

SEEKING GOD TOGETHER:

The experience of Spirituality in Interchurch Families

Christian spirituality in this context is understood as the way we respond to the presence of God in every aspect of our lives.

Interchurch family spirituality focuses on marriage and unity. The close link between these was affirmed by Pope John Paul II in the words he addressed to interchurch families when he visited Britain in 1982. During a celebration of marriage and family life held at York, he spoke directly to partners in mixed marriages between baptised Christians in which one was a Roman Catholic: *“You live in your marriage the hopes and the difficulties of the path to Christian unity. Express that hope in prayer together, in the unity of love. Together invite the Holy Spirit into your hearts and into your homes. He will help you to grow in trust and understanding.”*

Interchurch families share their relationship and experience in daily life across church boundaries. In this respect they are the smallest of ecumenical partnerships.

United through the sacraments of baptism and marriage, many partners in interchurch families believe they share the same faith and belong to the one Church of Christ, wounded by divisions.

They long to share celebrations of the sacraments. It is hurtful when couples are unable to share the eucharist, which is above all the sacrament of peace, unity and reconciliation. It means that children are given a sign of disunity, particularly poignant when their parents are committed to bringing them up in the faith and life of Christ.

Interchurch couples are faced with difficult questions:

It would be much easier if we went to one church. Should one of us give way?

How will our parents and relatives respond? Will they understand?

Where can we go for help and support?

Where are we to get married?

How can we make a real commitment to both our churches?

Can we arrange a shared celebration of baptism for our child?

What school should he/she attend?

What do we do about preparation for First Communion? And confirmation?

This searching for God’s will in the context of their two-church belonging involves a continuing dialogue in their marriage and family life. The experience is often frustrating and painful, but it can also be challenging, enriching and joyful.

This is a spiritual journey that all interchurch families are called to make. They approach and cope with it in different ways because all families are different. Prayer and support can make this journey one that deepens their faith in God and their trust and love for one another.

The Association of Interchurch Families offers help and support for such families and campaigns to get the churches to adopt a more sensitive approach to their spiritual and pastoral needs. The problem for these families, and also their joy, is that they experience a fuller communion with each other than do, as yet, the churches to which they belong. This can be a real opportunity for the churches, if they can come to see interchurch families as catalysts for Christian unity.

A sense of the domestic church is particularly important for interchurch families. The diversity of church backgrounds can enrich their relationship, and love helps them to overcome their problems. Indeed it can enhance their sense of unity in a way that helps them to see their differences as gifts to be shared rather than as obstacles to be overcome. The search for God in the diversity of their experience as well as in

prayer, in worship and in scripture is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. It also provides an insight into how the churches can draw closer together.

“God made us for communion – and therefore willed marriage. God made us for communion – and therefore willed the church. Both marriage and the church exist to draw human beings into God’s life of love – where alone differences are lived fully in communion: three distinct Persons, but one God in Trinity. Both marriage and the church are signs of this life of love – signs of the great mystery of God’s self-giving love revealed to us in Christ. No wonder that marital spirituality and spiritual ecumenism have so much in common; the one spirit is at work in both, drawing diverse human persons into the communion of God’s life and love.” (Ruth Reardon, 1997)

Maybe we have something of real value to gain from reflecting on Gabriel Marcel’s contention that life is not just a series of problems but rather a network of mysteries.

It is often thought that interchurch children will risk being confused and will lose their faith. The experience of some interchurch families shows that this need not be the case. Interchurch children can grow up with a strong ecumenical perspective but without carrying the same denominational baggage as their parents. In their case worshipping where they feel spiritually at home may be a sign of growing maturity, not a sign of shopping around. They can be a sign of hope for the future.

Interchurch family spirituality is not an individual spirituality, but one which brings together the spirituality of two people from two different Christian traditions. Christians brought up in one denomination are brought up in a particular spiritual tradition. When Christians of two denominations marry they have the opportunity of sharing two spiritual traditions with one another and with their children. A common experience of Catholic-Protestant marriages was well expressed by a Protestant from Northern Ireland married to a Catholic from the Irish Republic: she learned to value the Catholic sacramental tradition; he learned to value a real sermon.

Of course there is much more to it than that. Shared family prayers, scriptural reflection, sacramental sharing where it is possible and a real two-church commitment as well as a truly shared approach to all aspects of marriage and family life can be enriching. This is a unity nurtured by love and forged through diversity; it can mean a genuine mind shift and be spiritually uplifting.

Interchurch couples share the same joys, hopes, fears and anxieties as all married partners. But for interchurch partners, to the love and openness they experience in the mystery of sacramental marriage is added this further dimension of being at one with each other across church divisions; unity and marriage hand in hand.

Interchurch families live with a particular tension in their marriage and family life. This is especially apparent when one of them feels that he/she does not belong in his/her partner’s church. Sometimes this feeling can amount to rejection when the couple cannot receive communion together, particularly when no thought is given to addressing their pastoral and spiritual needs. It may surface over the baptism and education of the children, and their preparation for communion and confirmation. It is easy for one parent to feel left out. The tension may show itself over some point of liturgy or theology; differences may amount to little more than semantics but they may also locate real divergences.

Far from not belonging, some interchurch families feel a strong sense of double belonging and may be involved in the lives of both their churches at many different levels, given support and encouragement. They may experience shared celebration of the sacraments as far as this is possible. In these respects interchurch families can be ahead of their churches rather than at loggerheads with them. But while the churches are in only partial communion with each other, interchurch families will always experience tension in their relationship with them. This spiritual tension is an integral part of what it means to be an interchurch family. It can be frustrating and painful but carries within it a real hope of reconciliation and renewal.

The pilgrimage to which interchurch families are called involves a loving commitment that can never be satisfied with partial communion. It means constantly engaging in dialogue. It means never giving up. It may sometimes mean going beyond the rules. It will always mean searching for the truth behind convention. It will always mean waiting on God.

It is a spirituality of love and experience — a spirituality from below rather than from above. Perhaps this is the spiritual treasure that interchurch families can offer to their churches. This spirituality exemplifies the importance of relationships in the search for church unity. It reflects upon real Christian experience from the standpoint of faith. Interpersonal relationships and true dialogue - which recognises that unity emerges through diversity - are of its essence.

Being an interchurch family is what their spirituality is all about. For them, *“unity is both the journey’s end and the way of journeying now”*. (Churches Together in England Forum Report, 1997)