

# **Report to Swanwick**

This article was published as part of the report on the International Conference of Interchurch Families, held in Newcastle, NSW, Australia, August 2005, for the Swanwick Annual General Meeting in August 2005.

## **Report for AGM, Swanwick 28.08.05**

### **11th International Conference**

#### **Newcastle, New South Wales,**

#### **18-22 August 2005**

Edmonton 2001 was the last English-speaking international conference, before this one in Australia. In between we had the Rome Gathering in 2003, which adopted the Rome paper. Newcastle was smaller than Edmonton, with about 60 participants in all. There were no children, but lots of church leaders. There were couples from various parts of Australia – Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, and Wellington, New Zealand – with a combination of Catholics married to members of the Anglican, Uniting, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. Quite a number were sponsored by their Catholic dioceses, who also sent some Ecumenical Officers, or a member of their Diocesan Ecumenical Commission. There were two couples from Canada, and five of us from England. Most of the couples told their stories – 5 minutes each – to illustrate different points. For example, the Finches talked about baptism, first communion and confirmation. The group in New Zealand had met before the conference, and we were told of one mother who had wept all day after her child's Catholic baptism – she felt bereft. It struck me that that was where we had begun in 1967 – with a couple who had not spoken to one another for a week after their child's baptism. Yet still there are couples who do not know that it needn't be like that.

The first part of the conference focused on the Rome paper. I explained its background; Martin had of course devoted much time and effort to it. The Catholic theologian Gerard Kelly, from Sydney, gave a very good assessment, including a splendid exegesis of Ephesians, showing how the passage on marriage, as a symbol of the Christ/church relationship, fitted into the structure of the whole epistle, which is all about unity. A Uniting Church minister, Chris Budden, turned us to look outwards, with a series of questions that will repay further detailed study. The morning and evening worship was interspersed with quotations from the Rome paper.

The second part of the conference focused on Australian documents – on the very significant report of the bilateral Roman Catholic/Uniting Church dialogue on interchurch families, and

on the guidelines for eucharistic sharing that have been put out by various Australian dioceses since the 1993 Directory appeared, beginning with Brisbane in 1995. We were meeting in the diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, whose guidelines appeared in 2001. The Catholic bishop was with us all the time, as was the Anglican assistant bishop; this was a great encouragement. The Maitland-Newcastle guidelines recognise that some interchurch spouses may experience a real need to express their unity 'by receiving the Eucharist whenever they attend Mass together'. If this happens infrequently, they may do so on suitable occasions (provided the conditions for admission are met). If it occurs frequently, provision is made for the non-Catholic spouse to 'request permission to receive the Eucharist every time s/he attends Mass with his/her spouse.' On occasions when other Christians may be attending Mass neither an explicit prohibition nor an explicit invitation should be given publicly. It was very moving to hear a Uniting Church minister, wife of a Catholic, speak of her welcome by the parish priest and community to receive communion on a continuing basis.

Cardinal Cassidy, the predecessor of Cardinal Kasper as President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, now living in retirement in Newcastle, listened in on much of the conference and said goodbye with a few unprepared remarks. I think they are significant in measuring the distance we have travelled since 1993. He said that at that date, when the Council were working on the Directory, they felt that there was often a danger to the faith of the partners in an interchurch marriage, and the norms were formulated in a way that sought to preserve their faith. He did not think that at that time the Pontifical Council had as much appreciation as he himself now has – especially after attending the conference – of the contribution interchurch families can make to Christian unity.

*Ruth Reardon*