

## Reflections on Interreligious Marriage

### A joint study document

#### PRESENTATION

The increase in the marriages between Christians and people belonging to different religions raises a number of questions for the pastors of the different Churches. Recognizing this, the Office on Inter-Religious Relations (OIRR) of the World Council of Churches (Geneva) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) (Vatican City) have produced this joint study document.

We are aware that there are religious communities and Churches which do not celebrate or accept interreligious marriages. This document, however, has sought to address a reality in the modern world which is faced by all.

The document is addressed primarily to pastors, providing them with matter for reflection on a difficult question. It may also be useful for other people concerned with marriage preparation courses or marriage counselling.

It is therefore essentially *a reflection document of a pastoral nature*. Part I gives the results of an enquiry carried out by the OIRR and PCID. Part II examines some of the literature published by the Churches on interreligious marriages. Part III considers some of the issues that are raised by these marriages.

The document is *not a doctrinal statement*. Recognizing that the Churches have different views on marriage, it does not attempt to develop a theological position which would apply to interreligious marriages. Each Church would be expected to provide its own guidelines.

It is *not a study of marriage according to the different religions*. Such knowledge is available elsewhere. In fact the document remains very general. It would need to be applied to each religion: Christian-Jewish marriages, Christian-Muslim, Christian-Sikh, etc. Nevertheless it is felt that the reflections presented have some overall usefulness.

It is *not a recommendation for interreligious marriages*. The document simply addresses situations where such marriages are taking place. It is intended as a help to pastors in their task of making couples who have a project of marriage across religious boundaries more aware of what they may anticipate. Nevertheless, the commitment of such couples, once made, needs to be taken seriously and respected.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. In the field of interreligious relations reference is often made to "the dialogue of life". By that is meant all those daily encounters between people of different religions, in the neighbourhood and the work-place, in school and in leisure activities, which are lived in a positive manner and so are conducive to understanding, harmony and peace.

2. One particular form of encounter is interreligious marriage which brings into the closest relationship a man and a woman belonging to different religions.

3. In multi-religious societies such interreligious marriages have always existed. But the greater mobility in today's world has brought about an increase in contacts between people of different faith communities, and so correspondingly an increase in interreligious marriages. In some countries this increase could be attributed to other factors pertaining to majority-minority relations.

4. Because these marriages present special challenges, the WCC's Office on Inter-Religious Relations and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue decided to engage in a joint reflection. This decision was undertaken at the request of the Joint Working Group of the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church.

5. The project was launched in 1994 by way of an enquiry. Questionnaires were prepared and sent out to different churches and communities. The answers to these questionnaires form the basis of the first part of this modest publication. The second part takes stock of some of the material already produced by churches and Christian communities on this matter. The third part presents, in a brief but more systematic fashion, some reflections on aspects of interreligious marriages thrown into light by the enquiry and the resource material.

6. It is impossible within the compass of this brief publication to give an exposition of the concept of marriage according to the different religions. Nor is it possible to deal with the legal aspect of interreligious marriages. The various churches have their own laws to be applied in these cases. Attention would also have to be given to the civil laws governing marriage and these vary considerably from one country to another.

7. It is hoped that this booklet (which offers a series of reflections at the pastoral level) may encourage reflection and discussion among pastors and couples engaged in marriage preparation and marriage counselling.

## I LEARNING FROM AN ENQUIRY

8. In an effort to learn about the present state of interreligious marriages and the questions they raise, a number of texts, pastoral guidelines or resource materials were collected. To be sure, the compilation could not be exhaustive. The texts available vary in length, approach and style (we shall be describing some of them in the next section).

9. Going a step further, three different questionnaires, addressed respectively to churches, Christian spouses and non-Christian spouses, were sent in 1994 to a representative group of churches, primarily in countries where interreligious marriages constitute a relatively sizable phenomenon, and to a sample, not large but diversified, of interreligious couples.

10. The answers received were limited in number. It is difficult to identify all the reasons accounting for the hesitation of many to give responses to specific questions. It could be pointed out that some churches do not have a clear and detailed set of rules, or recognized practices, nor do they seem greatly interested in developing such rules. Much is left to the discernment of pastors. While there are general principles pertaining to the sacramental celebration of marriage, its canonicity and the church's pastoral responsibility, there seems to be a tendency in many countries to deal with the individual cases as they come, with due regard to the particular context.

11. The hesitation of many spouses to speak about relations within the couple concerning religious matters is understandable. Some may have chosen to be silent on issues or problems that are avoided in their households. Others seem to resent what they consider to be an intrusion into the intimate sphere of married life.

12. It goes without saying that the findings of the three questionnaires are to be treated with a measure of caution. They have no strong claim to sociological exhaustiveness and verifiability. Yet neither can they be disregarded altogether. A number of people, engaged in pastoral care or experienced in studies on interreligious marriages, see in them a confirmation of their own knowledge in this field. No conclusion, provisional as it may have been, was surprising to the point of requiring a more thorough investigation.

### A. The Churches

13. To the question on the general trends in the evolution of the *numerical importance* of interreligious marriages, the answers were not substantiated by statistical data. There was no indication that such data does in fact exist except in

the case of marriages celebrated in a church and duly registered. The information was often based on anecdotal evidence or personal estimates. On the whole, the information gathered shows that the number of interreligious marriages did increase in recent years, or at least remained constant. No responses referred to a decrease. Nevertheless some answers thought it appropriate to mention, in this context, that the number of divorces among interreligious couples has increased.

14. Respondents from some western countries, though not in large number, seem to have officiated at *interreligious celebrations*. The general proportion of interreligious celebrations remains, however, quite low. The majority of such celebrations would appear to have been held in churches.

15. Whenever interreligious celebrations are held, a minority of responses indicate a joint participation of "clergy" from both communities concerned. When this occurs, a few plan the service together. More frequent is the situation where the main officiant assigns a limited role to the other.

16. Cases where two different celebrations take place successively are not uncommon. One of them is often not public, but is restricted to the couple itself and their immediate family. Most interreligious marriages are, in the countries where this is possible, celebrated according to a civil rite.

17. Regarding *counselling*, there seems to be more involvement of pastors before marriage than after. On the other hand, pastoral assistance is not confined to the pastors. There are cases where informal groups of interreligious couples play, indirectly, a pastoral role.

18. The churches' *appraisal* of interreligious marriages is often not made explicit. While many responses express hope that such marriages may contribute positively to dialogue and harmony between Christians and other religious communities, scepticism about the promises of interreligious marriages is not hidden.

19. Although there is no proper assessment of the effects of interreligious marriages on the *religious commitment* of spouses, it is often stated that an already existing religious indifference and relativism often continues and is, in many instances, reinforced. The number of cases where the spouses continue to practise their faith separately is limited. Moreover, this does not happen without difficulty.

20. The choice of observing *two faith traditions* within one family, desirable as it may be in some cases, often appears to be unrealistic. It is sometimes suggested that for a partner to remain a deeply committed believer, the other partner must be either non-religious but tolerant, or be respectful of the religion of his/her spouse, in some cases to the point of being attracted to it.

21. With respect to *conversion*, it is noted that in a large number of cases a

distinction needs to be made between the formal act, required in some cases or encouraged in others, and the personal choice, followed by a long-standing commitment, to adhere to the religion of the spouse. Bearing in mind such a distinction, there do not seem to be many more conversions than before. Two factors appear to play a greater role in conversion: the pressure from outside to belong to one religious community and the desire of the couple for greater family cohesion.

22. In the absence of strong social pressure and legal prescriptions or restrictions, the general trend is for the non-committed spouse to follow the religiously committed one. Nevertheless, it seems that there are more Christian spouses that convert to the other religion than the other way round. In some countries interreligious marriages cease to be interreligious on the day of marriage. In these cases one partner chooses, or is asked, to convert to the religion of the other. This conversion is sometimes provisional.

23. There is little evidence of extensive, or even of any, *consultation* between religious leaders of the two communities concerned by an interreligious marriage.

#### B. The Christian Spouses

24. Christian spouses responded more fully to the questionnaire than their non-Christian partners. Nevertheless, their responses were far from exhaustive. Almost all insisted on anonymity or confidentiality.

25. The majority of Christian spouses stated that they did not seek *pastoral assistance* from their churches. They were not surprised, therefore, that it was not provided. Some were grateful, however, for the helpful personal advice and moral support received, though neither officially solicited nor formally offered.

26. Respondents were, on the whole, reserved in describing the evolution of their *religious practice* after marriage. While quite a few affirmed that their basic commitment, or the lack of it, did not change in any radical manner, they noted in most cases that their practice within their original community had decreased. Generally the spouse recognized, and even emphasized, the right of the other spouse to practise his/her religion. This practice, however, is often difficult for reasons pertaining to the organization of family life.

27. The majority did not seem to be concerned with, let alone preoccupied by, the attitude and *judgment of their religious community*. Some expressed their pain or anger for being ostracized or marginalized. A smaller number expressed their satisfaction and praised their community's understanding and care.

28. Not much "interreligious dialogue" takes place within the household.

Frequently *religious differences* are avoided or ignored. Nevertheless, in the eventuality of marital tension, these differences may resurface, sometimes forcefully. In very few cases were religious questions, in themselves, seen as sources of conflict.

29. *Religious education* of children, if at all taken seriously, is seldom a common endeavour. On these rare occasions, it is reduced to teaching faith in God and the hereafter, to imparting training in moral judgement, as well as to preaching tolerance and respect for religious diversity. In other cases, religious education is entrusted to one spouse and sometimes through him/her to one religious community.

#### C. The Non-Christian Spouses

30. Generally there is little or no *contact with the church* of the Christian spouse. The cases where the non-Christian spouse was asked to convert to Christianity are not numerous. Slightly more numerous are the cases where the non-Christian spouse is encouraged to learn about Christianity and is offered opportunities for this, or is asked to commit himself or herself to respect the Christian spouse's religious liberty.

31. On the whole, the *faith of the Christian partner* is mentioned as a neutral factor. In some cases it is perceived as beneficial to the couple. It is not regarded, more particularly when it is privatized, as a possible source of conflict. In a few cases, the non-Christian spouse tries, more indirectly than directly, to weaken the religious practice of the other spouse.

32. *Religious education* of the children is seen as a problem. It may be solved by being ignored and/or constantly "postponed". When a decision is made the realistic choice points to educating the children in the tradition of one faith community, but in a spirit of openness towards – and respect for – the other religion.

33. According to most answers, the *attitude of the community* is not generally favourable. The majority of correspondents refer to some reservation or an attitude of hostility on the part of their own family and religious community. While there may be less hostility from the side of the family of the Christian partner and the Christian community, reference is made to an attitude of superiority. The non-Christian spouse may be treated politely but condescendingly, and so does not feel fully accepted.

## II

### LOOKING AT THE AVAILABLE MATERIAL ON INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGES

34. Most documents available have been *produced in Western Europe and North America*. Generally they speak from the standpoint of a particular Christian tradition. A few are ecumenical. The majority of them address a national situation. All affirm their contextuality and have no claim to universality. There are many more documents referring to Christian-Muslim marriages than to interreligious marriages in general. The oldest document dates back to 1964. It offers "opinions" on Christian-Muslim marriages. Later, we hear more of "pedagogical perspectives". In the 1980s there were more and more pastoral and liturgical guidelines. Yet the educational character of the documents continues to be emphasized. Quite a few recent documents define themselves as a "resource", a "reference book" or a "guide".

35. Needless to say, the documents are diverse in length, style and focus. They are *addressed primarily to pastors* who are required to counsel and guide, in the name of the Christian community, young people considering an interreligious marriage. They are also made available to couples and their families and in some cases congregations and seminars. Whether they assess the sociological significance of interreligious marriages or not, they often indicate that there is already a sufficient number of them to make the issue worthy of consideration and action. They also make statements about the probability of seeing such marriages increase in number. While a few documents refer to interreligious marriages as an accepted fact in modern times, many others highlight at the outset the problematic, unusual, or even "exceptional" character of these marriages.

36. The documents vary in their insistence on the importance of the *challenge* posed to the Christian community by interreligious marriages. But they agree on the need to have a pastoral attitude of sensitivity, understanding and care. While none of the documents cautions overtly, or warns against interreligious marriage, most of them emphasize the difficulties such marriages entail. These difficulties are not attributed solely to religious differences and their direct implications but equally to the ethnic and cultural differences that often mark an interreligious marriage. Many documents refer to the "promises" of interreligious marriages or to the opportunity they may provide for mutual enrichment. Some of them are more elaborate than others in describing in what ways this enrichment occurs. Others try to define the conditions necessary for such an enrichment to occur.

37. The documents are, on the whole, more pastoral than theological and

more sociological than anthropological. Yet some of them dwell in general terms on the *Christian concept of marriage*, calling for careful consideration on whether and in what ways interreligious marriages are regrettable and yet are worthy of pastoral attention. Others look at the scriptural foundations for the Christian understanding of marriage. They examine the scriptural witness to interreligious marriages, including the Pauline teaching which constitutes the basis for dispensation. Nevertheless more attention is dedicated, in all documents, to the established Christian practice of marriage, the meaning of its celebration and/or its sacramental character and subsequent canonical status.

38. A number of documents chose to encourage the Christian pastors and other concerned people to acquaint themselves properly with the understanding and practice of *marriage according to other faith traditions*. They offer information, usually rather basic but sometimes quite detailed. Some emphasize legal questions. In a few cases elements of comparative matrimonial law are given. The comparative approach to the significance of marriage in Christianity and other religions is often less explicit, though consciously attempted in one or more cases.

39. Almost all documents indicate that the raising of children, and more particularly their *religious education*, is a central issue, if not *the* central issue. It appears best, according to most of them, that the child be raised in one tradition within an interreligious family while being taught, both in theory and through example, respect for the other tradition. Some documents do not conceal the wish that this religious tradition be Christianity, and call upon the Christian spouse to bear witness within the couple to his/her faith tradition. This is done not without stressing the need to respect the religious liberty of the other spouse, including that of being able to witness to his/her faith tradition. Also emphasized is the need to refrain from any coercion or compulsion in religious matters.

40. Many documents refer to the *celebration of marriage*, underlining its public character and expressing reservations about its repetition. In certain cases a distinction is made between the major celebration and a possible subsequent blessing or festive happening in the context of another community. While recommending a Christian celebration and stating the requirements and conditions for this, some discuss the possibility and form of involvement of religious leaders from another faith community. Samples of marriage rites or wedding liturgies, Christian and/or with various possible adaptations, are made available in a number of documents.

41. All documents point to the importance of *post-marriage pastoral assistance* and offer advice to families and to the Christian community. At times use is made of true stories or of hypothetical examples to show that the diversity of

cases makes the challenge enormous. This only serves to confirm that each couple is unique and that no one pastoral rule is applicable to all.

### III ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

#### 1. *Religious freedom*

42. The right to religious freedom is one of the most fundamental rights of the human person. Entering into marriage does not take away this right. The right to belong to a particular religion remains when the partners to a marriage follow different faiths.

43. The right to religious freedom does not concern only inner convictions, matters of belief, professing a *credo*. It extends to the acting out of belief in the whole of life, and particularly through worship. Such worship, moreover, is not to be seen merely on an individual basis. Religion has also a public, communitarian dimension. The partner to an interreligious marriage can, it is true, pray in private, at home. But there is both a need and a right to join in his or her community at worship, in church or chapel, temple or mosque. Something is missing if there is no participation in the celebrations which mark major feasts, Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, Guru Nanak's birthday, and so on. The individual and communitarian dimensions of religion mutually uphold one another.

44. In interreligious households, i.e. where the partners to a marriage belong to different religions, the exercise of religious freedom can come into conflict with a quality of marriage the partners will want to conserve, namely, harmony. An atmosphere of understanding and peace is essential for a happy development of the relationship between spouses. The continuance of a distinct religious point of reference, of a differing religious practice, need not necessarily threaten the harmony, but it may easily do so. Interreligious couples can fall into the temptation of trying to overcome the problem by eliminating one religion, or both.

45. Eliminating one religion could come about through the assimilation of one partner into the religion of the other. Of course this step may be taken after discovering the beauty of the other religion and being attracted by it. It can be the result of a genuine movement of conversion. It cannot be denied that a number of people have become interested in Christianity through the example of their Christian partner; they have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and they have willingly and joyfully asked to be baptized into the Church. Yet

sometimes assimilation may arise from an act of resignation. It is felt to be too trouble-some to continue to insist on the practice of one's own religion, so the husband, or the wife, stops praying and worshipping according to his or her own tradition in order to adopt the practice of the other religion. It may happen that religious practice simply ceases. In such cases it could be said that there is a religious loss for the spouse in question.

46. Assimilation can also come about due to pressure brought to bear by the partner in marriage, or by the partner's family, or simply by the environment in which the couple are living. Such pressure, which is to be distinguished from the witness of example, does not respect the integrity of the person. It is a strong principle that there should be no compulsion in religion.

47. It may happen that the partners will agree, either explicitly or tacitly, to eliminate all religion from their household. Religion is seen as a divisive element, and so is best avoided. It is not talked about, prayers are not said, the sense of belonging to the respective religious communities is lost. Here the result is a form of religious indifferentism. Although this is apparently the pattern of living of many couples and families in today's world, it should nevertheless be considered a loss. The marriage and the family are deprived of the extra dimension religion gives to life.

48. It would seem, therefore, appropriate to encourage the partners in interreligious marriages to live out, with great commitment, the ideals of their religious convictions, taking care nevertheless that one religion not be used against the other, so that the religions may not be an occasion for conflict but rather a source of enrichment.

#### 2. *Religious difference as a weapon*

49. As has been seen from the answers to the enquiry, difference of religion in itself does not usually constitute the primary source of conflict between married partners. Such conflict may arise for other reasons, questions of character, vision of married life, difficulties of reconciling professional activities with commitments to the family. Yet where there is also a difference of religion this may be invoked as the reason for a widening gap in mutual understanding. Instead of looking calmly at the real issues which divide, the one complaining seizes upon religion as a weapon with which to belabour the partner.

50. Now to treat religion in this fashion is obviously to instrumentalize it. This is not worthy of the believing person, nor is it respectful of religion. Religion should not be used as a means to avoid confronting difficulties, but should help in overcoming them. It can do so by providing motivation for seeing them as occasions of growth.

### 3 *Religious differences as enrichment*

51. Can the fact of belonging to different religions be a source of enrichment for the couple? There are perhaps many who consider such a perspective completely utopian. Yet there are couples who have succeeded in sharing their religious identities, giving each other support while doing so.

52. There are certain conditions for this mutual enrichment to take place. There needs to be an interest in the partner's religion. This can take the form of asking questions, of the partner, or of the partner's family, or of reading about the other religion. Knowledge can increase through accompanying the partner to church, temple, mosque or gurdwara.

53. This leads to the second condition for true enrichment, an attitude of respect. This respect needs to be shown for both religions, the partner's and one's own. In other words, acts are not to be performed which would go beyond the boundaries set up by a particular religion. A fairly obvious example here would be Holy Communion. Since receiving Communion is an act of Christian faith, it would surely be over-stepping the bounds if the partner belonging to another religion were to communicate. Of course if, as in some churches is the practice, a blessing is given to those who are not receiving the sacrament, the partner would be quite entitled to come forward for the blessing if so desired. There may be certain religious acts which can be performed together, even by people of different religions. Yet careful consideration will always be needed. Once again, the integrity of the faith is to be respected and this can be endangered by syncretism.

54. Even where there is not presence at the worship of the partner's community, there can be opportunities for mutual enrichment. Learning about the feasts of another religion can bring about reflection on elements of one's own faith. For instance, the practice of fasting during the month of Ramadan could be a stimulus to the Christian partner to re-examine the value of fasting. Or the theme of light overcoming darkness, prominent in the feast of Diwali, may bring about deeper reflection on Christ as Light. Similarly a knowledge of the Scriptures of the partner's religion may induce a spouse to take a new look at his or her own Scriptures. In all these instances it will usually be found that an increase in knowledge of the other religion will bring about a deepening of one's own faith.

### 4. *Bringing up children in an interreligious marriage*

55. It is when children arrive on the scene that the religious question becomes most acute in a family where the parents belong to different religions.

What religious identity is to be given to the children? Is a choice going to be made for one particular religion? Are the children going to be split, some being brought up in the faith of the father, and the others in that of the mother? Are they going to be brought up in both religions? Or are they to be given no religious identity? These are some of the solutions adopted and which need to be assessed.

56. Some parents opt for bringing the children up in one particular religion. Their aim is to give their children a clear identity, so that they know where they stand. When their play-mates at school ask them to which religion they belong, they will have a definite answer to give. They will not be embarrassed. It is also considered easier for the child to learn the tenets and practices of one religion. In this case there is less chance of confusion. There can also be greater continuity, a possibility of more harmonious development.

57. The disadvantage in this solution could be a certain distance created between the child and the parent of the other religion. One way of overcoming such a drawback would be to have the child brought up in one particular religion, while opening up references to the other religion. Much care would be needed here to see that the child did not become all mixed up.

58. Another solution adopted by some parents is to split the religious education: some of the children belonging to the father's religion, the others to the mother's. This could appear to be more equitable, yet it is obviously not without its problems. For one, it increases the burden of the parents who have to be concerned with not just one type of religious education but two. It is moreover a solution which, though adopted for the sake of peace and harmony, reinforces the division in the family. It also implicitly gives support to the unacceptable idea that one religion is as good as another.

59. In order to overcome this division other parents choose to bring the children up in both religions. The children are taught the stories and the principles of both religions. They are brought to the different places of worship. The aim is that they become familiar with both religions and so have no difficulty fitting into the extended families of both parents.

60. The disadvantage of this solution is again, from the child's point of view, the lack of specific identity. The child may in fact come to give little or no importance to either religion. There is thus the danger of encouraging indifference.

61. There are finally some parents who wish to avoid making a choice on their's child's behalf. They decide not to have the child brought up in either of the parents' religions. It is better, they think, for the child to make his or her own choice as an adolescent or as a young adult. This, they feel, is a way of showing greater respect for the child. Such a decision can be carried out in two

ways. In one the child receives no religious instruction at all – but in that case it might be wondered whether the child will want later to opt for a particular religion; there would have been no encouragement given to make such a choice. The other way would be to see that knowledge is conveyed about both religions so that, eventually, a motivated choice can be made.

62. There is a definite weakness in both of these approaches, but particularly in the first. If the child has received no religious instruction, it may be wondered how at a later age an option can be made for a particular religion. No encouragement will have been given for such a choice. Moreover the child is being deprived of the benefit of religious belonging during the crucial years of growth. Even where knowledge of a religion is handed on, it is done without creating a sense of commitment, and so can contribute little to the child's all-round development.

63. With reference to paragraphs 55-62 it is necessary to point out that some religious communities have established definite regulations concerning such matters. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church requires a Catholic entering into a Church-recognized marriage to promise to do all in his or her power to have the offspring brought up according to the Catholic faith. The various solutions proposed in the above-mentioned paragraphs would therefore not be acceptable.

### *5. The family and the school*

64. Whatever solution the parents adopt, they will have to reckon with the influence of the school. It would be too long here to go into the question of religious education in schools. This would require a booklet of its own. Nevertheless something should be said on this question.

65. The parents may be tempted to leave everything to the school, provided that religious knowledge classes are given. (This is not the case in all countries.) Although in some countries religious education includes teaching on world religions, more often than not it concentrates on one particular religion. In some cases, where the catchment area of the school is multi-ethnic and multi-religious, there is a tendency to play down the specifically doctrinal content and offer lessons on human problems. In any case, the parents may well find that one of the religions represented in the home is not getting sufficient attention. They will thus need to supplement the Religious Education lessons through their own efforts.

66. Moreover religion is not, or should not be, just one item on the school curriculum. Religious formation is not simply a question of imbibing infor-

mation, acquiring knowledge. It includes the cultivation of attitudes and the acquisition of habits. Learning how to pray, coming to appreciate the importance of the religious community, may tend to be neglected if the home is not playing its part. This is true in general. It could be said to be even more true of the interreligious household where special efforts will have to be made to preserve the atmosphere of respect for both religions of the parents.

### *6. Relations with the Christian community*

67. Understandably the Christian churches have difficulty in accepting interreligious marriages. For some churches marriage is a sacrament. For all churches, whether the sacramental aspect is emphasized or not, it can be said that marriage is held to be of great importance, an area of life which needs the maximum of support the Christian faith can give. Where one partner is not a Christian it is felt that this support is weakened.

68. Communities, therefore, tend to adopt one of two attitudes to interreligious marriages. One is to see them as a means of increasing the members of the Christian fold by bringing in new people. The other is to view them, on the contrary, as a danger to the flock. In the first case the non-Christian partner is treated solely as a potential convert. Pressure will be put on the Christian in the marriage to win over the spouse. If the efforts do not succeed, there will be a tendency to give the couple no further attention. In the second case not only is the non-Christian partner held to be responsible for leading a Christian astray, but the Christian will be condemned for weakness and a lack of appreciation of the faith. The net result will be the ostracization of the couple. Even where this is not official or canonical, the couple may feel themselves to be criticized and unwelcome, and so will cut themselves off from the community.

69. Yet, as the answers to the enquiries have mentioned, interreligious marriages are on the increase. Churches therefore are called upon to revise their attitudes, if necessary, and to give adequate pastoral care. Such care is needed at different stages: before the marriage is undertaken, at the time of the celebration of the marriage, during the married life of the couple.

70. With regard to preparation for marriage there is perhaps a need for young Christians to be made aware of the difficulties that may arise from interreligious marriages. There need be no illusions here though. Young people have little interest in warnings about hypothetical dangers. They do not feel that they are concerned. It is only when they have fallen in love with a person belonging to another religion that the matter interests them, but then it is usually too late for warnings.

71. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that interreligious couples need to be encouraged to prepare seriously for their future married life. For them, even more than for Christian couples, discussion of all issues well in advance is vital. It is not just a question of when the wedding is to take place, and how it is to be celebrated. The very concept of marriage needs to be discussed, so that each partner is aware of the other's understanding of the matter. Then the couple will have to decide how they are going to continue their religious practices. Perhaps even more important, they will have to form a common project for the upbringing and religious education of their future children.

72. It is obvious that a religiously mixed couple will require special attention. In many places preparation for marriage is conducted for a group of couples. A non-Christian might be quite happy to join such a group, but might also feel embarrassed and out of place. In such cases it might be better for the pastor to meet the couple alone, at least on some occasions. Nevertheless, meetings with experienced Christian couples can be of help to them also, and it would be a pity if they were deprived of this.

73. The celebration of marriage will depend on the church law of the Christian community involved. The law needs to be clearly explained to the non-Christian party. Some churches will not entertain any religious marriage if the two parties are not Christian. In other churches special permission (dispensation) is required before a religious marriage can be celebrated. There are some churches which are less strict in their approach.

74. If a church wedding is to be held, care is to be taken that the integrity of the rite be respected. The essential part of the ceremony is the exchange of consent. It would be belittling to the act of marriage if this were to be repeated. There should therefore not be two wedding ceremonies, one according to each religion. The holding of a complementary ceremony, an act of thanksgiving or a blessing, is sometimes envisaged. For some Christian Churches, however, the possibility of holding two celebrations is completely rejected. It must be remembered too that marriage is by nature a public act, so unless there are compelling reasons for doing so, the marriage should not be celebrated in secret. The whole question of the ceremony could be usefully discussed beforehand by the leaders of the two religions in order to work out a satisfactory solution. Adequate preparation is particularly required so that sensibilities, whether of Christians or of people of the other religion, are not offended.

75. The wedding is only the beginning. The interreligious couple will need support throughout their married life. It may be said that even those couples who have only had a civil marriage should benefit by this support. This will be one way of allowing the Christian partner to maintain contact with his or her own faith community.

76. Where interreligious marriages are numerous, it may be possible to organize special groups of interfaith couples. Newly-weds will then benefit from the experience of couples who have had to struggle through certain difficulties. Much benefit can be derived from such sharing.

77. As has been said, this document remains at the level of general principles. In their application local circumstances have to be taken into account. Christian Churches and Communities in any given country or region may consider the usefulness of exchanging views to see whether they could arrive at a common approach to interreligious marriages, a question which affects all.

Pontifical Council  
for Interreligious Dialogue  
Vatican City.

4 April 1997

The Office on  
Inter-Religious Relations  
World Council of Churches  
Geneva.