

Pastoral Services

The Marriage Service

Introduction

Clergy become marriage celebrants when they are recommended to the State Authorities by their particular denomination. The licence issued authorises the celebrant to perform the civil function of officiating at a marriage and issues a celebrant's number.

However, Clergy also perform a religious function as marriage celebrants. Implicit in this is the responsibility to prepare a couple for their future life. In this respect, marriage preparation is an important part of the ordained ministry. Clergy should give careful consideration to the resources they use in marriage preparation. At the same time, however, it is important to remember that the relationship with the couple is a great pastoral privilege.

Civil function

Rules and regulations concerning the civil role of a celebrant are documented in "Handbook for Marriage Celebrants". However, particular attention should be paid to:

- **Notice of Intended Marriage:** This form is to be filled in, and signed during the period spanning 18 months to 1 month before the wedding.
- **Evidence of date of birth:** In all cases, evidence of the date of birth of the bride and groom must be produced. This is usually in the form of a birth certificate or *certified* extract of birth, which should also be checked in regard to other details on the Notice of Intended Marriage. Where a birth certificate cannot be produced (almost always because the birth occurred outside of Australia) alternative processes are provided. Please be mindful that it is an offence to solemnise a marriage without evidence of both parties identity and date of birth being produced.
- **Previous Marriage(s):** If any party has been previously married, proof of the dissolution of the former marriage must be produced. This will be a death certificate (if the party is widowed) or a divorce certificate (if the party is divorced). Please note that the "decree nisi" must become "absolute", usually one month later, and the date of the decree absolute is the date to be entered on the Notice of Intended Marriage.
- **Certificates:** Please note that declaration on the reverse side of this certificate must be signed by both parties before the marriage takes place and in the presence of the celebrant. The civil authorities emphasise that the person solemnising the marriage must be the same person who witnesses this declaration. If there is a mistake made in completing the certificates, please be attentive to the prescribed methods of correction.

Marriage in Church of Divorced Persons.

Clergy are required to seek permission from the Bishop for the marriage in Church of divorced persons. Permission will almost certainly be given provided the pastoral issues are properly addressed. By this I am not referring to issues of blame; this is beyond all but God to discern or assign. However, I would like you to be assured that, in your view, the issues relating to a previous marriage have been sufficiently dealt with so as not to be a threat to the new relationship. I would like you to be assured that any children of a previous relationship have been adequately cared for in planning for the new marriage.

You are the people who have the direct pastoral relationship, so your recommendation will almost always guide me. In giving permission, I will also write to the couple assuring them of my good wishes and prayers. It is understood that no celebrant is obligated to solemnise a marriage involving a divorced person, if this offends his or her own conscience. In this instance the clergy person should sensitively refer the couple to another church celebrant.

Marriage outside of a church building

We are often asked to officiate at wedding outside of a church building. Traditionally this has been allowed only in the narrowest of circumstances (such as when there is no church building in the location). The intention of the traditional restriction was to ensure that the Christian character of the wedding service was held intact.

We live in a different age, but I want to hold to that original underlying intention. If there are pastoral reasons why a marriage away from the church building is appropriate, then permission may be given. However, the ceremony still must be “in church” (that is, it must have the ethos of God’s People gathering and the service should be an authorised form). Requests should be timely and in writing. They should make clear the pastoral reasons for the proposed location. The bishop's decision should not be pre-empted.