

Marriage Between a Christian and a Person of Another Faith Tradition

Guidelines

These guidelines are addressed primarily to bishops and priests.

Preamble

Canadian society, once considered Christian or at least nominally Christian, has become increasingly composed of persons of many faiths. Understandably, many people who meet one another in the more or less secular circumstances of ordinary life wish to marry across faith boundaries. Such marriages may bring rich cross-cultural experience to the couples and their families and also contribute positively to the texture of a new and emerging society. On the other hand, they sometimes cause strain between the individuals and their own faith communities and this strain unchecked may sometimes affect the quality of the relationships themselves. Increasingly people who wish to marry across faith boundaries approach Anglican clergy for marriage rites. This places a responsibility on such clergy to assess the appropriateness of a marriage in a Christian setting, the design of a suitable liturgy, and the provision of adequate and responsible pastoral support.

Theological Considerations

A Christian understanding of marriage is rooted in a Christian understanding of humanity. It is therefore better to speak of a “Christian understanding of marriage” rather than of “Christian marriage.” A Christian understanding of marriage includes at least the free consent of a man and a woman to a loving relationship which is lifelong and exclusive. It is therefore open to all, whether or not they are Christians, even though Christian tradition and thought have a larger and richer vision of marriage than this minimal standard.

However, although marriage as understood by Christians is open to all, not all necessarily share that understanding. Where an understanding of marriage is in sharp conflict with a Christian understanding of marriage, the marriage of inter-faith partners in a Christian setting may not be appropriate.

In Western Christian theology the ministers of marriage are the couple themselves and this applies to the partners in an inter-faith

marriage as well as to the marriage of two Christians; the church is present at marriage ceremonies to bless and support.

Each partner may bring diverse religious and theological understandings to their marriage. An inter-faith marriage involving a Christian should not question or deny the Christian understanding of marriage as it is reflected in such biblical passages as Mark 10.6–9, Ephesians 5.25–30, and also in the exhortations in the marriage rites of *The Book of Common Prayer* and *The Book of Alternative Services*.

Pastoral Considerations

The following dimensions of pastoral care should be considered by clergy who are asked to preside at an inter-faith marriage.

Exploration of the cultural and religious assumptions of the couple, including

- their understanding of the roles of men and women in their respective societies and the ways in which they expect these roles to be reflected in their relationship;

- the broad outlines of their faith and world view;

- their understanding of the nature of the family and of their responsibility to their children as a couple and as individual care-givers;

- their attitude to divorce and their intention to remain in a lifelong union;

- their understanding of financial considerations and the attitudes of their respective cultures to responsibility for earning and disposing of income;

- sexuality;

- the ways in which problems in a relationship may be faced and conflict may be resolved.

As with all marriages the priest should take note of the other points for discussion named in Canon XXI, Schedule E. In addition the priest should also discuss with the couple

- the attitude of their respective families to their relationship and the ways in which they believe they can deal with anticipated tensions;

- the kind of relationship they expect in their marriage;

their understanding of the nature of free consent in entering into a marriage relationship;¹

their willingness to learn sympathetically about the basic tenets and practice of each other's faith tradition;

whether they have begun a process towards a decision on the religious orientation and education of their children;

the participation of the family in the religious festivals of the partners' faith traditions, and especially the participation of the Christian partner in non-Christian rites;

the implications for their relationship should they move from a Western cultural setting to a non-Western or traditional context.

In the light of these and other conversations the priest and the couple must decide if it is appropriate for this marriage to be celebrated in church, recognizing that a decision to have the ceremony in a civil setting or in the context of the other faith community may be fitting. (A decision that a marriage ceremony in church is not appropriate in this case does not free an Anglican priest to circumvent the House of Bishops guidelines by presiding at a marriage ceremony in a domestic or outdoor setting.)

It should be noted that Canon XXI.I.10 of the Anglican Church of Canada, as well as the rubrics of *The Book of Alternative Services*, requires the bishop's permission for the marriage of two persons one of whom is not baptized, a rule which will apply in almost all cases of inter-faith marriage. Canon XXI.II.14 requires the bishop's permission for the modification of the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

A priest who has presided at an inter-faith marriage has a continuing responsibility to support the husband and wife and their families.

If a couple decides to be married in the tradition of the non-Christian faith, the priest should offer such cooperation and support as the couple requests, and may participate in the rite, if welcomed, as knowledge of the tradition and conscience allow. This would involve some education in that tradition, which would also be important in offering ongoing pastoral care.

¹ Canon XXI.III.17.c defines consent in detail.

Liturgical Considerations

The partner of the other faith tradition may wish to have some changes made in the marriage rites of the Anglican Church of Canada to reflect personal and family sensitivities and to incorporate elements of rites from their own tradition.

The Book of Common Prayer does not in itself allow for such alteration, but Canon XXI.II.14 provides that, "The form may be used with such modifications as may be permitted by the bishop having jurisdiction where the marriage is to be solemnized. In the vow, the non-Christian may omit the words 'holy' and 'according to God's ordinance,' but no other change may be made to the vow or to the declaration of intention."

Within the framework of this limitation there is ample room for the design of a marriage liturgy which draws on the tradition of Christian marriage rites and is also sensitive and hospitable to the partner of the other faith tradition and that person's family.

An inter-faith marriage rite offered by the Anglican Church of Canada is, at base, Christian and Anglican. This means that the centrality of God is at the heart of the liturgy and language referring to God is always to be included. The Trinitarian and Christological context of the worship is implied but the expression of specific references may be omitted out of pastoral sensitivity to the partner of the other faith tradition. However, at least one reading from the Gospels is always to be included, and the Lord's Prayer is to be used.

The eucharist is not celebrated at an inter-faith marriage.

The rite consists of the following elements:

- Greeting and exhortation
- Readings and opportunity for reflection
- Promises and vows (the wedding)
- Prayers of the People
- Blessing of the marriage
- Dismissal.

The marriage rite in *The Book of Alternative Services*, suitably adapted, is attached as the basis of inter-faith wedding services. As noted above, it may only be used in this or any other adapted form with the permission of the diocesan bishop. Suitable songs from the other faith tradition may be used between the readings or at other

points in the liturgy. Suitable ritual gestures drawn from the other tradition may be added, for instance to the ring ceremony. Prayers from other traditions may augment the Prayers of the People (although care should be taken to prevent the prayers from becoming too drawn out), and a religious leader of the other tradition may assist in leading them. It is important that songs, readings, and prayers from the other tradition should complement Christian devotion and serve to foster harmony among those involved. All these suggestions apply equally in principle to adaptation of *The Book of Common Prayer*.