

# First Interfaith Support Group Meets With Much Success

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As a result of the Charlotte Jewish Federation's Outreach survey and the recommendations of the Federation's Outreach committee, the first support group for interfaith couples was held March 19 - April 23. The group was cosponsored by Jewish Social Services and the Jewish Community Center; the co-facilitators were Adrienne Rosenberg, Director of Jewish Social Services and Pam Crown, M. Ed., a Jewish partner in an interfaith marriage.

Limited to six couples, five couples signed up for the first group. The mandatory telephone screening to participate in the group was conducted by Adrienne Rosenberg and Marty Schner, JCC Director. Purpose of the screening was twofold: to further explain the purposes of the group to prospective members and to discourage anyone who needed marital counseling rather than a support team.

The group, at \$15 per couple, met for 1½ hour sessions at an apartment complex meeting room. This provided privacy in a comfortable and neutral setting, where no one could feel there was bias at wanting the non-Jewish partner to convert.

The first session began with a mixer to introduce themselves and to feel comfortable.

Then the rules of the group were presented: confidentiality - what was said in the group remained in the group; support - we wanted to support what people were expressing and not try to change them; attendance - all members of the group were expected to attend each session. These rules were accepted by the members and were never broken.

The breakdown statistically of their backgrounds was as follows: three of the female partners were Jewish; two of the male partners were Jewish. Age range was from the twenties to the late fifties. Couples represented were as follows: 1) Man raised Orthodox Jewish; woman, Methodist; three children, 11-18, being raised Jewish; 2) Man raised Baptist; woman, Jewish; one preschool child being raised Jewish; 3) Man raised Catholic; woman, strong Reform Jewish; no children but planned to have a family and leaned toward raising children Jewish; 4) Man raised traditional Jewish; woman, Methodist; four children being raised as Unitarians; 5) Man, a born-again Baptist; woman, Jewish; second marriage for both; both had children raised in their respective faiths, ironically enough, who had all intermarried.

The group members listed the following topics they wanted to discuss during the remaining sessions:

- Background differences (in-laws and out-laws); the extended family.
  - Religiously growing together; support within the marriage for the "other" partner.
  - Rites of passage.
  - Jewish community's response and responsibility.
  - Group's plans for the future in terms of contacts.
- They also listed as their mutual goals, that they wanted to know they were not alone (i.e., there were other interfaith couples; that they wanted to share experiences unique to themselves, and that they wanted support and friendship.)

The second session examined the initial responses of the members' families and the extended family network as it presently existed. All types of situations were represented from the father who sat "shiva" and has never seen his grandchildren to the father who has never attended any of his grandchildren's Bar Mitzvahs to parents who have been most accepting and put no pressure to conform religiously to all situations inbetween. The difficulty of adapting to Jewish custom and ceremony was described by many of the non-Jewish partners. All agreed they married for love, assuming they would work things out. However, the pressures and reactions of

their own upbringing, the reactions of their relatives and the emergence of children into the partnership often caused points of tension and compromise.

A video tape was shown which depicted an interfaith couples group in Cincinnati. All agreed they could see themselves in the film and discussions followed about how it is to be an interfaith couple.

During the third session, one of the non-Jewish partners expressed his discomfort at the bias that the Jewish partner's side seemed to be emerging as dominant in the group. This was examined, in light of the fact this group was sponsored by Jewish agencies and in lieu of the customs and ceremonies of Judaism which did not appear present in most of the other partner's backgrounds.

This helped to trigger off an awareness of the awkwardness of the other partner's discomfort in synagogue or church. Different members spoke of their experiences as the "awkward partner" and they were handling this or not handling this within the marriage. It should be noted that during the session, there was often hand-holding and eye contact of partners, which showed a desire to work together and an awareness of the feelings of the other

partner.

The raising of children religiously and the decisions of which holidays to celebrate and how were examined. It seemed to be the opinion of everyone in the group that children did need to have one religion to provide moral and ethical backgrounds. One couple, who did not have children yet, seemed to be asking the others their experiences in order to explore their future plans. Some of the couples had both Christmas trees and menorahs at Christmas/Chanukah time. Some had both seders and Easter dinners and celebrations at Passover/Easter. There were variations on how holidays were celebrated and how children were involved in these celebrations. Difficulties and joys were expressed on these topics.

The group cohesiveness increased with each session; there was an exchange of phone numbers for contact outside the group. Although the group was scheduled to be an hour and a half, most stayed after for informal discussion.

The fourth session was the most intense, probably because it occurred right after the weekend of Passover/Easter. That the holidays followed so closely, and that the group members had been

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