



## Two Churches, One Marriage

### Developing a Religious and Spiritual Bond



### Education

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#### Religion and Spirituality

When addressing the topic of “religion,” many individuals distinguish between organized religion and their own “spirituality.” Often these people refer to their personal faith or spirituality as being something inside themselves (e.g., faith, personal beliefs) or revolving around their relationship with God. In contrast, church or religion is viewed as an external institution with church buildings, rituals, customs, traditions and doctrines. Often times these individuals also comment that an individual's religiosity or religious practice can be independent from one's faith or spirituality. Andrew stated, for example, “I think you could have faith and not attend church at all.” Another individual, Alan, said before getting married that he would be willing to change religious affiliation, and said that his personal relationship is with God, Christ, and not so much with a church.

Given that many individuals distinguish between their religious and spiritual lives, these topics will be treated as separate dimensions. The first part will explore how couples can develop a joint religious life, or said in another way, find ways to worship or participate in church communities. The second part will explore how couples can strengthen and build a joint spiritual life, one that can be independent of organized religion. It should be noted, however, that one's religious and spiritual lives can (and some would argue should) strengthen and reinforce each other. Being active in a church can nourish one's spiritual life; and one's spirituality or faith can find expression through one's participation in a church community. Thus, it would be hard to separate these two dimensions for many people.

#### Developing a Joint Religious Life

**Where to Attend Church** - One of the important questions facing many interchurch couples is where they will attend church. Interchurch couples found a variety of ways of answering this question. Some couples decide that both partners will remain active in their own churches, but will seldom, if ever, worship at the other's church. A strong commitment to their own church, as well as a possible discomfort with their partner's church, may lead some couple to choose this approach. The potential downside to this approach, however, is that it can inhibit a couple from developing a religious bond. In addition, one or both individuals may miss being able to worship with their partner. Eric, for example, shared, “When I see a couple in the church I just think ‘Man, do they



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realize how neat it is for both them to be together?' They probably take it for granted." Another person conceded that it was difficult going back to her church because it meant she would go alone, while her children and husband went to the other church.

Another approach that some couples adopted was for each individual to remain active in his or her own church, but also regularly attend their partner's church too. For a number of couples, this seemed to resolve the dilemma of wanting to remain faithful to their own religious identity, yet find a way to worship with their partner. Couples who used this approach often did it in one of two ways. Some couples tried to attend both services every weekend. Jim and Sandy, for example, went to Mass Saturday night at Sandy's church, and then attended Jim's church service Sunday morning. Other couples used a different approach, agreeing to go to each other's church on alternating weekends.

In some cases, the interest in attending each other's church may not be mutual. One partner may be willing to go to the other person's service on regular basis, but the other partner seldom (or never) goes to the other person's church service. Susan, a Latter Day Saint, said she developed an interest in the Catholic Church prior to meeting her husband. Michael, on the other hand, never goes to Susan's services. He replied, "You know, I really have been kind of selfish. I have never had any interest in your church at all."

Another approach used by some couples is to choose one church to attend as a couple. The desire to worship together is an important reason that many couples chose this option. In some cases, deciding to attend one church is accompanied by a decision to change religious affiliation, while in other cases it does not. Tom, a Methodist, for example, did not become a Catholic despite becoming active in his wife's Catholic Church. The next unit, Religious Affiliation: To Change or Not to Change, has a more detailed discussion of issues related to change of religious affiliation.

The above discussion assumes that both individuals attend church. This is not true for all interchurch couples. For some couples, one individual may be very active in a church, while the other one is not. In other cases, neither partner may be very active in church. If one or both of you are not involved in a church community, it may be helpful for the two of you to discuss the reasons why as a couple. Have negative experiences in the past influenced one or both individual's desire to attend church? Are one or both of you unclear on how to deal with religious differences, and use remaining inactive as a way of avoiding possible conflict over religious differences? Or, do one or both of you view church as unnecessary because you have separated your spirituality from belonging to a church community? Even if both individuals do not attend church, it is still possible for the couple to develop and strengthen a spiritual bond, which is discussed in the second part of the unit.

**Issues in Attending Partner's Church** – There may be a number of issues that individuals may need to work through regarding attending each other's church. An issue raised by many interchurch individuals was the discomfort they experienced visiting their partner's church. In some cases, this discomfort was so strong that it prevented the individual from ever attending their partner's church. For those who were able to work through or overcome that discomfort, however,



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they often encountered unexpected rewards. After attending each other's services, some couples are surprised to find more similarities than differences. Richard, for example, noted similarities between the Catholic and Baptist church after going to both services, despite the use of different terminology. In some cases, individuals discovered that they preferred their partner's denomination or church, and even changed religious affiliation.

An individual's discomfort in going to their partner's church could be due to several factors. Often this discomfort existed simply because the other church was different or unfamiliar. One Protestant man, Greg, said one of the biggest challenges he faced in his interchurch marriage was "going to this strange building with these strange objects around that she calls a church that I had never seen the inside of before, except maybe on some historical tours." Greg was also uncomfortable with the Crucifix hanging in Catholic churches, and had commented to his wife that he thought it was an idol. In contrast, his partner Jolene said, "If I don't see the crucifix hanging up there, it's not a church. I've gotten past that so that I can go to other churches. But it's still important." Danielle, a Catholic, was very apprehensive about going to her fiancé's Evangelical church for the first time. Part of her apprehension was around people speaking tongues during the service. In addition, she said, "I, myself, am more introverted with my religious practices and so I probably wouldn't be so interested in such an overt display, but, I can see why people would be." She did finally go to his church for an Easter service, and had a positive enough experience that she planned to attend the church again.

For some individuals, the apprehension they experienced in attending their partner's church was rooted in misconceptions or negative stereotypes they learned about that denomination or church. One woman shared, "I grew up in a church that taught that Catholics were evil. I was programmed to think that Catholics were going to be very closed and that I would have to become Catholic or be an outcast. I didn't find that to be true at all." She added, "I was told that I'd be forced to convert, that they'd steal my children and baptize them while I wasn't looking and make them Catholic."

Finally, some individuals were uncomfortable attending their partner's church out of a fear that they would not be accepted. Sandy, for example, feared that others might try to get her to change churches. She stated, "I always got the feeling that, 'Oh, you're Catholic and you're here visiting?' And it was almost like, the challenge was to get me." In contrast, Samantha, a devout Catholic, found the friendliness and inclusiveness of many Protestant churches to be quite inviting. In some cases, the interchurch partner becomes such an accepted part of the church, that others can forget they are not church members. Erica, a Catholic, said there are a lot of people at her husband's church who think she's Lutheran because they frequently see her at church services and other activities.

Another concern raised by some Catholics was that attending their partner's Protestant service did not count toward their obligation to attend Mass each Sunday. One individual said that some priests believe, "You're not going to church" when you attend your partner's Protestant service. Going to both services was one way in which some Catholics addressed this issue.



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Communion can also be another issue that Catholic-Protestant couples face, particularly those who regularly attend each other's services. In the Catholic Church, communion is reserved for Catholics. Protestants attending a Catholic service may struggle with being excluded from communion. Daniel shared, "There is something that really makes you feel left out when my wife gets up and goes up for communion and there you sit. And it's like you've got a neon sign going across your forehead saying non-Catholic, non-Catholic. You feel awkward and left out." In many Catholic churches, non-Catholics can come forward at communion time and receive a blessing from the priest or Eucharistic minister as an alternative to receiving communion. This can help reduce the sense of alienation the non-Catholic may experience. For some couples, however, this is not a complete solution, and leaves some hurt that they cannot share full communion with their partner.

Conversely, Catholics often did not feel comfortable taking communion at their partner's Protestant church. This, in turn, can make the Catholic feel like an outsider. One Catholic woman commented on her experience of being in a Protestant church during communion, "Everyone in this small church of 100 or 200 people went up to communion. I just sat there. Everyone looked at me, like, 'Why aren't you going up?' It's like, 'That's not communion. That's just not right. You're not supposed to take it anywhere.'" Some interchurch individuals believe that differences in beliefs regarding communion are not substantial enough to prevent them from participating in communion at another church. In some cases, this is done with the knowledge and approval of the clergy member.

**Other Ways to Develop a Joint Religious Life** - It is important to note that attending worship services is only one way that interchurch couples can become involved in each other's churches. Some couples participate in service or volunteer activities together, while others participate in Bible studies or other religious education activities with their partners. Mitch and Tracy, for example, attended a Bible study at Tracy's church, and volunteered their time in doing marriage preparation in both of their respective churches. Couples can also participate in church-sponsored social activities. Linda, for example, played on her husband's church softball team. Being involved in these activities not only strengthens the couple's bond, but it can also foster a sense of belonging and connection to the church communities.

### Developing a Joint Spiritual Life

Interchurch individuals stressed the importance of developing a spiritual bond between the couple outside of church. Learning to pray together, for example, was one of the most frequently mentioned ways of doing this by interchurch couples. Paula emphasized the importance of praying together as a couple by saying, "So it really doesn't matter what faith they're from or what church they're from, as long as they're working toward the same goal, praying, and [having] faith in God....It's pretty hard to split up when you're praying together. You're working out your problems together."



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How should a couple pray together? The answer depends upon the couple. Prayer encompasses a wide variety of methods and techniques through which one is able to draw nearer to God. How God is defined, however, often varies from person to person. The uniqueness of how God is experienced is similar to the uniqueness of communication that individuals employ when speaking to God. There are a many different approaches through which individuals are able to communicate with God. Some view prayer as a solitary activity done in silence and others view prayer as a group activity to be done aloud. Prayer can be both spontaneous as well as rehearsed. It can be done sporadically or in a scheduled manner, such as before bed or before meals. Prayer can be done in written format, orally spoken, or acted out. Prayer can be used to give thanks, give praise, offer a petition, or simply to listen to God. Some couples use the Bible or devotional books as a starting point for their prayers, while others use prayer journals to enrich the experience. These many methods can be combined to create a unique prayer experience with your partner.

Developing a joint prayer life is not the only way to build a joint spiritual bond. Some couples study the Bible together, or read other religious books together. Others discuss spiritual topics or say grace at meals.