

## **Abstract**

*This article describes a grounded theory that emerged from the Interfaith Research Project (IRP) that was sponsored by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA). The first part of the paper briefly outlines the methodology that facilitated its development. The remainder of the article describes the theory's value and use for intermarried couples, clergy, lay professionals and paraprofessionals. A case study is also proffered, along with implications and conclusions.*

## **Mapping the Challenges that Intermarried Couples Encounter**

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Adults who worship in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA) have been intermarrying in sizeable numbers for some time. According to the vital statistics kept by the GOA's Department of Registry, over the past 20 years, 62% of all marriages conducted in the GOA's churches have been designated "interchurch/inter-Christian" (Stephanopoulos, 2004). Moreover, others have surmised that when these figures are combined with GOA members who intermarry outside of the GOA, the percentage may exceed 75% (Harakas, 1997; Lorant & Wingenbach, 1996).

As a result, in 1997 the GOA's leadership determined that a closer examination of this growing group of faithful was linked to its future well-being. Furthermore, because of my background and expertise in matters related to marriages and families, I was asked to submit a research proposal intended to assist the GOA's outreach to the intermarried couples and families who have some level of association with this faith group. My proposal was accepted in 1998, and I began my work shortly thereafter.

Briefly, this proposal contained (a) a research approach that would later be identified as the Interfaith Research Project (IRP), and (b) a strategic plan to reach out more effectively to intermarried couples and their families. The main objectives of the IRP were to develop a systematic, thick, rich description and theoretical conceptualization of this population's challenges and lived experiences (Joanides, Mayhew & Mamalakis, 2002; Joanides, 2002, 2003,

2004; Patsavos & Joanides, 2000). In addition, the following deliverables related to the proposal's strategic planning component also emerged:

- A grounded theory of intermarried couples and their families
- A Web site devoted to intermarried couples' challenges<sup>1</sup>
- A resource for intermarried couples, parents and families, together with a resource for clergy and lay workers<sup>2</sup>
- Lectures, workshops, articles, audio and visual tapes

This article will outline one of the deliverables that have emerged from my work, i.e., A Greek Orthodox Social Ecological Developmental Cybernetics of Cybernetics Grounded Theory of Intermarried Couples in the GOA. To be more specific, I intend to briefly describe the methodology I employed to develop this theory. I will then discuss each component of the theory, as well as the interplay that exists between its various components. A case example will also be proffered to help explicate this theory's use and value. Implications and conclusions will subsequently follow.

### **A Brief Overview of the Methodology Used<sup>3</sup>**

A qualitative methodology was selected and utilized. My reasoning for selecting this research approach is because qualitative research is ideally suited for exploring and understanding a phenomena or culture that has otherwise never been studied carefully (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, since I was

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<sup>1</sup> The Interfaith Marriage Web site has been up and running since 1998. The address is as follows: [www.interfaith.goarch.org](http://www.interfaith.goarch.org).

<sup>2</sup> A resource for couples has been available since 2002, it is entitled, [When you intermarry: A resource for inter-Christian intercultural couples, parents and families](#). A resource for clergy and lay workers has been available since January of 2004. It is entitled, [Ministering to intermarried couples: A resource for clergy and lay workers](#). Both resources are grounded upon the information that emerged from the IRP.

interested in developing both a thick, rich description and theoretical conceptualization of the intermarried couples in the GOA, I selected a grounded theory approach (Glazer & Strauss, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1997), and a naturalistic approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Grounded theory is used to help investigators develop a theoretical understanding of a given phenomena or culture. This approach is “grounded” on participants’ descriptions and observations, and not on the investigator’s experiences, knowledge and expertise (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). In addition, since I was also interested in generating a thick, rich description of this populations lived experiences and challenges, a naturalistic approach was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Focus groups were also utilized to help me gather information. This information gathering technique permitted participants the opportunity to both validate and build off of each other’s remarks, while also serving to permit rich descriptions and observations to emerge (Morgan, 1998; Piercy & Nickerson, 1996). I conducted two to three groups in each of the 9 Metropolis’ of the GOA. One group was comprised of Baby Boomers, who at the time of my investigation were between the ages of 35 – 50. The second group was comprised of Generation X’ers who were between the ages of 20 – 35. In total, 202 intermarried spouses participated in one of 20 groups.

Some typical questions that were asked were as follows: What has it been like being intermarried? What have been your blessings, surprises and

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<sup>3</sup> Because of space limitations I am unable to detail the methodology I used. For more information either consult the author or consider reviewing his other writings.

challenges? What have been some of your parenting challenges? All questions were open-ended and designed to create conversation. As moderator, my task was to facilitate a respectful discussion among participants.

After each focus group, I also conducted debriefing telephone interviews. After an analysis of each taped focus group transcript, I phoned one to three participants and read my analysis to them. I conducted a total of 22 of these interviews, each lasting between 60-90 minutes. This was done to ensure that the emerging results were indicative of what participants were observing and not the result of my personal theoretical bias (Joanides, Brigham & Joanning, 1997).<sup>4</sup>

I also determined to post emergent information from these groups on the Interfaith Marriage Web site [www.interfaith.goarch.org](http://www.interfaith.goarch.org). Feedback forms were provided for intermarried couples who reviewed the results and wished to provide further feedback. In total, 168 intermarried respondents completed and returned these forms.<sup>5</sup> When focus group participants are considered, along with those who reviewed the information on the Web site, a total of 370 participants were part of this study.

## **Analysis**

Analysis proceeded in three stages (Krueger, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this process, I typically used an inductive approach that sought to explicate and identify a story line that was conceptually and systematically dense, and was derived from the collected data. Thirteen subcategories emerged

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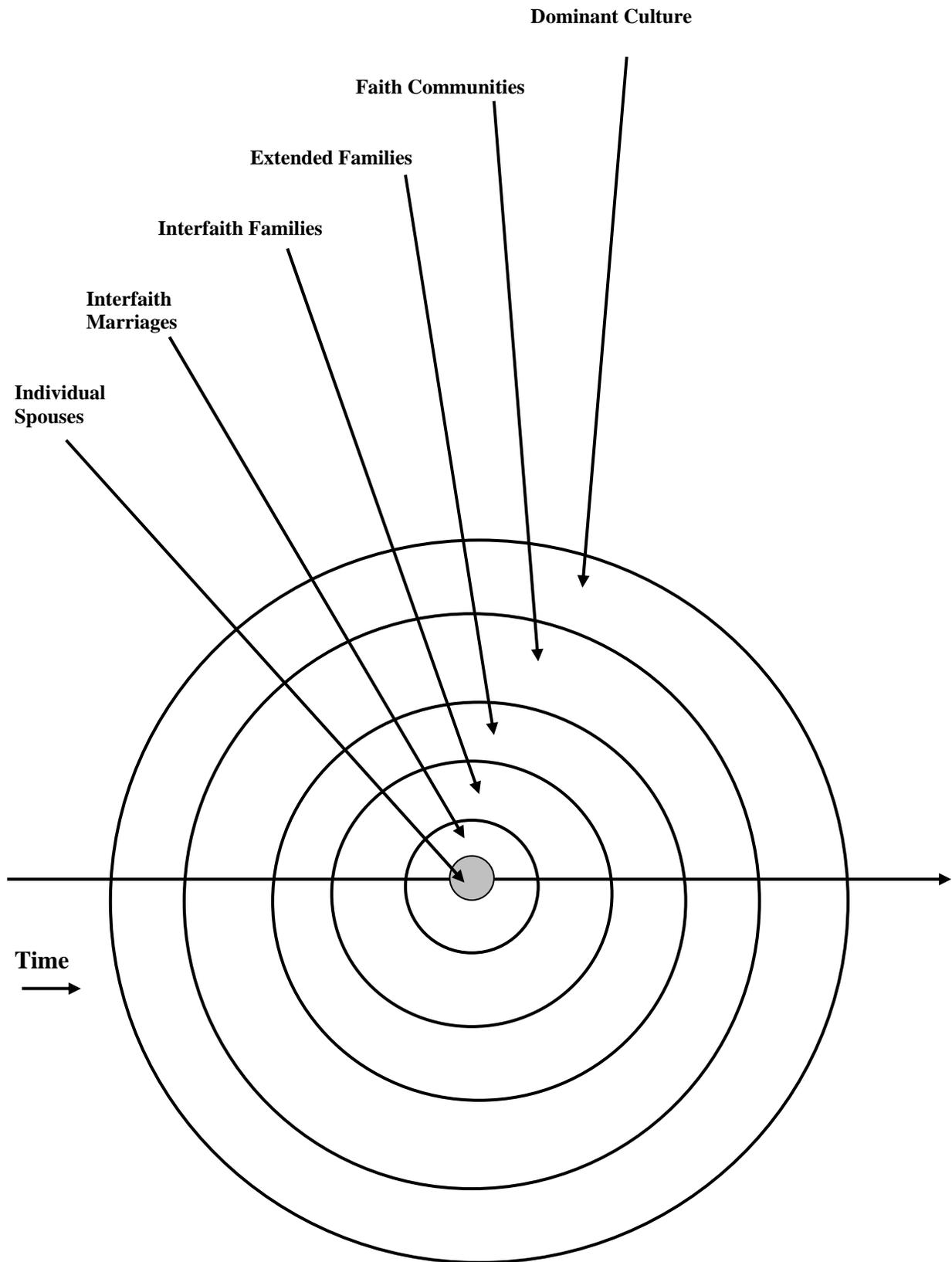
<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding the other techniques that were selected and used to ensure trustworthiness, please contact the author or consult his other writings.

<sup>5</sup> Since that time, thousands of visitors have reviewed the IRP's results. From the feedback that I have received, results appear to generally apply to both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians. To date, I have

from this process which served to form the basis of the grounded theory that appears in Figure 1. The full name of this theory is, An Orthodox Social Ecological, Developmental, Cybernetics of Cybernetics Grounded Theory of Inter-Christian, Intercultural Couples in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. For purposes of brevity, I will refer to this theory throughout the remainder of this article with the descriptors “theory” or “grounded theory.”

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yet to receive any feedback suggesting that results are skewed or non-representative of intermarried couples’ lived experiences.



**Figure 1. An Orthodox Social Ecological Developmental Cybernetics of Cybernetics Grounded theory of Inter-Christian Intercultural Couples in the GOA**

## **Important Assertions and Observations**

When I think of a theory, I think of a map. Like any good map that helps people visualize and negotiate their way through unfamiliar territory, in my own mind, theories accomplish the same objective.

With regard to the grounded theory that appears in visual form in Figure 1, it is my contention that this theory, not only maps the unique territory that intermarried couples and their families must negotiate, but it also can be of assistance to this population of couples in their efforts to manage and negotiate the challenges they might encounter as a result of their different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, this theory can be of assistance to clergy, professionals and paraprofessionals<sup>6</sup>. In particular, it can help familiarize those who either minister or work with intermarried couples and their families with the unique territory this population must negotiate. It can also prove invaluable in their efforts to facilitate change in couple's lives who seek their help. These assertions will become clearer as you continue to read the information that follows.

In addition, as the title of this theory suggests, presuppositions and assertions from social ecological and developmental theory were adopted to help me map participant's observations and descriptions. A second order family therapy approach termed, cybernetics of cybernetics, was also selected and employed to help clergy, professionals and paraprofessionals use this theory in as effective and efficient manner as possible.

Finally, I have chosen an interdisciplinary approach to study intermarried couples and their families i.e., one that combines social science and Orthodox/Christian theology. By taking this approach, I would argue that the construction of a more precise map of the unique territory under consideration was facilitated.

### **The Social Ecological Dimension**

Family scholars use social ecology theory to assist them in their work (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). In the simplest of terms, social ecological theory asserts that individuals are not disassociated islands, but are instead part of a complex social ecology that is comprised of numerous interdependent subsystems. Moreover, these subsystems are interrelated with one another, but are not always in complete synergy with each other, due in large part to conflicting needs and priorities. When subsystem needs conflict, the individuals, couples and families who are imbedded within them are likely to encounter challenges, and by extension, individual, couple and family growing pains, issues and problems (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Carter and McGoldrick, 1989).

Since there seemed to be a goodness-of-fit between participant's observations and descriptions and social ecological theory, I determined to use components of this theory to assist me in mapping the complex territory that participants were describing during the data collection process. To be more specific, participants repeatedly referred to a cluster of social subsystems that were interrelated with the unique challenges they encountered as intermarried

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<sup>6</sup> When using the term "professionals," I am referring to mental health providers such as psychologists, counselors and marriage and family therapists. The term "paraprofessionals" is intended to refer to

couples whose ethnic and faith group backgrounds differed. The circles in Figure 1 illustrate these subsystems. However, what these circles fail to show is the tension that emerges when subsystem needs conflict with one another.

Based on participant's remarks, when subsystem needs clash, challenges emerge for intermarried couples and their families – challenges that can potentially have a negative impact on individual, couple and family well-being, and by extension, their efforts to cultivate religious and spiritual well-being. The following example serves to illustrate this last point. It features a couple whom I will refer to with the pseudonyms, Nick and Sarah.

### **Nick and Sarah**

Nick (31) and Sarah (29) have been married for less than a year. Nick is Greek Orthodox. By his own admission, he has a low connection to his religious background, and a high connection to his ethnic background. Sarah is Presbyterian. She has a high connection to her religious background and a low connection to her ethnic background.

Shortly after their honeymoon, Sarah discovers that the Greek Orthodox Church does not permit non-Orthodox to participate in its sacramental life. This runs contrary to Sarah's own faith background and personal perspective of the sacraments. As a result, she decides to approach the local priest to express her dissatisfaction with this pastoral guideline, but before doing so she discusses the issue with her spouse.

Nick generally agrees with his wife's perspective, but does not support his spouse's plan. He argues that because "everyone knows everyone," he worries

that Sarah's meeting might prove embarrassing to him and his extended family. He thus asks Sarah to forget about this issue. Sarah acquiesces, but not before expressing her dissatisfaction from time to time. Moreover, when his wife ventilates, Nick learns to listen without comment, the potential crisis passes.

For the next several years, Sarah meets her religious and spiritual needs alone and in the Presbyterian Church. She repeatedly invites Nick to accompany her, but shows little interest in doing so. She knows better than to push her husband to come with her, and prays that one day she will be able to cultivate a religious and spiritual life with her husband.

### **Observations**

While this example only begins to describe the complex nature of the territory that intermarried couples must negotiate who are associated with the GOA, it does function to illustrate the utility of this part of the theory. In particular, the nature of this couple's challenge is not only individual – Sarah's challenge or Nick's challenge – it also involves the couple subsystem. Moreover, if circumstances differed, and Sarah ignored Nick's needs, or Nick was unsympathetic to Sarah's complaints about the Orthodox Church, individual, couple and extended family well-being might be compromised. The couple's individual and future family's religious and spiritual development could also be seriously damaged. Furthermore, as will become clearer when I offer more information about this couple five years after the above sequence of events occur, if challenges related to a couple's religious and ethnic differences remain unresolved, they could require some outside intervention from either a clergy

person or a professional couple's counselor. That being the case, I would maintain that clergy, professionals and paraprofessionals should find this theory useful in their efforts to sort through, and identify the complicating social ecological factors that are implicated in the unique challenges that intermarried couples encounter.

### **Developmental Dimension**

As potentially useful as the social ecological dimension of this theory might be, it fails to account for the developmental challenges that IRP participants described. For example, participants observed that the challenges they encountered as engaged couples were different from the challenges they faced as newlyweds, and the challenges they faced as newlyweds were different from the challenges they faced when they considered starting a family, or when the children arrived, or when their children entered adolescence, young adulthood or when they finally would leave home. To account for these challenges, I determined to integrate developmental theory into the grounded theory that was forming during data collection and analysis. By including presuppositions and assertions from developmental theory, I was able to map and account for the life cycle challenges that participants described. A succinct explanation of this dimension of the grounded theory follows.

Like social ecology theory, family scholars utilize developmental theory to help them with their work (Rogers & White, 1993). The arrow in Figure 1 under the word "Time" serves to illustrate the developmental component of this theory. Briefly, this theory posits that individuals, couples and families encounter different

challenges that must be negotiated from one stage of the life cycle to the next. Moreover, should a couple fail to successfully negotiate certain challenges in one stage of the family life cycle, this failure will negatively impact their efforts to negotiate challenges in subsequent stages (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). This will become clearer in the example given below.

### **Nick and Sarah**

Let us suppose that time has passed, and Nick and Sarah are now in their fifth year of marriage. Sarah still disagrees with the Orthodox Church's perspective regarding non-Orthodox participation in its sacramental life, but has chosen to honor her husband's request and has avoided making this a point of contention with the local Greek Orthodox priest. The issue is all but forgotten until they begin talking about starting a family. When discussions of children begin, Nick states that he would like to baptize their children in the Greek Orthodox Church. Sarah is resistant to this idea, but does not discount it outright because of her need to cultivate a religious and spiritual life with her husband. However, when she discovers that members of her side of the family would be excluded from functioning as godparents, because only Greek Orthodox Christians can participate in the Orthodox Church's sacramental life, her anger swells again regarding this pastoral guideline. To exacerbate matters further, Nick informs her that he would like to follow a Greek tradition by naming their first child after his parents – Constantine or Athena – two names that Sarah finds unappealing. Moreover, when Nick's parents discover that the couple is planning to start a family, they begin aggressively advocating that their future grandchildren be

baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church – further complicating the couple’s challenges. As much as Sarah cares for her in-laws, this is a need/request that Sarah finds she cannot meet.

As a result, these conflicting subsystem and developmental needs serve to resurrect an old challenge that had remained dormant and unresolved – Sarah’s discomfort with the Greek Orthodox Church’s pastoral guidelines regarding sacramental participation. However, the difference with regards to their present challenges, when compared to earlier challenges, is their complex nature. Their present challenges not only involve individual and couple needs, but they also include extended family needs. The following information further serves to explicate the complexity of this couple’s challenges.

- Sarah wants to baptize the couple’s future children in the Presbyterian Church because she is the more religious of the two partners. She also believes she can do a better job of raising and nurturing their developing faith in the Presbyterian Church, because she knows this faith tradition.
- Nick wants to baptize in the Greek Orthodox Church because he has a strong attachment to his cultural background. He also favors this choice as a way to honor his parents and show them his gratitude for the many sacrifices they made to get him through law school.
- Nick’s parents want their grandchildren baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church because they fear that the unity of their family might somehow be compromised. In their minds, if the couple baptizes in the Presbyterian

Church, their grandchildren will not be as close to their Greek American identity, and by extension, their side of the family.

These conflicting needs leave both spouses feeling misunderstood, and hopelessly conflicted because they cannot discern how they will get past these seemingly irreconcilable needs. They thus determine to postpone any further discussion related to starting a family. While this decision serves as a temporary solution - because it reduces the intensity and frequency of their arguments - both partners know that it does nothing to resolve their challenges.

### **General Observations**

As previously stated, social ecology theory permitted me to illustrate the subsystem challenges that intermarried couples and their families encounter in the GOA, but it did not permit me to map and describe the developmental changes and challenges that participants were describing. To account for these challenges, developmental theory was selected and integrated into this developing theory. This enabled me to map the maturational changes, challenges and needs that participants were describing across the family life cycle. Additionally, this added dimension also permits those using this theory to attend to the unique developmental challenges that intermarried couples and their families encounter and must negotiate to preserve individual, couple and family stability and well-being.

### **Cybernetics of Cybernetics**

As I listened to IRP participants, one theme that seemed to repeated itself is that these couples wanted help from the church in their efforts to negotiate the

challenges they faced, but they did not want to be told what to do. These comments led me to adopt and incorporate a non-directive, collaborative approach that family therapists often use when working with couples and families, i.e., a cybernetics of cybernetics approach (Becvar & Becvar, 1996).

Briefly, this therapeutic approach asserts that individuals, couples and families are in the best position to determine what changes might best meet their needs as individuals couples and families. It further maintains that the therapist should actively perturb a couple or family system with information in hopes of facilitating healthy systemic change, but should not seek to fix a couple or family system like a mechanic might fix an automobile. With the help of emergent information from the therapeutic process, it is up to the couple or family to make the needed adjustments necessary to bring a marital or family system back into balance.

When this approach is adopted by clergy, professionals and paraprofessionals in their efforts to introduce this theory to couples, a collaborative, non-directive relationship that is in synergy with IRP participants' requests is more likely to emerge. To illustrate this point, let us turn our attention back to Nick and Sarah.

### **Employing this Theory Collaboratively**

Unable to resolve their challenges, Nick and Sarah seek me out for a second opinion. During our first meeting, I listen attentively to their story. As their story unfolds, it becomes apparent to me that both spouses fear that their present challenges could seriously damage their marriage. I also discern that they are

motivated to make some changes that will lead them toward some mutually satisfying resolutions.

To facilitate change, I inform them that I think I can help. I then proceed to introduce them to some information from the IRP in hopes of both normalizing their present distressed situation as well as empowering them with the useful tools that will facilitate to help them make some mutually satisfying changes. A key component of this intervention turns out to be my explanation of the grounded theory outlined in this paper. This theory proves helpful to both partners' efforts to develop a more sophisticated understanding of their challenges. It also proves helpful to their efforts to construct the following strategic plan that will help them address and resolve their challenges.

- In order for the couple to find the needed couple space to make some mutually satisfying decisions, they determine that they need to draw a boundary between themselves and Nick's parents. As such, they decide that Nick must schedule a private meeting with his parents to respectfully inform them that he and Sara are having some problems that require the couple – without outside assistance - to make some decisions related to their future children's religious and spiritual needs.
- While Nick draws this boundary, Sara will assume a behind-the-scenes supportive role.
- Both partners will work together to protect this boundary.
- The couple also decides to permit themselves six months to prayerfully examine this issues that are challenging them with care. During this time,

both spouses decide that they must begin educating themselves regarding Nick's ethno religious background, as well as Sarah's religious background.

Once this plan is executed, the following positive changes occur. Nick's parents begrudgingly accept the couple's request for privacy. The couple's arguments are reduced in number and intensity, and within one month cease completely. Sarah gains a deeper respect and understanding of the Greek Orthodox Church's sacramental theology and Nick begins to cultivate a considerably more personal appreciation for Christian/Orthodox spirituality. Furthermore, to facilitate her husband's religious and spiritual growth, by the end of the third month Sarah begins attending the Greek Orthodox Church with regularity. Because of her newfound knowledge of the Orthodox Church, she indicates that she does not feel as though she is compromising her religious and spiritual needs. By the fifth month, both spouses decide to baptize their children in the Greek Orthodox Church, and while Sarah is not ready to consider naming their first born after one of Nick's parent's, she states that she is "keeping this option open."

### **Implications**

On the basis of my work with hundreds of intermarried couples in the GOA, I believe this theory has implications for the challenges that church leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century face in their efforts to facilitate religious and spiritual well-being for the growing numbers of intermarried couples and families that populate their churches. I also believe that this theory has implications for the work that clergy

and lay professionals and paraprofessionals do with this population of couples and families. It is also my contention that an understanding of this theory has implications for intermarried couples' who are struggling to resolve challenges related to their religious and ethnic differences. The following points serve to amplify these assertions.

- This paper has maintained that an understanding of this theory has the potential of assisting intermarried couples with the challenges they encounter across the family life cycle as a result of their different religious and ethnic backgrounds. As such, pastors who introduce this theory to couples preparing for marriage empower them with useful information should they encounter future challenges related to their ethnic and faith group differences (Joanides, 2002, 2003, 2004).
- I would further assert that this theory can also be of assistance to mildly conflicted couples (Joanides, 2002, 2004). By "mildly conflicted," I am referring to couples who possess some good conflict resolution skills, but occasionally will get stuck and require some outside help – whether that help comes from a counselor, self-help materials or both.
- Results from the IRP also indicate that intermarried couples encounter a host of unique challenges that intra-married couples do not face (Joanides, 2002, 2004). As was the case with the couple I introduced in this article, results also suggest that most of these challenges are not simply individual challenges, but frequently involve other subsystems. As a pastor and marital and family therapist who has counseled numerous

intermarried couples, I have found that an understanding of this theory has helped me become a more effective facilitator and pastor when working with this population. I believe this to be the case, because this theory has helped me better manage the complex nature of many of the challenges that intermarried couples encounter. Moreover, pastors and seminarians with whom I have shared this theory have also found it useful in their work.

- While it is true that many pastors either do not have the time or inclination to do much couple's counseling, it is also equally true that all pastors must interact and do a certain amount of counseling with intermarried couples and their families. As such, should a pastor be disinclined in doing the kind of couple's counseling described in this article, I would maintain that an understanding of this theory can still be of some value to him/her. At minimum, this theory can assist pastors in their efforts to become more sensitive to the unique challenges that intermarried couples and their families encounter in their efforts to cultivate religious and spiritual well-being (Joanides, 2004).
- Many faith groups' in the United States, and elsewhere, still operate as though their congregations are exclusively comprised of intra-married couples, when this is no longer the case. As a result, many of the pastoral guidelines that clergy use are in need of updating so as to account for the unique challenges that both intra-married and intermarried couples and their families encounter. Results from the IRP suggest this to be true. Results also suggest that guidelines that are in need of revision tend to

impede intermarried couples' church attendance, while also negatively impacting their religious and spiritual development and well-being (Joanides, 2002, 2003, 2004). To that end, knowledge of the theory presented in this article can help both clergy and lay church leaders - at all levels - acquire a more sophisticated understanding of this population's unique challenges, while also helping them in their efforts to develop and promote pastoral guidelines that facilitate the religious and spiritual development for intermarried couples and their families.

## **Conclusion**

This article has described a grounded theory related to intermarried couples that emerged as a result of a research project I conducted for the GOA. While it is true that this theory emerged from the research that I conducted with intermarried couples in the GOA, I would maintain that there is nothing about this theory that would preclude its use outside of the GOA.

To be more specific, it is my contention that an understanding of this theory can empower engaged couples in their efforts to understand and work through conflict related to their ethnic and religious differences. I have also posited that engaged couples, as well as mildly conflicted intermarried couples who are introduced to this theory are better able to understand and work toward mutually satisfying resolutions related to the challenges that the encounter as a result of being intermarried. I have further asserted that clergy and lay leaders who understand this theory will not only gain a broader understanding of the unique challenges this population of couples and families encounter, but be in a better

position to respectfully minister to this population. Finally, on the basis of feedback that I've received, it is my contention that this theory has value and utility for other Christian and non-Christian faith groups.

Finally, an adversarial relationship has traditionally existed between the social sciences and religion. However, as more and more social scientists and theologians have seen the value of adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines social science and theology, this strained relationship has begun to change (Koenig, 2004). The grounded theory presented in this paper was inspired by this growing trend, and it is hoped that this paper will serve to encourage more interdisciplinary work like this in the future.

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