



## Two Churches, One Marriage

### Finding Support and Acceptance



### Education

#### Acceptance from Parents

#### Acceptance from Other Family Members

#### Acceptance within Churches

#### Strategies for dealing with lack of acceptance

#### Acceptance from Parents

An important issue for many interchurch couples is gaining support and acceptance from their parents. Unfortunately, some couples indicated they did not always get the support or acceptance they desired. One woman said her husband's Protestant family did not want them to get married because she was Roman Catholic. Ellen, who helps prepare couples for marriage, reported that some engaged couples worry that their parents will not attend the wedding because they disapprove of the interchurch marriage. Issues of acceptance can also arise later in the marriage when the couple has children. One man reported that his wife's Catholic family was upset by the couple's decision to baptize the child in the Methodist church.

Lack of acceptance is shown in a variety of other ways, such as making critical remarks regarding a person's religion. One woman described her husband's family's reaction to her being Catholic as, "You people are all wrong. You don't know what you're talking about. You pray to Mary, you pray to the saints, you do all these smells and bells stuff, and it's just wrong." An unwillingness to attend a worship service with the couple was also perceived as a sign of non-acceptance. One woman shared how her Catholic parents weren't willing to go to their Protestant church because "It doesn't count on Sunday." Even if a parent does go to a service, a lack of participation in the service can be interpreted as non-acceptance. One Catholic woman complained that when her Mother went to a candlelight service at her husband's Protestant church, she did not sing the Christmas carols or mention the service later. In contrast, taking the time and effort to learn about another's church conveyed some measure of acceptance. One man said that after his brother also married a Catholic woman, his father attended the Catholic Church to learn about the Catholic faith, and is now much more comfortable with it.

Ironically, having interchurch parents did not necessarily guarantee that couples received support or acceptance for their own interchurch marriage. One woman's mother was very much against her having an interchurch marriage because of her own difficult time in an interchurch marriage. Another woman reported that her mother was very upset when she changed denominations, even though her mother had also changed denominations in her own interchurch marriage.



## Two Churches, One Marriage

Talking with interchurch couples gives some insights as to why some parents have difficulty with their child entering an interchurch marriage. Some parents fear their child will become less active in church as a result of an interchurch marriage. This concern was voiced by Danielle, a Catholic engaged to an Evangelical Christian man. She said, "Your mom said to you that she's worried that we were unequally yoked. I know she meant, 'If you have somebody who's like, very strong in their faith, and you're with somebody who has no faith, or just completely weak, you might be brought down to that person's level, you might not be able to stay at your level.'" Another woman believed her father-in-law was initially upset over their marriage out a fear that she would try to change his son to Catholicism.

Parents may also have negative reactions when their child changes churches or denominations. Some parents see it as a personal failure. One woman thought her parents felt "they didn't raise their kids to be strong-enough Catholics so that they felt they needed to remain Catholic." She later added that her mother prays everyday that she will return to the Catholic Church. This sense of failure may also lead parents to feel embarrassment. One woman said that most of her relatives did not know that she was not going to the Catholic Church because her parents did not want them to know. Other parents can perceive the change of affiliation as an act of disloyalty. One woman reported that her mother changed to Catholicism, and felt betrayed by her daughter's change to a Protestant denomination. She believes her mother thought the decision to change affiliation was "kind of like thumbing my nose at her decision."

In addition to the points mentioned above, the level of acceptance by parents could be influenced by many other factors. The belief that one church was superior to another made it difficult for some parents or family members to accept interchurch marriages. Several individuals shared how parents, relatives, or priests communicated their belief that the "Catholic Church is the only one." One man described how neither his mother nor his brothers went to the cousin's wedding because she was "marrying down" to a non-Catholic and was changing to her partner's denomination. His family believed the Catholic Church was the best for believers, while being a Presbyterian "was good, but not so good." The belief that one's church is superior to others' is not restricted to Catholics. One woman reported that her mother-in-law questioned whether or not she was saved because she was a Catholic. Another man reported that his staunch Presbyterian grandmother wrote a number of family members complaining when someone in the family married a Methodist. Many interchurch individuals reject this way of thinking, preferring to focus on the fact that both are Christians, or that they worship the same God.

The strength of religious identity in one's family of origin may be another factor that impacts acceptance. Alex shared that he would have experienced considerable family pressure from both his parents and extended family if he had not remained Catholic. He attributed this to the fact that he came from a very Catholic family, which had priests in multiple generations and had other members who were highly involved in the Catholic Church. Previous family experiences with interchurch marriages can also influence acceptance. One woman described her family's fear that she and her husband would have troubles similar to other relatives over religious differences. In contrast, having siblings who were already in interchurch marriages could sometimes pave the way for acceptance for another sibling entering an interchurch marriage.



## Two Churches, One Marriage

Many interchurch individuals believed that the level of acceptance from parents and other family members could partly be explained by their experiences with other religions growing up. In general, interchurch individuals believed that more exposure to other religions increased acceptance. Conversely, lack of exposure could create misconceptions and lack of acceptance. One man stated, "Ignorance breeds prejudice." Another said regarding his grandmother, "She never really said anything, but the majority of the misconceptions she's had were simply because she never was around Catholics. She never grew up near a Catholic." The type of experience can also be an important factor. One man described how his parents were not supportive of his interchurch marriage to begin with, and thinks that it is due in part to the fact that they grew up in a community where there was friction between Catholics and Lutherans.

Finally, it may be helpful to understand the historical context of interchurch marriages. Today, nearly 40% of marriages are interchurch, indicating a much greater level of acceptance than in the past. In previous generations, interchurch marriages were much less common and actively discouraged. One man said, "If you go back 30-40 years ago, a lot of priests wouldn't let you marry somebody of another faith." One interchurch couple that was married 47 years said that they were not allowed to have Mass at their wedding because they were interchurch. Parents or other family members raised in these earlier generations may have a less accepting attitude about interchurch marriages based on the negative attitudes about interchurch marriages with which they were raised.

It is important to note that not all parents had difficulty accepting a child's interchurch marriage. One mother, for example, told her daughter-in-law, "As long as you can get him to go to church, I don't care what church." Other people suggested that acceptance of the partner by parents was made easier because they came to know and like the individual. In some cases, the parents may even be truly indifferent to the issue of the couple being interchurch. In other cases, the individual may have mixed feelings. One couple discussed how her parents were upset that their daughter had changed to another denomination, but were pleased she was still active in a church (unlike her brothers, the woman added).

It is important to recognize that with time, parents who were initially concerned about or non-accepting of an interchurch relationship may grow to accept it. The mother-in-law who was fearful that her son would be "unequally yoked" eventually was able to support and even defend the relationship. When asked by the women at her church Bible study if her son's Catholic fiancée was saved, she responded, "Yes, she is. As a matter of fact, she's a lot more of a Christian than many of the people that I know go to this church." Another woman said it took her Catholic mother five to six years to come to terms with her change to a Protestant church. She shared that her mother went to visit one of her brothers who had moved over a year ago to a different state. When Sunday morning came around and her parents asked to go to church, her brother had to look up in the phone book the location of the nearest church. When her mother returned home, she said to her daughter, "Well, at least you go to church." The woman said that after that things were OK.

### Acceptance from Other Family Members



## Two Churches, One Marriage

Lack of acceptance can also come from other family members such as siblings, grandparents, or other relatives. One woman described how an aunt and uncle ignored their wedding invitation. She said her aunt and uncle believed the couple was not legitimately married “because if we don't get married in a Catholic Church, we're not married in God's eyes.” In some cases, an interchurch parent may even have to deal with a lack of acceptance from his or her own children. This situation is most likely to arise when the individual has children from a previous relationship. One woman who became Catholic in her second marriage commented to her oldest daughter that she had not made a very Christian comment. Her daughter retorted, “What do you care! You're not a Christian any more, you're Catholic!” Another woman described her daughter's difficulty with her becoming an Episcopalian. Her daughter exclaimed, “But Mom, you've always been Presbyterian! You're mother was always Presbyterian. Your grandmother was always Presbyterian.”

### Acceptance within Churches

A lack of acceptance of interchurch couples could sometimes be experienced in church as well. One woman said, “Often times, some of the biggest hurts come from people within a church as well. We had one couple tell us that we were such a neat couple, it's too bad we could never be a sacrament of a marriage because we weren't both Catholic.” Another man said the church has a tendency to see interchurch couples as a problem. He said that churches “are treating it as if it's some sort of problem that we're going to stamp out.” Several incidences were mentioned where clergy were insensitive or not accepting of interchurch partners or marriages. Interchurch couples may be especially surprised or disappointed by the lack of acceptance from clergy. As one woman put it, you expect clergy to offer “respect, acceptance, and tolerance and understanding.”

Non-acceptance of interchurch couples within the church was demonstrated in a number of ways. Clergy may refuse to participate in an important religious ceremony for the couple. One couple was upset when a pastor with whom the husband had grown up with refused to officiate the couple's wedding. A Catholic woman also asked her priest to be at her second daughter's baptism at her husband's Lutheran church, but he responded that he could not do it. By the same token, clergy who are willing to participate in an interchurch ceremony, perhaps with clergy from other churches, can convey acceptance to the couple.

Interchurch individuals also described experiences where clergy took the position that one denomination or church was superior to another. Two women, for example, had similar experiences where a priest drew a circle and put the Catholic Church in the middle of the circle to represent that it had the fullest truth. Other denominations were off-center or outside the circle, suggesting their faith or belief in God was not as full or as good as Catholics. One woman said her girlfriend and her fiancé were turned away by a priest because she was not Catholic. She was made to feel like “it was a bad thing that she wasn't Catholic” or that she was “inferior.”

Lack of acceptance was also communicated by trying to persuade one person to change denominations. This could be interpreted as “you are not acceptable as you are, you must change or convert.” Andrea, a Protestant woman, described getting a letter every year from her husband's



## Two Churches, One Marriage

Catholic Church inviting her to join the church. She felt this communicated that she was important only if she changed denominations. Chris, an Evangelical Christian, said it appeared that the priest's goal in marriage preparation was "basically to try to change me. He did not try to understand the differences and come up with some way to work them out, which we have done within our own time." His partner Danielle added that in one session, the priest "came in with his Bible all place marked like he was just going to open his Bible and show my fiancé where he was wrong." In contrast, not trying to change the partner was interpreted as a sign of acceptance. Eve, a Protestant woman, took religion classes to learn more about her partner's Catholic faith. When she later told the priest she wanted to change religious affiliation, he expressed surprise by saying, "You're kidding. I mean, that's great, but you're kidding." Eve interpreted his response to mean that "he was OK with the two of us being together and being married and it just didn't matter to him that I wasn't Catholic."

Being excluded from church activities by both clergy and church members also conveyed a lack of acceptance. One woman was hurt when their church declined the couple's offer to lead a Renewal group and an interfaith group during an evangelization process. She commented, "There is still a lot of saying no. You're just not good enough." A man shared that he and his wife had been actively involved in Marriage Encounter, but left after some people in the group stated that there needed to be two Catholic partners to lead Marriage Encounter. Just as being excluded conveyed non-acceptance, being invited to participate despite one's religious differences could be powerful in terms of conveying acceptance. A woman appreciated the fact that her Protestant husband was asked to help at a Catholic high school. When they informed the principal that he was not Catholic, he replied, "So what."

Acknowledging that interchurch couples exist and taking an interest in them was another powerful expression of acceptance. One woman said the Family Life Office in her city was wonderful because they acknowledged that interchurch couples existed and "that it's OK to exist." Another person liked the fact that church mailings came addressed to both of them, which was another way of acknowledging that the other partner existed and was important. One woman felt supported when church members demonstrated interest by inquiring if the couple had attended the other's service.

### Strategies for dealing with lack of acceptance

During interviews, interchurch individuals offered different strategies that they used to deal with lack of acceptance from family and church. An important theme raised by several individuals was to focus less on what others think and more on what the couple believes is the right thing to do. One person advised that young couples "shouldn't be so concerned about what the world wants them to do, or what their parents want them to do. They have to be comfortable themselves, as people of Christ's church. They need to pray about it and need to seek direction and I think they have to eventually come down to the decision that they're comfortable with." Another said that she and her husband soon realized that no matter what they did, someone was going to disagree with their decision. This realization helped them focus on what they needed to do, and not be



## Two Churches, One Marriage

preoccupied with what others thought. Another said, “Your faith is your own. And you can't do it to please somebody else.”

Although this advice may seem simple in concept, it may be difficult to implement in practice. Individuals who have an overly strong connection or dependence upon their parents, for example, may have great difficulty going against a parent's wishes or desires. One man, who became very active in the Catholic Church, never officially joined the Catholic Church because his mother would strongly object to him becoming Catholic. Even after her death, he is uncertain if he will ever officially join the church. This is only one example of how parents had a strong influence over their adult children. Individuals, however, also need to be cautious about the opposite extreme, which is to automatically disregard all outside input.

Interchurch individuals also need to be careful about how much they will personalize criticism or lack of acceptance directed towards them. Erica, for example, described wanting her priest to be at her second daughter's baptism, but he would not attend, saying he couldn't do it. She was unclear as to why he said no. She wondered if perhaps he wanted to attend but could not due to church reasons rather than personal reasons. She admitted that it would be less hurtful if she knew he did not come because he had “his hands tied” rather than for personal reasons. As much as possible, individuals should try to determine what is behind a lack of acceptance. Often times, lack of acceptance on the part of parents is rooted in some fear that they have for their child. As stated earlier, some parents fear their children will drift away from church if they are in an interchurch marriage, or they fear they did not do a good enough job raising their children in their own religious tradition. In other cases, the lack of acceptance may be rooted in some negative experiences or attitudes about other religious traditions. Understanding these underlying fears or attitudes can take some of the sting out of lack of acceptance. It may also give the individual some insight on how best to address the issue, such as providing the necessary reassurance to alleviate a parent's fears.

At times, you may need to gently confront others who make non-accepting or insensitive comments in an effort to educate or sensitize them. One woman believed that interchurch individuals have some responsibility to share and educate others on what life is like for interchurch couples. She noted, for example, that Catholic schools need to be reminded that “there are parents who are not of the Catholic religion, so when we're doing things of religious significance you can't cut out half of a child's parents. You have to find a way to help include them.”

It will obviously take some wisdom to discern when it is best to educate others about how a particular comment or action was hurtful or insensitive, or simply let the incident pass. Although some individuals may become defensive if the incident is addressed, others individuals will be grateful because it will raise their consciousness about that issue. Talking about a particular incident may open the door for a deeper dialogue about the topic, which may benefit both parties.

Another strategy for dealing with non-acceptance was to avoid talking about the issues with family members or others. One woman shared that she would like to talk to her mother about religion and her marriage, but does not because she knows that her mother will become defensive and say,



## Two Churches, One Marriage

“You should be doing this.” Another said she rarely discussed religion with her family because her change of religious affiliation was a sore topic with the family. Although this strategy should not be endorsed in all situations, there are times when avoiding talking about a sore topic may be the prudent option. This option should be considered when maintaining the relationship is important, compromise is not a real possibility, and several previous attempts to discuss the situation have failed. If this approach is used, family members should attempt to build a connection in other areas besides the area of conflict.

A final way to deal with lack of acceptance is to seek out the support of others who are sympathetic and accepting of interchurch couples, especially other interchurch couples. For example, one individual commented that they liked their interchurch group because they are with other people who understand them because they are in a similar situation. Some couples choose to develop an informal network of interchurch couples, while others seek out more formal contact with interchurch couples such as joining a support group or organization for interchurch couples. One such organization is the Association for Interchurch Families (AIF) (<http://www.interchurchfamilies.org>), which is an international organization devoted to interchurch families. This site contains numerous resources for couples, including an electronic version of its journal, *Interchurch Families*. You can also join a listserv for individuals interested in discussing interchurch issues. The AIF website also lists chapters or contacts for several different countries. For information about the American chapter of the Association for Interchurch Families, you can go to the following web address: <http://www.aifusa.org>.