

# How can an interfaith marriage work with one nonbeliever?



## Highland Views

Chris Highland

Columnist

When I met my wife, Carol, we were carrying the cross. Seriously. It was an ecumenical Good Friday service at a large downtown church. We joined other ministers in hauling a big cross into the sanctuary before leading the service.

I was about to “follow Jesus out the door” of the church (and religion) while retaining my position as an interfaith chaplain on the streets. Carol held an advocacy position with a nonprofit, working with immigrants from many countries living in a low-income neighborhood.

I visited her where she worked, and she came to see my tiny office tucked behind the organ pipes in the same church where we carried the cross.

A mutual respect developed ... as well as a professional and personal attraction.

That was about 2000. We grew close, lived together for a few years, and in 2005 I moved to a small cabin on an island in Washington state to work the land and write a few books. Carol had taken a new job as the director of an interfaith council with responsibilities that spanned the San Francisco Bay Area.

In 2008, I returned to California to marry Carol at a Zen Buddhist center with celebrant friends who were Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Wiccan. Carol's parents, Janet and Charlie, reaffirmed their vows that day — their 50th anniversary. As it happens, my sister and her husband share the same wedding date.



Carol Hovis, teaching in Asheville. CHRIS HIGHLAND

June 23 is my dear wife's 56th birthday. It seems fitting to honor her with a few words, not only because she's my wife, but because her years of service and her great talents should be recognized (shamelessly biased here). I also think our marriage might offer some insights into the joys and challenges of an interfaith/intersecular relationship.

I asked Carol if she could describe a thread or a stream that runs through her years of ministry. “Relationships” and “inclusion” have been central, she says.

“As I reflect upon my life thus far, every chapter is founded upon significant connections with friends, family, colleagues, mentors. They root and ground me as I keep uncovering the depths of who I am.”

In terms of inclusivity, she says, “Ever since I can recall, I have had an in-

ner sense of ‘knowing’ that all persons are invited and included in the great scheme of life.”

I asked her to explain how a person of deep faith can live in a committed relationship with someone who doesn't believe the way she does (I have a certain personal interest in her response).

“What's important to me is depth and authenticity and commitment to treating all sentient beings with respect and dignity,” she replies. “Whether or not Chris believes in a Supreme Being or the certainty of an afterlife, these are not requirements for our relationship to be authentic, committed and have depth. His beliefs are simply not deal-breakers for the love and bond we share.”

She goes on to say that our common bond is love, respect, joy of the outdoors and family, as well as sharing in a good

movie or story, tasty food and travel.

In other words, keeping life simple in a complex world.

We support each other's gifts and skills, joy in assisting others in meaningful, creative ways. Carol responds, “We also admire in each other the talents we seek to deepen in ourselves — Chris' writing and teaching, Carol's networking and bridge-building.”

As you can tell, this is all very personal, and our marriage is far from perfect (whatever a “perfect” relationship is imagined to be). One thing to emphasize is that we do not “tolerate” each other's beliefs or lack of beliefs. We certainly have disagreements, but we often share similar views of the good and bad in our world.

Though I don't often attend church with her, I do go to hear her speak as a guest minister now and then (I've even been known to read a scripture verse in a service). She has accompanied me to lend support when I lecture or give book readings.

If you are in an interfaith or intersecular relationship, it may help to know that, like any marriage, it takes work, but it can be fulfilling and encouraging. On a foundation of love and laughter (with healthy tears), there are creative ways of handling conflicts that can be quite different than two believers or two nonbelievers may encounter.

Where we once carried a cross together in a church, we might now carry each other's materials for a service or class, carry a pack down a trail or carry in the groceries. Living life together, faith or no faith, is as good as it gets.

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com).*