



Two Churches, One Marriage

Religious Affiliation: To Change or Not to Change



Education

No Right or Wrong Answer

Reasons Why Some Individuals Changed Religious Affiliation

Reasons Why Some Individuals Did Not Change

Change is a Process

No Right or Wrong Answer

Couples from different religious backgrounds face a difficult decision with regards to religious affiliation. Should individuals change religious affiliation to create a same-church marriage, or should each partner remain faithful to their own religious affiliation? Couples have built successful marriages choosing both pathways. Therefore, the question is not whether or not one approach is right or wrong, but rather, which approach best fits you and your partner's needs. Each approach has potential positives and negatives. Individuals must carefully consider the potential positives and negatives to each approach. Then they must decide how important each of these factors are, giving them proper weight in their decision-making.

The next two sections explore reasons why individuals chose to or chose not to change religious affiliation. As stated earlier, these two sections are not intended to advocate for one position over the other, but to highlight the various factors that can enter the decision-making process.

Reasons Why Some Individuals Changed Religious Affiliation

Individuals who are in interchurch relationships can change religious affiliation for a number of reasons. These factors include:

Preferred the New Denomination – In a national survey, individuals who were originally in interchurch relationship indicated that the most important reason they changed religious affiliation was that they preferred the new denomination. Through an interchurch relationship, individuals become exposed to and learn about their partner's denomination. For some individuals, they find their partner's denomination a better fit than the one in which they were originally raised. Bernadette, for example, was raised Lutheran by her parents. Through her marriage with Phillip, she learned more about the Catholic Church. Over time, Bernadette discovered that the Catholic teachings were a better fit with her beliefs, and she eventually joined the Catholic Church. It is also



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possible that individuals may find a particular church community or congregation that they prefer, but happens to be a different denomination.

A Stronger Marriage and Family – The national survey also indicated that another key motive for individuals to change religious affiliation was the belief that their marriage or family would be stronger if they were united on the religion issue. Marie, for example, expressed concern that families have enough problems as it is, without being “split on the religion issue.” She felt the family would be stronger if it had one faith. Adam expressed a similar desire for unity, stating, “The point of getting married is two becoming one. And, what is the point of doing that if you're living separate lives, especially in an area as intimate as your faith.”

Desire to Worship Together – Another key reason for individuals to change religious affiliation was the desire to worship together as a couple. Meredith said, “I just wanted us to be able to go to church together.” The desire to worship together may be closely related to wanting a united marriage for many individuals.

For the Children – Children was another common motive for changing religious affiliation. Some couples feel that the children will receive a mixed message about religion, or will be confused by two different religious traditions. How couples address the religious upbringing of children will be explored in more depth in the next unit.

Both Changed as a Compromise – Some individuals reported that one reason they changed religious affiliation was out of a compromise. Rather than require only one individual to change religious affiliation, some couples agree to look for a church that will be mutually agreeable to both. Peggy and Matt, for example, both became Episcopalian because it offered elements that both wanted from a church. Peggy, a former Catholic, said she needed a church that had kneeling benches, liturgy, and communion similar to the Catholic Church. Matt, an organist, needed a church with good music.

To Keep a Relationship – Some individuals also feel pressured by their partners to change religious affiliation, or risk losing the relationship. Beth admitted that she didn't want a disagreement over religion to keep her and her partner from getting married, so she changed religious affiliation. Although Beth was raised Catholic and had strong beliefs, she noted that her partner was “real head-strong” about not becoming Catholic, and also “didn't want to have our family split and go to two different churches.” Beth said, “I guess I wanted to get married so bad I did, more or less tell him, ‘Yes, I would change.’” She later reported feeling resentment over this issue.

Keep Peace in Extended Family – For a small number of people, they changed religious affiliation in order to keep peace in the extended family. Derek stated that his sister-in-law became Catholic because her husband's family was strongly Catholic. Otherwise, her different religious background would have been a “bone of contention” in the marriage and extended family.



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Reasons Why Some Individuals Did Not Change

Just as some individuals had compelling reasons for changing religious affiliation, research also uncovered compelling reasons why others did not want to change religious affiliation. These are listed below:

Don't Accept Beliefs – In some cases, individuals stated they disagreed with certain beliefs of their partner's church. Therefore, they felt they could not change to their partner's denomination because of an incompatibility of beliefs. An individual's disagreement with the beliefs could be based on an informed view of what those beliefs or practices were, or it could be based on misperceptions or stereotypes.

Church Traditions - Some people do not want to change religious affiliation because they cherished or valued certain religious traditions in their current church. Jean said since she has been active in her husband's church for 12 years, leading people to ask her why she doesn't simply join that church. She responds, "There are certain traditions in the Catholic faith or the Catholic religion that are very important to me that I'm not willing to give up."

Loss of Identity – For many individuals, their denominational affiliation is an integral part of their identity, making it difficult for them to change religious affiliation. When Michael was asked if he ever thought of changing religious affiliation, he declared no, and justified it by saying he was an "old South Omaha Irish Catholic." Like Michael, one's religious identity may also be tied up with one's racial or ethnic identity, making it even more difficult to consider changing religious affiliation. Identities are also heavily shaped by family experiences growing up. For many families, family rituals are often intertwined with religious rituals. Therefore, changing religious affiliation may alter both religious and family traditions, creating another potential loss.

Even in cases where an individual does change religious affiliation, their religious identity may be slow to change. Beth, who now goes to a Protestant church, said that when she goes home, she always goes to Mass with her parents if they go. Beth added, "I go and I receive communion, too, and deep down I feel like I probably shouldn't; and yet, I also feel deep down that I'll always remain a Catholic at heart.... I don't think I'll ever lose that."

Family Reactions – Some individuals reported that they would not change religious affiliation because doing so would mean going against family tradition and risk losing family acceptance. Alex described how he was open to changing religions, but felt that it would be a disaster if he did because he came "from a real Catholic family." Several individuals in his family, for example, were priests. Jefferson said that one thing that has held him back from changing religious affiliation has been his mother, who would strongly object to his becoming Catholic.

Change is a Process

It is important to recognize that making a decision to change or not to change religious affiliation is a process. Couples will also need to discern what factors are important to each individual and the



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relationship, and assess their relative importance. Learning about each other's religious traditions is also critically important, particularly for those who may seriously consider changing religious affiliation. Learning about a new religious tradition takes time. Although a significant percentage (37.2%) of interchurch couples become same-church within the first year of marriage, the process can take much longer for other couples. For 22.3% of the couples, change of affiliation did not occur until after five years of marriage. Jacob, for example, did not change to Catholicism until he and his wife had been married for seven years, and had four children.

Even after an individual decides to change religious affiliation, it may take even longer for that person to be fully comfortable with the change. Beth said that it took 15 years before she could say going to a Presbyterian Church was going to “her” church instead of her going to her husband's church. Cheryl, a former Catholic, said she struggled with in her conversion to a Protestant church because she was taught growing up that the Catholic Church is the one true church. With time, however, individuals can come to fully embrace the new denomination. Although Cheryl initially struggled with her conversion, she eventually entered seminary school to become a Presbyterian minister.