

Entering and Celebrating Christian Marriage

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Pastoral and Legal Notes

Planning a wedding service with an engaged couple can be an important part of the pastoral care offered in preparation for marriage, and there is considerable freedom of choice to exercise and enjoy. However, there are a number of legal requirements that a wedding service in a nonconformist church must fulfil.

The following legal notes apply to England and Wales at the time of writing in 2015. The law may change (more than once) soon afterwards and those responsible for marriage services need to be clear as to the legal requirements in force at the time of the service. More information can be found on the 'Births, Deaths, Marriages and Care' section of the www.gov.uk website.

In other parts of the world, legal arrangements will differ and it is most important that those conducting wedding services should be aware of, and comply with, the requirements of the law currently in force in the place where the marriage service is to be conducted.

Legal Notes

- 1 The church building must be registered for marriages (though this requirement may change). For details on how to achieve this, see <http://bit.ly/1FT09hd>
- 2 The legal preliminaries before marriage should have been completed and applicable document(s) produced. Details of registration and necessary document(s) are not given here as they belong to the responsibility of the Authorised Person or Registrar (and may in the future be subject to change).
- 3 Marriages may be solemnized at any hour of the day or night and on any day of the week, including Bank Holidays, subject to the agreement of the Authorised Person or Registrar.
- 4 A marriage ceremony is a public event. The doors must not be so closed as to prevent people from entering.
- 5 An Authorised Person or Registrar must be present to witness and register the marriage.
- 6 There must be present at least two people who are able to act as witnesses, apart from the couple, Authorised Person, the Registrar or the person conducting the service.
- 7 During some part of the ceremony, the couple must each make a declaration of no impediment as follows

Either

I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, (name) may not be joined in matrimony to (name)

or

I declare that I know of no legal reason why I, (name) may not be joined in marriage to (name)

or

by replying "I am" to the question "Are you, (name) free lawfully to marry (name)."

- 8 Various forms of the vows are possible, and there is no reason why a couple should not compose their own, providing of course that they contain the legal form of words required below and do not contradict the Christian understanding of marriage embodied in the services in this book. The couple's vows must include the following words

Either

I call upon these persons here present to witness that I, (name) do take thee (name) to be my lawful wedded wife/husband

or

I(name) take you/thee (name) to be my wedded wife/husband

In these legal forms of words, the names used should be the full names, including surnames, which the parties use and by which they are generally known. If these names are different from the names given on the certificate(s) (or schedule), this difference must be cleared by the Authorised Person or Registrar prior to the marriage taking place.

If the law in England and Wales changes to order to allow denominational variation, those conducting marriage services 'according to the rites and ceremonies of the Baptists' should still comply with these legal notes or else with replacement guidelines issued by Baptists Together.

- 9 There are special provisions to enable marriages to take place in the homes of those who are housebound, for marriages for those who are detained, and how those with a speech or hearing impediment are to make their declarations and vows. For these matters the advice of the Authorised Person or Registrar should be sought.

Pastoral Notes

There are various customs attached to the wedding service which need not be followed and may well be questioned in the light of contemporary views of marriage. For example, the custom of the bride arriving after the bridegroom may be varied by both the man and woman entering the church at the beginning of the service and entering together, or by walking down either side to meet at the front. The custom of the bride being given away by her father may be omitted, repeated for the groom, or extended by including other members of the couple's families and the whole congregation. Alternatives are offered in the following material.

As an alternative to repeating the words after the minister, the couple may wish to read them from previously prepared cards.

Since marriages are very different in character, depending on the age and circumstances of the man and woman, it is important that, before use, the following material is carefully examined for any inappropriateness to the wedding taking place.

The following section offers two basic patterns for the marriage service. In the first, the ceremony is integrated into an act of worship, with the introduction and declarations being followed by the ministry of the Word and then the marriage vows and prayers. In the second, traditional pattern, the marriage ceremony takes place early in the service and is followed by the opportunity to reflect and pray on what has taken place. Words may be taken from either pattern, or from the additional material offered later, provided the legal requirements outlines above are observed.

In addition, a pattern is offered for the blessing of a civil ceremony and a pattern for an act of thanksgiving. Both provide opportunity for the reaffirmation of marriage vows.

Scripture Readings

Genesis 1:26-31a; 2:4b-8; Psalms 8; 33:2-9; 67; 95; 100; 103:1-5, 15-18; 117; 121; 128; 136:1-9, 26; 144:8-10, 15, 17-18; 145; 148; 150; Proverbs 3:3-6; Song of Songs 2:8-10, 14, 16; 8:6-7; Isaiah 54:5-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 5:13-16; 7:21, 24-27; 19:3-6; 22:35-40; Mark 10:6-9; John 2:1-11; 15:1-17; Romans 12:1-2, 9-13; 1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 3:14-21; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Peter 3:1-12; 1 John 3:18-24; 4:7-12; Revelation 19:1, 5-9a.

For guidance and advice on same sex marriages, please see our website page on this subject: <http://bit.ly/1hqdpnU>

Gathering for Worship is available from our online shop (www.baptist.org.uk/shop), priced at £33.00