

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

A paper written for the Association of Interchurch Families by two interchurch families - a Roman Catholic lay woman married to an Anglican priest, and a male Anglican priest married to a Roman Catholic.

By interchurch families we mean families in which husband and wife are practising members of two different churches, particularly where one is a Roman Catholic and the other an Anglican or a member of a Free Church.

Within this definition there are vast differences between couples and families. We can find interchurch couples at every point on the ecumenical scale which runs from competition through co-existence and co-operation to commitment. We are referring here to those couples who have reached the stage of commitment to unity.

These are families which experience themselves as a *domestic church*, to use the phrase of Vatican II. At the same time this family unit in Christ is attached to two different churches, at present divided (although now recognising themselves to be on a converging path towards unity). These families feel called to hold within their own unity in Christ a 'double loyalty' to both traditions to which they are attached, accepting all the tensions involved in this so long as divisions continue, and praying and working constantly for all that promotes unity.

Interchurch families are welded together sacramentally not only by our common baptism but also by Christian marriage. Like all other Christian families, domestic churches, they are called to be signs of the unity of love between Christ and his Church, which is the same love with which the Father loves the Son and within which Christians are called to love one another. Like other Christian families they are called to reflect the love of God, to mirror the love of the Trinity. As in other Christian families, the parents jointly have a mission and ministry to their children, to incorporate them into a relationship of love which reflects God's love for us all. Where this is done each member of the family becomes a member of Christ and of his Church as it is expressed in the domestic church to which they belong. On one level the domestic church is the Church of Christ for the members of the family. But this domestic church is nourished and attached to the whole Church of Christ through two traditions, two denominations, two 'churches' which themselves are not in communion with one another. Its members belong to Christ through being members of those two divided communities as well as through belonging to the domestic church, the family unit in Christ.

On the face of it this is impossible. But it is not more impossible than the fact of Christian divisions — that there are divided 'churches' although there is only one Church of Christ, since Christ is not divided. Interchurch families are therefore convinced that they must hold on to both ends of their experience and hold them in tension together. On the one hand they experience themselves as a unit in Christ and are members of the one Church of Christ through being members of the one domestic church. On the other hand husband and wife belong to two different and divided 'churches' and their children are initiated into and nurtured in the one Church of Christ through both of them. Holding on to both ends of their experience at once means that they must go through with it to the end, accepting all the tensions and hurts which are involved, and not running away from them, and not being destroyed by them.

Even if they can only do this in a very fragmentary and feeble way, it is the experience of some families that their problems are being transformed into seeds of hope; they would testify to a joyful experience of duality in unity which outweighs all the difficulties and hurts. They can actually experience a reconciliation between the churches at the level of their own domestic church. Suspicion, fear and ignorance can melt away and they can feel 'at home' in both the traditions which nurture the one Christian family. Sometimes also they can find themselves instruments of reconciliation between their extended families and congregations.

Speaking to interchurch families at York in 1982, Pope John Paul II said to them: "You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity." Interchurch families are very conscious of the

difficulties, but they feel that they are living the hopes as well, and they want to be able to express the hopes which they experience. This is why they are raising questions, very difficult questions for the churches: not only questions of eucharistic hospitality but underlying questions of double belonging, of dual membership, especially for the children of such families. How can the churches help us to express what is a reality for us: that we are members of one domestic church attached to the one Church of Christ through two different churches, that our children are initiated into the one Church of Christ first and foremost through our one domestic church which draws on two distinct traditions.