



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 influx, 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*.¹ "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*,² 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.



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

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