

# Inter-Church Marriage as a Challenge to Ecumenism

A Study with Particular Reference  
to Poumai Naga Churches, Northeast India

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## Abstract

Inter-Church marriage remains a complex challenge to ecumenism, particularly within the Poumai Naga Churches of Northeast India, where Baptist and Roman Catholic traditions are predominant. While both traditions affirm marriage as sacred, theological and doctrinal differences, administrative practices, and concern over proselytism, identity, and otherness often create tension for couples and families. This study examines how Inter-Church marriages, though increasingly common, are frequently perceived as threats to church identity and unity. At the same time, they present opportunity for dialogue, mutual understanding, and the renewal of Christian witness. Addressing these challenges requires openness, trust, and a renewed ecumenical spirit within Poumai Naga Churches.

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## 1. Introduction

Inter-Church marriage<sup>1</sup> has become an increasingly common reality among Christians of diverse traditions. Yet many conservative communities continue to view such unions with suspicion, perceiving them as potential threats to ecclesial identity. Differences in theology, worship, traditions, beliefs, and administration often become points of contention and misunderstanding. Family involved in such marriages frequently encounter difficulties, finding themselves caught between two ecclesiastical systems. In some contexts, these unions are even regarded as inter-faith marriages, as other denominations are treated almost as separate religions. Consequently, young people in committed relationships often face painful choices- breaking off relationships, eloping, enduring social stigma, or even risking ex-communication. Although the specific challenges vary across communities, they remain both pressing and persistent. This situation calls for deeper theological reflection and practical engagement so that Christian marriage may be nurtured in an ecumenical spirit, fostering greater unity among believers of different traditions. Accordingly, this article explores the challenges of Inter-Church marriage within the two major church traditions among the Poumai Naga- the Baptist and Roman Catholic Churches, and considers how ecumenical education and shared experiences can help overcome these barriers and foster genuine Christian unity at both local and global levels.

## 2. Christian Marriage

Christian marriage is the sacred covenantal union of a man and a woman, regarded as a vocation and a participation in the communion with Christ and God. Scripture presents it as a metaphor of Christ's relationship with the

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<sup>1</sup> *Inter-Church Marriage* in this context refers to *Inter-Denominational Marriage*. This term is used interchangeably throughout this work, as the Roman Catholic Church generally rejects the classification of itself as a “Denomination” and prefers to be identified simply as the “Church.”

Church, where the couple becomes the “bride” of Christ and heirs of the grace through the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Its foundation lies in the order of creation (Gen. 1: 27-28; Gen. 2: 18-25), where God created male and female with sexual distinction as an integral part of human personhood.<sup>3</sup> By this design, a man leaves his father and mother, unites with his wife, and the two become “one flesh” (Gen. 2: 24). Thus, marriage holds both theological and interpersonal significance as a covenant of life and love.<sup>4</sup>

While the Old Testament reflects polygamy and patriarchal customs, the central biblical emphasis affirmed in the New Testament points to monogamous marriage as God’s will and design. Jesus reaffirmed this covenantal union (Matt. 19:4-6), and Paul extended its meaning beyond Jewish tradition, acknowledging marriages even with non-Israelites and teaching that the unbelieving partner is sanctified through the believing spouse (1 Cor. 7: 12-14). From these foundations, some Christian traditions developed a sacramental understanding of marriage as a lifelong and indissoluble union of body and soul, mirroring the covenant between Christ and the Church.<sup>5</sup>

### **Different Stances on Christian Marriage**

This study focuses on the two major Christian traditions among the Poumai Naga churches in Northeast India- Baptist and Roman Catholic churches- as they represent the majority of the population and where most Inter-Church marriages occur.

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<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade Ed. 1987. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol. 9, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 218-219.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 1981. *God and Marriage*, Edinburgh: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn E. Baumann, “The Churches and Inter-Christian Marriages” *Worship*, (1968): Volume 42, Number 10, 612.

<sup>5</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, John Mbiti (et al.) (Eds.) 2003. *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. 3, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Brill, 413-414.

## Roman Catholic Church

The 1917 *Codex Iuris Canonici* codified marriage law, which was later, revised in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (CIC 1055-1165). Marriage is regarded as “a partnership of the whole of life” (CIC. 1055). The bond of marriage between baptized persons, whether Catholics or not, is considered a sacrament. According to scholastic tradition, the spouses themselves are the ministers of this sacrament, while the Church, through its ordained minister, serves as the official witness and grants recognition.<sup>6</sup>

The revised law reflects a new ecumenical openness. Mixed religion is no longer an absolute impediment to marriage, though official permission is still required. In such unions, the Catholic partner must promise to preserve the faith and raise the children in the Catholic tradition, while respecting the conscience of the non-Catholic spouse. In cases of mixed marriage, the local ordinary may grant a dispensation from canonical form, provided the marriage is celebrated publicly. The impediment of disparity of cult (marriage between a Catholic and non-baptized person) remains, but it can be lifted by dispensation, with conditions regarding baptism and the religious upbringing of children.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, the 1983 Code of Canon Law marks a shift from an institutional to a more personalist approach to marriage. While the earlier law emphasized indissolubility with less regard for personal circumstances, the new law recognizes factors such as immaturity, coercion, or defective consent. It continues to uphold the permanence of marital commitment, while also providing remedies when true consent is lacking.<sup>8</sup> These canonical laws remain uniform and universally binding on all Roman Catholic Churches.

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<sup>6</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milic Lochman, John Mbiti (et al.) (Eds.) 2003. *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, op. cit., 418.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*. 2003. Second Edition. Washington, D.C.: Gale & The Catholic University of America, 206.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, op. cit., 206, 207.

## **Baptist Churches**

Within Protestant Baptist churches, marriage is regarded as a sacred rite rather than a sacrament.<sup>9</sup> Baptists also affirm marriage as a divine institution, ordained by God as a covenantal union between one man and one woman. This union is conceptualized as a lifelong, sacred bond, with the divine ideal being for spouses to mutually honour God and love one another. However, Baptists uphold the principle of local church autonomy, where primary authority for matters of worship and discipline- including marriage- resides.<sup>10</sup> Due to this decentralized polity, beliefs and practices can vary between churches and associations. Therefore, this study specifically examines the Poumai Baptist Naga Association (PNBA).

### **Poumai Naga Baptist Association (PNBA)**

The Poumai Naga Baptist Association (PNBA) is a major association of the Manipur Baptist Convention (MBC), which is affiliated with the Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India (CBCNEI). The CBCNEI is one of the member Churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC). PNBA maintains a distinct ecclesiastical stance on marriage, recognizing only weddings solemnized within the church as legitimate Christian marriage, while excluding court marriages and elopements.

The PNBA enforces strict regulations concerning “mixed marriages.” Members who allow their children to marry outside the Baptist faith, or to non-Christians, and participate in such engagement ceremonies will face church discipline, while the child involved will be expelled.<sup>11</sup> In inter-denominational marriages, non-Baptist spouses are required to convert to the Baptist faith and undergo believer’s baptism by immersion, as infant and sprinkling baptism are not recognized. These measures underscore the

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<sup>9</sup> Marriage Sacrament, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://britannica.com/topic/sacrament/Marriage>, Accessed on 11.12.22.

<sup>10</sup> Norman H. Winthrop S. Hudson Maring. 1963. *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, Valley Forge: The Judson Press.

<sup>11</sup> PNBA, 2022. *Administrative Manual*, p. 38.

PNBA's commitment to upholding doctrinal purity and reinforcing communal boundaries through its marital regulations.

### **3. Marriage as an Ecumenical Challenge**

The different positions of Churches on marriage create challenges of Inter-Church/denominational marriage within the ecumenical movement. Some Churches regard others as deficient and isolate themselves, claiming of superiority as the “true” church. While some are opening to ecumenism and revising their approach, others remain reserved. It is therefore vital to recognize these challenges and engage in constructive dialogue to foster better relationships. Key issues driving this rejectionist attitude include the fear of proselytism, concerns over identity, and the problem of otherness.

#### **Fear of Proselytism**

In Christian-majority communities, inter church/denominational marriage is often viewed with suspicion due to the fear of proselytism, commonly described as “sheep stealing.” Some churches/denominations perceive such unions as opportunities to convert others, believing their Church to be the only true one. Consequently, permitting such marriages is sometimes seen as failure to safeguard the congregation and as signalling doctrinal weakness. Parents are also held responsible for protecting their children and families, while community pressures often intensify these concerns. Individuals who enter into such marriages are frequently made to feel that they have displeased God and betrayed their parents, relatives, friends, and church.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, allowing such marriages is sometimes perceived as a strategy to attract others, thereby deepening trust deficit between Churches/denominations.

#### **Identity and Otherness**

The challenges of Inter-Church marriage are closely linked to issues of identity and otherness. Many Churches, conservative in their traditions, beliefs, and norms, seek to preserve long-established practices. They often

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<sup>12</sup> Glenn E. Baumann, “The Churches and Inter-Christian Marriages,” 611.

regard new developments or movements with suspicion and as threats to their faith.

This emphasis on identity can foster a sense of superiority over fellow churches. Similarly, when engaging with different worldviews, some churches treat alternative perspectives as dangers to their own identity. Such attitudes create significant barriers to mutual understanding and cooperation.

## 4. Ecumenism: The Way Forward

### Need Ecumenical Dialogue

The long isolation of Churches has fostered mistrust, self-centeredness, and suspicion. Ecumenical dialogue at the local level is essential for building mutual understanding, recognition, and healthy relationships. While differences are acknowledged, shared values should also be emphasized. In the Poumai Naga context, although different Churches exist, believers remain one in Christ and rooted in the same cultural background. Therefore, unlike inter-faith/religious marriage, Inter-Church/denominational marriage should not be a problem or hindrance for the Christian community, especially for the younger generation.

Both Baptist and Roman Catholic Churches share a common understanding of marriage: i) It is ordained by God. ii) It is publicly proclaimed. iii) It is entered with the blessings of the Church. iv) It is by nature a permanent union. They affirm that in marriage, a baptized man and woman receive God's grace to live together in holiness, witnessing Christ to each other, their family, and society, reflecting Christ's love in self-giving.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Pastoral Care of Inter-Church Families: Witness to Unity, *Ecumenism*, No. 82, June 1986, 8.

## Respect of Conscience

Respecting individual conscience is fundamental in every religion. Christians believe that Christ grants the freedom to discern and choose what is right. No civil or religious authority has the right to coerce or ridicule such decisions, as Vatican II emphasized in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. Every believer must be welcomed with the highest respect for his or her conscience, for faith is a gift freely bestowed by God and accepted by those whom grace draws. The Vatican II *Declaration on the Church* also acknowledges baptized members of other Christian denominations as brothers and sisters in faith, teaching that many elements of grace and holiness exist beyond the visible boundaries of one's own church.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Christians must welcome and respect the freedom of individuals to choose their denomination, since the Church cannot and should not override one's conscience in determining faith and life.

## Openness

Recent changes in Roman Catholic canonical laws reflect a spirit of openness toward other churches. This spirit of ecumenism views Inter-Church/denominational marriage as an opportunity for deeper mutual understanding, emphasizing shared faith.<sup>15</sup> Such openness fosters learning, constructive criticism, overcomes prejudices, and creates space for sharing experiences.<sup>16</sup> It removes barriers that hinder acceptance of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. It also reminds the Church to value self-giving love and community, rather than placing excessive focus on institutional ceremonies and rites.

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<sup>14</sup> Pastoral Care of Inter-Church Families: Inter-Church Families: Witness to Unity, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Glenn E. Baumann, "The Churches and Inter-Christian Marriages", 611.

<sup>16</sup> Iwuamadi Lawrence, *Class Presentation* at Ecumenical Institute, Bossey on 14-12-22.

### **Coherence**

In biblical ecumenical hermeneutics, the “hermeneutics of coherence” emphasized the unity of the Christian faith. It seeks to overcome misunderstandings, controversies, and divisions by resolving conflicts, preventing schisms, and avoiding divisive interpretations of doctrine. Differences in beliefs, traditions, and practices should not divide the Christian community, for unity is rooted in Christ himself. As Paul asked, “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1: 13). This unity in diversity flows from the Holy Spirit, who bestows a rich variety of gifts and ministries (1 Cor. 12:1-11).<sup>17</sup>

### **Trust and Confidence**

Building trust and confidence is essential for an ecumenical way forward. Without them, suspicion grows and relationships weaken. With mutual trust, Churches can take responsibility in addressing the challenges of Inter-Church/denominational marriage within the Christian community. Churches must also recognize the reality of such marriages, accept one another, and respect the maturity of individuals in choosing their marital life.

## **5. Some Aims and Objectives of Inter-Church Marriage in the Ecumenical Movement**

- Over the centuries, the Christian community has remained deeply divided due to differences in views, ideologies, beliefs, traditions, theologies, doctrines, leadership and politics. Therefore, it has become a prerequisite for the Christian community to come together and strive toward a better understanding of one another, emphasizing the shared heritage of faith rather than the differences that further divide the body of Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for the Ecumenical Reflection of Hermeneutics, 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1998.

- Inter-Church marriage can play a vital role in promoting mutual understanding and unity among Christian churches/denominations. Through such unions, individuals are encouraged to learn, appreciate, and recognize the beliefs and practices of other traditions. When people love and live together, there is a natural tendency to engage in dialogue, to respect diversity, and to foster deeper relationships grounded in faith.
- In any human society, when one group becomes majority, there is often a tendency of dominate or claim superiority over others. Within the Christian context, this mentality is also evident. Thus, Inter-Church marriage, has the potential to foster equality among diverse Church traditions by breaking down barriers of prejudice and promoting a spirit of inclusiveness and oneness.
- In today's world, which increasingly seeks peace, reconciliation, coexistence across lines of religion, class, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, and nation, Inter-Church marriage should not be viewed as a hindrance but rather as an opportunity. Such unions can serve as a testimony to Christian unity and may inspire others toward the pursuit of oneness in Christ through exemplary living.
- Individual conscience must be respected in Inter-Church marriages. If couples wish to maintain their own church traditions, the Church should not interfere but should instead encourage mutual respect for each other's convictions. The focus should be on strengthening love and understanding across denominational lines rather than creating divisions based on differing church affiliations.
- After all, if certain groups choose to remain reserve in their conservative traditional stances, they should nevertheless remain open to dialogue with those who actively work toward the unity of Christian community. Such openness aligns with the prayer and desire of our Lord Jesus Christ, who earnestly prayed that His disciples "may all be one" (John 17:21-23).

## 6. Personal Reflection on Ecumenical Education and Ethics

While studying at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland, which is part of the World Council of Church (WCC), I had the privilege of gaining valuable experiences and learning a great deal about ecumenical life, education and ethics. The World Council of Churches (WCC), which comprises 356 member Churches from around the world, brings together diverse Church traditions, regions, and theological backgrounds. The Ecumenical Institute at Bossey provides a unique environment where ecumenical and inter-religious studies are not only explored theoretically but also practiced in community life. It serves as a space for open dialogue, enabling participants to engage with people of other faiths and traditions, and to live together as a global community of faith and humanity. Thus, ecumenical education and ethics, as a sub-disciple of Christian theology, has been instrumental in shaping the skills necessary to address issues of misunderstanding and pseudo-communication, in situation where dialogue does not necessarily result in mutual understanding. Based on my experiences, the following aspects stand out as particularly significant.

### **Education**

Proper education is essential for understanding the deeper traditions of another Church. Without it, misunderstandings and misjudgements are likely to occur. Through ecumenical education, individuals learn to appreciate and critically engage with various theological and cultural perspectives. It encourages questioning, reflection, and a deeper appreciation of one's own tradition as well as those of others.

### **Inclusiveness**

The attitude of inclusiveness plays vital role in ecumenical education. It fosters an environment in which different forms of worship, traditions, cultures, and regional expressions of faith are recognized, celebrated, and integrated within community life and shared worship.

## **Tolerance**

Although people's actions, thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives may differ greatly due to their distinct traditions or cultural backgrounds, the ethics of tolerance expressed through patience and respect is an essential skill in ecumenism. Tolerance enables individuals to engage peacefully with others whose views differ from their own. It helps avoid unnecessary conflict and fosters a spirit of community in which every member is respected and valued, even in the midst of disagreement.

## **Appreciation**

Within the diverse traditions of the Christian Church, there are many valuable elements that deserve recognition and appreciation. Ecumenical education and ethics encourage individuals to identify and learn from these positive aspects within other church traditions. By integrating such strengths into one's own context, Churches can become more vibrant, creative, and effective in worship, service, and mission. Appreciation thus becomes a bridge for mutual enrichment and growth within the wider Christian community.

## **Acknowledgement**

Historical realities reveal that some Churches or communities have, at times, wronged others — whether through domination, colonization, or marginalization. In such cases, ecumenical understanding calls for honest acknowledgement of past mistakes rather than denial or justification. This process of recognition opens the path toward reconciliation, forgiveness, and renewed fellowship. Through genuine acknowledgement, Christians affirm their shared identity as brothers and sisters in Christ, committed to healing and unity.

## **Need for Friendly and Open Discussion**

In ecumenical education, even when individuals hold differing theological or ecclesial positions, it is vital to engage in open and friendly dialogue. Rather than withdrawing from difficult conversations, participants should approach

sensitive issues with humility, logic, and empathy. Discussions should aim to deepen mutual understanding by focusing on ideas and reasoning rather than emotions or personal attacks. Such open dialogue nurtures mutual respect and strengthens the collective pursuit of Christian unity.

## 7. Conclusion

From a biblical and theological perspective, there is no valid basis for restricting Inter-Church/denominational marriage. Differences in viewing marriage as a sacrament or a rite pose minimal challenges among the two major Church traditions in Poumai Naga Churches. The real issues arise often stem from fear of proselytism, identity concerns, mistrust, and a sense of otherness. These must be addressed with a renewed spirit of ecumenism, rooted in Christ’s love that unites believers as brothers and sister in one community. Certain conservative institutional laws of the Church should be reviewed in light of changing times, as seen in Roman Catholic reforms. Moreover, local ecumenical dialogue is urgently needed, since global discussions often fail to reach grassroots communities. However, if these issues remain unresolved, churches risk alienating younger generation, disrupting their spiritual and social lives, and even fostering hostility toward the Church. Upholding the dignity of individual conscience and dismantling exclusionary attitudes are therefore essential steps towards greater Christian unity.

Ecumenism calls the Church to live out Christ’s prayer for unity (John 17:21). Both Inter-Church marriages and ecumenical education reveal that love grounded in faith can transcend denominational barriers, fostering mutual respect, understanding, and shared witness. Ecumenical education and ethics, in particular, nurtures inclusiveness, tolerance, appreciation, and reconciliation through informed dialogue and reflective engagement. Together, these dimensions affirm that Christian unity does not require uniformity, but harmony amid diversity. When believers engage one another with openness and humility, they actively participate in God’s reconciling mission to the world. Thus, the Church’s witness in a divided world depends on a living testimony that reflects the reconciling love of Christ through

understanding, cooperation, and peace. The future of ecumenism, therefore, rests not only on theological consensus but also on lived experiences of love, learning, and collaboration within the household of faith.

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## 9. Short biography

Bevei Konah Simeon serves as Programme Executive for Youth Concerns at the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), where he also supports the Office of the General Secretary. He is from Purul in Manipur's Senapati District and belongs to the Poumai Naga community, affiliated with the Poumai Naga Baptist Association, a member of the Manipur Baptist Convention and the Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India.

He holds a Bachelor of Divinity from Baptist Theological College, Pfutsero, and a Master of Theology in Social Analysis from Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai. He has further enhanced his ecumenical formation through a Complementary Certificate in Ecumenical Studies from the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland, of the World Council of Churches.

Prior to joining NCCI, Mr Simeon served as Youth Director and Sunday School Superintendent at Purul Akutpa Baptist Church. In his current role, he contributes to youth-centred programmes while supporting the Council's broader ecumenical mission.

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