



# Two Churches, One Marriage

## Learning to Manage Religious Differences



### Education

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#### Two Common Myths about Religious Differences

There are two common myths about religious differences that interchurch individuals need to dispel to effectively work with religious differences. The first myth is that only interchurch couples have important religious differences. Religious differences can and do exist between all couples, not just those with different denominational affiliations. Religious differences can exist for a couple in a number of different areas, not just denominational affiliation. Couples can be similar or different regarding their beliefs about God, as well as what they consider to be moral behavior. Couples can also differ on the importance they attribute to attending church, prayer, reading the Bible, or having God guide their actions or decisions in their daily lives. Indeed, some interchurch couples may have fewer religious differences than same-church couples when evaluated on these dimensions. Two Catholics, for example, could hold differing beliefs as to how important God is to them, and may have very different views on how important it is to attend Mass each week or to pray to God. They may also have very different views on which Church doctrines they feel should be upheld, such as contraception. In contrast, a Lutheran and Catholic couple may be very similar on the importance they give to attending church, prayer, and allowing God to guide their daily lives. This couple may also focus more on the common beliefs they share as Christians as opposed to the doctrinal differences between the Catholic and Lutheran churches. In this example, religious differences are more likely to be problematic for the same-church couple than the interchurch couple.

A second common myth is the belief that religious differences are inherently problematic. This is a particularly difficult myth to dispel since there is an element of truth behind the myth. Religious differences do have the potential to be destructive if individuals are not careful in how they approach these differences. Unfortunately, human beings have a tendency to mistrust differences, and often attribute a negative view towards attitudes, practices, or human beings that are different.



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As one individual stated, “your knee-jerk reaction” is to view that other religion as being bad or wrong. This view can be further reinforced by beliefs that one's own church or denomination is superior to others. This can lead individuals to try and change their partner. Charles admitted that in the beginning of his marriage, “I had pretty well all the answers, and that I knew what I believed, and, by golly, she was wrong. Somehow I was going to make sure that she knew that.”

What this myth does not acknowledge, however, is that religious differences can lead to positive outcomes if they are effectively managed. Couples often find, to their surprise, that religious differences have the potential to enrich one another and their relationship. Exploring differences, for example, often leads individuals to learn more about their partner as well as themselves. Charles, after admitting that he tried to prove his wife's beliefs were wrong, added, “Not only did I learn that I don't have all the answers, but I also learned to start to find out what I really believed.” Thus, exploring differences with our partners has the potential to make us more closely examine what we believe and why. This can, in turn, become a catalyst for spiritual growth. Many individuals also learn greater tolerance of others by learning more about their partner's religious background. The following sections discuss destructive and positive ways to manage religious differences.

### **Don't Try to Change the Other Person**

In interviews with interchurch individuals, many shared how early in their marriage they challenged their partner's beliefs or practices. Peter, for example, showed his wife a religion book that described the different religions, and used the book to point out what he didn't like about her religion. Another couple, Jeff and Margaret, admitted that in the beginning of their marriage, they were each out to try to convert the other and would point out what was wrong with the other's beliefs. Unfortunately, this approach can lead to power struggles in the relationship, leaving one or both partners feeling angry or invalidated. Chris and Danielle, for example, had frequent debates over different topics such as transubstantiation, whether or not it was possible to know if you are saved, or if it was appropriate to pray to others. During one debate, Danielle told Chris, “I feel that you're saying that unless I do everything exactly the way that you think I should be doing it, that I might as well give up. I might as well quit going to church. I might as well quit reading the Bible. Why should I bother to do any of this, if you think that no matter what, that I'm wrong because I'm Catholic?”

In a more extreme form, an individual may even pressure his or her partner to change religious affiliation. Beth changed denominational affiliation because she didn't want a disagreement over religion to keep her and her partner from getting married. She said she was raised Catholic and had strong beliefs, yet her husband Peter was “real head-strong” about not becoming Catholic, and said he “didn't want to have our family split and go to two different churches.” Therefore, Beth said she would change religious affiliation. Pressuring a partner to change, however, can create serious problems in the relationship. Beth admitted that she and her husband have had arguments about it since. She said, “At times I feel resentful because I think he made me do it. At the time, you know, love was blind, as they say, and I was willing to do that at that time.” Beth later added, “I didn't think it was going to be that big of a thing to not allow myself to marry him over that.” Her feelings of resentment surfaced again when her son was born because she knew that he would not be



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baptized in the Catholic Church. The fact that he wanted her to change continued to be a problem in the relationship for many years, and has contributed to the relationship being like a roller coaster for her. While attempting to work out some of their problems, her husband said she could go back to the Catholic Church if she wanted to. Peter added that his wife might feel greater resentment over the other problems in the marriage because she had given a lot in other areas, particularly religion.

Not all couples went into their marriage trying to change their partner. Some went into the relationship with the belief that “when you marry somebody, you don't marry them thinking ‘I'm going to change that person.’” Michael stated that he and Susan went into the marriage with a mutual understanding that “she wasn't going to try to make me do her way or I wasn't going to make her see my way.” Other individuals did not want their partner to change their religious beliefs or faith because it was such an integral part of their identity. Joan said, “I don't want my husband to change because that's not him.” Richard shared, “I knew how important her faith was to her and how important her religion was to her and I saw no purpose in trying to interfere with that.” Differences define us as individuals. Differences, whether or not they are of a religious nature, make us unique from one another. Respecting these differences communicates respect for our partners, and values their uniqueness.

Some individuals were able to avoid or stop pressuring their partner through a belief that the desire to change would need to come from God. One couple, Ron and Nicole, described a conflict over religion that nearly ended their relationship. Ron was an inactive Baptist, while Nicole was an active Lutheran. After Ron refused to go to church on a family vacation with Nicole's parents, the couple had a big fight when they returned home. Nicole essentially gave Ron an ultimatum that he would either “stand by her” by going to church with her, or she would give up on the relationship. This fight created a significant amount of tension between the couple over the next two weeks. In retelling the story, Ron stated that he would have responded better if Nicole had asked him to attend church with her rather than giving him an ultimatum. After the fight, Nicole realized that she needed to back off. She stated, “I had to back off in order for him to step forward and say, ‘I'll go to church.’” Nicole shared that backing off was very hard to do, but recognized that the decision was not in her hands. She said, “I had planted a seed, and couldn't push him. I mean it wasn't up to me at that point to do the pushing. It had to come from God.” Ron did eventually go to church with her and ultimately joined the Lutheran church.

### **Exploring Differences: A Process of Discovery**

Another successful strategy that many couples use in dealing with differences is to learn more about their partner's religious faith. Religious differences can be a barrier in the relationship unless one is willing to explore the other's religion. Todd described “walls” that were in the couple's relationship at the beginning until they began to explore the other's faith. Ideally, both individuals will adopt the spirit of a traveler who ventures to a different land to witness the customs and beliefs of a different culture. The traveler goes with the hope of discovering something new and exciting. As we observe this new culture, we note both ways in which it is similar and different from our own. In this manner, we learn not only about the new culture, but also our own. Making the effort to



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learn about our partner's faith also sends a powerful message of love and acceptance. By learning more about our partner's faith, we are demonstrating in a concrete way that we value who our partner is and our desire to know them better.

Interchurch individuals can show their willingness to learn about their partner's faith in a number of different ways. Attending their partner's church was one way that many interchurch couples learned more about their partner's faith. Other ways included reading and discussing literature from each church, or attending religious education classes through the partner's church.

Some couples may face barriers to learning more about their partner's faith. For some individuals, unfamiliarity or negative preconceptions about the partner's church or denomination can be an initial barrier to learning more. One Catholic woman stated she felt "foreign" in the Protestant church. Another individual was raised hearing very negative views of Catholics in the church she was raised, and was originally apprehensive about going to a Catholic mass. In time, however, individuals become more open to learning about their partner's church as they become more familiar with their partner's church and their negative misconceptions are proven to be untrue. Alisha said, "I never would have thought to walk into another church. And now I feel comfortable going to any church." Another potential barrier is if one or both individuals are not well informed about their own faith tradition. In some cases, individuals may not know a lot about one's own church teachings or may even be misinformed about them. This can lead to some confusion as to what the differences really are between a couple.

Overcoming these barriers, if they exist, is critically important for interchurch couples. In addition to being a powerful way to validate one's partner, learning about our partner's religious faith can offer several other important benefits. Interchurch individuals often discover after visiting their partner's church that the two churches are more similar than originally perceived. As Doug said, "We didn't know there was anything the same because we had never stepped inside a Lutheran or Catholic Church." If addressed in an inquisitive rather than challenging way, exploring differences can enhance the intimacy between the couple. Chris, for example, stated that being curious about each other's religion had led to "hours and hours of conversation."

A genuine exploration of each other's religious faith can also challenge us to grow spiritually. One of the ways in which it can do this is to call us to examine our own beliefs more closely. Charles said, "There was a tendency to just assume that I knew what I believed, but then when you've got somebody on the other side saying, 'Why do you believe that?' Well, no one's ever asked you that question before. It kind of forces you to go back and start saying, 'Well, yeah, why do we all believe that?' and, so I think you grow in faith when you're challenged like that. I think my faith is deeper because of her, and because I was forced to look at what I believed." Suzanne made a similar point, stating that being active in her husband's church has enhanced the practice of her own Catholic faith. "It has made me look at my faith and my chapel position maybe a little more closely as to why do I go to Mass. And why do I do this? And why do I do that?"

Spiritual growth can also come from being exposed to different perspectives. As one individual stated, "You find out so much more by broadening your horizons." Interchurch individuals reported



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being enriched by different perspectives in a number of ways. Rebecca said that she and her partner teach each other a lot because of their different perspectives. She said that her fiancé Doug has “opened my eyes up to appreciating a beautiful sunset and a wonderful scene or a lake, or whatever. I've always appreciated those things, but not thinking... the beauty is God.” She in turn has taught him a lot through some of the facts about religion that she knows better than him. Getting different perspectives by attending both church services was commonly cited as being helpful. Erica said that her husband's pastor goes through a more theological perspective on the readings, while her priest tries to apply it to daily life. She added, “We get both sides, which is really good.” Another individual offered that being in an interchurch group with couples of different faiths “was so rich because everybody had so much to offer.”

Finally, exploring differences can also lead individuals to become more accepting or tolerant of other religious traditions. Beth said she has become more inclusive in her thinking, and recognizes that we are all here for some purpose and believe in one God. Danielle said, “I know we've all had preconceived notions about our opposite religion before we knew each other and certainly before we started dating. So, I think, I am personally more open to other people's views, now, and less judgmental of them.” Danielle's husband, Chris, said that being exposed to a different religion has made him a bit more open and challenged some of his “intellectual arrogance.”

### Look for Commonalities

Successful interchurch couples often commented on the temptation to focus on differences, but stressed the importance of looking for commonalities. Robert said that too often “you tend to focus on a relatively small amount of differences and tend to ignore the acute body of stuff that's similar.” Ellen said, “When we first got married, nobody had you talk about what was the same. All you ever heard about was, 'These are your differences'.” She added, “We knew we had differences, but never ever, until after later, did we ever talk about what was the same. Now you still know the differences are there. You don't minimize the differences, but now you spend a lot more time on - we can worship together, the creeds are the same.” Likewise, Marcus said that the key for he and his wife was “leaving the differences behind and coming together with the things that we did have in common.”

Interchurch individuals can focus on their commonalities in a number of different ways. Several interchurch individuals focus on the fact that both are Christians, and pay less attention to denominational differences. When talking about baptism, Louis said that when they first got married, the baptism of his daughter was a big deal. Now 15 years later, it is not a big deal because he recognizes that she's baptized into the Christian family. In a similar vein, many interchurch individuals stressed that both partners believe in the same God. Doug said, “I could, quite frankly, get married in any church... my God isn't different from hers because I'm Presbyterian. My God, to me, in my view, isn't any different than her God in the Catholic Church.”

Many individuals also believe that the religious differences don't matter to God. Erica, a Catholic, commented that it was initially difficult for her to allow her daughter to be baptized Lutheran, but also acknowledged that, “It doesn't matter if they may be of a different faith, because it is all the



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same to God.” As Ellen stated, “Who says that God is only going to call two Lutherans together, and that God is only going to call two Catholics together.”

Some interchurch couples believe that it is important to focus more on each person's spiritual relationship with God and one another, and should avoid putting “too much focus on the [church] institution.” One individual stated, “As long as your focus is on our church does it this way and the minister said this, or Sunday school is different, you will never make any progress.”

### **Other Beliefs that Foster Acceptance of Differences**

Interchurch individuals often cited certain beliefs or values they held that seemed to foster acceptance or tolerance of religious differences. There was a strong belief among many interchurch individuals, for example, that it is not right to judge others. Rebecca commented, “It just doesn't seem right to point your fingers and say, ‘You're wrong, you're wrong,’ and then on the other hand say you're a Christian.” Her partner Doug added that he wonders about some things in Rebecca's church, but reminds himself that it is not for him to judge what is right or wrong. Another individual said, “I'm sure Jesus would want us to try to be accepting and understanding of each other despite minor differences.” Others believed in the old adage “different strokes for different folks.” Vanessa, for example, stated, “I feel that everybody has his or her own way of worshiping and Catholic Church is not the only way to do it. It's the way for me.” From this perspective, specific denominations or churches were not viewed as inherently superior to others, but might offer a better fit for some individuals compared to others. Others also believed that love could transcend differences. Erica, for example, believed that religious differences were not as important compared to the love that a couple has for one another or God.

### **Putting the Problem in Context**

Another view expressed by some was that the real problem was not with the interchurch couples themselves, but the fact that the various churches were divided. The division over religious differences that couples sometimes struggle with reflects the same division that Christianity struggles with its different denominations and churches. For some couples, this perspective helped them to avoid personalizing the struggle too much. At the same time, it suggests that couples that can successfully work through their differences can witness to the larger faith community the ideals of ecumenism.

### **Trouble-shooting Conflict over Religious Differences**

This section explores other questions or tools that may help if you and your partner are having conflict over religious differences. If you are having conflict over religious differences, you may need to slow things down and make sure you and your partner are using effective communication skills. Both of you, for example, should attempt to clarify the intent and impact of the messages with one another using the speaking and listening skills discussed in the Communication unit. When Chris and Danielle discussed religious topics, Danielle felt that Chris was putting her down because he challenged her beliefs and practices. When Danielle finally shared this with Chris, he



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was able to clarify that this was not his intent. Chris shared that he enjoyed debating about the religious differences, but did not view her in a lesser light because her beliefs were different from his.

As much as possible, each of you should try to maintain a curious or inquisitive stance toward your partner. Rather than simply focusing on what your partner believes or practices, it may be helpful for you to explore why certain beliefs or practices are so important to him or her. It may also be helpful to explore how each of you came to adopt your beliefs or practices. Was it something learned through family, church, or some other way? Was it learned as a child or as adult?

It may be helpful to recognize that for many people, religious traditions are intertwined with family traditions. Going to church, for example, is also a family ritual for many individuals. Religious and family rituals may be closely interwoven during religious holidays such as Christmas or Easter. As a result, religious and family identity may be closely connected for many people. Jessica, for example, experienced a strong sense of loneliness when her partner did not attend church with her on Christmas because she associated Christmas as a time of family togetherness growing up. As a result of this connection between religion and family, you need to be aware that challenging an individual's religious beliefs or practices may also challenge their loyalty to their family identity, creating a more intense reaction.

If you are stuck, there are other questions you might consider. Are you and your partner focusing too much on differences, and not enough on commonalities? Is the difference the two of you are fighting over a "difference that will make a difference?" In some cases, standing back and putting the issue in a broader context makes it easier to simply agree to disagree on an issue. You may also want to consider if conflict over religious differences reflects a deeper issue in the relationship. Is the conflict, for example, a symptom of power issues in the relationship, or an expression of someone's concerns regarding commitment? If you find yourself continually struggling over religious differences, it would be wise to seek out professional help.