



Two Churches, One Marriage

The Religious Upbringing of Children



Education

A Challenging Topic for Couples to Explore

For couples that plan to have children, an important question that must be faced is deciding which religious tradition or traditions the children will be raised within. This is a challenging question for many interchurch couples. In fact, many interchurch couples stated that the religious upbringing of children was the issue most likely to cause conflict. Each parent naturally wants to pass on to their child or children their religious beliefs and heritage. Each parent's family of origin may also have strong feelings or convictions about the religious upbringing of the children, which can make the decision even more complex for couples.

Therefore, it may come as little surprise that many interchurch couples postpone talking about the religious upbringing of children until the children arrive. In fact, when and where to baptize the child may precipitate conflict for the couple as they strive to make a mutually satisfying decision about the religious upbringing of their child. Other couples reported postponing baptizing their child to avoid a conflict over the issue.

Rather than adopt a passive stance towards the issue, it is recommended that couples begin a dialogue on this issue as soon as possible. This will permit the couple time to fully explore each other's religious traditions, expectations for parenting, and the potential implications of any decision the couple makes. Taking time to explore this issue reflects that making a decision of this magnitude is a process that takes time.

Different Approaches to Addressing the Religious Upbringing of Children

Couples used several different approaches to raising their children. These various approaches that couples used, along with their potential strengths and limitations are described below:

One Religious Tradition, One Church - One approach to raising children is to decide on one religious tradition as a couple, and raise the children in that religious tradition. In some cases, both partners changed religious affiliation to a third denomination that was agreeable to both. In the majority of cases, however, one partner changed religious affiliation to the other partner's denomination. In some cases, one partner becomes active in the other partner's church but does not officially join that church. Tom and Mary, for example, were Methodist and Catholic



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respectively. The couple decided to raise their child Catholic. Although Tom became active in his wife's church, he never officially joined the Catholic Church.

As described in the previous unit, individuals could have several motivations for changing religious affiliation, with the religious upbringing of children being only one possible reason. Other prominent reasons included finding another denomination the individual preferred to their own, believing the family or marriage would be stronger if they belonged to one denomination, or having the desire to worship together. Several couples stated that they felt raising their children in one religious tradition would be less confusing for their children.

This approach, however, did present problems for some couples. As mentioned in the previous unit, the decision to change religious affiliation can impact an individual's relationship with their parents or extended family. Some families expressed disapproval over the individual's decision to change religious affiliation. Other individuals feared that they were hurting their parents by their decision. Beth, who changed from Catholicism to her husband's denomination, feels like she let her mother down because she will never see her grandson "make his first Holy Communion and that sort of thing." She struggles most with her decision when she hears her mother talk about her friend's children having their first communion or similar events. This leaves her feeling bad or guilty. Beth also feels like she would be closer with her family if they were the same denomination. Her husband Peter concurred, and added that family gatherings like Christmas and Sundays can be more difficult with extended family because they come from different church traditions.

Different Religious Traditions, One Church - A second approach used by some couples was for each partner to remain active in their own religious tradition, but raise all the children in one partner's religious tradition. The key advantage of this approach is that it allows each individual to remain active in his or her own church, which may be crucial for individuals who have a strong identity with their current church or denomination. The biggest potential difficulty with this approach is that one partner may feel excluded from the religious training of the children. One parent commented, for example, that she felt a "real separation" when the children were in a religious event and only one parent was invited to participate in the ceremony.

This approach also presents challenges to the parent who raises the child in his or her own denomination or church. This parent cannot share the responsibility of religious training of the children in the same way same church couples can. Eric, a father of three, lamented, "Talk about the challenge . . . There were times when I found myself in church with these three kids in the pew and I said, 'What kind of a deal have I struck here?' I mean, I am alone with these kids in this church trying to keep control of them, you know, trying to keep my faith. Who got the better deal out of this thing?"

One of the issues that these couples must address is in which parent's church the children will be raised. Research suggests that children are generally raised in the church of the parent who is more devout. One Catholic woman, Cassandra, said she did not want to promise to raise her children Catholic because she recognized that her husband "was a better Christian, being a Methodist, than I was as a Catholic." Other factors, however, can influence which church the child



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or children are raised. Some couples consider the impact the decision will have on their respective families of origin. One couple, for example, anticipated strong resistance from the husband's family if they raised the child anything other than Catholic. To avoid that problem, they decided to raise the child Catholic. Stephanie said they decided that their children would be raised Catholic because they wanted their children to go to Catholic schools for a better education. The couple agreed that it would be easier for them going to a Catholic school if they were Catholic. The type of religious education or youth programs available through one church can be another factor weighed in the decision. One couple, for example, decided to have the children begin to attend the husband's church because the youth program was much stronger at his church.

Different Religious Traditions, Different Churches - A variation of the second approach was for each parent to remain active in his or her own church, and raise each child exclusively in a single church, but not all in the same church. One couple, Allen and Debbie, decided prior to having children to raise the boys Lutheran (the father's denomination) and the girls Catholic (the mother's denomination). One potential pitfall to an arrangement based on the child's sex is if the couple later has only boys or girls, or a very uneven mix of the two. In these cases, the arrangement may not seem as balanced or fair. Some remarried or stepfamilies also adopt this approach, with the children being raised in each biological parent's church.

Different Religious Traditions, Both Churches - A fourth approach is for each individual to remain active in his or her own church and teach the children both religious traditions. Chris and Danielle, for example, described their plan for raising their children in both Evangelical Christian and Catholic churches. They agreed they would teach their young child the "mutual beliefs" about salvation and God that both denominations shared. They also planned to continue to attend both churches. As the child got older and could ask questions, then they would answer the child's questions honestly and openly, including if they had different points of view. However, the couple also agreed that neither would belittle the other person's church or the other person's beliefs. In addition, neither person would attempt to explain the other's teachings or doctrine. The child would eventually be given the freedom to decide which church he or she wanted to join. Although the couple feared that exposing the child to both churches might be a little confusing, both felt this was the fairest or most equitable solution.

Indeed, the fear that the children would be confused kept other couples from considering this option. Another fear expressed by some was that children raised in both churches might get a watered down version of each, and never develop a deep conviction about either religious tradition. Couples who elected to raise their children in both churches, however, believed being exposed to two different religions could be an advantage rather than a limitation. Charles, for example, believed that children raised in interchurch marriages had the potential for a deeper or more closely examined faith. He said, "You are forced to explore what you really believe, not only as parents, but also your children, because you have more than one view point. And I think that is a strength. I think children come out with a stronger faith because they thought through it. It's not a childish faith that was based strictly on whatever my mom and dad told me." Some parents tried to avoid confusing their children by emphasizing the commonalities rather than the differences between the denominations. Elizabeth stated she and her partner intended on building a very



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strong foundation that would be based on “fundamentals of Christianity,” and not necessarily the Catholic or Lutheran church. Some parents also stated that they believed their children would learn to be more accepting of other religions. Paul stated he thought his children had learned to be more tolerant of other religious traditions. He added, “I think that they are comfortable in their own religion but they also feel that other people have a right to be comfortable in their religion.”

Concerns about this approach included the challenge of sharing one's faith with their children in a way that was both appropriate and respectful to the other partner's beliefs. Charles shared, “I think one of the challenges is to be true to your faith. A lot of times there are questions that you can't answer in the same way as you have been taught and you don't want to answer it in such a way that you denigrate her beliefs, but at the same time you don't also want to subjugate your own. So that becomes kind of tricky. For a while I was really uncomfortable doing that. It took me a while to come to the realization that the best way was just to be honest and explain that there is a difference and this is what the difference is. You're much better off than sweeping it under the carpet or getting some sort of bland answer that doesn't really do either one of you any good.” Others questioned the time and financial resources required to be active in both churches. Simon, who said he wanted to expose his son to both religious traditions, worried how his son would be able to go to two religious education classes.

Give Them a Choice - As the children grow older, another approach may evolve, which is to give the children the freedom to choose which tradition they want to follow. Tim, a believer of this approach, stated, “Each kid has got to find their own way.” Some parents feel strongly about this that they do not baptize their children, fearing that it will predetermine the child's choice. Chris and Danielle, for example, resisted a priest's advice to have their infant baptized Catholic because they believed that for “the child to go through these things would be obviously making the child Catholic.” Both felt that this was not fair.