

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AS 'WINDOWS' FOR ECUMENISM

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During the days before our conference I have rummaged in my memory to recall my first ecumenical experiences. It is a question worth asking ourselves. Where did the truth of Christ's will for church unity first dawn upon you?

'Blow our cover'

My own awakening to the call for church unity came as a ten-year old fourth-grade student. I experienced the episode of my family's attending the wedding of 'a Baptist couple who were - and still are - dear friends. The year was 1958, and ecumenism in American Roman Catholic circles was hardly conceivable. In fact, one thought of ecumenism in those pre-Vatican II days more in terms of a 'Department of Foreign Affairs'. You needed a formal 'visa' to enter hostile territory which the pope and church Secretary of State had quarantined. My parents ventured to secure just such a visa to attend the wedding in question.

Ample warnings about this suspect event had been delivered to me and my sister from the parochial school principal. My parents received cautions from the pastor. We were instructed not to 'participate' - just sit during the service and be 'passively present'. And by all means, we were repeatedly told, don't sing *their* hymns.

Having been duly briefed, we marched to the Baptist Church. And then, as we were ushered down the aisle of that magnificent Georgian church, I did what every well-trained Catholic child would do upon arriving at the pew ... I GENUFLECTED!

My mother was mortified as heads craned to notice my 'foreign' behaviour. My father quietly reassured me it was "OK" after I got seated; but he did add: "You blew our cover!" From that moment on, my mind has wondered why baptized people have perpetuated fortress mentalities towards each other? Why have we erected barriers to the unity Christ has given and wills for the church?

Now, nearly thirty-five years later, I find it intriguing that this early juxtaposition of marriage and ecumenical consciousness has matured into our focus on 'interchurch families'. If there is one thing which the growing number of interchurch spouses and children challenge us to do, it is to 'blow our cover' and make visible the unity which Christ and his Spirit give to the church.

The metaphor of 'Windows'

Ed describes himself as a 'mess hall Methodist'. Ed is a Roman Catholic. In fact, he serves as deacon at St Justina's parish in a large city on the southeastern coast of the United States. But his wife, Jane, belongs to the nearby United Methodist Church. So every Wednesday evening Ed cooks in the Methodist kitchen for his wife's congregational meal. Jane, an artist, works with the Worship Committee at St Justina's.

Ed and Jane represent a growing phenomenon across the United States - they are an interchurch couple. These are a special kind of 'mixed marriage' because each spouse in an interchurch marriage participates in his or her respective church, and to various degrees in the partner's church. And both spouses take an active role in the religious education of their children, who often claim a 'double belonging'. Interchurch parents and children come to feel welcome and at home in either church.

In this talk I will consider how interchurch families give us some understanding of both the once-and-future church. Since I share with other theologians a need for the retrieval of root 'metaphors' to clarify our understanding, I will concentrate upon the metaphor of 'windows' in two senses. Each will, I hope, awaken a sense of the mystery before us.

It was good Pope John XXIII who opened the windows of the Vatican to let in a little fresh air and effected a clean sweep of Roman Catholicism's anti-ecumenical policies (among other things). This geriatric wonder-worker (he was within days of his 78th birthday when elected pope!) had made a career of deftly side-stepping canon law niceties. Perhaps you've seen the movie version of his celebrated intervention on behalf of Jewish children in Eastern Europe during one of his World War II posts as a Vatican diplomat. He wrote fraudulent baptismal certificates to secure safe passage for Jewish children who were destined for the concentration camps. (Perhaps he even copyrighted the term 'double belonging' in a broader sense with this exercise!) In any event, good 'Pope John exhibited a pastor's heart in the care of souls.

What I would suggest is that when he opened the Vatican windows he also ESCAPED - much to the surprise of everyone within the walls. This was the first modern pope to travel as pope outside the Vatican. On the very eve of the opening of the Second Vatican Council he made a surprise pilgrimage to the village of Assisi. The symbolism was unmistakable. The council he was convoking would reform the church, just as the gentle Francis had attempted to reform the church of the thirteenth century from within. John, much like Francis, was calling us back to Christ. It was the Christ of the poor, the Christ who suffered in solidarity with the damaged and the outcast. It was the Christ of the gospel who became the heart of the Johannine church of the 1960's and has newly summoned us to His truth ever since.

When I use the metaphor of 'windows' on our ecumenics as it once was, I suggest that we need to consider the symbol of the window in a different sense than as a mere 'opening' to glimpse an object outside.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize recipient and survivor of the Holocaust gives us a riveting sense of the symbolic power of the 'window' as a vantage point of indifference in his novel *The Town beyond the Wall*. The hero of his story is magnetically drawn to the Hungarian

village where decades earlier his family was deported by the Nazis. Only when he looks up from the town square and sees again the 'window' where a bystander watched all day during the Jews' hasty summons and departure does it dawn upon him that he has returned to wrestle with the man's indifference to their plight. What possesses a person to be so indifferent? Is he not an accomplice with the murderers?

And then the hero, Michael, is drawn back to an earlier episode when a young boy who was also in the concentration camp had come to Michael's room seeking some companionship. But Michael had rejected that overture for friendship. He turned to the window and spurned him. When he turned around the boy had departed, and would soon be dead from an automobile accident. Wiesel tells us that it happened on Yom Kippur, the Jewish festival of reconciliation. An opportunity had been missed. He had frozen in the posture of a guilty bystander. Indifference had touched even this hero, Michael.

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops included in the Decree on Ecumenism the statement that we begged pardon from other Christians whom we had offended, and forgave those who had offended us. Morally speaking, the most corrupting ecumenical sin has been our *indifference* toward one another as baptized sisters and brothers. Before we can progress to new patterns for restoring Christian unity, we need to name our sins of indifference, the humiliations and indignities we have visited upon each other. It is difficult to comprehend how not only church leaders but also the people in the pews could harbour hostilities and religious prejudices so deep-seated that they still strangle some of our people.

Recently I read the remarks of a theological pundit who had assessed that in recent decades we have expected too much from the institutional church. He complained that we had tried to make the church 'all things to all persons'. He recommended that a healthy phase of 'downshifting' would be the most appropriate for the church. My first reaction is one of dismay. This smacks of what I describe to my students as 'Christianity lite' (L-I-T-E, in the sense of curtailing a theology of the cross and a sense of mission). In ecumenical 'futures' it means to relieve some of the pressure of a 'challenge' to church unity. This subtle 'downshifting' happens in our church bureaucracies whenever leaders raise the bar a bit higher and impede any visible ecumenical progress.

Let me give you an example of what I am suggesting. About a year and a half ago, James A Belasco wrote a best-selling book entitled *Teaching the Elephant to Dance: Empowering Change in your Organization*. While it is hardly a study of the church, it has applications for us. The title of the book - rendered in the metaphor of the dancing elephant - reminds us how graceless our institutions can become. Belasco simply described how trainers shackle young elephants with heavy chains to deeply embedded stakes. In that way the elephants learn to stay in place. Older elephants never try to leave even though they have the strength to pull the stake out and move beyond. The conditioning limits their movements with only a small metal bracelet around their foot - attached to nothing.

Our institutions are in many ways conditioned like these elephants. And surely the church has been bound in unfortunate ways by earlier conditioned constraints that need not have been. It is the source of that famous institutional epitaph: "We've always done it this way."

We drag our unattached chain, elephant-like, and never realise that we can walk away from some of our conditioned responses. Belasco reminds us that in today's fast-paced world elephants are endangered species. These slow, ponderous, bulky pachyderms can't move fast enough to escape the ivory hunters (or better, the poachers).

You can see the applications to our con'ditioned ways of ministering to interchurch families as problem 'mixed marriages'. In fact, I would suggest that if you insist on using the old mental starch of our ecumenically indifferent theologies, you will not only fail to understand these families as a gift, but you will endanger the life of the church by contributing to the haemorrhaging away of a major part of the body of the future church.

A new paradigm?

The question I have is: Does the spirituality of interchurch families afford a new paradigm for the inculturation of Christian faith? And does it, in fact, achieve this through a symbiotic relationship of two traditions personified in the unity of wife and husband? This leads to a further question: How does the communion (*koinonia*) lived in an interchurch family foreshadow the unity of our now-separated churches?

In this sense the interchurch family will give us a new 'window' through which to glimpse the future. But I mean the metaphor of 'window' in another sense, too.

Virtually everyone has some familiarity with the new computer technology. One of the most revolutionary breakthroughs in computer technology has been the new Windows' programming. Consider what these computer 'windows' actually do:

1. A 'window' creates a boundary;
2. You can now decide what boundaries make up a file;
3. You can now interface 'windows' (data) from separate files. In the past, you had first to 'exit' from a file, and then go back and collect separate data. You could never look at two things at once.

I suggest that interchurch families are giving the churches such metaphorical 'windows' and new possibilities for appreciating our ecumenical future as never before. And there are some familiar biblical precedents for this openness to the future in the New Testament.

The Magi in Matthew's gospel story of Jesus' birth are my kind of people. In a way, I think that interchurch families are modern magi. Think about it. It took great courage for Matthew's (mythical) characters to leave the Orient and chase a star to Jerusalem, then on to Bethlehem. This was not a guided tour, the AAA-4-star package-travel. There was undoubtedly a 'struggle' going on within these Magi. T.S.Eliot captures the drama in his poem, 'Journey of the Magi'.

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey.*

Notice especially how he concludes the poem:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set this down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death?
There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth
and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our
death.*

Remember that these Magi needed great courage to set out on this journey. Because it was an *interior* search. They looked for something worthy of faith - they were struggling with ultimate questions. And such a journey means you 'leave behind' where you are. It is risky business, being Magi.

Perhaps the most stunning surprise of Epiphany is the realization of disappointment: the story narrates how expectations aren't met. Eliot's poem describes it this way: "The place (of Christ's birth) ... was (you may say) satisfactory." This is not the Christ they expected. A different sort of Messiah. It's all compounded by the star's stopping in Jerusalem where Herod panics at the thought of a rival 'king'. And the Jewish authorities retrieve the information of 'Bethlehem' from the revelations of scripture, but the religious establishment fails to act upon it. Only Magi risk finding Christ in this story which is already eclipsed by the shadow of the cross.

If you dare to be a Magi person you open yourself to conversion. You give up some of your fundamentalisms. You acknowledge that God acts in new and surprising ways. This 'change' is all symbolized by the Magi "returning to their home by another route". ('Homecoming' is a biblical code-word for 'conversion'.) Are they disappointed? Yes and no.

*We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.*

This is the experience of interchurch families - uneasy with the old paradigms of denominationalism, and envisioning the restoration of the full unity of the church. Just as the Magi were the 'gentiles' being amalgamated into the great church of Jewish Christians, so interchurch families are one of the many faces of today's gentiles. These new 'gentiles' always surprise us as privileged people of faith. They even embarrass our institutional Christianity. Gentile-like breakthroughs always happen on the margins. And our response to

this 'wonder' of new kith should be just as the Father in Luke's parable of the prodigal son: welcome them with robes and rings and kisses!

Precincts of God's Epiphany

Thomas Merton has taught me much about ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. In his talk on the day of his death at Bangkok in 1968 he told a story he had heard while on his visit to Asia. A Buddhist abbot was fleeing from his Tibetan monastery before the advance of Chinese Communist troops. Another monk joined him with a train of twenty-five yaks loaded with the treasures of the monastery and 'essential' provisions. The abbot didn't stay with the treasure or treasurer; travelling light, he at last reached India, destitute but alive. The yak-tending monk, unable to leave 'seeming valuables' behind, was overtaken by soldiers and was never heard of again.

This is a Magi-like story. It is the lived experience, too, of interchurch families who are risking to venture ahead of many others. Merton asked if we are planning over the next twenty years to be travelling with a train of yaks? He advised us to "let the yaks take care of themselves". Better, he said, to attend to our own inner transformation. This is the truth lived by authentically interchurch families. Interchurch families are a living parable; they are the precincts of God's epiphany in the ecumenism of our day.

May Christ be with you as you serve the faith of interchurch families. May your own eyes, ears and hearts be opened as you gaze upon the nativity of Christ in this wonderful new Epiphany of the 'domestic church'. Listen and hear, like Ezechiel, the "still quiet voice" of their truth. It is the voice of the God of Jesus Christ who summons us to the future with the faithful reminder: "Behold, I make all things new!"

Telling our Stories

I leave you with three questions for our discussion:

1. What stories of *indifference* (on the part of the church or priests or pastoral ministers) can you tell? What is the 'content' of these stories?
2. What stories of 'teaching elephants to dance' can you tell? Or, what stories of interchurch families as 'modern magi' can you narrate?
3. Can you narrate for us your own first awakening to the *truth* of the ecumenical mission? When and where did the truth of Christ's will for church unity first dawn upon you?

George Kilcourse