

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Marriage

The Church of England is committed to being a 'Christian presence in every community.' The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

The guidelines have been prepared by members of the Presence & Engagement task group and are primarily aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is also a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find contact details for diocesan advisers as well as other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk.

Introduction

In an increasing number of situations, clergy are being approached by couples seeking marriage, one of whom is an adherent of a faith other than Christianity. The following guidelines are designed to set out briefly some of the theological, pastoral, liturgical and legal issues which may need to be explored, particularly where a wedding service is being planned to take place in church.

Anglican thinking about marriage emphasises that the theology of marriage is rooted in creation. Marriage is common to human life and not exclusive to Christians. It is not the Church's ceremony, or even the couple's faith, which makes a legal marriage, but rather the freely given consent to a lifelong union of love and fidelity made by one man and one woman who are of an age to marry and are not in law married to anyone else. However, though there may be a Christian understanding of marriage that is applicable to all, regardless of faith, it is not true that all necessarily share that understanding. It would be difficult to justify the marriage in church of someone who clearly intends something quite different from the Christian understanding of marriage. Therefore, the marriage of partners of different faiths in church is not appropriate in every circumstance and clergy should be discerning.

Pastoral Questions

Clergy who receive requests from mixed-faith couples may have questions about the appropriateness of conducting such a ceremony in church, though of course this is their legal right if they have the necessary connections to the parish. In such cases, careful discussions that explore these issues are appropriate. As with any marriage preparation, it is important to meet the couple where they are and to recognise the stage that they have reached in their particular journey, and the direction in which they are heading. The real question is whether they are able and prepared to move towards a vision of marriage compatible with a Christian understanding. Their vows both express their immediate desire to live as husband and

wife within the Christian understanding of marriage, and their intention that this will endure and mature in the future and our prayers aim at that growth into spiritual maturity.

The critical question for the marriage of a couple of different faiths in church is whether there is an acceptance of marriage as exclusive, lifelong and involving commitment and an openness to the wider Christian understanding as expressed in the marriage service. Though ministers should aim to be generous and encouraging towards a couple seeking marriage, the service needs to be consistent with Church of England requirements. Ministers may find it useful to understand that couples often present with a variety of ideas of how they might like a service to be performed. These will need to be considered carefully against the **Liturgical Considerations** outlined below which detail what constitutes a legal marriage in the Church of England. Couples often ask ministers for:

- a marriage conducted in church according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, possibly including some elements to recognise the faith or religious identity of the other partner.
- a civil ceremony followed by a specially devised religious celebration, which might be held either in a church, a place of worship of the other faith, or a third venue;
- a civil ceremony followed in some sequence by a Christian service of blessing in church and a celebration in a place of worship of the other faith;
- a marriage conducted according to the rites and ceremonies of the other faith, possibly including some elements to recognise the faith or religious identity of the Christian partner

Liturgical Considerations

Where there is no prior civil ceremony, the entire service (the 1662 service, the Common Worship service or the Series One service) constitutes the rite and ceremony prescribed by law in the Church of England. This means (unlike the position in non-Anglican churches, where only certain words are legally required) that any alteration to the service by way of omission of words and phrases could threaten the legal validity of the marriage ceremony. Furthermore, clergy are bound by Canon B5 only to make alterations to authorized services which are 'not of substantial importance' and are 'neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter'. Therefore, although it might be tempting to modify or leave out language and imagery so as to take account of the faith of the non-Christian partner, this would not be appropriate.

A particular issue is prayer in the name of the Trinity. It might be suggested that this should be replaced with more general descriptions of God which do not conflict with the understanding of God in other faiths. But even if universally acceptable terms could be found, the difficulty is that the Trinitarian theology is implicit in the service and could not be taken out without losing its Christian character. The most obvious point in the service is perhaps the exchange of rings in the name of the Trinity. Only at this point are either of the couple required actively to say the Trinitarian formula as distinct from acknowledging it on the lips of the minister. However, it is not possible to omit this otherwise the service could not be construed as a 'rite and ceremony' of the Church of England and the legal questions raised above become pertinent.

However, additional prayers, hymns and readings, chosen by the couple in consultation with the minister, are commonly added to the authorized service. Although legal as well as theological considerations argue

against omissions, additions might be appropriately made such as an additional reading from another scripture or a prayer or blessing in the appropriate language provided none of the material would be contrary to Christian teaching. Additional readings should not form part of the main liturgical service.

After discussing these issues, the minister may feel it more appropriate to encourage the couple to hold a specially devised service in church following a civil ceremony which dealt with the legal aspect. This would give more flexibility about what can be offered because there would not have to be any specified liturgy, although the form for a Service of Prayer and Dedication in Church after a Civil Marriage may serve as a starting point. However, it is important to remember that the service would still be an act of Christian worship and again, Canon B5 requires that none of the material used should be ‘contrary to, or indicative of any departure from the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter’.

All these issues, and especially what Christians really understand by the Trinity, could be very fruitful elements in a dialogue between minister and couple about the whole meaning of faith and marriage. In the end, it must be up to the couple to determine whether, and in what sense, they choose to use and understand one of the Church of England’s marriage services.

Marriage Preparation

The Canons of the Church of England place on the clergy a duty to prepare couples for marriage, and the Notes to the Common Worship Marriage Service state that it is the custom and practice of the Church of England to offer preparation for marriage for couples who are soon to be married as well as to be available for support and counselling in the years to come. Many of these issues as well as those of the pastoral issues of faith, community, culture or ethnic origin, can be explored with the couple using much of the marriage preparation material available. Whether a marriage in church is decided on, the minister has a pastoral responsibility towards the couple. They need to reach an informed judgment about their decision to marry at all, and the minister can help them consider all the issues involved. It will be important for the minister to have a sense and understanding of the cultural implications that can arise for those who marry outside their faith traditions and to raise questions of how they will live and raise any children they may be blessed with. Indeed, the question of which religious tradition any children of the marriage may be raised in can be a cause of future tension; as part of good preparation it will be necessary to explore this with the couple so that they may begin this conversation before they are married.

The Legal Position

The Law of England provides that every single or widowed person of marriageable age resident in, or with qualifying connections to a parish has a right to be married in the parish church according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, whether he or she is baptised or not. The Church of England teaches that marriage is for life. It also recognizes that, sadly, some marriages do fail and, if this should happen, it seeks to be available for all involved. The Church now accepts that, in exceptional circumstances, a divorced person may marry again in church during the lifetime of a former spouse.

There may be occasions when couples approach the church who have already been married in another country and/or in another place of worship – to each other or to someone else. Ministers will need to check if these marriages are legally binding. They should contact the Diocesan Registrar for cases where this is not clear. The Diocesan Registrar is the legal officer for each Diocese.

By law, a marriage can only be conducted after an appropriate preliminary. This is a legal formality which authorises the wedding to take place. In the Church of England, the normal preliminary is the calling of banns in each party's parish church. However, from 2nd March 2015, where one or both parties are non-European Economic Area nationals, the law deems banns insufficient and a Superintendent Registrar's Certificate is required instead before the wedding can take place. Clergy are responsible for checking the nationalities of the parties to see whether this is necessary. Before the day of the marriage, two certificates should be presented the minister, who will need to check the details are correct.