

Foyers Interconfessionnels de Suisse

AFI – CH Association Foyers Interconfessionnels de Suisse

21st meeting of Swiss Romande (French-speaking) Interchurch Families and

first meeting since the founding of the Swiss Association,

September 24th – 25th, 2005.

The meeting took place at La Pelouse, Bex, Vaud, a conference centre run by the Sisters of St. Maurice, surrounded by the magnificent Alpes vaudoises and blessed by glorious early autumn weather: enabling a beautiful 'Célébration en plein air' (open air Mass lead by Fr René Beaupère, sermons brought by pastors Jean-Baptiste Lipp and Andreas Rüttner) in the grounds on Sunday morning. The chalice brought by Jean-Baptiste and used for the open air Mass was a diocesan treasure, dating from pre-Reformation times and therefore having a provenance from the unified Church.

About thirty adults plus assorted children attended. The conference was conducted in French and attended primarily by couples from French-speaking Switzerland and organised by Family Walther and the group of Fribourg.

Swiss Interchurch families and the Swiss Association

There have been a number of local French speaking groups meeting since the mid-1960s, with the Lausanne groups meeting together on an annual basis since 1968-69. Since 1974 a meeting of French-speaking Swiss families from the wider Suisse Romande has met most years. They have had strong links with Père René Beaupère and the journal 'Foyers Mixtes' published in Lyon. The First World Gathering of Interchurch Families was held in Geneva in 1998. Following the Second World gathering in Rome in 2003 it was decided to set up a national organisation to work in three main areas: as a network for interchurch families; as a link between denominations, and; to raise the visibility of interchurch families and their way of life. In November 2003 the First General Assembly was held at Fribourg (the Canton is bilingual) and a council of seven people was set up. Although initially driven by the long standing relationships established in French-speaking Switzerland, documentation has been

drawn up in both French and German and is readily available on disc. The council tries to find more and more contact with German-speaking groups and clergy in Switzerland, but the interest in such an Association (Verein der Konfessionsverbindenden Familien in der Schweiz) seems to be low or slow.

Proceedings of the Weekend

The programme ran from after lunch on Saturday until after lunch on Sunday. The main task we gave ourselves was to prepare a response to the message that Cardinal Kasper had given to the World Gathering in Rome in 2003 to be taken there by Jean-Baptiste Lipp for the meeting to be held with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in October 2005.

The children meanwhile had a parallel programme organised for two different age groups, which included the preparation of artwork for the Sunday Mass, two of them also accompanied the singing, (which we practised on Saturday evening after dinner,) on the 'cello. Many of us also took the opportunity to join the nuns for vespers on Saturday evening.

Inevitably even when we gave ourselves a whole weekend, and split into four different groups to make initial discussion more manageable, we had given ourselves quite a task. We all had our own views, somehow each group's reporter had to try to convey the main thrust of the discussion to the Sunday round up session and this had in turn to woven into a letter. It was clear that we did not have the time to agree the exact wording of the letter, even if this had been possible there was still some uncertainty as to exactly on whose behalf we were able to speak, we laughed about the problems embodied in Swiss democracy. There were also recognised to be some difficulties in balancing personal and even emotional responses to the letter with what would be the most constructive message(s) to try to convey to Rome. In the end we tried to draw up the main themes of the discussions and to entrust Jean-Baptiste to draw up a draft to be exchanged between a very limited number of volunteers/nominees in light of the tight time frame in which we were operating.

Whilst opinions varied some of the main points to come out of the discussion were that:

- We were encouraged that Cardinal Kasper did not see us as a 'problem' and we liked the personal approach at the beginning of the letter (although many thought that the letter became less personal and less encouraging as it went on)
- Many people did not agree that their suffering was not caused by directives but by the divisions of the Church, in fact they thought that the contrary was true and that directives cemented divisions
- There was a strong feeling that what we had in common was more important than the differences that separated us
- There was concern that the letter seemed to imply a certainty as to what unity was, some felt that perhaps it was more of search for an unknown end point
- Opinions were very mixed about the role of interchurch couples in ecumenism, some clearly felt burnt out and wanted to know what the hierarchy was going to offer them in terms of support rather than vice versa, others felt that they were too few in

number or even that they did feel that they had a role to play but that the authorities would not give them space to act it out

- Finally there was a concern that some of these opinions sounded more negative than perhaps was intended and that careful drafting of a response was required!

Conclusions

An interesting and stimulating weekend was had by all in beautiful surroundings, helped on in its way perhaps by the wine that served at meals, which had been produced by the vineyard of one of the participating couples in Valais. It was agreed to try to arrange the next meeting for eighteen months hence, possibly in the canton of Geneva.

For recent arrivals from the U.K. it was interesting to learn of the cultural differences between the two countries. As is of course always the case experiences of individuals often depended very much on their own priest/pasteur, but the different constitutions of Cantons themselves are an important factor. When we came to Geneva our seven-year old daughter was very shocked to learn that there was no religious teaching in the state schools. We naively assumed this to be the case in a secular state. But have now discovered that in some Cantons not only does (very denominational) religious teaching take place in the schools but also that the clergy are paid by the Canton. Some cantons are very mixed e.g. Vaud, Neuchâtel, Genève and generally more enlightened, others are almost uni-denominational and therefore much more unused to inter-church marriages, like Fribourg, Valais or Jura. We have even discovered that the strange geography of Geneva, an oasis surrounded by France, came about after the expulsion of Napoleon and drawing of boundaries to ensure a Protestant state, excluding the possibility of inclusion of any 'problematic' Catholic peasants in the Jura. Ironically the majority of the population today is Catholic.

Rachel Jones