



# Interfaith Families: Practicing Radical Inclusion and Hospitality

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It is well known that the modern understandings of a single objective Truth, the sense of trust and reliability in authority and the structures that maintain authority, and leadership models that practice hierarchy and exclusive specialization have been replaced by a postmodern society in which multiple truths and realities live side by side, structures and authorities have lost their prominence and are now met with profound skepticism, and collaboration and collective wisdom are shaping new models for leadership and being in the world. It is also well known that these changes have affected the nature and substance of the family unit. Resulting from the phenomena of globalization and the relational effects of the Internet and social media as part of this postmodern shift, interfaith interaction has become commonplace, at least in most urban and suburban areas of the country. With this interaction come partnerships, marriages, and children who are living, learning, and seeking new ways of being Muslim-Christian, Jewish-Christian, Buddhist-Christian, Hindu-Christian, agnostic-Christian, and so on.

Familial identity is shifting in major ways (and has actually been in flux for

*Interfaith families inhabit a liminal space and offer a number of gifts that can contribute greatly to congregational formation, such as creativity, deep tolerance, and code-switching. In turn, congregations can support interfaith families through formational opportunities for new couples, parents, and children and through the creation of a spirit of radical inclusion and hospitality.*

some time). A century ago, 12% of couples in America were in interfaith marriages. Today, “a bit fewer than *one third* of all marriages remain mixed today.”<sup>1</sup> What is even more revealing, couples are taking part in one another’s faith practices, both at home and within the religious spaces of their respective partners. As a result, children born or adopted into multifaith homes signal new generations of individuals who carry multiple religious identities as they develop and become adults.

Churches are now beginning to respond to this interfaith familial dynamic: “In the past 10 years religious communities’ involvement in interfaith worship has doubled, and involvement in interfaith community service activities has nearly tripled.”<sup>2</sup> Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 12% of churches have been involved in an interfaith worship service in the last twelve months; and 20% have participated in interfaith community service activities. In the tradition to which I belong, the United Church of Christ, figures remain fairly steady with 18% taking part in interfaith worship services and 23% involved in interfaith community service activities. It is interesting to note, however, that these figures pale in comparison to the interfaith involvement of other religious traditions such as Conservative Judaism, Baha’i, and Islam.<sup>3</sup>

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Therefore, while churches have increased interfaith outreach and collaboration since September 11, 2001, they are doing so at significantly lower rates than other traditions. With mainline denominations continuing to witness declines in membership and an increasingly aging population in the pews and with the rise of traditions like Islam and Buddhism in the Western world, more effort and action is needed by mainline Christians to understand and contribute in meaningful ways to the dynamics of this present age. As the numbers of interfaith couples and families continue to increase with current trends, people of faith must practice new ways to support the spiritual formation of this particular group of people.

<sup>1</sup>Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010) 148; see also 149–154.

<sup>2</sup>David A. Roozen, “American Congregations Reach Out to Other Faith Traditions: A Decade of Change 2000–2010,” *Faith Communities Today* (2011) 1; also at [http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/American\\_Congregations\\_Reach\\_Out.pdf](http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/sites/faithcommunitiestoday.org/files/American_Congregations_Reach_Out.pdf) (accessed October 13, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

## TWO TRUTHS ABOUT INTERFAITH FAMILIES (OR WHY WE NEED TO DO THIS WORK)

*Truth #1: Interfaith families permanently inhabit a liminal space.* My own interest in this subject originates from lived experience. My husband is a Sunni Muslim (who was born and raised in Morocco and is ethnically Berber), and I am an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ (who was born and raised in the Southwestern United States and is biracially Puerto Rican and Italian). In many respects, my partner and I inhabit a rather unique religious (and ethnic/cultural) space; and while I do know of other interfaith clergy partnerships within my own tradition, they are a rarity.

This permanently liminal (or in-between) space in which interfaith couples and families find themselves is a phenomenon that is often difficult for congregations fully to grasp, as mainline traditions were originally designed to preserve not only certain theological tenets but also particular ethnic identities and ways of being. Many churches still seek to maintain those deep theological and ethnic ties as part of their purpose and mission in light of this more widely diverse context. However, this experience of interfaith relationship and hospitality was not uncommon in biblical times; it is most notably present in the narratives of Abraham and Hagar (Gen 16:7–15; Gen 21:14–21) and in the stories of the early church (Acts 2:1–12; Acts 11:1–18).

*Truth #2: Interfaith families often model some invaluable skills that the church desperately needs.* Out of the first truth regarding the liminality of interfaith relationships and families comes the second truth: interfaith families have much to teach us about how best to navigate diversity and relationships in general, a set of skills that the church sorely needs in this age. Research and interviews with interfaith families indicate that

Religious difference in families [is] a valuable growing ground for precisely those skills required for meaningful participation in an increasingly diverse society.... In contrast to interfaith exchanges occurring in the public spaces of school and workplace, the religious encounters of mixed families are marked by greater duration and much higher levels of emotional investment and intensity.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the inherently private nature of families, the work of negotiation of differences, developing increased respect, and the ability to hold in tension multiple religious truths and identities has not often been discussed in public circles, particularly in the context of the church. Moreover, for interfaith families to bring their private practices, understandings, and ways of life into the public setting of church exposes parents and children to the possibilities of further subjugation, judgment, and overall lack of understanding.

The kinds of skills and values that are nurtured within interfaith households

<sup>4</sup>Kate McCarthy, "Pluralist Family Values: Domestic Strategies for Living with Religious Difference," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612 (2007) 190 and 189.

can greatly enrich the mainline church. In general, there seem to be three main gifts that the radical welcome and full inclusion and participation of interfaith families can bring to Christianity as a whole.

1. *Creativity.* Interfaith families exercise a level of creativity in practicing and negotiating their own faith traditions for themselves and their children that can deeply contribute to the spiritual formation and worship lives of churches. By expanding and shedding light on current meanings of symbols and stories that are shared among different religions (a common and easily translatable example is the Jewish-Christian Star of David), families build upon rich traditions and, at the same time, weave these traditions together in meaningful and even unexpected ways. While this may not be as easy for families whose traditions greatly differ, interfaith families are paving new ground and offering models for stretching the imaginative spirit of religious foundations in order to create faiths that make sense for their own contexts and lived experiences.

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For example, my husband and I often discuss the differences between similar stories found in the Qur'an and the Bible, dynamically exegeting these narratives through dialogue (sometimes over dinner or other times as brought up by a television or radio news commentary) and thereby discovering and internalizing the wisdoms that each variation holds. Our wedding ceremony incorporated both biblical and quranic scriptures. In the space of a church service, in which the sacred text of only one tradition is upheld and examined, the acknowledgment and presence of other stories and meanings opens possibilities for new insights and practices, deepening congregational faith formation. Interfaith families who have successfully utilized this imaginative space possess the creative skills that offer a model for congregations to develop such skills as well.

2. *Deep tolerance.*<sup>5</sup> The concept of tolerance possesses both positive and negative connotations, but I understand tolerance in the context of interfaith understanding to mean a deep and abiding presence and collaborative impact of another on one's own experience and being. This implies the value of respect for another's beliefs and traditions and requires the faith practice of hospitality in the most profound sense. In this manner, a deep tolerance is cultivated, which then leads to the fullness of acceptance and, finally, integration of the other into one's own space of community and belonging. It is not a surface-level acceptance of the other as simply inhabiting the same geographical or architectural space (as is upheld in basic

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 193.

US civil rights discourse) but, rather, an interactive sharing of practice, ritual, and belief that impacts each individual's relationship with God, others, and creation.

Interfaith families signify the most intimate example of this deep tolerance. In general, parents and children engage in constant negotiations that include spousal disagreements that need compromise; children's sibling rivalries and competing needs for space, identity, and attention; and family meetings where crucial decisions for the group's overall happiness and welfare are determined (for example, where to live, where to go to school, and what activities to engage in that enrich physical and mental capacities). Interfaith families possess an added dimension in negotiating these realities in light of multiple religious identities, and this often calls for the deeper definition of tolerance.

Kate McCarthy's research in interviewing interfaith families highlights one particular story where the limits of tolerance were tested:

Janet, a Zen Buddhist who has been with her partner Susan for more than twenty years, has great respect for Susan's return to the Catholicism of her childhood, but finds that their daughter's religious upbringing has brought her to the edges of her tolerance: "When she's doing her thing, she's doing her thing. But when it involves my child, I'm afraid that I just don't want her to be burdened with so much of the guilt that Catholicism had for me." It is at this point that some—but not all—interfaith couples are able to take tolerance to another level and develop skills for engaging they previously only tolerated, potentially offering a model for larger civil society.<sup>6</sup>

These kinds of issues possess the potential to deepen congregations' skills and practices of radical inclusion and hospitality. In the United Church of Christ, there are many individuals who were raised in the Catholic tradition; often, they come to the UCC for the progressive and flexible theology by which this tradition is somewhat known. As a result, couples and families may wish to maintain some of the liturgical aspects of their Catholic faith and seek to incorporate them into the family rituals that take place within the space of the church (i.e., baptisms, weddings, and funerals), which signals the element of creativity that was previously discussed. Additionally, many spouses and children of members in the United Church of Christ identify as Buddhist, agnostic, or atheist; and this presents unique opportunities for churches to practice deep tolerance.

3. *Code-switching*. As a result of the liminal spaces that interfaith families inhabit, many of them have developed an ability to move in and out of various contexts depending on factors such as audience or subject. This is known as code-switching, and is often used in the context of individuals who speak two languages and thus have the ability to move back and forth between these languages depending on the situation. The practice of code-switching also applies to interfaith families who learn to speak multiple "languages of faith" and then to serve as a bridge between those languages in ways that maintain the individual integrity of

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 194.

each tradition. This skill is a necessary foundation through which both creativity and profound tolerance can be developed.

These skills are also not much different than those developed by biracial/multiracial individuals. Being raised by a Puerto Rican father and an Italian mother, there were ways that I developed skills (through the careful nurture of my parents) that enabled me to navigate the realities of and my experiences within a society that valued a monolithic sense of ethnic/racial identity, yet fully embrace and switch between the languages and practices of both identities, which were clearly distinct but also similar in some respects. My husband Ali maintains the same skill set, although his developed much later as an adult immigrant to the United States through navigating between two very different cultures and multiple languages, including English, Arabic, and French.

As a minister who serves in the national setting of the United Church of Christ, I have the pleasure of preaching in a variety of churches across the country. Each time I share about my interfaith family in the midst of the service, there is always an individual who approaches me afterward and excitedly exclaims something to the effect of “My spouse is Muslim too!” or “My daughter/son married a Jew/Hindu/etc.” I love hearing these stories, as they remind me of the great diversity that already exists within the church. Many of the individuals sitting in the pews have spouses, children, or other relatives who have interfaith families and children; and these individuals have probably developed some abilities in code-switching in order to relate to those family members.

It is important to note here that not all families are intentionally “interfaith.” Many people who marry someone of another faith choose to adopt the other’s religion for a number of reasons, one being the desire to raise children in a single religious tradition. This is an equally valid and commendable decision, and it also demonstrates the practices of creativity, deep tolerance, and code-switching, though in very different ways than in intentionally interfaith families.

## TWO MYTHS ABOUT INTERFAITH FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

*Myth #1: Interfaith families are different from us.* When I tell people that my husband is Muslim, the most common and immediate response is, “Wow, what is *that* like?” Now, I’m never quite sure what people expect me to say; but this is usually my response: “I expect that it’s pretty similar to most other relationships and marriages.” The reality is that interfaith families navigate life, conflict, joys, and challenges just like any other family, but they have negotiated these issues with an added dimension of complexity. While this first myth is an obvious one, it warrants mention as a reminder to congregations of a common starting point for practicing radical inclusion and hospitality.

*Myth #2: People enter into interfaith relationships and families without much thought or planning.* This is another common myth that needs debunking. Most interfaith families spend a great deal of time, thought, and planning negotiating vari-

ous issues. Ali and I have spent much energy discussing the possibilities of children and how we would desire to raise those children religiously. Though I think we continue to have some differing ideas about this subject, the ability for the two of us to continue this dialogue in a deeply tolerant manner speaks to the intention and planning that many couples and families engage in when seeking a way forward together.

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Another common articulation often coupled with this second myth is the notion that parents are not concerned about the spiritual formation of their children. It is more accurate to contend that what most interfaith parents seek are safe religious spaces in which their children will be welcomed and nurtured and neither parent's religion will be denigrated or devalued. Because of the traditionally exclusive nature of the church (whether perceived or real), parents want to ensure that their children will be nurtured by the stories of their parents' faiths and be formed by the truths that those stories embody.

## WHY INTERFAITH FAMILIES NEED THE CHURCH

Churches can play a vital role in supporting interfaith couples and families in their spiritual formation. Because people have often developed these gifts and skills of creativity, deep tolerance, and code-switching in isolation and outside the setting of the church, it is now time for churches to serve more publicly as places where these families can find guidance, resources, and a sense of community.

In many ways, there also exists the myth among interfaith families that these things do not already exist within churches today. While there is some truth to this statement, I believe that mainline denominations already offer a variety of gifts and resources that can assist interfaith families in deep spiritual engagement and theological reflection. There are three main areas that most pastors and churches offer that can be expanded upon and developed as particular entry points for interfaith families.

1. *Formational opportunities for new couples.* Premarital counseling, planning and officiating at marriage or commitment ceremonies, and facilitation of newlywed groups are only a few of the specialties that pastors and churches offer members of congregations and that can be expanded to include interfaith couples. In one context or another, most pastors have already encountered interfaith couples and have helped these couples negotiate religious differences. However, an intentional openness and development of skills to attend to the particular needs and challenges faced by these couples can draw in folks who would otherwise navigate these critical life events and experiences on their own. Offering

this pastoral expertise and service in the broader community will signal to interfaith couples that this could be a safe space through which they can gain much needed support of their union, gain tools for negotiating differences, and perhaps meet other couples who are encountering the same issues they are facing.

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2. *Formational opportunities for parents and children.* We already know that churches provide faith formation and education in a variety of ways—worship, liturgy, music, Bible study, Sunday School, and missions. For the most part, interfaith families desire to take part in such practices and activities in order to deepen their own and their children’s faiths. In addition, the movement in Christian education to equip parents to put faith back into the home by offering and encouraging weekly home devotionals and practices is something that would greatly benefit interfaith families. Pastors and educators can adapt these practices and exercises to an interfaith context and offer resources and ideas for these families so they don’t need to continually reinvent the wheel themselves. A spirit of flexibility, adaptability, and creativity on the part of pastors and church educators will go a long way with interfaith families.

3. *A general spirit of inclusion and hospitality.* Churches can be and already are places where genuine welcome is practiced. As previously articulated, it is not uncommon for members of a church to be already connected with people who are in interfaith relationships (for example, their children, siblings, or other relatives married a Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.). That practice of familial welcome is extended into the church where people gather to uplift and support one another as humans and not as unknown “others” because they can already relate another’s story to their own personal experience.

However, this spirit of inclusion and hospitality must be extended even further and may involve changing the “way things have always been done” in order to truly practice radical inclusion and make room for new ways of doing and being. What would it look like to create space within the liturgy—or the physical space of the sanctuary—for interfaith reflection, dialogue, and even sharing? How might the preparation of a churchwide gathering be different if it required certain food restrictions and specifications for those who are of other faith traditions? How might a congregation partner with the local synagogue, mosque, or temple to address community issues or engage in intentional learning? Spiritual support for interfaith families is a real, tangible, often unrecognized need that churches can help to meet, if they are willing to engage in the difficult—but radical—work of listening to the stories and experiences of these families, learning about other traditions and ways of doing ministry and adapting to an ever-changing context.



## SOME CAUTIONS

1. *Ask before assuming.* It goes without saying that understanding the needs of interfaith couples and children is paramount in this work, and this requires first asking families about those needs. They may not want to engage with a church in this particular stage of their lives. Or, they may have needs that extend outside the walls of the church or that the church cannot meet at the present time. Or, they may not have any needs. It is never good to assume, and it is always good to ask and then honor the responses. This is what practicing radical hospitality is about—placing the desires of another above one’s own.

2. *The burden is not theirs to carry—it is ours.* This phenomenon is similar to placing the burden of antiracist and anti-oppression work on people of color. Congregations must be careful not to place the work of becoming fully inclusive of interfaith families solely on those who are a part of such families. It requires education, awareness, and advocacy on the part of the whole church, not just the select few who already experience this added complexity (both the joy and the challenge) in their lives.

Mainline denominations developed in the United States from a desire to establish clear differences among theological beliefs (and oftentimes to distinguish and maintain a sense of ethnic identity in conjunction with these beliefs). However, these differences matter less and less in a society that has abandoned an understanding of the modern structures and authorities as central to the functioning of that society. In a postmodern world, the faith trajectory of “believing, behaving, and belonging” has become “belonging, behaving, and believing.”<sup>7</sup> Interfaith families and children, like all other families and children today, yearn primarily for a sense of belonging within their respective communities and their respective faiths. John Cobb Jr. noted that individuals “must show that faith in Jesus Christ is neither an attitude of rigid defense of inherited doctrines and attitudes, nor the pretense of standing on some neutral ground and supposing that from that perspective we can judge the merits of all the world’s great religious traditions.”<sup>8</sup> Rather, he said, “If we do have faith, we will abandon the effort to establish our own security, and will trust Christ instead.”<sup>9</sup> Radical inclusion and welcome of interfaith families requires a profound trust in Christ and most inevitably ensures that the faiths, rituals, and liturgies we currently practice in our churches today will be transformed, through the work of the Spirit, into something more beautiful and diverse than we can presently imagine. ⊕

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<sup>7</sup>Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), esp. 199–214.

<sup>8</sup>John B. Cobb Jr., “The Religions,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 373.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.