

According to Archdiocesan statistics, approximately two of every three marriages (66%) conducted in our churches over the past several decades have been categorized as inter-Christian and inter-Church. In addition, if we consider the number of young adults who are choosing to marry in a non-Orthodox setting, some estimates suggest that as many as 80% of our adults are intermarrying.

Given these growing numbers, in 1999, under the direction of Archbishop Demetrios, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA) commissioned the Interfaith Research Project (IRP) to generate an in-depth, systematic picture of intermarried couples' experiences and challenges. This initial research effort would also provide an empirical basis for the GOA's future work with this population of faithful.

For more information, please visit the Interfaith Marriage Web site at www.interfaith.goarch.org.

KEY CHALLENGES

INCREASED RESPECT & TOLERANCE FOR DIVERSITY

Results from the IRP indicate that when the Church -at any level- ignores the diverse social and religious milieu in which it is embedded, and instead espouses and promotes exclusivist, ethnocentric and nationalistic policies, this approach can potentially give intermarried couples the impression that the Church is irrelevant, insensitive, and out-of-step. Results also indicate that if Church leaders hope to effectively reach-out to intermarried couples and families, they must begin rethinking their position regarding ethnicity and culture.

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION

Results indicate that just as single faith, single-ethnic or single-cultural couples want the church to assist them in their efforts to inculcate their children with a moral and religious foundation, intermarried couples look to the church for similar assistance. Sunday School programs, retreats, and Christ-centered youth groups that are designed to help their children develop a Christian moral and religious perspective tend to be highly valued – and expected - by intermarried parents.

YOUTH PROGRAMS

Results also suggest that when respondents' local church failed to provide a strong youth program, intermarried couples who had baptized their children in the Greek Orthodox Church considered meeting some of these needs in the non-Orthodox spouses' faith community. To address this challenge, the Church (at all levels) must devote more money and resources to improve its youth programs, otherwise many intermarried parents may consider other avenues in their efforts to meet their children's religious, spiritual and moral needs.

INTERMARRIAGE AND EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Church group activities and educational materials have generally failed to broach the subject of intermarriage, and perhaps have communicated subtle messages that non-Greek and non-Orthodox backgrounds are less important. In the Church's efforts to reach out to inter-Christian and intercultural couples, it must find ways of infusing future Sunday school materials with a balanced perspective that at once values Greek Orthodoxy and other religious and ethnic traditions. In addition, youth groups such as JOY and GOYA should make a more conscious effort to (a) respectfully acknowledge our faithfuls' religious and cultural diversity, (b) foster tolerance, acceptance and respect for all those who worship in our churches and (c) begin respectfully introducing adolescents to the complex topic of intermarriage.

CHILDREN

Most intermarried couples desire their children be exposed to both parents' religious and ethnic backgrounds. As such, many parents from this population of faithful desire and would support church programs and activities that afford intermarried couples the opportunity to introduce their children to Greek culture. However, what will be challenging for the Church, is finding ways of accomplishing this task without appearing ethnocentric, since intermarried parents tend to be

leery of programs and activities that are ethnocentric.

THE NON-ORTHODOX SPOUSE

Results also suggest that our local churches will be challenged to find fresh, new, creative ways to include non-Orthodox into its religious and social life without necessarily violating the integrity of the Orthodox Church's belief system. One primary reason why the Church should consider this challenge seriously is correlated with family commitment and support. Results from the IRP suggest that when the Church makes it easier for the non-Orthodox partner to meet their religious and social needs, it increases the likelihood that intermarried couples will attend and support our churches together and with more frequency.

NON-ORTHODOX AND CONVERSION

The Church will be challenged to find respectful ways to assist non-Orthodox spouses in their efforts to consider conversion. While it is true that many non-Orthodox spouses are non-Orthodox by choice – a choice the Church respects. Respondents' observations suggest that a sizable number of non-Greek Orthodox spouses that attend our churches might consider conversion if they were respectfully given the option to convert.

THEOLOGICAL SYMPOSIA

Intermarried couples have unique needs when compared to single faith marriages. In an effort to address these needs, theological symposia should be convened that are designed to examine intermarried couple and family issues. These conferences should gather our best and brightest stakeholders – such as theologians, physicians social scientists, to name a few. The goal would be an effort to help the Church examine and modify its present pastoral guidelines and approaches as they relate to this population of faithful. For example, it may be that the Church's present guidelines pertaining to intermarried couples are creating marital strife within these unions. Discerning how this may be occurring and trying to make some systemic modifications may

serve to positively impact the relationship these couples and families have with the Orthodox Church.

MYTHS REGARDING INTERMARRIAGE

The Archdiocese must continue to proactively address pejorative myths and ideas related to intermarried couples and their families, and clearly label them as inappropriate and unchristian. Myths that lack empirical support such as "interfaith marriages are more likely to end in divorce" and "children from interfaith marriages will end up without a religious and cultural identity," compel some intermarried couples to reconsider if there is a place for them our churches.

PREMARITAL COUNSELING

Local churches must provide premarital counseling that is uniquely tailored toward meeting the needs of intermarried couples. This process can respectfully help couples understand the challenges they may encounter as (a) individuals, (b) spouses, and (c) families if they choose to remain in an inter-Christian marriage as compared to a single-church marriage.

FOLLOW-UP AFTER MARRIAGE

Continued contact with intermarried couples after marriage is also a key challenge for local churches in their efforts to retain a meaningful connection with intermarried newlyweds. Information from the IRP suggests that these types of couples are more vulnerable to being marginalized and/or dropping out. Finding better ways of staying connected with these couples after marriage until they bond with our communities is a vital challenge that must be addressed and resolved.

MORE ENGLISH

Wherever possible, more English in and outside of the services should be encouraged. According to IRP respondents, the use of English sends messages to intermarried couples that they are "accepted" and the use of "too much Greek" makes non-Orthodox feel like "outsiders" and "second class citizens."

IMPROVING ADULT CATECHETICAL PROGRAMS

As a result of the increasingly secular society in which intermarried couples are embedded, the church must continually strive to increase and improve its adult catechetical programs. Generally speaking, results from the IRP suggest that cradle Greek Orthodox Christians lack a rudimentary understanding of their Orthodox faith. The Church must find new, creative ways of sharing the Orthodox faith with this population of faithful. Continued ignorance of Orthodoxy seems to compromise the connections that intermarried spouses, couples and families have with their local Greek orthodox community.

EXTENDED FAMILY CHALLENGES

Intermarried couples' decision to intermarry can sometimes create extended family problems, especially within Greek Orthodox family systems. Pastors and lay workers should be intimately familiar with these particular challenges and wherever possible seek to be of assistance to these family systems.

CONCLUSION

Results from the IRP suggest that indifference toward these and other similar challenges will negatively impact the GOA's efforts to move into the twenty-first century as a vibrant, healthy, holy witness of our Lord's Good News. Conversely, a prayerful acknowledgment of these challenges, together with some concerted efforts to address them, can only have a positive impact on the future well-being of the GOA at all levels.

INTERFAITH WEB SITE

www.Interfaith.goarch.org

OUTREACH & EVANGELISM WEB SITE

www.Outreach.goarch.org



KEY CHALLENGES

Intermarried Couples Encounter

A Brief Description



Icon by the hand of Athanasios Clark

Rev. Fr. Charles Joanides, Ph.D., LMFT