

Getting Married

in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland


Presbyterian
CHURCH IN IRELAND

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Congratulations on your engagement.

The next few weeks and months will undoubtedly be an exciting whirlwind of activity, as you make all kinds of wedding plans.

This booklet is designed to explore the ideals of Christian marriage and to assist you with the practicalities involved in a church wedding. We'll help you understand the legal requirements and look at possible orders of service, including vows you might exchange as bride and groom.

While much emphasis can be placed on the big day itself, we would stress the importance of good marriage preparation – laying the foundation for an ever loving, deepening and enduring marriage.

What do we mean by Christian marriage?

Traditionally marriage is defined as the voluntary union for life, of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others. As an institution it predates the church and has been on the scene since the beginning of time.

Marriage is very much part of God's loving design for humanity. As early as the opening chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we are told that God created human beings, male and female. Every person is unique, special and of equal importance, since all are made in the image of God.

It is also pointed out that God made woman as a companion for man. And in the next verse this basic instruction is given: *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh"* (Genesis 2:24). These precise words are restated by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (19:4-6), and they are further underlined by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (5:31).

As a bride and groom exchange their vows, it is a symbolic enactment of all that is intended in the verses we have just mentioned. They leave their respective family units and, now joined together as husband and wife, they step forward to face the changing seasons of life together.

God's endorsement of marriage is seen in the second chapter of John's Gospel when Jesus and His disciples were invited to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus evidently delighted in the bride and bridegroom, performing His first miracle as He turned water into wine. It is good to know that the same Christ promises to be with couples by His Spirit as they take their promises in His presence. As they commit themselves to Him and make themselves dependent upon His grace, He will enrich their love, support them and help them in their lives together.

The special nature and sacredness of Christian marriage is compared in Ephesians to the union between Christ and His church. It is impossible to think of anything as special or as profound as this relationship. The church is portrayed as the bride and Christ as the groom who loves her so much that He lays down his life for her. Christ models for us the totality of sacrificial and selfless love. The depth of this love can transform all our friendships and relationships, including marriage.

How do we discover and experience such love? It is made available to us in Jesus Christ as we come to Him and commit our lives to Him. In Ephesians Paul speaks of Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith, and being rooted and established in that same love! He prays that we *“may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge –that (we) may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”* (3:14-19).

In the wedding service several ideas are mentioned, which spell out the full dimensions of Christian love:

Marriage is a Covenant

Covenant is a very rich biblical word, which highlights God’s unconditional love towards His people, as He keeps His Word and never breaks His promises. In spite of its constant rebellion against Him, God so loved the world that He sent his one and only Son to woo and win His people back to Him. The idea of marriage as a covenant emphasises the concept of a deep, binding and enduring commitment between one man and one woman. In other words, marriage is for better, for worse. The joy of Christian marriage is that we stand together with God, loving and cherishing each other as mutual companions, as we share the inevitable highs and lows of life.

Marriage underlines faithfulness

Total trustworthiness, reliability, integrity, honesty, and commitment to one another come into play here. Husband and wife are like an open book with no hidden agendas or secrets.

Marriage enables the full expression of physical love between husband and wife

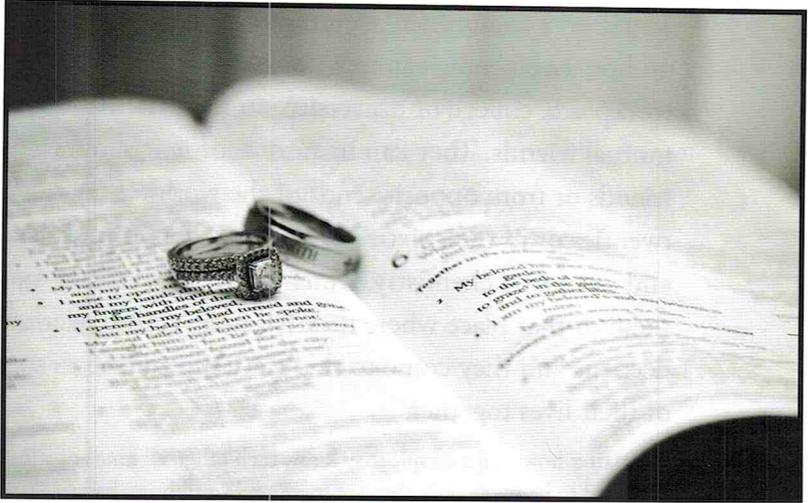
The physical side of marriage is a wonderful gift from God and something to be treasured. It is being able to embrace, to hold and to delight in one another. Sexual intimacy is a coming together of our bodies, hearts and spirits. Physical union should be the gift of marriage, as the consummation of our vows or the seal of our togetherness in marriage. It is an important part of the marriage relationship with husband and wife learning how to appreciate and cherish each other in a loving sensual union.

Marriage is for the furtherance of family life

Marriage has always been the natural context in which to raise children, as fathers and mothers give complementary role models to children. Marriage safeguards them and also supports the wider family across the generations. Research confirms that compared with every other kind of relationship, marriage is more stable and beneficial for couples, families and the whole of society. The strength, depth and beauty of the marriage relationship help provide a secure environment for bringing up children.

Conclusion

In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes there is a verse sometimes read in wedding services: *“Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”* (4:12). This is used to refer to the strengthening, enabling presence of God in the marriage relationship. Although no couple is ever immune from misunderstanding and difficulties, those who marry in the Lord can turn to Him for daily help, guidance, forgiveness, mercy, comfort, protection, and encouragement. They can know the fullest dimensions of His love, joy and peace. They can experience the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the companionship of His Spirit.



What do we mean by Marriage Preparation?

Marriage is undoubtedly a gift of God. It is amazing to reflect on how two people can meet each other at a church youth club, workplace, college or university, on their holidays or through mutual friends. They can be next door neighbours, childhood friends or from opposite ends of the world. They can be in their twenties or in their sixties. Somehow there is mutual attraction and a sense of chemistry, which draws them closer and brings them to that place where they fall in love. The relationship deepens and they come to this place of wanting to spend the rest of their lives together.

No matter how well a couple may know each other, all kinds of adjustments will need to be made once they are married. We all bring baggage from our past, have bad habits or attitudes that can make us irritating, and we can be selfish and uncaring towards others. It's what the Bible calls sin.

Marriage preparation is about helping couples learn how to live and grow together over a lifetime. Time out during your engagement, so that you can deepen your understanding of each other, is an excellent investment in your future.

There is a variety of approaches to preparing couples for marriage. Quite often ministers will meet with the couple over several evenings. Congregations are organised in larger units called Presbyteries and sometimes marriage preparation classes are organised centrally at this level. In some congregations a married couple may be asked by the minister to meet with a number of couples together on his behalf. In larger congregations it can be the case that where several marriages are planned throughout the calendar year, a group of engaged couples will be brought together over several evenings for marriage preparation.

Perhaps you are currently living away from home and will not be returning sufficiently often to be able to complete a course. In that case your minister might recommend you to link up with a local church, where preparation is available.

In Northern Ireland marriage preparation is provided by several agencies; one such is Christian Guidelines which continually organises courses for those planning marriage. The website is constantly updated: www.christianguidelines.org.

Numerous books are available on the subject of marriage. Why not visit your local Christian bookshop?

If you have any concerns about preparation, please share them with your minister! Engaged couples might feel slightly apprehensive about signing up for such classes, not knowing what to expect. We would ask you to put any preconceptions to one side. Good marriage preparation will give you the opportunity and the tools to discuss any areas that couples might otherwise find difficult to address, from in-laws to handling finance and everything else in-between.

Once married, the journey together continues. It is important to keep investing in your marriage, to make time for each other and to maintain the art of dating or romancing each other. At some future date you might consider a marriage enrichment course, something being increasingly offered by churches.

In marriage preparation the subjects most often included are:

Communication	Adjusting to families
Understanding each other	Keeping love alive
Handling conflict	Finance
Commitment	Distinctives of Christian marriage

What about my circumstances?

All of us are influenced by our past – both good and bad. We bring to our marriages different life experiences. Some come from loving homes, others not. Some come with strong faith, others with very little. For some life has been seemingly straightforward, for others difficult and complicated.

We have outlined below some scenarios that may affect you. It is our hope that your minister will look at all these issues with grace, compassion, wisdom and understanding. It is fair to say, however, that there are varying approaches, with some ministers being stricter than others in their interpretation of what the Bible teaches. In all of this we aim to explore the heights of Christian teaching and to affirm the special nature of marriage.

I am already living with somebody

Some ministers may require you to separate from your partner until the wedding day. Obviously this will depend on circumstances, particularly if children are involved. We believe in the sanctity of marriage where two people give themselves totally to each other in love and this is something that operates at a much deeper level than merely living together. We want to make your marriage special.

I have been married before

Divorce does not prevent you from getting married in a Presbyterian church. Your minister may wish to discuss your previous relationship with you. Couples, where one or both are divorced, are encouraged to meet with a re-marriage panel which will help them talk through their past experiences from a pastoral point of view. Although the panel will give advice and make recommendations, the final decision rests with the minister, who will have talked through the issues with you.

My fiancé(e) is from a Roman Catholic background and I would like the priest to be involved

This can still be a very sensitive issue throughout Ireland, north and south. Some ministers are more open to this situation than others. It is of course important that the current practices regarding inter-church marriages be fully understood by both partners. One useful resource is the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association www.nimma.org.uk.

My fiancé(e) comes from a totally different faith background

As Ireland becomes much more multi-cultural, these situations arise. This is an area that needs to be handled with the utmost care and discretion because it is difficult to work out how we can make a complete soul connection with somebody from a different faith background. Hopefully the non-Christian partner will be open to understand the essentials of Christian faith, as explained by the minister. It is very important to talk about expectations here, and how religious practice might be worked out in the future marriage.

My partner does not share my Christian faith

Again it is very difficult when we do not share something which is so central to our lives with our nearest and dearest. It goes without saying that couples approaching marriage ought to have discovered much in common. Compatibility may be seen in mutual interests and pastimes, similar ideas about life and shared dreams. In Christian marriage it is such a privilege to be complete soulmates, sharing life at the very deepest level together in Christ. The Presbyterian Church has recently taken a strong stance in this area in its recommendation that Christians should marry Christians.

I have a dark secret from my past which I can't share

Perhaps something has happened that you have attempted to bury, but which still troubles you. There is never a good reason to hold back information from our nearest and dearest. Over time events from the past can cast deepening shadows over our present relationship. You may want to discuss details with your minister, ask for prayer ministry or counselling.

I don't seem to get on with his/her family

It ought to be an enriching experience to get to know your partner's background and family. It is also true to say, however, that families have different ways of doing things. Some will remember birthdays; others won't. If you are aware of areas where sensitivities could potentially arise, it might be a good idea to talk all of this through together or with the help of your minister.

I don't know if we will be able to have children

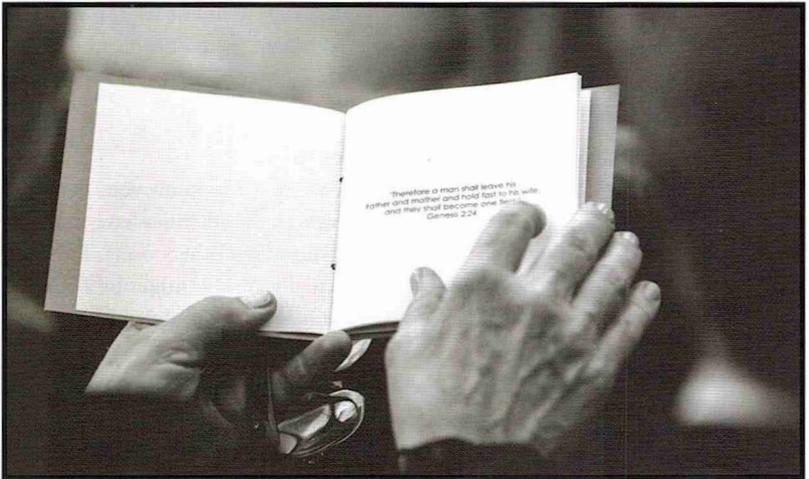
We hope that couples will be able to have children, but sometimes these expectations will not be met and there can be much resultant heartache and pain. To be aware that there might even be an issue at this stage of your relationship is sensible and practical.

I want to have a church wedding, but don't really believe in anything

Again be honest with your minister. All we ask of you is to be open-minded as you attend marriage preparation classes, or come to church to find out more. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

I'm interested in finding out more about the Christian life

We would encourage you to join the church as a couple, attend worship regularly and become involved in the life and activities of the congregation. There are a number of helpful courses available, including Christianity Explored and Alpha. We see Jesus as the One who came that we might have fullness of life – forgiveness for our sins, new beginnings, strength for today, guidance through life and love eternal.



What do I do next?

The Practicalities

Be in contact with your minister as soon as possible!

It is important not to book a reception venue until you have consulted your minister, as he or she may not be available on the date you have in mind. Please remember that Presbyterian ministers are not able to officiate at weddings on Sundays. A meeting with your minister will familiarise you with the practicalities and various marriage arrangements. It will also give you the opportunity to get to know your minister a bit better, and vice versa. It is much more significant and meaningful when there is a good positive relationship between the minister and you as the couple. If you have any questions, this is also a good opportunity to raise them.

Legalities in Northern Ireland

Your minister will have a supply of the relevant forms and will explain the procedure to you. The Marriage Notice Application Form, which needs to be signed by the officiating minister, may also be downloaded by visiting local council websites or www.nidirect.gov.uk and following the relevant links. This form, when completed, is taken to the local council office and a marriage schedule is issued in due course, without which the wedding cannot proceed.

Legalities in the Republic of Ireland

The website which gives necessary information to couples marrying in the Republic is www.groireland.ie. When a couple meets with the minister, he or she will remind them that without the Marriage Registration Form, the marriage cannot legally proceed.

Please ensure that the necessary documentation has been given to the minister well in advance of the service.

Location

The wedding should normally take place in the church to which either the bride or the groom belongs, usually the bride. If the couple wish to get married in a different church building, this should be discussed with the minister when initial arrangements are being made. While it is possible to get married at a venue other than a church building, we strongly recommend the wedding to take place in the church, to underline the sacredness of the occasion.

Payment

You may be wondering what payment may be customary for a wedding. Some congregations issue their own guidelines. The organist or pianist may have a particular fee, but any amounts given should reflect time and practice, particularly if time has had to be taken off work. A contribution should also be made for the use of the Church building especially when heat and light are involved. There may be a church officer or caretaker who has had to open the doors, rearrange furniture and tidy up afterwards. You may wish to present the minister with a token of appreciation. In conclusion, protocols will vary from congregation to congregation.

Photography & Recording

It is useful for couples to discuss this area with the minister. Parameters are set in place for very good reasons. For example, flash photography or constant movement during the service can become a real distraction and take away from the sacredness of the occasion. Once you have discussed these matters, you should instruct the photographer and cameramen accordingly. You may find it helpful for the minister to make an announcement at the beginning of the service, limiting the taking of photos to those authorised. Again this can help reduce stress on you as a couple.

Please ensure also that all those officially involved in making memories of the service, comply with copyright laws.

Music

You may have favourite hymns or special choruses in mind, as well as associations with processional and/or recessional pieces. You may want to have soloists or instrumentalists involved in the service. It is important to consult with the person who will be playing. Your choices need to be discussed and agreed with your minister. Please remember, above all, that the music should reflect the fact that your wedding is a service of Christian worship.

Possible Hymns:

Love divine, all loves excelling

Praise my soul, the King of heaven

Be thou my vision

All things bright and beautiful

In Christ alone

The King of Love my Shepherd is

O for a thousand tongues to sing

*(There is a selection of marriage and family hymns in
The Irish Presbyterian Hymnbook – numbers 579 -587)*

Possible Choruses:

Blessed be Your Name

Such love

Make me a channel of your peace

My Jesus, my Saviour

My Lord, what love is this

King of kings, majesty

All I once held dear

Scripture Readings

Here are some Bible passages that may be used during the service.

Old Testament:

Genesis 2:18-25 – The principles of marriage

Psalms 23 – The Lord's my Shepherd

Psalms 67 – A prayer for God's blessing

Psalms 121 – God's help and guidance

Psalms 127 and Matthew 7:21, 24-27 – Unless the Lord builds the house....

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 – Three strands in marriage

Song of Songs 8:6-7 – Many waters cannot quench love

Jeremiah 29: 4-13 – God's plans

Jeremiah 31:31-34 – God's new covenant

New Testament:

Matthew 5: 3-10 – The Beatitudes

John 2: 1-12 – Jesus was a guest at the wedding in Cana of Galilee

John 15: 1-9 – Abiding in Christian love

1 Corinthians 13 – Arguably the finest words on the subject of love ever written!

Romans 12: 1-2, 9-13 – Love, patience, prayer, generosity, hospitality; a good description of the Christian home

Ephesians 3: 14-21 – A prayer that we would know the full dimensions of Christian love

Ephesians 5: 22-33 – The marriage relationship

Colossians 3:12-17 – God's new wardrobe

1 Peter 3:1-12 – Wives and husbands

1 John 4:7-13 – Love God, love one another

The Rehearsal

It is important to meet at the wedding location as close to the day as possible, in order to go over the order of service. Those involved in the bridal and groom's parties should attend. The rehearsal will seem slightly artificial, but it will give you an idea of the arrangements on the day, hopefully giving you one less worry. The minister will tell everyone when to arrive, and where to stand.

The Wedding Service

- The groom and best man should arrive in good time and double check the rings.
- The bride should remember that to arrive very late can cause high blood pressure!
- In the Republic of Ireland there is a requirement that a declaration of no impediment be made by the bride and groom in the presence of each other, the minister and the witnesses:

Do you solemnly declare that you believe there is no impediment of kindred or affinity or other lawful hindrance to your proposed marriage with N?

- Your minister will assist you with the legal documents, which are completed after the service. Congregations keep a register for their own records, which you will also be asked to sign. You will need two witnesses, usually the best man and chief bridesmaid. Both must be over 18.

Suggested Outline of Service

We have suggested the following template, while acknowledging that orders of service will vary slightly from congregation to congregation. You may wish to have family members or friends participating in the readings or prayers. This will need to be agreed with the minister who will also need to sign off the order of service before it goes to the printers.

Bridal processional

Welcome

Call to worship

Praise

Statement on marriage

The bride may be given away

Prayer for God's blessing on the couple

Exchange of vows

The giving of rings

The proclamation of marriage

(Praise)

The blessing of marriage – prayers for the couple as they begin married life.

Scripture readings

Address

Praise

The Benediction

Signing of the register

Recessional

The Vows

The vows may be made either as a question (1), or as a statement (2).

(1) As a question, the minister says to the groom:

*In the presence of God and before this congregation,
do you N take N to be your wife?
Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honour and protect her,
and, forsaking all others, to be faithful to her, as long as you both shall live?*

Groom: *I do.*

The minister says to the bride:

*In the presence of God and before this congregation,
do you N take N to be your husband?
Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honour and protect him,
and, forsaking all others, to be faithful to him, as long as you both shall live?*

Bride: *I do.*

(2) As a statement, the groom says:

*I, N, take you, N, to be my wife,
I promise to love you, comfort you, honour and protect you,
and, forsaking all others, be faithful to you as long as we both shall live.*

The bride shall then say:

*I, N, take you, N, to be my husband,
I promise to love you, comfort you, honour and protect you,
and, forsaking all others, be faithful to you as long as we both shall live.*

The Reception

You needn't feel under any obligation to invite your minister, or minister and spouse, to the reception. However, should you wish to do so, please signal this at the earliest opportunity. If this is left until nearer the time, the minister may already have made other commitments.

The Cost

From deciding who should be invited and where to draw the line, to visiting venues, choosing menus and table decorations, buying the all-important dress and sorting out colour schemes, co-ordinating outfits, organising photographs, hiring cars and making sure the rings are in the right place at the right time – the list is potentially endless. It is stating the obvious, but the bigger the plans, the costlier the wedding. While not wanting to cramp style, we want to suggest that simpler plans can lead to a day which is just as enjoyable.

Married Life

Our Church has stated that a Presbyterian minister, “should officiate at a marriage, only if at least one of the people concerned is a Presbyterian. This means that at least one should have sufficient connection with a congregation in order to ensure that meaningful pastoral care can be offered.”

We want to establish and build a good relationship with you every step of the way to your wedding day, but then hopefully beyond. Wherever you settle after the wedding, we encourage you to establish a strong link with the church and become involved. Church is the family of God which meets together to discover the realities of the greatest love of all – the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.



Some concluding thoughts

Marriage is a wonderful adventure of growing togetherness and deepening love.

It is a wonderful gift when two people trust and understand each other totally, reading each other's thoughts and finishing each other's sentences. We need to remember also that marriage is about two selfish and stubborn people now living under the same roof.

It is true that no two people are totally compatible. We are bundles of contradiction, as changeable as the weather. We can be completely together, or we can miss one another completely.

Tim Keller in his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, observes that

“The primary challenge of marriage is learning how to love and care for the stranger to whom you find yourself married.”

We might add that marriage is a place where we make many discoveries about ourselves as well.

He continues,

“The reason that marriage is so painful and yet wonderful is because it is a reflection of the Gospel, which is painful and wonderful at once. The Gospel is – we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared to believe, and at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.

This is the only kind of relationship that will really transform us. Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God’s saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God’s mercy and grace.”

The vows you share on your wedding day are the firmest possible foundation on which to build a marriage that will last. However close you are as a couple, you need to realise that you are still a work in progress. Our prayer is that you will know God’s grace and blessing every day, so that you can become everything He wants you to be.



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