

## HOW DO CONGREGATIONS RESPOND TO INTERFAITH COUPLES?

Beth Parab is an Episcopal priest. Her husband, Sameer, is an observant Hindu. Their first date lasted eight hours, stretching from coffee to dinner to a walk on the beach. And very soon afterward, she had to start thinking seriously about whether interfaith marriage was a possibility for her.

As the world becomes more interconnected and more people's religious identities are in flux, couples who hold different beliefs are becoming common in the pews of almost every religious institution. And pastors and members need to adjust to those realities. "The issue now is for churches to acknowledge that there are interfaith couples in their midst," said Susan Katz Miller, author of *Being Both*.<sup>1</sup> "You want to be as welcoming as possible if you want families to stay." Miller has seen an institutional shift toward understanding that interfaith marriage is happening, with or without the participation of churches, and she asserts "it's not a problem to be overcome."

While Christian-Jewish may be most people's first association for "interfaith," as the population of "nones" grows, the most common pairing is actually a Christian and a nonbeliever—and the clash between belief and unbelief can be more difficult than the clash of belief in different things. However, people with different beliefs can be happily married if their values are closely aligned, said Dale McGowan, author of *In Faith and in Doubt*,<sup>2</sup> a book about marriage between believers and nonbelievers. The reverse is much harder; a conservative and a liberal from the same denomination are more likely to have problems, because theological questions tend to be less of an issue than everyday values.

### Issues Interfaith Couples Face

While there are often struggles regarding faith traditions and practices faced within an interfaith marriage, the greater struggles come from outside the relationship.

*Judgmental family members.* Often, more than the couple or the congregation, extended family proves to be the sticking point. When Libby Yoskowitz of Huntington, NY, got engaged to a Jewish man, her conservative Presbyterian parents "definitely went through a process to get to the point where they were OK with it." Over time, Jack Yoskowitz has become more of a cultural than religious Jew. All three of their children were confirmed as teens, and none expressed interest in a bar or bat mitzvah. But the family celebrates all Jewish holidays, and Libby Yoskowitz said that the exposure has enriched her own faith. Particularly at Maundy Thursday and Passover services, she thinks about the common roots of Christianity and Judaism.

*Unwelcoming congregations.* McGowan, an atheist, used to go with his wife to her Baptist church until one Sunday when the pastor specifically attacked marriage to unbelievers; basically he felt that "[the pastor] was asking my wife to leave me." Similarly,



"I'M A NON-PARTICIPATING SPOUSE...  
I WAS PROMISED OPEN CONVERSATIONS,  
SIMPLE FRIENDSHIP, AND LEMON SQUARES."

Sameer Parab no longer attends church after a toxic experience—the congregation of his wife’s liberal Episcopal church refused to allow an interfaith group to rent a meeting room on Saturdays.

*Fear of confusing the children.* A common worry about exposing children to two faiths is that they will feel confused, but Miller discounts that. “To give them as much information as possible is a gift,” she said. In the extensive interviews she did for her book, adults never wished they’d had less information as children, but often spoke of wishing they’d had more.

### How Faith Communities Can Respond

In shrinking mainline churches, interfaith families might easily be seen as a prize in a competition, or as a resource that might be lost. But Miller suggests that pastors talk to the other religious leaders in an interfaith couple’s life, with the goal of strengthening all relationships, within the family and outside.

Indeed, some churches are being proactive. Last year, St. Elisabeth’s Episcopal Church in Glencoe, IL, a Chicago suburb with a large Jewish population, ran a program for interfaith families in conjunction with a synagogue and learned that they needed a meeting space that was neither Christian nor Jewish, plus some kind of shared worship element. “I can’t guarantee that everyone’s going to be comfortable with me,” said pastor Daphne Cody, “I’ve had to come to peace with that.” Every week at Communion, Cody specifies that “all are welcome, regardless of religious background,” but even that receives varying responses. Some Jewish spouses feel they need permission to take it; some feel they need permission not to take it. Her congregation has added some elements, such as a psalm that they have learned to say in Hebrew. But “Jesus is the cornerstone of Christianity,” she said. “We want people to participate as they’re comfortable, but we’re not going to take Jesus out.”

If a pastor tells a nonreligious spouse that they’re always welcome at church, “it will almost always be heard as an attempt to proselytize,” McGowan said. Pastors need language that explicitly assures people that’s not the case. “You’ve got to be clear, or it will be assumed to be something else,” McGowan said. Some nonreligious people come with memories of bad experiences. That is particularly true of conservative churches, he said, where “for a lot of people, it’s a reminder of something they left.” Thomas Beaudoin,

an associate professor of theology at Fordham University, agreed that in a conservative congregation, interfaith relationships can produce more anxiety. Non-judgmental sharing of experiences, on both sides, is a path forward, but “you can’t get there cheaply.” He suggested that church members “try to tell the story of how you came to understand the center of your faith the way you do.” Beaudoin speculates that people who have loose affiliations to their faith are more likely to marry outside it—but as it is, churches are “having a hard enough time holding Christian-Christian couples.”

“You should always be open to conversation,” said Jeren Rowell, Kansas City district superintendent for the Church of the Nazarene. Many interfaith conversations, he said, find “quite a bit that would connect us, more than what would divide us.” In fact, in most Nazarene families, a child chooses to be baptized when he or she is ready, which can lead to constructive dialogue. The non-participating spouse, Rowell said, needs to reach “a place of comfort, that [the church] has the best interest of the child in mind.”

Welcoming a spouse from another tradition or no tradition succeeds “because we don’t make a big deal out of it,” Rowell said. “You begin at the point of just offering friendship.”

For Miller, who grew up in and married into an interfaith family, “it has inspired creativity, the idea of bridge-building and peace-making.” Even without the marriage factor, people do frequently change denominational identities and move from one faith or church to another. “Some people would say that every marriage is an interfaith marriage,” she said.

### Embracing One Family of Different Faiths

How does our congregation respond to interfaith couples and families consistent with our theology and values as well as respect for people who hold different beliefs? What would true acceptance look like? What are the benefits or rewards for our congregation when we interact with other faith communities?

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1. Susan Katz Miller, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013).

2. Dale McGowan, *In Faith and In Doubt: How Religious Believers and Nonbelievers Can Create Strong Marriages and Loving Families* (American Management Association, 2014; [www.amacombooks.org](http://www.amacombooks.org)).