

After 25 Years

Two AIF couples look back - and forward

25 YEARS ON THE PATH TOWARDS UNITY

David is Anglican; Irene is Catholic. David is British; Irene is French. Our wedding in December 1960 took place in a Catholic church amid warnings of the priests and the bare signs of celebration and sacrament allowed us. We knew we were black sheep, but our love for each other was deep, nurtured by five years of waiting and letter-writing which was often about the problems that we could foresee in our allegiances to separate Christian denominations. But we didn't allow them to spoil our joyful day.

Once he had accepted to 'sign his children away', as his family put it at the time, David has always been supportive, insisting that the family must worship together weekly; therefore Anglican communion service for him, Catholic mass for everyone, including him. When Irene was unable to go to mass he still took the children, and as they grew up, when questions and arguments on the Christian way of life came up, they turned to him also for answers. So did Irene, who gradually came to think of David no longer as 'a Christian, but...', but as 'a better Christian than I am'.

Irene decided not to send the children to a Catholic school where there was little talk of ecumenism; would the school realise that David was a Christian too? However, we both ensured that they would be taught the Catholic faith by taking them to catechism classes on Saturdays and helping them with their *La Retraite* correspondence courses throughout their growing years and our moves as an RAF family.

Growth

For many years we felt a common basic faith, but were also very aware of separateness. We were often hurt by each other, and by other Christians. At that time we had no ecumenical aim; we just dealt with situations as they arose. Christening, first communions, and confirmations were tinged every time with sadness and pain because David, as committed a Christian father as any, even on those occasions could not receive Our Lord in the eucharist with the rest of us.

One Catholic priest who did fully recognise David as a Christian had his parish about fifteen miles from our home. So our family traveled there to mass on Sundays, where Irene no longer felt like a second-class Catholic and where David was on the readers' rota. Over this eight year period, it was no wonder that this priest became our family friend and that we grew in trust with each other's differences.

Then came our Marriage Encounter weekend; we felt ourselves renewed as a couple, and were deeply touched by the blessing given to David at the mass in lieu of communion. This gave us an experience of the love of the church for our couple. After our weekend, we realised that the concept of the domestic church gave us the unity denied us by the official churches, and such was the effect of this that we both

were inspired to involve ourselves much more in church affairs and pastoral commitment. At about this time, Irene started attending David's church services with him; and as we were gradually accepted by both church communities as a couple and felt more united, it was strange that the pain of separation at communion became more acute.

The visit of the Pope to this country was a time of deep joy and thankfulness for us. Another great source of inspiration was a French Catholic priest who is ecumenical officer in his own diocese. His vision of our couple as a vehicle towards unity rather than a handicap has been life giving to us.

Soon after, we joined the Association of Interchurch Families. It filled our need for mutual support of similar couples. We share a lot, mainly of sadness, of love for both our churches, and of how we suffer for and through our spouse; also of our impatience with what seems to us to be man-made rules and regulations. Again and again, never being allowed to witness at the Lord's table to the unity we live, gives us a share of the pain of Christ in his churches which are separated. We love and respect the Catholic Church and don't want to break its rules, but we long for some sign of reconciliation, some demonstration of the progress made in the last few years, something that the normal Catholic can appreciate and understand. At the same time we see how we are blessed to be witnesses of Christ's possible unity in diversity. One way we have found for daily sharing is in the few minutes spent on Bible study together, using the booklet of the Bible Reading Fellowship.

Celebration

On our 25th wedding anniversary we hoped for a really symbolic occasion. David asked our Catholic parish priest, with some diffidence, to receive communion at a celebratory mass. Without offering any promise, he told us that it might be possible, but permission would have to come from the bishop. We both got very excited, and hopefully enquired every Sunday if an answer had been received. When it did come, the reply was devastatingly negative.

The very next weekend, we went with downcast hearts to the Spode conference of Interchurch Families. There, a Catholic bishop gave us over an hour of his time and love in talking out our disappointment. He suggested a mass at which David's Anglican priest would distribute the reserved sacrament at the same moment as the Catholic priest gave communion. We took to this idea immediately, as it would demonstrate most vividly the separateness as well as the partial unity of the Body of Christ. He did us good.

So we obtained an interview with our bishop, and he listened with fatherly concern to our longing for our 25th wedding celebration to be an opportunity for a gathering of Christians worshipping as fully together as the Catholic Church would allow. It was decided to hold the mass in the hall of the local Catholic primary school. We sought to achieve a balance of David's Anglicans, Irene's Catholics, our common Christian friends from Chippenham, encountered couples, our Interchurch Families group, and family, both French and English.

We chose the Mass for the Unity of Christians, and included our choice of readings and hymns. We decided that the collection would be shared between Christian Aid and CAFOD. Our three youngsters, as

time went on, were amazed to witness our excitement and involvement; they had never seen us like this, especially not David! They gladly accepted to do the readings and serve on the altar.

The Day

Suddenly, (or so it seemed) relatives arrived from France to stay, and the big day brought its last-minute tasks and panics. Then we were at the school door welcoming friends and acquaintances from near and far. Then we were sitting waiting, then both priests entered (Irene's priest had just accepted the presidency of our local council of churches and David's was the vice-president) and an inner calm came over us as we both concentrated on participating to the full. Our first hymn was 'This is the day that the Lord has made'. Our congregation entered into the service as though they all worshipped there together each week. There were about 170 participants with a good mix of all denominations, but the love and acceptance of one another slowly became tangible as the mass progressed. We had two sermons: one on unity, one on marriage. The highlights were the renewal of marriage vows when all the couples stood with us to repeat those well-known phrases, and the sign of peace when the priests of our two parishes gave each other their hands. Communion time expressed what we meant it to.

All too soon it was over, and it was apparent that we were not the only ones to have felt the touch of the Holy Spirit that afternoon. As they shared the refreshments after mass, the openness and friendliness of the people, many of them strangers to one another, was obvious.

Looking back, we feel a sense of achievement. We find ourselves strengthened through this celebration, as if anointed, more at one with each other and as a little church. Nevertheless, we feel chastened at how slow our own progress along the path towards unity has been over 25 years. This reminds us how tolerant we must be towards those who seem indifferent to Christian unity.

We know that it was not only through us, but through the love, acceptance and prayer of those taking part that the service became the true corporate worship, reflecting Christ's wish that they may be one in him. We were surprised, and felt humble at how much feedback followed, and how richly people interpreted the celebration in the light of their particular gifts. We have learned a lot about people and about the Holy Spirit, and are starting to wonder what form our ruby wedding anniversary will take - in the year 2000.