

## The Society for Ecumenical Studies

# Interchurch Families And The Ecumenical Movement

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Mixed marriages have been considered as a practical issue facing the modern ecumenical movement since its early days. The encyclical letter of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to other churches in January 1920, asking for the establishment of a *koinonia* of churches<sup>1</sup>, parallel to the League of Nations, appealed to churches to demonstrate their friendship to one another "by the settlement of the question of mixed marriages between the various confessions". When in 1959 Pope John XXIII announced the calling of the Second Vatican Council, Dr Visser t'Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), said that its success would be judged by how it dealt with religious liberty and mixed marriages.

The Council did deal with religious liberty directly, but with mixed marriages only indirectly. The theology underlying the Vatican Council documents (e.g. the recognition of unity in baptism), as well as the Decree on Religious Liberty, enabled the Catholic Church gradually to change the way it dealt with mixed marriages. In 1966 it issued the Instruction *Matrimonii Sacramentum* and in 1970 the motu proprio *Matrimonia Mixta*. Significantly, the Directory on Ecumenism of 1967 said nothing about mixed marriages; the two were not formally related at this stage.

However, in 1966 Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Pope Paul VI in their joint communiqué mentioned mixed marriages as 'one of the chief difficulties to be addressed', and they established an international Anglican-Roman Catholic working group to look at mixed marriages. In 1967 a joint meeting of representatives of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC at Nemi in Italy discussed the pastoral and ecumenical difficulties in mixed marriages.

Meanwhile interchurch families had themselves begun to meet, in France in the early 1960s and in England in 1968. In 1968 *One in Christ* carried an editorial proposing the possibility that the children of interchurch families might be brought up in the churches of both parents.

In 1975 the international Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission on Mixed Marriages produced its report *Anglican-Roman Catholic Marriage*. It established three theological principles:

- i. Baptism is the indestructible bond of union.
- ii. There had been a change of viewpoint from marriage as a legal contract to marriage as a sacramental covenant.
- iii. It is a primary duty of the Church to respect the God-given unity of marriage.

Also in 1975 *Beyond Tolerance* was published as a report of the international consultation on mixed marriages held in Dublin in 1974. Contributors to this consultation pointed to the positive value and significance of mixed marriages for the ecumenical movement. Geoffrey Wainwright presented a paper on "The Ecclesiological Significance of Interchurch Marriage", in which he pointed out that the family is the domestic church, and an interchurch family is an example of church unity achieved. 'Dual membership is an anomaly, but ecclesiastical disunity is the major anomaly.' John Coventry observed that parents in some interchurch families were asking, 'Cannot our children be baptised into the one Church of Christ, as it exists in our two churches?'; and pointed out that this question should be faced by students of ecclesiology.

Two particular issues concerned interchurch families in the next two decades: the possibility of receiving communion together (see *Sharing Communion: An Appeal to the Churches by Interchurch Families*, by Ruth Reardon and Melanie Finch, 1983), and the extent to which it was possible for interchurch families, both parents and children, to belong to two churches (see *Whom God Hath Joined*, by

Mary Bard, 1987). During this period, both these issues were also discussed by a number of ecumenical groups, particularly the English Anglican-Roman Catholic Committee (see e.g. *Christian Initiation and Church Membership*, British Council of Churches, 1988).

In 1988 the English Association of Interchurch Families made a presentation to the Inter-Church Process, *Not Strangers but Pilgrims*, in which it drew parallels between the experience of interchurch families and the way forward for unity between the churches. Interchurch families had entered the covenant of marriage; they lived under the same roof; they had a common purse; they ate and worshipped together: coming from different families of origin, they learnt to appreciate two ways of doing things: their marriage covenant was a response to their vocation by God, and a means whereby they grew spiritually.

In 1989 the Joint Working Group of the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity arranged a Consultation on Mixed Marriages in Geneva in October. The report of that Consultation went to the Joint Working Group, and has never been published. It did, however, contribute to WCC and Vatican thinking, not least in the preparation of the 1993 Directory on Ecumenism. It pointed to the impact of the experience of interchurch families on the evolution of ecumenical relationships.

Interchurch families in France and in England were disappointed that the report of the Consultation was not published, and in 1993 Fr René Beaupère and Pastor Jacques Maury addressed an *Appeal To Our Churches* in France, asking them to recognise that the experience of interchurch families raised important ecclesiological questions for the churches to tackle. The major churches in France (Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran) all replied, but, starting from their classical theological positions, showed that it was not possible for them to move at present, except by allowing some exceptions, adaptations, tolerances. In a reply to these replies, Fr Beaupère and Pastor Maury expressed their gratitude, but pointed out that the

ecclesiological questions remained to be tackled. The churches need to integrate these 'islands of reconciliation' (interchurch families) into their life at structural levels - otherwise they will remain isolated manifestations, cancerous growths which contribute nothing to the growth of the ecumenical body.

In 1993 the new *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* was issued by the Vatican. Unlike the 1967 Directory, it included an extensive section on mixed marriages between baptised Christians, thus recognising that they were a significant part of the ecumenical scene, and allowing, by way of exception, under certain conditions and in particular cases, the other partner in a mixed marriage to receive communion in the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1994 the Group for Local Unity of Churches Together in England published *Churches Together in Marriage*. This recommended that interchurch families should be regarded by the churches 'as promise, not a threat': that the churches explore together the extent to which the sense of 'dual commitment/double belonging' experienced by some interchurch families can be ... given formal expression in church discipline and structures'; that the churches look together at the 'double belonging' experienced by some interchurch children and address the ecclesiological questions which this raises.