

Interfaith parishioners

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue

Amy Frykholm's article "[Double belonging](#)" took me back to my first encounter with double belonging. A young man in my congregation returned from working with the Peace Corps in Vietnam. He made an appointment to see me. After describing his Peace Corps experience, including his encounters with Buddhist monks and Buddhist practice, he said, "I think I'm a Buddhist." My knowledge of Buddhism at the time, I'm ashamed to admit, was based on a 20-page chapter in a book on comparative religion.

I gently raised the question of his Christianity. "Oh," he said, "I'm still a Christian." I suggested that one could be a Buddhist or a Christian but not both. "Who says?" he asked. "Where does it say you can't be both? I haven't found anything on Buddhism that conflicts with my Christian faith or requires that I disavow my faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, there's a lot about Buddhism that feels like what real Christianity ought to be."

He continued to attend Sunday morning worship in the Presbyterian church with his family. When he fell in love he made another appointment—to discuss a wedding. His fiancée had also been brought up in a Christian church, and she too considered herself a Buddhist-Christian. She was less patient than he, wondering why I was making a big deal out of an issue that seemed simple to them. They believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and called people to lives of faithful following, and they also believed the best way to do that was through the practice of Buddhism.

Some of my colleagues who knew the young man and his family were sympathetic to my dilemma and to the couple's proposal. Special help came from Arthur Romig, a retired Presbyterian mission worker who served on our staff. Art was born in China of missionary parents, returned to China as a missionary, spent time in a Japanese prison camp, returned to China after World War II and served until the communist revolution. He reminded me that the issues of double belonging emerged daily in the ministry of missionaries, and that Christians had done a lot of damage to indigenous cultures when they insisted that becoming a Christian meant rejecting traditional

and deeply loved cultural and religious practices.

Art's advice? Go ahead and marry the couple and see what the Spirit can do. I did, and as far as I know, they are still practicing Buddhist-Christians.

This is one of the major issues that Christian churches must deal with in the future. Some argue that we must maintain boundaries and never risk watering down Christian practices. Some argue that attending a yoga class is contrary to Christian belief and practice. (Three yoga classes meet in the church I serve, led by one of our elders.) Others, including me, hope that Christians who trust Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life will be open to other faith traditions and to people who find themselves compelled by and attracted to more than one of them. Every Sunday I look out at a congregation that includes several Jews, a few Muslim and Hindu guests, and a hodgepodge of skeptics, agnostics, doubters and seekers. Some of them feel at home with us, and some belong to more than one faith community.