

Association of Interchurch Families

Contribution to the Synodality Conversation

Introduction

Interchurch families are couples from two different church traditions (usually a Roman Catholic married to a Christian of another communion) who both retain their original church membership but, so far as they are able, are also committed to live, worship and participate in their spouse's church. Those who are parents exercise a joint responsibility under God for the religious and spiritual upbringing of their children and they teach them by word and example to appreciate both their Christian traditions. There is, however, no blueprint for such interchurch families. Each one is unique and makes its own conscientious decision about the extent and manner in which it will live out its two-church character, sharing in the richness of the traditions of both communities.

Mindful of the direction in the Synodal documents that "Genuine efforts must be made to include all voices" the Association of Interchurch Families [AIF] convened an online conversation for members to share in small groups what it is like to live as an interchurch couple in today's Church. The output from these conversations and from a similar exercise with members of the English and Welsh Anglican Roman Catholic Committee [EWARC] in 2020 have been combined to generate this contribution to the Synodal process which is structured around the three synodal themes – Communion, Participation and Mission, looking in turn at the contribution of interchurch families to each one. All the conversations were deep, open and moving, and spoke of both the joys and the sorrows of being part of an interchurch family.¹

Participation

Through the years of their marriages, interchurch families "walk together" and share together in their domestic church with the Spirit ever-present and binding them close, like the third strand in "a cord that is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Our stories tell of the unique gift that interchurch families have to offer in the intimacy and everydayness of our ecumenical relationships with each other where we develop a space in which we can do exactly what the Synod is asking for – we can hear the voices of more than just the "Catholic half" as we attempt to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. This space, we believe, is a graced one that is anointed in baptism and marriage. It speaks prophetically of a distinctive form of participation across ecclesial boundaries, one rooted in deep communion of faith, love and sacrament where we gather an experience of grass-roots Christian Unity that few other members of our churches are privileged to share. Our experience of walking together as members of different churches united in baptism and marriage gives us a particular expertise, wisdom and, we believe, an *authority* that can be offered as part of the Synod conversation.

Too often members' stories told of a lack of pastoral sensitivity for interchurch couples from priests (sometimes, but not always, newly ordained) who know little about what makes them different from other "mixed marriages". Many do not seem to recognise that the concerns and needs of these couples are deeply spiritual and have a significant impact on their sacramental bond and the life of their domestic church. Couples told of cases where the lack of welcome from Catholic clergy has led the family to worship almost exclusively in the non-Catholic spouse's church where they felt more welcome.

¹ Mirroring the comment made by Pope St John Paul II who addressed interchurch families during his visit to England (1982) saying: "You live in your marriages the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian Unity".

It was noted that some of the increase in pastoral insensitivity may be linked to an approach in parts of the Catholic Church that focuses upon cultural Catholicism and a 'traditionalist' mindset.

Communion

A key aspect of our experience, and one which is never far from the consideration of many interchurch families, is the desire to share Communion. Many in positions of authority in the Catholic church seem unaware – or are possibly not concerned – that interchurch couples' need for Eucharistic hospitality is both deeply spiritual and genuinely felt. Ours is not just a casual wish, but something that impacts our sacramental bond, whether married for 6 years or 60.

On the occasions when bishops or priests have applied the norms of *One Bread One Body* sympathetically and have given permission for non-Catholic spouses to receive communion, couples told of this being a source of great joy, a blessing on their spiritual union which has strengthened their marriage bond and deepened their relationship. Some have been given permission to share Communion together just for specific one-off occasions, but couples ask why, if it is acceptable on that day, is it not also permissible the next time that they attend Mass – and the next. In the words of Pope Francis, Communion is "food for the journey" and, like our bodies, our spiritual union, our marriage, needs regular feeding.

Sadly, this pastoral need is more often refused than granted and interchurch families are separated at the Communion table. Both spouses (ie including the Catholic partner) talk of feeling rejected. The scandal and pain of disunity is often referred to by bishops and priests at ecumenical forums but, for obvious reasons, most do not (indeed, cannot) understand the pain of which they talk in the way that it affects interchurch families. We have become experts in handling this pain; it is an expertise and experience that we ask our church to listen to, and to address, as we walk together. It is notable that couples from across the country talked of the support they receive from other members of their Catholic congregations who firmly believe that it is wrong to deny Communion to the non-Catholic spouse

Although rules and norms allow for Communion to be shared "in exceptional cases", the granting of such exceptions is nearly always dependent on the personal stance of the local priest / bishop. Some are prepared to recognise the conscientious discernment reached by individual couples, but others stand rigidly by the view that the situation of being an interchurch couple is not 'exceptional' and thus is not sufficient cause to consider offering Communion. Other couples have been told that it is "just not possible".

Local practice regarding the application of eucharistic hospitality is geographically inconsistent (several couples referred to it as a "postcode lottery") – and a change of parish priest or bishop can often bring a sudden reversal of pastoral care which is at best insensitive, and at worst a source of considerable pain. One couple who had been allowed to receive together for over 30 years were recently refused when a new priest arrived, and the Methodist wife was turned away at the altar on Easter Sunday. They are now in their 80s and are deeply distressed. Couples spoke of no longer worshipping together after a new priest revoked the permission given by his predecessor; of not asking for permission because of the pain of previous refusals; of "milestone" wedding anniversaries not being considered "exceptional"; and of the impact that refusal to admit a non-Catholic parent to communion has on children's view of the Catholic church. Even committed families talked about losing hope because "we have been rebuffed so many times"

It is important to note that interchurch couples involved in the conversations were not seeking eucharistic hospitality for all. Rather, they seek recognition of their specific situation and need,

and a much more positive embracing of the pastoral possibilities that are already provided for by current regulations - but are rarely implemented in England.

The Catholic Church often seems to approach the issue of eucharistic hospitality from an institutional perspective rather than from people's lived experience and pastoral need, and it tends to overlook the ecclesiology of the domestic church where two people become "one flesh, one body" in marriage. The current norms in *One Bread One Body* emphasise that requests for Eucharistic hospitality are to be discerned by the bishop or his delegated authority. Yet the deepening sense of what it means to be a synodal church in which the Christian body discerns *together*, suggests that this process of discernment concerning eucharistic sharing should be one in which the interchurch family itself should also participate.

Mission

Families play an important role in the mission of the church and in this context interchurch couples have particular evangelising gifts to offer. Disunity has undoubtedly undermined the effectiveness of Christian mission for centuries, but interchurch families, united in love and faith across ecclesial difference, are a powerful witness to a deeper truth about the oneness of Christianity and the way that the Spirit works in the world. Couples talk of integrating both unity and diversity in their marriages and of being a prophetic sign for the whole Church, highlighting that what we have in common far outweighs that which separates us.

Interchurch families are a resource for their churches and for *the* Church. Without fanfare, most such families witness to their unity through committed engagement with ecumenical activities. They are to be found working and worshipping together at all levels of ecumenical organisations and are often to be found at the heart of many local groups involving other Christians. In their own churches they help to share good practice from their "other" church home, and, through their efforts, they demonstrate a compelling example of receptive ecumenism in action. And all the while, by not hiding their two-church identity, their example speaks to the world about the unity of Spirit that is central to what Christians really believe.

Conclusion

Interchurch families learn every day from their experience of walking together in love and unity, whilst living with ecclesial difference, and we offer that learning to the Church and to the Synodal process. We enjoy the riches of each other's faith; we learn to respect difference and, in doing so, deepen our own faith and learn to value it. We learn tolerance. We learn that difference is a richness that leads to a broader understanding of each other and of the simple truth that there is much more that unites than divides us. We live this unity in our homes, form deep spiritual friendships with people from other churches and share our experiences. We long for our churches to learn this same message of unity from us, to listen to the Spirit who works to bring us together - and to act on our hope.

Finally, a few general, verbatim comments from interchurch families:

- "The experience of our spouse's church has enhanced and enriched our marriage and our commitment to ecumenism. We have gained the best from each of our denominations – receptive ecumenism at the personal level"
- "Being married to someone from a different denomination has made me more aware of the strengths of my own – and a better member."
- "We think about our own faith tradition very deeply – being a member is not just routine."

- “Our children were upset that their mother was refused permission to receive Communion at a First Communion service. The refusal has impacted their approach to the Catholic church which they see as unnecessarily legalistic. They no longer practice.”
- “I feel a failure when my church refuses my wife communion.”
- “By faithfully living, and often worshipping, in both churches, we are ahead of our times”.