

Living the Faith You Share

10 Ecumenical Guidelines
for Couples in Roman
Catholic/Protestant
Marriages

Prepared by the
Massachusetts Commission on Christian Unity

Living the Faith You Share

This pamphlet is intended to help you who are couples in interchurch marriages. We write to you from the perspective of our ministry in the various Christian churches, Catholic and Protestant.

We want to help you live a life of Christian love and unity even amid the present reality of the dividedness of our churches.

Interchurch marriages - those involving persons from different Christian communions - have become quite common. As interchurch couples discover, their marriage holds out both opportunities and challenges. We want to highlight the ways in which your life together can grow through this experience of faith: where its joys can be enhanced, its pain lessened, its sense of God's presence deepened.

For many years now, our churches have been committed to and engaged in the work of ecumenism: building up the unity of Christians of diverse denominations. Out of that ecumenical endeavor has emerged a responsibility to overcome attitudes and actions that undermine that unity, and to cultivate positive ones that move us toward the goal of Christ's prayer: "that they all may be one" (John 17:21).

In the past there was a tendency to look upon partners of "mixed marriages" (a familiar term designating couples of any two faiths) as persons disloyal to their church. Those who entered Catholic-Protestant marriage were often subject to harsh pressures or strong condemnation for marrying "outside their faith."

Rather than perpetuate such a negative feeling, we want to affirm and strengthen interchurch couples. For they have found their vocation to Christian marriage leading them into a love that can be a true ecumenical encounter, one that contributes to our common mission of reconciliation and unity.

As ministers and people of different traditions we have learned how to be honest and realistic about our divisions, while becoming more responsive to "the signs of the times" in the experience of couples who live a call to Christian unity with a special grace. Fortunately, since Vatican II, many churches have come to witness and support the special and positive role of interchurch couples in the life of our Christian communities. We want you to know you have a place in our midst.

In the past the Roman Catholic Church opposed the participation of Catholics in Protestant church activities or worship. Protestants did the same, not so much by official pronouncements as by the quiet "it isn't done" type of pressure. Now that we recognize one another as "brothers and sisters in Christ," separated by important differences, yet united in a common desire for unity according to the mind of Christ, the attitudes of most Christian churches have changed.

Now is the time for us to move thoughtfully beyond that former separatism. We offer the following guidelines in the hope that your marriage can become a particular source of blessing, not only for you but for all of us as we strive to build up the Body of Christ in the Spirit.

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1. Your Marriage is Holy

To the Christian, marriage is neither a casual nor a socially legislated business arrangement. Within a shared faith perspective, it is a holy covenant between two persons who love each other, binding them together for a lifetime of committed love.

Your marriage is one of the sacred and most treasured parts of your life. St. Paul compares the relationship between husband and wife with that of Jesus and His Church (Ephesians, 5:32).

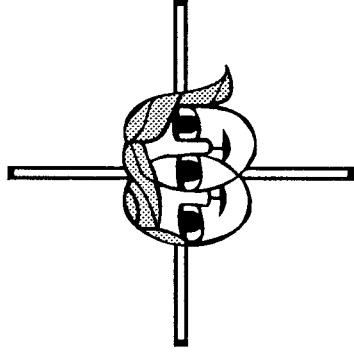
Through mysterious and providential ways, God blends together two distinct persons into a glorious new creation where "the two become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Through the Scriptures we see how God calls men and women beyond their loneliness and isolation into a life-giving relationship. Both purposes of marriage: the faithful love of husband and wife and the gift of their children, uniquely manifest God's presence in our world. Christian tradition affirms that this divine, creative power works within the bond of your love, making it revelatory of God.

God's fidelity to us becomes visible in a couple's Christian pledge to give themselves to one another "for better for

worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health until death." Indeed, your solemn vow to be faithful forms the essence of Christian marriage. In times of suffering or despair, in times when you feel worthless, your spouse still loves you and through his or her devotion clothes you in worth.

Through various theologies, our churches point to marriage as symbolizing and realizing God's presence. Husband and wife become channels of grace through which God's love, forgiveness, blessings and strength are given to one another after the pattern of Christ's giving of Himself for His bride, the church.

Being partners in an inter-church marriage should not diminish this source of holiness for you, but provides an ongoing occasion to give thanks for the gift of a love in Christ stronger than any power of separation (see Romans 8: 38-39).



2. Your Marriage has a Special Potential

We use the term "inter-church" to describe the ecumenical significance of your marriage. "Ecumenical" is a word that expresses the unity that Christ wills for His Church across the barriers which for many have been and may still feel insurmountable. Yet in our time, hope arises in the hearts of Christians who yearn for a greater oneness in faith.

This oneness will come for us as churches, as it will for you in your marriage, if we are willing to let the Holy Spirit lead us along paths to deeper understanding and mutual respect for each other's faith. Your commitment to a truly "ecumenical" life will stimulate your growth together - and ours - when you let prayer and reflection on our religious traditions lead you beyond hurtful distortions and stereotypes of other Christians, to an accurate grasp of those truths we hold dear.

In your marriage you experience real hardships caused by the division of Christ's Church, yet this is precisely what offers you your unique "ecumenical" vocation. You know perhaps too well the real annoyance and pain caused by

the divided church. But in and through the love you have for one another, God gives you the strength to overcome these.

They are far surpassed by the joy of your life together. Your interchurch marriage, with its strong bond of love and loyalty that crosses the barriers of a divided church, will be a real sign to our divided Christendom of the triumph of holy love over the dividedness of the churches.

3. Respect What your Partner Regards as Holy

Although you love your spouse dearly, differing religious backgrounds may tend to make you regard lightly or even with scorn some of those things which your partner finds sacred in his or her faith. Defensive teaching often caricatures the beliefs of others in order to make them less attractive. We are all victims of this type of polemic.

Respecting what the other regards as holy does not mean that you will readily understand it. Marriage involves loving a total person and this means respecting this person's judgement and hence those

areas of life which your spouse finds most meaningful. We show this respect by letting our partner fulfill the obligations he or she feels strongly. Things that we regard as holy are often too deep to be explained by words; they have to be experienced. As matters of faith they sometimes remain ineffable even to those who treasure them!

4. Together Learn about Each Other's Church

You should learn together so that your spiritual life matures in unison. Each of you already has many ideas about the other's church through conversations (or arguments) with friends and the reading of books or magazines articles. The church which your spouse knows became important to him or her not through looking at it from the outside, but by participating from within.

Obviously this begins with a clear and true knowledge of your own tradition. Since religious education for many Christians may end in adolescence, an adult education in your church may entail reading about its beliefs and moral teachings and discussing them with competent people.

Likewise, you cannot really become acquainted with your partner's church solely by reading about Roman Catholics or Protestants. You must meet them, talk with them and grapple together with them to find God's will and see the presence of God in today's tense and complex world.

As a couple in an inter-church marriage you should seek ways of studying together your different churches and traditions. It is desirable that you participate in the local congregations to which you normally would belong. Look for lay dialogue groups or other ecumenical activities where you and your spouse can discuss your faith together with others.

Very often you will find that men and women in other faith communities are striving to accomplish the same things for which you are striving—only the avenues of approach and the failures (usually so visible) are different.

Don't be afraid to make yourselves known as an inter-church couple to your pastors. Talk with them about your plans and hopes. On your initial visits to your partner's church you might feel a bit out of place, especially if you have already been married many years and in the past people looked with disfavor on your "mixed marriage."

Today the official way is open, so go with hope that you will be accepted. However, if you find that your local parishes do not offer any ecumenical opportunities, you can contact your church's regional ecumenical office. They will try to help you find programs or institutes where you can find help and support.

5. Worship God Together as a Family

It is expected that you will ordinarily worship separately in your own churches, but you should worship together (spouses and children) in each other's church from time to time. There is no permission from the local clergy required in order for ecumenical couples to worship together.

Enter as fully as you can in the worship. You may join in the singing of hymns, saying of prayers and all the other parts of worship. It may be possible to have a Eucharist celebration only if both partners desire it and, in good conscience, can receive Holy Communion. At the present time, the only restriction on full participation is that the Catholic partner should not receive Communion in The Lord's Supper, nor the Protestant in the Mass. Full participation in this sacrament is considered by Catholics, Orthodox and some Protes-

tants to be the visible sign of the unity of all the communicants in one church or body. Every interchurch couple should respect and accept with patience and hope this visible and painful sign of the division between the churches.

Sitting together during the communion rite, having said the prayers and sung the hymns, you are a silent sign of suffering and judgement on our divided church as one partner leaves to receive communion and the other does not. You are also a prophetic sign of hope because within your marriage you have overcome real barriers of division and you bring a ferment of impatience for the consummation of the visible unity of God's kingdom.

Your interchurch home and marriage should be sustained by family prayer. Although in every Christian family common prayer and scripture reading should have a vital part, your family has even greater reason and need for this. Because your public worship must so often be apart, your private worship together needs to be frequent and

regular. Prayer at meals and at nighttime before the children retire, family reading from the Bible can be a great source of unity and grace in your common life and faith. Your family life will be richer, more intimate and a greater source of strength to you when prayer is natural, when parents and their children are at ease together in calling upon our one God with a common name. Worshipping together in churches and in the home is a vital part of your marriage.

6. Avoid Arguing about Past History

All churches share in the responsibility for a divided church. Since the Reformation we have lived with each other's self-righteousness, often demeaning the other in an effort to prove ourselves right. This "they are wrong" attitude has deeply ingrained its way into 450 years of teaching and preaching. It surfaces in the subtle guise of prejudice and in more blatant acts of bigotry. Within each church history has witnessed great and generous deeds, yet also violence in word and action by persons and organizations in each tradition.

How important it is for us to remember: God does not build the Church on the perfection of its members, but through grace working in our recognition that we are imperfect sinners constantly standing in need of forgiveness and renewal. Acknowledgment of the sin of division rightly starts with confessing our own guilt, rather than accusing others and their tradition.

This humility must extend right up into the present. The prejudices we carry, and those of our friends and our relatives, can inflict far more pain on a marriage than the words of Martin Luther or ancient Popes. Mutual acknowledgment of guilt removes from each of us the need to defend our church for everything it has done. It frees us to talk together in unity and hope about our respective churches and families.

7. Educate your Children with an Ecumenical Spirit

The responsibility for the education of your children is yours. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches vigorously uphold the primacy of the parents in education of the children. Instructing and forming your children in Christian faith and witness is one of the most challenging and delicate tasks you will face

in your marriage. Since yours is an interchurch marriage, your children should be educated with genuine ecumenical respect.

If you were married in the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) you were required to sign a statement promising that you would raise your children as Catholics. The wording of these promises differed from diocese to diocese but the intent was the same: to prevent the endless bickering that might threaten your marriage by requiring a decision before you took the final step and to ensure that the children would be raised as Catholics (which generally implied that the children could not be instructed in Protestantism or have contact with Protestant church activities). While most Protestant churches did not require such promises, social pressure was strong to keep the children away from Catholicism.

Today churches see the value of educating the children of interchurch marriages so that they have a strong faith identity that builds respect for the traditions of others. The Catholic Church today asks Catholic spouses entering an interchurch marriage to promise to do all within their power to share their faith with their children through baptism and

education in the Catholic church. At the same time, it also recognizes the fact that religious education of the children is the right and responsibility of both parents. If you have not already done so through previous decision, you should reach an agreement as to the baptism and formal religious instruction of your children. Once this decision has been reached, even in the case where the traditional Catholic promises had been made, every effort should be made to acquaint the children with the traditions and beliefs of both parents so that they can develop an appreciation of the worth and meaning of the religious traditions that are a part of their family.

Perhaps more important than classroom religious education children receive is the Christian formation they acquire from the attitudes and faith and life of their parents. The depth of faith of the parents—as they live their faith together—is one of the most important religious factors in the education and formation of the child. Parents should strive to know each other's traditions and practices well enough so that the child can talk freely without always having to consult father for one part and mother for the other.

8. Don't Let the Older Generation Get You Down

The recurring differences between generations surface in so many areas that in-law jokes have become part of our marriage lore. Children want to please their parents. Choosing a mate belonging to another religious tradition may set up a real conflict between love and loyalty to your spouse and your desire to please your parents.

Sometimes couples experience a subtle condescension or outright rejection by parents or members of the older generation.

If you are treated like this, point out to them how your interchurch marriage testifies to the Spirit's yearning for a unity not yet fully realized in a divided Christendom. Your marriage has positive value for both churches. Through your efforts in genuine hope, it points to the will of Christ for the unity of all churches.

Don't press a discussion into a futile argument. No matter how theologically correct you are, heated debates tend to harden the lines of difference into walls that separate. The success of your marriage in the long run is the only real proof you can give that their fears and condemnation were unwarranted.

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9. Involve Yourself in Service to the World

No marriage exists merely to serve itself. Rather, marriage should strengthen partners so that they can better serve others.

One difficult but rewarding vocation in marriage is raising children. This involves you in work and programs for children in your community. Your interchurch marriage has something unique to contribute to this. Whatever signs of religious prejudice or ignorance begin to divide a group you will be better equipped than most to provide enlightenment and to give living evidence that persons or groups can work harmoniously together even when they have differences in faith.

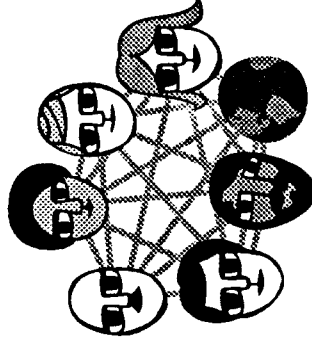
Look for opportunities or needs where you can help in existing ecumenical programs, or offer initiatives: for example, an outreach to other interchurch couples.

As you yourselves grow stronger spiritually by rejecting criticism of your interchurch marriage, and as you deepen ecumenical insights that overcome ignorance and bigotry, you may discover a real call to bring this strength and depth into those places in your community life where prejudice and suspicion keep

people apart. Rich-poor, educated-uneducated, black-white, employer-employee, immigrant-native; all of these can often become destructive, painful relationships similar to what your marriage might become without special care and understanding. You may not eliminate the pain, but you can always bring compassion and hope.

Whether you find a form of service along these or other lines in your community, your life and work together for others, as well as your support to the church in its mission, can be an inspiring sign to others of the power of Christians united in serving the world God loves.

Your family is called by God to be a blessing to others; in answering this call generously, you will enjoy and manifest a life and meaning in Christ that is everlasting.



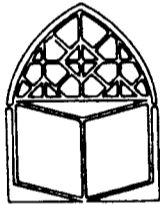
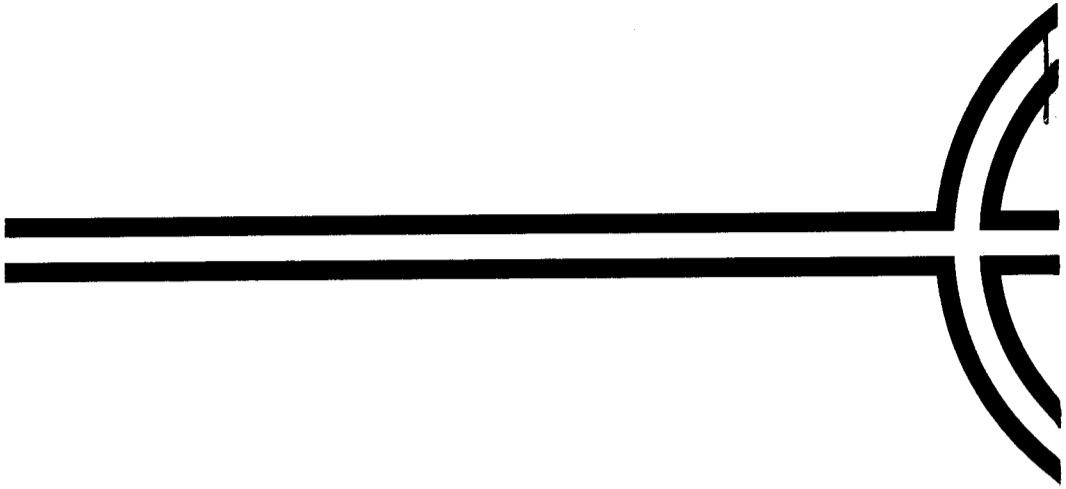
10. Seek Pastoral Counseling if You Consider "Changing Churches"

Throughout your life together your aim should be to deepen your faith without alienating your partner from his or her church. Winning members from "one church to another" is not an ecumenical goal. Neither should it be the purpose of either partner in following these guidelines.

It may happen, however, that one or both partners may undergo serious spiritual discernment and choose to become a member of another community of faith. If you find yourself considering this, seek out the counsel of a competent pastor or layperson: one who has an accurate and ecumenically informed knowledge of your faith. A third party can often point out things you have overlooked that will either keep you from making a premature move or help you to change with more insight and meaning.

Your mutual goal should be to draw nearer to God, to let the Spirit guide and nurture your decisions, and to witness in your married life the presence of Christ who has so graciously loved our whole human family.

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This booklet and its companion piece, *Christian Understandings of Marriage: Ecumenical and Pastoral Directives*, are available through Divinitas Press, a publishing service of the Massachusetts Bible Society, 41 Bromfield Street, Boston, MA 02108.