Celebrating the Giftedness of Interchurch Families
By Daniel J. Olsen, Ph.D.

I recently met a couple who had been in an interchurch marriage for fifty-two years. By interchurch, I am referring to a marriage between two baptized Christians who come from different Christian traditions. In this case, the wife was a lifelong practicing Roman Catholic and the husband was a lifelong practicing Missouri Synod Lutheran. Listening to them, I was struck by the fact that they exuded their love for one another and for Christ in their words and actions. As they recounted various stories of their family life over the decades, the sacramental nature of their marriage was readily evident to all.

Driving home that evening, I remember thinking that the Catholic Church’s teaching that the Christian home is a “domestic church” was rarely more evident to me. All Christian homes, whether they include two Catholics, two Orthodox, two Baptists, or any combination thereof, are called to become places where Christ’s love is shared and celebrated on a daily basis. Saying that they are “small churches” does not mean that interchurch families (or any Christian families) are supposed to be “perfect”; rather it means that they are called to do their part in making Christ’s love, joy and compassion present as they go about their lives together. Family life is full of mundane tasks, small (and sometimes large) disagreements, love and loss. The realities of life may not be all that exciting sometimes, but this is where God’s love is first experienced and nurtured.

Interchurch couples will face unique challenges in becoming a fruitful “church of the home” due to the fact that they are linked to two distinctive Christian traditions. It will be challenging to figure out how to raise children in their respective churches, how to pray together, and how to welcome relatives and friends who come from diverse traditions. However, they are no less “domestic church” or “sacramental” because of this fact. With this sense of inherent goodness and holiness in mind, let me propose a few tips for working through some the challenges that interchurch couples often face, especially in the early years of their marriage.

First, share the particularities of your story of faith with your spouse. Share prayers that you learned growing up. Share traditions that remain important to you from your church of origin. Moreover, share “what you have heard” about the beliefs and practices of your spouse’s Christian community. Doing so will allow your spouse to clear up any misunderstandings that might exist and allow you to enter into an honest dialogue about diverse Christian beliefs and practices. Interchurch couples cannot assume that their spouse will know and share their specific Christian beliefs and practices. Frankly, no newlywed should assume this reality, but it is particularly important that interchurch couples take what initially seems like a difficulty and turn it into an opportunity for mutual growth. Discussing your inherited traditions can bring about greater depth in
understanding your Christian beliefs and practices and aid you in coming to know and love your spouse and his/her church more fully.

Second, be patient with your extended families. Some parents and grandparents will view your choice to marry someone from a different Christian tradition as a mistake. They may advise against it, perhaps in rather strong terms. Try not to view this as a lack of trust or sign of disapproval as much as an expression of their love for you, even if a bit misguided. They want you to be happy. Therefore, as best as you can, enter into a dialogue about Christian unity and share your understanding of faith in Christ with both families. As the years pass, you can provide witness to them of your commitment to God and one another. Through your union, you can become the opportunity for them to grow in understanding their love for God in new and unexpected ways.

Third, remain connected to your churches. Some pastors fear that upon marrying a member of a different tradition, you will create your own “third church” or leave both due to confusion or disagreements over the differences you hold. In all things, though, your communities are called to support, nourish and strengthen you as a couple on your Christian journey. Explore ways that you can integrate both churches, especially their pastoral leadership, into the fabric of your particular domestic church. It may make most sense to choose one Christian tradition to raise your children in, but the more you can discover ways that you can celebrate what unites you as Christians and bring that into your home, the better. None of these tasks will be easily attended to, but they can allow you to become living bridges between your two churches and bring you closer as a couple united in Christ. Then you, too, will be able to share your story of 50 years in a loving interchurch marriage to others.

Daniel and Tracy Olsen have been married for 12 years and live in suburban Chicago with their two young children Abigail and Matthew. Dan is the Assistant Director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the Archdiocese of Chicago. He was awarded his Ph.D. in Constructive Theology from Loyola University Chicago in 2008, with his research focusing on Christian interchurch (mixed marriage) families. Dan also serves as an adjunct Professor of Religious Studies at St. Xavier University and teaches within the Lay Formation Program of the Archdiocese of Chicago.