

Resources

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"Marriage is provided as part of God's loving purpose for humanity since the beginning of creation."

"It is appointed for the ordering of family life, where children, who are also God's gift to us, may enjoy the security of love and the heritage of faith."

"It is appointed for the well-being of human society, which can be stable and happy only where the marriage bond is honored and upheld."
Christian Marriage (Supplemental Liturgical Resource 3)

"God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman. In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other."

"This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully."
Book of Common Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



A Ministry of the General Assembly Council

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations
Worldwide Ministries Division
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202-1396
502-569-5292

PDS 74-292-97-008

For orders, call PDS 1-800-524-2612

INTERFAITH MARRIAGE



Presbyterian Christians may find themselves facing questions about marriage of themselves or their family members with Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists, Hindus, and people of other faiths. Partners in an interfaith marriage have potentially great differences, growing out of separate traditions of beliefs, values, rituals, and community patterns. These often have unanticipated implications that affect not only the couple but also their families of origin, their children, and the larger community.

As Presbyterians consider the complex and frequently painful issues involved in interfaith marriage, a simple starting point can be reflection on the fundamental principles underlying a Christian understanding of marriage in our tradition: It is a gift of a loving God given for our well-being, and it is a calling of God to faithfulness and discipleship.

The church also ponders the varied insights of biblical interpreters. Some readers will deem the advice of 2 Corinthians 6:14 to be applicable: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers." Others will determine that the references to idolatry and unrighteousness in the 2 Corinthians passage are inappropriate to the situation. The contrasting tendencies toward separatism and inclusivism in relation to marriage in Ezra-Nehemiah and in the book of Ruth provide additional opportunities for reflection.

A couple's decision about whether to enter an interfaith marriage hopefully can involve various parties who would be part of the context in which the marriage would exist. If the couple decide to marry, the Christian pastor may participate with the

families in making difficult decisions about appropriate wedding ceremonies. Once a marriage occurs, the couple needs strong support from all those in their communities. This calls for special roles for the pastor and congregation as well as for families.

Suggestions for the interfaith couple and their families:

- **Both partners need information on their own faith and that of the other.** Spiritual growth and well-being should be the guiding principle as the couple seeks personal wholeness and a relationship to God.
- **A non-coercive, non-manipulative family environment is important** to spiritual well-being. Striving for conversion of one spouse to the other's faith does not encourage harmony. While a Christian may believe that the Spirit of God is preparing the heart of the partner for faith in Jesus Christ, it is important that any conversion be an individual's personal response to God.
- **Each partner in an interfaith marriage needs cross-cultural sensitivity.** Many conflicts and interpersonal tensions are due to differences in cultural backgrounds. These should be appropriately distinguished from religious issues.
- **Renewal of identity is constantly needed** within the tension of interfaith marriage, especially as personal and family identity relates to the partners' families and/or countries of origin. Often mental "tapes" from childhood arouse a desire for a partner to return to previous lifestyles and attitudes.

- **A pre-nuptial agreement should be considered if this is customary** within the religious community of either of the marriage partners. Legal issues surrounding the marriage are generally best negotiated by the Christian within the context of the other community.
- **The raising of children should be discussed thoroughly prior to marriage.** Even so, a couple may find that the birth of a child brings unanticipated feelings to the surface. If parents have agreed a child is to be baptized, this should imply the future direction of the child's religious instruction. Likewise, the Christian should expect to be bound by any agreed direction toward the partner's faith. Ideally, each parent can openly guide a child to understand the connections and distinctions between the two parents' faiths.
- **An interfaith family can help others find bridges** between two faith communities. A willingness to explore the traditions, beliefs, history, and community of a spouse's faith can bring shared growth to all.
- **Family worship and celebration of life-cycle events will enrich** interfaith home life. Pressures from society and family can make this difficult.
- **Practical family management is a challenge** to an interfaith pair who maintain relationships in two communities. Intentional decisions about participation in religious ceremonies, holidays, and activities are necessary. Other considerations relate to social life, education, and use of family resources.

Suggestions for the congregation:

- **Support and include the couple** in the ongoing life and activities of the church through special effort.
- **Help parents make and live by commitments about the spiritual nurture of their children.** Each child's own commitment may be undetermined well into the teenage years.
- **Signal inclusion of all children** of interfaith marriages, though their participation will depend on their parents' decisions.
- **Encourage a relationship between the two communities** linked through the spouses in an interfaith marriage. This may bring new understandings to a Christian congregation and the other faith group.
- **Expect the pastor to be available** to an interfaith couple, even if the pastor did not perform the wedding ceremony. Pastoral assistance can enable conflicts to evolve into teaching and welcoming occasions. The pastor may sometimes need to enlist the help of cross-cultural specialists.
- **Affirm the couple in the wider community.** This could lead to organizing support groups for interfaith couples among neighboring congregations.

Use Interfaith Marriage: A Resource by Presbyterians for material on specific religions, case studies, liturgy suggestions.