



David and Odile Pollard (Ed. Richard Collins)

# Marrying Across Cultures

## Does your church look a bit like the United Nations?

If it does, chances are you have a number of cross-cultural marriages in your midst. Or you will soon! They're a growing trend, aren't they? And while they offer a rich experience of marriage, they also come with challenges. In this article, we're going to explore some of these challenges, helping you to guide those who are contemplating this lifetime adventure.

### Biblical model

The Bible contains some wonderful examples of cross-cultural marriage. One of the best known is found in the book of Ruth. Ruth, a Moabite, marries Boaz, a Hebrew. Yet it's the words of Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi, which perhaps resonate the most clearly across the centuries. One of us used these words as a statement of commitment before becoming engaged.

*Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God.* (Ruth 1.16)

What a precious declaration.

Cross-cultural marriages have a lot to commend them, often arising from a shared desire for Christian service. That's an excellent foundation. In addition, some have discovered a love for another culture before even encountering their prospective life partner. There is so much to share when two cultural backgrounds come together. And if children arrive, they have a fascinating genetic mix!

Nevertheless, marriages of this kind come with a variety of challenges, which need addressing sooner rather than later. It's best to consider the following possible issues well before any engagement or wedding date is fixed.

- Do you both love each other's culture?
- Have you visited your partner's country of origin?
- Do you speak at least some of your partner's language?
- What expectations do you have of your spouse learning your language?
- Where do you intend to live?
- How often do you expect to visit your spouse's home country? How often do you expect to

see your parents and wider extended family?  
Where will you spend Christmas?

- What are your expectations around moving to your partner's country of origin? Are you open or closed to that possibility?
- How do you celebrate the traditions of your culture and what expectations do you have of your spouse in participating in those traditions?
- What role is your spouse expected to play within the extended family?
- What expectations will the in-laws have?
- What roles do men and women play in your different cultures? Have you discussed how this will affect your own particular circumstances?
- What does each culture and family group expect regarding the care of young children? And ageing parents?
- What language will you each speak? To each other? To your children?
- What expectations do you have regarding bilingualism for your children?
- How do you view the education of your children?
- (If applicable) What are your views of military service?
- Who will handle all the paperwork, visas, passports, tax returns?

The questions could go on and on. It's tempting to think that it will all come out in the wash, as long as we trust God. However, failure to address these questions can lead to serious problems later in life. Trusting God is always good and right, but it doesn't preclude the need to think carefully about the challenges. Here are some things a mixed-culture couple should consider, once a commitment has been made.

## Celebrate both cultures

Both cultures are valuable, so both should be celebrated in the home. Give space to each other to display cultural artefacts important to both. Flags, ornaments, art, the potential for exhibiting the richness of both cultures is endless. Be bold and proud of both cultures!

## Leave and Cleave

Ensure you have a shared understanding of Genesis 2.24, the need to 'leave and cleave' to your spouse. Your first human loyalty is to your spouse, to care and share your lives together. Seek to understand the values of your in-laws, while being clear about the values you hold together as a couple. Do not allow yourselves to be pulled apart by competing priorities when it comes to family. Ensure you have discussed this thoroughly before marriage and continue to talk as you face challenges.

## The depth of cultural ties

Be aware that ties with one's culture rarely disappear. These ties are emotional and they often persist in a deep-seated way. One of us shared this: 'My wife missed the winter snow of her home country increasingly with the years. She felt the need to re-establish a link with her homeland. When the children were born, she was conscious of a lack of support from people of her own culture, even though in her country of adoption there was plenty of help and advice proffered. The support of the Christian family was essential, because at least one set of relatives was not there to look after the children and give them those special little treats from time to time.'

## Material Inequality

In some cases, there is material inequality between cultures. It can lead to feelings of inferiority. Not only that, but it can lead to very different approaches to money and waste. What is wasteful to one may seem insignificant to the other. Profligacy is a relative term, but each must seek to respect the other's view and work towards understanding. As for money, it holds a power over some which can be very unhealthy. Seeking to understand God's ways and his approach to money is the best way to reach a common understanding.

## Bilingualism

Bilingualism is a gift, but it's not always possible. It offers tremendous opportunities, but before embarking on the journey, it's essential to do your

research. Otherwise it can end in frustration and disappointment. Understand the considerable effort involved in raising a bilingual child.

## Facing judgement

In some circumstances, the children of mixed-race couples can face judgement and intolerance. It's not easy being seen as 'different,' especially when you're a teenager. Be aware that your children need a lot of support when facing disparaging remarks or teasing at school.

## Weddings and Documents

Some of us don't like admin. Does anyone really like it?! Marrying across cultures involves a lot more admin than for mono-cultural couples. Do your research. What does a person lose when they take on another nationality? Is it possible to establish dual nationality? What are the tax implications? Once you've made your choices, how will they affect the children?

As for weddings, they are freighted with significant cultural assumptions. To some, every detail matters; it has meaning. For others, the details don't matter at all. Try to establish early on which elements of each culture you want to include. Plan way ahead to avoid problems.

## Visits from the In-Laws

How long do your parents come to stay? A week? Two weeks? How about nine months? In some cultures, a pregnant woman stays indoors for the period of her pregnancy, cared for by her mother. So cultures vary hugely over their expectations of the role of in-laws and the length of visits. Come to understand the family into which you're marrying. Ask your partner what the expectations are regarding visits to the home.

*'You don't know what it's like . . .'*

In many cross-cultural marriages, this sentence is often used. And it's true. We don't know what it's like to live in the other's culture. Nor do they perfectly understand ours. But together you have committed to something richer and deeper than a culture. You have committed to build a new life together under God's sovereignty and love.

That creates a culture all of its own. Informed by country, yes, but more than anything, built on God's love and faithfulness.

As for all those whose marriages are founded on Christ, we will flourish when He sits right at the centre. Marrying into another culture often requires the ability to 'go the extra mile,' but his grace is always sufficient. It is sufficient for all things when we trust the One who holds all things by the word of his power. (Heb 1.3)

When we live for his glory.



## David and Odile Pollard

\*An earlier version of this article incorporated ideas from Pete and Dorothea Lowman, Nancy Bourne, and Jim and Nancy Baddoo.

## For further reading:

Janet Fraser-Smith, *Love across the Latitudes* (Arab World Ministries)

E Harding and P Riley, *The Bilingual Family*

Lenore Archberg, *Raising Children Bilingually*.

## About Living Leadership

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