

Planning Your Marriage Service

Guidance from the Rev. Dr. Anthony P. Johnson

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When two persons decide to commit themselves to each other for life, they are doing something both very old and very new. What you are doing is very old. Century upon century, millions upon millions of men and women have made loving commitments to each other. What you are doing is very new. Each individual is unique and, therefore, each couple is a new and unique combination.

The choice for words and rituals in your marriage service should reflect your unique personalities and relationship. Your service may be traditional or it may be written entirely by the two of you. The important thing is that it is yours.

This approach requires more of you and of me than if I were to pencil your names into a standard ceremony. It requires that we meet at least once, preferably twice. First, we want to get to know each other -- and officiant and a couple should not be strangers -- and second, together we want to plan a service that reflects your values, beliefs, and personalities.

While there are no absolute requirements for the composition of a marriage service, here are the typical elements in typical order. (Following this section is a service following this outline.)

Opening Words/Statement of Purpose. This sets the tone of the service. Usually the officiant speaks first; however, the couple may wish to open the service by greeting their guests.

Parents' Blessing. This is optional and depends upon the age(s) of the couple and their relationship with their parents.

Reading(s). The couple chooses one or more readings that they find meaningful. These may be religious or secular and may be read by the officiant, the couple, friends or relatives.

Homily. This is the officiant's statement about what is important in marriage and may include thoughts the couple wish to have conveyed to those attending.

Vows. The bride and groom formally state their commitment to each other.

Giving of Ring(s). This is often preceded by a statement of the symbolism of the rings and may include a ring vow.

Pronouncement. This is the officiant's declaration that the couple is married.

Kiss.

Closing Meditation. This is usually given by the officiant

There are other possibilities. For instance, I am often called upon to officiate at interfaith marriages. In such cases the couples have the choice of strict neutrality or explicit affirmation of their two religious traditions. I include an example for a Jewish-Christian marriage -- a wine ceremony -- in the following service. The traditions of couples I have

married have included Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Wicca, and secular humanism.

There are many books on planning marriage services. One that I recommend is *For as Long as We Both Shall Live* by Roger Fritts [William, Morrow & Co., 1993]. *Wedding Readings*, edited by Eleanor Munro [Viking Penguin, 1996] and *African-American Wedding Readings*, edited by Tamara Nikuradse [Penguin, 1998], are two excellent collections of readings.

As a Minister of Religion in Fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, I am prepared to help you get your marriage off to a good start. Since my ordination in 1977, I have married nearly 500 opposite-sex and same-sex couples. I have served in parish and community ministries in California, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. I hold the degrees of A.B. (Boston University), M.Div. (Harvard University Divinity School); M.S. (Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy) and D.Min. (New York Theological Seminary). I currently have ministries at the Community Church of New York (New York City), the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Palisades (Englewood, NJ), and the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden (CT). The Community Church (www.ccnyc.org) and the Meriden Church (www.uumeriden.org) include attractive and dignified worship spaces suitable for marriage ceremonies.

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Basic Marriage Service

Compiled by the Rev. Dr. Anthony P. Johnson

Opening Words

We gather here this day because

and

have asked us to join with them in the celebration of their marriage. This service cannot by itself marry these two. Rather, it is a solemn and public declaration that a loving relationship has grown between these two so strong that they expect it to last through a lifetime together. But more than expect it to last, they intend and desire it to last, to endure, to grow, and to change, as _____ and _____ grow and change as individuals who are together.

You who gather around these two are important persons in their lives: family and friends whom they wish to have a part in this celebration of their love and declaration of their commitment to each other. It is important that each of you is here to be a witness to their marriage vows.

Parents' Blessing *Optional*

It is important to _____ and _____ that their parents are here with them today.

_____ and _____,

_____ and _____,

do you who have nurtured these two give your blessings to their marriage and pledge to them your love and support? •

**We do.*

Wine Ceremony - First Part *Optional*

In this celebration of your marriage, you will twice drink of this wine that you see before you. In many religions, wine signifies life. It is the fruit of the vine. So important was the vine in ancient times that the prophet Micah prophesied that in the time of peace and justice, each person would sit beneath his on vine and fig tree. In the Jewish tradition, the cup of wine signifies the willingness to share in life's joys and sorrows. In the Christian tradition, it symbolizes sacrifice and love. By your drinking of this wine, each from your own cup, you signify your intentions, as two individuals, to be married.

**The bride and groom drink simultaneously from separate cups.*

Reading(s)

Homily

Vows

_____ and _____ inasmuch as it is your intention to dwell as husband and wife from this day forward, I ask you to join hands and before these witnesses and all you hold sacred to declare your marriage vows.

[The Groom and Bride, in turn:]

*I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife/husband,
to have and to hold from this day forward
for better for worse,
for richer for poorer,
in sickness or in health,
to love and to cherish,
so long as we both shall live.*

Exchange of Rings

Written by the Rev. James Lawson

The metal in these rings
has little real value
except in its use today.
Your words are gone as you say them
but as you say them,
your lives are changed forever.
You are man and woman,
born to trouble and joy;
and this is the greatest triumph --
that the greatest of gifts
are yours for the risk of asking.

We are to witness now
the sealing of this promise with these rings
sign and token before the world
of the world you will create --
single, whole and quiet --
within the world outside.
Together you are one; as one you are a world.

[*The bride and groom, in turn:]

** With this ring I wed you
and join my life to yours.*

Wine Ceremony - Second Part *Optional*

This is the second time in this service that you will drink of the fruit of the vine that signifies life. When you first drank this wine, you had not yet joined yourselves together

by the speaking of vows and the giving of rings. Therefore, you drank from two separate cups. Now you will drink from one cup, not because you are any less two individuals, but because you have joined your two lives in one shared life. Many days you will sit and eat and drink at the same table. Drink now from the same cup. And may the cup of life be always full to overflowing.

*The bride and groom drink from the same cup.

Pronouncement

_____ and _____ have spoken their marriage vows and exchanged rings as symbols of these vows. Because of these words and these actions, because we have witnessed these, and -- most of all -- because _____ and _____ have pledged themselves to each other in love, they are now husband and wife.

* *The couple kisses.*

Closing Words

Let us now join in the spirit of prayer and meditation.

May these two people, now married, keep this covenant, which they have made. May they be a blessing and a comfort to each other in all the challenges of life.

May they, trusting in each other, trust in life and not be afraid.

May they not only accept and give affection between themselves, but also together have affection and consideration for others.

We who are present, and those who are absent and thinking of these two, hope and pray, each in his or her own way, that the inspiration of this hour will not be forgotten.

May _____ and _____ continue to love one another forever.

With hearts full of love and joy, we make this our prayer for them.

Amen.

A Sampling of Readings

The readings that follow constitute a small sample, intended to demonstrate the range from which you may choose readings for your marriage ceremony. In respect of the authors' copyrights, I include only brief excerpts:

I Corinthians 13

If I speak in human tongues and the tongues of angels but have not love...

George Elliot: complete quotation as written

Theodore Parker:

It takes years to marry completely two hearts, even of the most loving and well-assorted. A happy wedlock is a long falling in love.

Carl Sandburg:

**so you can take love as it comes keening
as it comes with a voice and a face and you make a talk of it
talking to yourself a talk worth keeping
... and you give it away and yet it stays hoarded...**

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