

## Children of Interfaith Families

*From a brochure of the same title, produced and distributed by the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396.*

Sharing faith with our children is a significant act in our lives. Thus, when children arrive in an interfaith family, an acute question arises: What religious identity will the children be given, if any?

Even when there are two religions in a marriage, the partners may have little disagreement about teaching basic moral values. Further, children can be made generally aware of the presence of God in their lives and in the life of the home. But religious formation goes beyond this to include the cultivation of attitudes and the development of habits, the imbibing of information and the acquisition of knowledge. The home must assist if children are to learn how to pray or appreciate the importance of the religious community. The example of their parents' daily lives is the most permanent instruction for children.

When the parents' religion is personally important to them, they want to share it with their children. Interreligious families experience the need to teach respect for two religions. Yet the question of a child's particular religious identity and instruction remains. Some of the possible options and implications identified in a wide-ranging study will aid a family's discussion of choices:

*Bring up all the children of the family in one particular religion.*

Advantages: Children learn the tenets and practices of one religion, without confusion. Greater continuity and more harmonious development should result. Children have a clear identity and are unembarrassed when playmates ask questions.

Disadvantages: A certain distance could develop between the children and the parent of the other religion.

Compensatory planning: While bringing up the children in one particular religion, open up references to the other religion. Be careful that the children do not become mixed up.

*Raise some of the family's children in each parent's religion.*

Advantages: Splitting the religious education appears equitable.

Disadvantages: The parents are burdened with concerns about two types of religious education.

Divisions in the family may be reinforced, even though harmony is being sought. Implicit support may be given to the unacceptable idea that one religion is as good as another.

*Bring the children up in both religions.*

Advantages: Children have no difficulty fitting into the extended families of both parents. They become familiar with both religions — their stories, principles, and places of worship.

Disadvantages: Children may lack specific identity and may come to give little or no importance to either religion. This may foster indifference.

*Avoid making a choice on the children's behalf and raise them in neither religion.*

Advantage: Children can make their own choices as adolescents or young adults. This shows respect

for the child.

Disadvantage: Children are deprived of the benefit of religious belonging during the crucial years of growth. Even when knowledge of a religion is handed on, in the hope there can be a motivated choice later, no sense of commitment is developed; without this, religion can contribute little to children's all-round development. When no religious instruction is given, the children may not opt for any particular religion later, since they have had no encouragement.

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Children should never be placed in the battleground of a family's conflicts, religious or otherwise. Questions about the raising of children should be discussed thoroughly prior to a couple entering into an interfaith marriage. Many couples fail to do this as they concentrate upon their love for one another and assume they will face future challenges when they come. But it is the actual conception and birth of a child that often brings to the surface feelings not anticipated by one or both members of the couple. At the most extreme, this can mean even an inability to live out agreements made earlier about the religious identity and upbringing of anticipated children.

An early decision after the arrival of a child often revolves around infancy ceremonies or rituals — the sacrament of baptism, naming ceremonies, ritual circumcision for male babies. Any ceremony that is purely cultural may not raise long-term issues but all religious ceremonies must be taken seriously for the life decision they represent.

A child may be baptized when at least one of the parents is a confessing Christian who makes a sincere vow to raise the child in the fellowship of Christ and the church. If the parents agree to have a child baptized, this means that the non-Christian parent accepts the future direction of the child's religious instruction and should not undermine efforts of the Christian parent.

If the couple decides to raise a child in another faith, the Christian parent should likewise be responsible to uphold the religious instruction of the child in that faith. At the same time, such a parent should determine never to equivocate about her or his own faith commitments and, while adhering to the family decision, can remember that the continuing work of the Holy Spirit and of a Christian parent's faithful living are quiet influences in any family's life.

The decision about the religious upbringing of children is full of heavy emotional overtones. It should be made slowly and prayerfully. Whenever possible, parents should discuss their decision together with leaders of their respective religious communities, both before marriage and at the time of a child's birth.

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When a child is being presented for baptism, ordinarily the parent(s)...shall be an active member of the congregation. Those presenting children for baptism shall promise to provide nurture and guidance within the community of faith until the child is ready to make a personal profession of faith and assume the responsibility of active church membership.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Book of Order, W-2.3014

In baptism God claims us, and seals us to show that we belong to God.  
God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.  
By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
Book of Common Worship

Publications on which this content is based:

*Reflections on Interreligious Marriage: A joint study document* (1997), the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches Office on Inter-Religious Relations;  
*Interfaith Marriage: A Resource by Presbyterian Christians* (1992), PDS# 243-92-010.