholic Church in a long time. It has been described as being similar to the hopes experienced around the time of Vatican II. The methodology of Synod was one of listening, where there was both a freedom to speak and ears to listen. This methodology had a great strength in listening to those concerned with, and informed about, the realities of family life and it allowed a fuller perspective to be offered from within family life with all its joy and challenge - not a distant and less realistic view.

The pain felt by many interchurch partners, both Roman Catholics and those of other Christian denominations when they or their partner are excluded from the Eucharist was also testified to at the synod. AIF's Chair of Trustees wrote to the Catholic magazine, *The Tablet* on behalf of the Association during the synod and expressed the views of many interchurch families. "AIF both rejoices in the possibility of authorised Eucharistic sharing that already exist in Britain, and would like them to be better known, and also points out that a seeming limitation to 'unique occasions' does not satisfy the ongoing need felt by some in interchurch families".

The lack of knowledge about the guidelines on Eucharist sharing and the uneven way in which they are practically applied across the UK is a great concern for interchurch families as are the painful consequences of this separation at both "unique" and special occasions for a family and on a weekly basis throughout married life.

The consequence of this separation of families at the communion table can be significant, not only in the pain it causes both partners but because of the indifference that can result from the ongoing experience of rejection. There was a hope that this would be better understood through the synodal

process. When placing a high value on the gospel and Christ's light both in and of the world, the spiritual consequences of indifference cannot be overlooked. This pain and indifference may be felt by either or both partners or by their children as they repeatedly observe the treatment of a loved one by the Church. One father wrote "I am not surprised that my children, although raised in the Catholic Church no longer wish to worship in a Church that has refused to give communion to their devotedly Christian mother except on rare occasions".

Although the synod methodology has been a staged progression with periods of waiting, allowing time for active listening and discernment, for some the pace of change has seemed too slow. In a world where things happen quickly and decisions are made instantly; there is a concern that people will run out of patience waiting for the outcome to unfold and as a consequence move away from the church. The media attention around the synod has not always helped with the raising of expectations and predicting of outcomes. For some, the fear of crushed hopes and further pain may mean that despite the imminence of Pope Francis's response to the Synod, they may have already turned their attention elsewhere.

To conclude I want use a quote by Alastair Haggart formerly the Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church from 1984 when it was published in the AIF Newsletter. Although written over thirty years ago it still holds true for many interchurch Families. 'We always keep working at the relationship between the personal and the corporate. It has improved enormously; it has enormous potential for further improvement; but if the improvement is going to take place, it is going to take place because we, in the Association of Interchurch Families, stay with the problem, suffer the pain and the frustration; never expecting too much; never being satisfied with too little.'

As interchurch families our hope going forward is that each couple and family will be supported by the Church according to their needs, not just during marriage preparation but throughout their life together. The needs of each family are unique just as each person is unique and loved by God. The priority is to be a Church showing the love, mercy and the welcome of Christ. We continue to hope and pray for increased unity within and between the Churches and between individuals and we continue to strive to be examples of "domestic church" and of Christ's love and unity in practice.

One AIF member expressed to me his hope that the Church would continue to "listen to the voice of Christ and to continue to listen to each other". It must now be our hope that the re-invigorated Synodal process instituted by Pope Francis becomes an established means of true listening in the Catholic Church and that the two synods of 2014 and 2015 will be just the start of a process which shows Christ's light to the world.

1. The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis. Vatican City 24<sup>th</sup> October 2015 paragraph 94.

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