
Preparing for a Wedding in the Episcopal Church

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Introduction



Marriage greets us with what seem to be limitless possibilities. It can also bring us up short as we confront finite limitations. Marriage has cosmic significance, but that significance is expressed by means of very earthly realities. The wedding itself serves as the pivotal moment in which the huge array of options comes face-to-face with the practical limits of what can and does take place. This moment is the start of what the couple intend to last for the rest of their lives; it is a single moment open to a wonderful range of future possibilities. Think of it as the narrow point on an hourglass—the possibilities of the past narrow down to that moment, which then allows new possible futures that could not come to be, were it not for that specific action of consent and commitment. As the old hymn put it, “Blessed be the tie that binds”—it is in accepting and committing to one’s spouse, pruning away all other possibilities, that the marriage blooms into the reality it becomes, day by day. The wedding is a moment—the marriage is a life.

This booklet is intended as a guide to clergy, church musicians, and couples, to map out some of the possibilities available to them, and to offer counsel as to how best to make use of the time and treasure invested in planning and experiencing this pivotal event in the couple’s life together.

First, however, a disclaimer: because marriage is governed by “both laws”—the liturgical and canon law of the church, and the civil law of the state (and in some places of the local jurisdiction as well)—and because these laws are not uniform across the whole of the church and the nation(s) in which the church functions, you are well advised to check with your local authority (sacred and secular) to find out what may be permissible or discouraged, or even mandated or forbidden, in your diocese and state (or city). Clergy in particular, due to the fact that they wear two hats as they exercise both the sacred and secular functions, are advised to be familiar with any requirements of their diocese and their civil jurisdiction.

With this in mind, some clergy have found it helpful to put some rules or guidelines in place in advance, in the form of a marriage policy statement, in order to limit the range of possibilities available. Couples will find this to be a help rather than a constraint, aiding them to focus on what is central to the event and what is peripheral—what is required, recommended, discouraged, or disallowed. This guide is intended to serve as a help in putting such a set of guidelines in place. An example form is offered in the last section, but it is intended only to serve as a starting point. It is open to as much amendment as the clergy and parish think best serves your situation, taking into account whatever local requirements may be in force.

The Marriage Canon: What the Church Requires



The Episcopal Church's marriage canon was extensively revised in 2015. This revision was intended to bring greater clarity to the responsibilities of the couple and the clergy, to restore a chronology that had been lost in earlier piecemeal revisions, and to bring the canon into conformity with the liturgical rites available since 1979. Because the canon is laid out in chronological order, it will serve as a framework for the following examination of the process that leads up to the wedding, and the wedding itself.

CANON I.18: Of the Celebration and Blessing of Marriage

Sec. 1. Every Member of the Clergy of this Church shall conform to the laws of the State governing the creation of the civil status of marriage, and also these canons concerning the solemnization of marriage. Members of the Clergy may solemnize a marriage using any of the liturgical forms authorized by this Church.

Sec. 2. The couple shall notify the Member of the Clergy of their intent to marry at least thirty days prior to the solemnization; Provided, that if one of the parties is a member of the Congregation of the Member of the Clergy, or both parties can furnish satisfactory evidence of the need for shortening the time, this requirement can be waived for weighty cause; in which case the Member of the Clergy shall immediately report this action in writing to the Bishop.

Sec. 3. Prior to the solemnization, the Member of the Clergy shall determine:

- (a) that both parties have the right to marry according to the laws of the State and consent to do so freely, without fraud, coercion, mistake as to the identity of either, or mental reservation; and
- (b) that at least one of the parties is baptized; and

(c) that both parties have been instructed by the Member of the Clergy, or a person known by the Member of the Clergy to be competent and responsible, in the nature, purpose, and meaning, as well as the rights, duties and responsibilities of marriage.

Sec. 4. Prior to the solemnization, the parties shall sign the following Declaration of Intention:

We understand the teaching of the church that God's purpose for our marriage is for our mutual joy, for the help and comfort we will give to each other in prosperity and adversity, and, when it is God's will, for the gift and heritage of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of God. We also understand that our marriage is to be un-conditional, mutual, exclusive, faithful, and lifelong; and we engage to make the utmost effort to accept these gifts and fulfill these duties, with the help of God and the support of our community.

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Sec. 5. At least two witnesses shall be present at the solemnization, and together with the Member of the Clergy and the parties, sign the record of the solemnization in the proper register; which record shall include the date and place of the solemnization, the names of the witnesses, the parties and their parents, the age of the parties, Church status, and residence(s).

Sec. 6. A bishop or priest may pronounce a blessing upon a civil marriage using any of the liturgical forms authorized by this Church.

Sec. 7. It shall be within the discretion of any Member of the Clergy of this Church to decline to solemnize or bless any marriage.¹

¹“Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church—2015,” 58. Revisions adopted at the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, Salt Lake City, UT, June 25–July 3, 2015. Available online at www.generalconvention.org.

The Officiant



The Civil Law

Every Member of the Clergy of this Church shall conform to the laws of the State governing the creation of the civil status of marriage . . . (Canon I.18.1)

It is beyond the scope of this resource to include information that would cover all of the civil jurisdictions in which the Episcopal Church (TEC) functions, a number of them outside the United States. This is due to the very wide range of civil requirements as they are applied in different states and municipalities both in the United States and in those other parts of the world in which TEC has a diocesan, parochial, or mission presence. Some of these regulations concern the couple; these include age requirements, need for parental consent, degree of kinship within which marriage is permitted, and status of previous marriages. Other regulations concern who may serve as an authorized officiant. Clergy are well advised to familiarize themselves with the civil law in their own town, city, state, and in some cases country, to be sure that both they and the couple are in full compliance with the civil law.

In general, most jurisdictions require that couples obtain a marriage license or other form of registration prior to the solemnization of their marriage. Such licenses are usually applicable for a set period of time, for example sixty days from the date of registration, so it is important that the couple not obtain the license too far in advance of the wedding, or—in places where a waiting period is required for a license—too late. The license serves as a summary of the civil requirements, in that one must be in compliance in order to obtain the license; clergy and the couple can take some assurance that the license certifies the couple have a legal right to marry.

When it comes to the officiant, some jurisdictions require all marriage officiants to register with the local civil authority, while others consider being an ordained minister in any religious body to be adequate without further registration. Clergy should check on the local policy soon after beginning ministry in a new area, in order to be prepared for the first marriage request that may come along.

A Note on Terminology ABOUT THE OFFICIANT

Various rites refer to the officiant by different terms: *celebrant*, *officiant*, and in the newer liturgies, *presider*. Some civil jurisdictions use the term *solemnizer*. Whatever term is used for the officiant, it is good to remember that in the church's view the actual ministers of the marriage are the couple themselves—they administer marriage to each other. The officiant is there almost in the capacity of a master of ceremonies, or the conductor of an orchestra, overseeing the flow of the rite, and of course making specific contributions to it. But the heart of marriage is the couple, not the clergy.

The Church's Law

Every Member of the Clergy of this Church shall conform to . . . these canons concerning the solemnization of marriage. (Canon I.18.1)

The canons of the church lay out the responsibilities and rights of the clergy, and these will be examined at greater length in each of the following sections. The Book of Common Prayer (BCP), which is the liturgical law of the Episcopal Church, also spells out many of the possibilities and limitations.

In the Episcopal Church the ordinary officiant at a wedding is a priest (or a bishop). This is so because “such ministers alone have the function of pronouncing the nuptial blessing, and of celebrating the Holy Eucharist” (BCP 422). In some jurisdictions a deacon may solemnize a marriage under the civil law. The church places some limitations on how a deacon may do so, if at all permitted by the local church policy. Moreover, the rubrics (prayer book instructions) state that a deacon (where civil law allows) should officiate only when “no priest or bishop is available”; when officiating, a deacon must omit the nuptial blessing. (It should be noted that this blessing is one of the two chief functions of a church wedding—the other being witness and support. The absence of a blessing does not invalidate or otherwise alter the nature of the marriage itself, since the actual *ministers* of marriage are the couple. But the nuptial blessing is a central element of the rite.)

A deacon may participate fully in a marriage in which a priest or bishop is officiating, and “may deliver the charge, ask for the Declaration of Consent, read the Gospel . . .” and assist in the regular diaconal functions when the Eucharist follows. An assisting priest may also take on such tasks as arranged by the clergy in charge. In a large parish, it is not unusual for a couple who are active members to want to involve all of the clergy who minister there, and the rubric provides for just such a possibility.