

# Interchurch Families

## ***PERTH***

**2-4 MAY 1992**

This year Scottish AIF bravely agreed to host the seventh international conference of interchurch families. They made up for small numbers by their enthusiasm, and masterminded a lively weekend. St Mary's Redemptorist monastery on Kinnoull Hill, Perth, with wonderful gardens and far-reaching views, was an ideal setting.

In 1990 we met in Ireland. Unfortunately the Northern and Southern Irish associations were unable to send representatives this time, but two couples came from the French *Foyers Mixtes* and Fr George Kilcourse, founder of the American AIF, joined us as he has done twice before, together with Orthodox priest Fr Gregory Wingenbach from the Kentuckian Interfaith Community. Dan O'Connor, Scottish Episcopalian priest and director of Scottish Churches House, acted throughout the weekend as a valued observer; we were grateful for his quiet encouragement.

### **Telling our Stories**

On Saturday national groups presented the current situation within each association. Thanks to a timely detour off the M6, the English group were able to show the very first copy, hot off the reels, of the new AIF video, accompanied by a brief description of our current Development Appeal and of Mary Bard's book in preparation: *Telling our Story*.

The Scots, mostly young families, presented a telling sketch. The group emigrated to the moon, each member having a different reason - to find a church where they really felt they belonged, to get away from parents' well-meaning comments, to find an encouraging priest, and so on. Fortunately, they all agreed to return to earth rather than forming a new church on the moon, and to keep trying!

The two French couples represented different generations. They used their own experience to show how things in France have changed over the years with regard to marriage, baptism, religious education and eucharistic sharing. The children of the older couple had been baptised into the French Reformed Church, as the parents felt this gave them more options - interestingly, the opposite of what is often decided in England, perhaps explained by similar attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church in England and the French Reformed Church towards the 'majority' church.

## **Double Belonging**

On Sunday morning George Kilcourse spoke on the 'Telling our Story' theme. His recently published book *Double Belonging* narrates the experience of many interchurch families, together with a theological commentary. He underlined the fact that, as the climate in the churches as a whole becomes more ecumenical, the more interchurch families are able to attend and hold ecumenical workshops and meetings, and the more people will appreciate the contribution interchurch families can make. The text of his talk is given in the Centrepiece of this newsletter.

Fr George, looking at the U.S. situation, said that interchurch marriages, although growing in number, are still seen as an unwelcome phenomenon, a problem rather than a resource. But a high degree of ecumenical and interfaith co-operation is taken for granted, and couples find that their impact on hesitant or hostile clergy is greater if they affirm positively that interchurch marriage is the fruit of the Holy Spirit across the whole church. The church recognises and blesses that which is holy. Couples acting in co-operation with God are bringing themselves into the presence of God.

In our discussions we talked a lot about the vulnerability of interchurch couples - especially through their children - at different stages of their marriage, and therefore of the reluctance of the couples to be exposed because of this. George felt that the associations should act as the memory and conscience of the church, and by using video and various publications should tell the story of vulnerability and faith to illustrate the *success* of the interchurch family.

When Dan O'Connor summed up his feelings about the conference, he stressed that telling our stories needs to be linked with *telling The Story* (Jesus got into trouble about the rules because he put human need first).

The new ecumenical instruments which have been set up in Britain show that the churches have committed themselves to moving forward together, so we may now call them to account when they seem to move too slowly, and to forget the needs of those who suffer most from christian divisions. As we have said so many times before, the disunity of the churches is the abnormality, not the marriage of interchurch couples.

Our worship during the weekend included songs from the Iona community and a lively dramatisation of the gospel by the children, who had also created decorative altar and lectern frontals. Moments of quiet prayer and of sharing the eucharist together united us in the peaceful oratory. We were also united in a visit to Scone Palace, an energetic *ceilidh* and our enjoyment of a robust Scottish diet.

### **Looking Ahead**

The next international conference in 1994 coincides with the United Nations International Year of the Family, and we hope to focus on the theme of the nurture of mixed and interchurch families, while in 1996 we are invited to meet in the United States. The different emphasis in each national association enables us all to put our own situation into clearer perspective. It is good to know that the American association is growing fast, and that new groups are starting in New Zealand and Canada. Perhaps next time they will be with us too. *Melanie Finch*