

GENERAL SYNOD

REDUCING WEDDING FEES

To move on behalf of Blackburn Diocesan Synod

That this Synod call on the Archbishops' Council to introduce an order to amend the Parochial Fees and Scheduled Matters Amending Order 2019 so that the fees relating to marriages are set at nil or at a minimal amount, in order to demonstrate the Church's commitment to marriage and pastoral care.

Summary

There is a correlation between the rising level of Church of England wedding fees and the sharp decline in recent years in numbers of church weddings, which trend appears to be especially acute in poorer areas. The current fees structure is economically unjust, putting church weddings beyond the reach of the poorest in our society. Marriage according to Scripture and our own liturgy is meant to be a gift of God's grace, but our fees give a contrary impression. If we believe in marriage as we ought, we should ensure that finance is no bar to anyone who wishes to marry in Church. Expensive fees limit the missional potential of marriage ministry.

Background

1. Blackpool Deanery Synod, in bringing forth this motion, asserted that there is a causal link between the level at which Church of England wedding fees are set and the sharp decline in recent years in church weddings nationally, which appears to be especially acute in poorer areas such as Blackpool (a 79% reduction between 2010 and 2018 across the 6 Blackpool churches that submitted figures for snapshot research). The national picture is not quite as bleak as the local situation in Blackpool, but still evinces a sharp rate of decline (63,371 Church of England weddings in 1999, compared to 31,430 in 2019 – a fall of 50%).¹ Everyone who wants to get married in Church should be able to, without worrying about affordability.
2. Following debate, the motion for wedding fees to be 'set at nil or at a minimal amount' was passed by Blackpool Deanery Synod unanimously on 29 January 2019 and was carried by a majority at Blackburn Diocesan Synod on 16 July 2019.

Financial argument

3. Cost is by no means the only factor behind the decline in the number of church weddings. Compared to a generation ago, there is much more 'competition' in the wedding market, with thousands more venues licensed for weddings (including, since April 2022, outdoor spaces)² and with many specialist venues offering the added convenience of an 'all-in-one' ceremony and reception package deal on the same premises. There is also the effect of the secularisation of society: the number of baptisms, which are provided free-of-

¹ Figures from <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/research-and-statistics/resources-publications-and-data#na>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/outdoor-civil-weddings-and-civil-partnerships-made-permanent>

charge, has also declined in the same period, though by approximately half the rate as the decline in church weddings (125,600 baptisms in 1999 compared to 89,080 in 2019; a fall of 29%).³

4. Nevertheless, the cost of a church wedding (the base price in 2022 is £480; which does not include charges for reading banns, heating, the services of a vergier, music, bells, and flowers) seems also to be a key factor. Anecdotally, many clergy speak of couples making enquiries about getting married in their parish church, only to balk at the cost when informed. The high fees put off would-be church wedding couples when compared to the all-in rates offered by secular venues, some of which do not vary their price depending on whether or not the couple have their ceremony at the venue or elsewhere.
5. The statutory fees charged by the Church of England have increased steeply over the last two decades; from £162 in 2000, to £306 in 2010, and £480 in 2022. This represents almost a 300% rise in 22 years, vastly outstripping inflation over the same period (53%).⁴
6. Close to £500 (again, with no vergier, music, or decorations) may not seem an unreasonable cost for some couples who, perhaps with parental help, are able to afford an average spend on their weddings of £17,300 (2021 survey figures),⁵ but it is prohibitive for the poorest in our society: the bottom quintile median annual household income in the year ending March 2019 was £256 per week (not to mention the current cost of living crisis)..⁶ The high level of fees therefore effectively acts like a poll tax, disproportionately deterring poorer couples from marrying in church. Changing the level of fees is therefore a matter of economic justice.
7. It is already within the power of the PCC to waive their portion of the wedding fee (£262) in case of hardship, and to petition the Archdeacon to waive the Diocesan Board of Finance portion (£218) also. This, however, is a suboptimal solution. Couples are unlikely to be aware of the option at the point of enquiry, and it is difficult for a parish priest to judge whether, when, and how to raise the possibility (and act on it) without undermining the dignity of low-income couples. While people on low incomes are already reduced to dependency in so many areas of their lives, such as state benefits and foodbanks, it is regrettable that they should also be so for a rite of the Church that the Church believes God has given for righteous living and human flourishing. The bureaucracy involved in petitioning the Archdeacon to waive fees also means that the only convenient way to reduce the cost is one that affects parish church finances rather than diocesan, disincentivising parochial clergy from exercising that power. Moreover, continuing this current system does not resolve any of the sense of economic injustice we have described.
8. We concede that wedding fees still provide an important income stream for some parish churches (particularly older and/or more ornate buildings which have a

³ Figures from <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/research-and-statistics/resources-publications-and-data#na>

⁴ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

⁵ <https://www.hitched.co.uk/wedding-planning/organising-and-planning/the-average-wedding-cost-in-the-uk-revealed/>

⁶ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/pay-and-income/income-distribution/latest>

high upkeep cost). If, however, reducing the fee to nil or a minimal amount should result in more church weddings taking place overall, moving instead to a voluntary donation system (which could in many cases be Gift Aided) while continuing to retain a portion of the fees for optional 'add-ons' (music, flowers, bells etc.) may compensate for the loss of income from the statutory fee. It may be that dioceses need to provide support (perhaps on a temporary basis) to those parishes who face a drop in income from such fees by reducing parish share accordingly.

9. In crude terms, it is hard to see any reason to keep marriage fees as they are 'because we need the money.' In many places, that money is not coming in anyway. It is far better in our view to offer marriage *for free* than *not at all*, which is increasingly becoming the reality in many parishes.

Theological argument

10. According to the Preface to the service of Holy Matrimony,

Marriage is a gift of God in creation
through which husband and wife may know the grace of God.
It is given
that as man and woman grow together in love and trust,
they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind,
as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.⁷

Three points may be made from this liturgical introduction to the rite:

- (i) Marriage is God's *gift* for human flourishing (Genesis 2:18-25).
 - (ii) The gift of marriage is a means of knowing God's *grace*.
 - (iii) Marriage is a 'mystery' (*sacramentum* in the Vulgate), illuminating the union of Christ with the Church his bride (Ephesians 5:31-32).
11. With this in mind, it is grossly inappropriate that the Church should levy prohibitively expensive fees for a *gift* of God, that makes known his *grace*, and which illustrates – or even somehow anticipates or sacramentally participates in – the salvation Christ freely provides believers through faith-union with himself. What God has brought together (human marriage and his free grace), the Church, by its exorbitant fee structure, has put asunder.
 12. If we believe that marriage was given by God, as the Preface (following the Prayer Book) goes on to say, as the holy context for sexual union, as the foundation of family life, and for lifelong companionship and comfort, the Church should enable as many loving and committed couples to access this means of grace, without finance being a bar to any. Even if a move to set wedding fees at nil were to cost parish churches financially (which may not overall prove to be the case), it ought to be a cost that we are happy to bear. If we believe marriage to be good for the couple themselves, for their children (current or future), and for society as a whole – as well as being pleasing to God – we should put our money where our mouth is.
 13. When Jesus himself describes the eschatological wedding feast in a parable (Luke 14:15-24, cf. Matthew 22:1-14), he has the host (God) tell his servants to

⁷ <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/marriage>.

“Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (v21, NRSV). The call of Jesus is clear, both here and in other parts of the Gospels, echoing the wider narrative of Scripture: there is a privileged place at the great Kingdom Wedding Feast for the last and the least, the poor and the neglected. In striking contrast, the current wedding fees structure in the Church of England privileges the wealthy and precludes the poor.

Missional argument

14. The occasional offices are an invaluable component in the Church’s mission to and service of the community. The chance to pastor people through major ‘life events’ is a great privilege; and the evangelistic opportunities provided by such contacts are precious indeed.
15. Fewer weddings in churches mean fewer opportunities to provide couples with marriage preparation, bringing prayer and Scriptural wisdom to bear on their relationship, that theirs might be a long and happy marriage. Marriage preparation, as well as the ceremony itself, also helps establish a meaningful bond between the priest, church family, and the couple; which ongoing relationship makes future opportunities for pastoral care and ministry more likely. Experts writing on church growth speak of the need for multiple points of contact with those who are not yet members of our churches.⁸ Marriage ministry (including in some cases the habitual worshipper requirements to establish a Qualifying Connection) opens the door to those points of contact.
16. Having fees ‘set at nil or at a minimal amount’ would also improve the perception of the Church’s relationship with money. It would allow those who may have stereotypes and preconceptions about us constantly looking to take money off people to see instead a radically counter-cultural form of generosity. That in itself would point to a generous and self-giving God who gave himself freely for our salvation.

Rev’d Dr Tom Woolford, 070, Blackburn

June 2022

Published by the General Synod of the Church of England
© The Archbishops’ Council 2022

⁸ See, for example, Ray Evans’ *Ready, Steady Grow: Equipping Today’s Gospel Churches* (IVP:2014).