

THE MINISTER'S PERSONAL POLICIES ON WEDDINGS

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I. Specific Questions About Policies

1. Will you perform ceremonies only for members of the congregation where you serve?

If your congregation has an especially fine facility, you will have more requests from people outside the church to have their weddings there. Many larger churches have more than one sanctuary. Besides the main auditorium they may have a chapel that seats a hundred or so and maybe even a prayer chapel that will accommodate a dozen or so. Consequently, the church is ideally equipped to handle private weddings, moderate-sized ceremonies, as well as large gatherings. Under those conditions the facility meets the needs of practically all possibilities.

Weddings can occupy a good deal of time when you consider rehearsal time and counseling sessions, which will number from one to six or more, depending on your policy. Simply to keep weddings from overrunning your schedule, you may have to devise some policies. One way to keep them manageable is to require that at least one of the persons be a member of the church. Congregations that have extensive facilities probably have multiple staff as well; you may be able to work out some kind of arrangement among you that can accommodate more of these requests from non-members. Nevertheless, limiting weddings to church members is still an option.

There are some difficulties with a members-only policy. Past members may want to return to have the ceremony at "the home church." Requests may also come from relatives of members. You may want to consider what might happen if you refused to perform a ceremony for regular attenders or for one of their relatives. A members-only policy can cause hurts feelings unless it is qualified in some way or simply used as a guideline with cases-by-case exceptions made discreetly.

2. Should you perform a ceremony for non-Christians?

Ministers sometimes shy away from doing ceremonies for non-Christian couples. This aversion may be due to their tendency to regard marriage as a Christian institution. More often they fear that a minister's doing the wedding in a church may falsely imply approval of their lives before God. If you do perform such weddings, you may want to drop out Christian items like pronouncing the couple husband and wife "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." By coming to a minister instead of going to a justice of the peace, they are probably indicating a desire for a church wedding and a certain nebulous sense of wanting a religious connection with their married life. It would seem more appropriate to fan any spark of religious interest than to turn them away and thus turn them off to that minimal religious impulse. You may be able to talk quite naturally with them about spiritual things that have so much to do with a fulfilling life together.

3. Should you perform a ceremony for a Christian and non-Christian?

Part of the issue here is what you consider “non-Christian.” There is a difference between a non-Christian and a nominal Christian, between a non-Christian and someone from another denomination, and between a non-Christian and an anti-Christian. Practically speaking, some “good moral people” make better mates for a Christian than do those relatively active “Christians” that have personality defects their Christianity has not corrected.

A second part of the issue is whether “marrying in the Lord is advice or commandment.” To put it differently, is it sinful to “contract” a marriage with an unbeliever or is it ill-advised? Since it is not sinful to “continue” a mixed marriage, we assume it is for practical rather than theological reasons that Paul says what he does about not marrying outside the faith (1 Corinthians 7:39; cp. 2 Corinthians 6:14).

Another part of the issue is how you should conceive of “your role” in such cases. Is it your responsibility to try to stop ill-advisable marriages or to enhance the tendency toward making them more advisable? Is it realistic to assume a role that even parents of the couple would have a hard time fulfilling at this stage of the relationship’s development? As a minister is it possible not to apply those values and principles that belong to the message you proclaim? Can you perform the wedding in a way that does not imply your approval or disapproval? The couple has not come for your blessing or your approval, but for your services. With rare exceptions the fact is that they will get married; so the issue is not whether they ought to marry or whether you think they should marry. The issue is whether you can improve their future life together and help insure their marital success. By performing the wedding you do not have to be approving the marriage, although admittedly it is difficult to separate the fact that you are a Christian minister and the fact that you are performing a wedding that is immoral. So you have to decide whether you are obligated to apply to non-Christians the values of a belief system they have not adopted.

A last part of the issue is what the parents of the Christian may think of you and the church if they have been trying to keep their son or daughter from marrying this non-Christian. You have to balance off their interest in the matter with the welfare of the couple themselves.

4. Should you perform the ceremony for a couple if one or both have been divorced?

There are many types of specific problems here; so it is difficult to come up with an answer that fits them all. You may be asked to perform the ceremony for an apparently guilty party in a previous divorce who wants a public wedding in the same church where his previously wife still attends. You will probably not be able to figure out whether a person was the “innocent party” in a previous divorce. If you are convinced that a “guilty party” should never remarry, about all you can realistically assume responsibility for is communicating to the person involved that this is your viewpoint, and then you will have to leave the responsibility with them. Whether you go ahead and perform the ceremony will be determined by the role you perceive that a minister should take in marriage.

5. Should you marry a couple that you do think makes unlikely marital partners?

The government has certain restrictions on who can marry and who can marry whom. Beyond these regulations you will probably not succeed at preventing ill-advised marriages. A more realistic approach is to make available to them tests that will reveal the differences between them, and then make suggestions for minimizing these differences, understanding them, and changing the ones that ought to be changed. In general, this redemptive approach coincides with the stance Christianity takes toward people between Christ's first and second comings. Occasionally this procedure will cause the couple to reconsider, but it will always ameliorate the problems they may encounter.

6. Should you marry racially mixed couples?

In America racially mixed marriages are more common and more accepted today than they were a generation ago. Although a few Christian groups consider such marriages immoral, the question of advisability does need attention from a societal standpoint. You are not in a very good position to deter the man and woman from carrying through with such an arrangement especially at this late date in the relationship. In some parts of the country there may still be enough public sentiment against interracial marriage that you should consider what effect marrying a black and white couple might have on your ministry or that of the congregation you are serving. At least you should work out in your mind how you will deal with any negative reactions that come from the church or community.

6. Should you require the couple to have counseling before marrying them?

Many ministers adopt this approach as a way of fulfilling their responsibility toward the couple in a day when marriage vows are sometimes taken too lightly and as a way of actually helping upgrade their commitment to marriage and their likelihood of success in the marriage. Adopting this policy also weeds out people that are unreceptive to the spiritual values that undergird such counseling. Consequently the minister is spending his time in a manner that is more in keeping with his calling.

People sometimes hesitate and resist counseling. Resistance may not mean disinterest in spiritual things so much as a fear that the minister will get too directive ("pushy") on religious things they are not too sure about. After all, they do not know the minister personally in many cases, and they envision a worst-case scenario rather easily if they are not regular church people. Young couples may be apprehensive of talking about highly personal matters. Frankly in cases where they do not know you very well, that concern is understandable since you have no basis for credibility with them.

7. Should you charge for performing the wedding ceremony?

Some ministers set a flat fee. Others consider weddings and funerals as part of their responsibility in the ministry of the church that supports them. A minister could graciously accept an voluntary honorarium and then return it to the couple as a present on their first anniversary. That would give him a natural opportunity for renewed contact with them. Ministers sometimes do not charge members of their congregation, but set a

fee for outsiders. An honorarium can be considered partial repayment for any books or other materials the minister provides at his own expense during the planning meetings and counseling sessions. All in all it seems best not to set a fee, and to consider a voluntary honorarium as a gesture of appreciation more than a payment for services.

8. Where are you willing to perform wedding ceremonies?

Besides having the wedding in the church building, informal weddings may be held in the minister's living room, in an open-air situation, or in the home of one of the parents. Any setting that does not compromise the solemnity of the ceremony should be acceptable. You need to be careful about performing ceremonies at another church. You should have the couple contact the minister of that congregation, and it would be a good idea to make a personal contact as well since there is a certain respect for the other minister's ministry that has become traditional in ministerial etiquette. You do not want to get caught in some disaffection between the minister and the couple or one of their families so as to affect your own relationship with that minister.

II. Summary of General Considerations

1. Time consumption

In making decisions about the questions above, you will need to keep several issues in balance. The amount of time you judge to be appropriate for counseling-rehearsals-ceremonies in light of your other commitments, interests, and skills.

2. Outreach opportunities

Refusing to perform ceremonies in certain circumstances may be cutting off opportunities for outreach. This matter applies to religiously or racially mixed couples, couples where one or both is not a Christian, couples where one or both have previously been divorced. Ministers are always looking for natural points of contact with unreached people; yet here is one of those potential contacts you may be overlooking. It largely depends on how you integrate these cases into planned outreach; that is, whether you require counseling sessions, whether you always make at least a "soft-sell" presentation of the gospel to persons without a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. You may have to go at this question in a trial-and-error fashion to see whether this situation in fact produces very many converts and recommitments in comparison to other occasions of evangelism. Marriage is one time in people's lives when they are in the process of change, and those times are the ones in which conversions most naturally and frequently come because of the greater felt need for security and therefore greater openness to the Christian message.