

A romantic wedding scene at night. A bride in a long, flowing white gown and a groom in a light-colored suit are standing on a wooden deck, facing each other and holding hands. They are under a gazebo-like structure with a glass roof, illuminated by warm string lights. The background shows a dimly lit outdoor wedding reception area with wooden chairs and tables.

**LOVE ESSENTIAL**  
The Wedding Officiating Handbook

REV LANCE W ORNDORFF

# LOVE ESSENTIAL

## THE WEDDING OFFICIATING HANDBOOK

Rev. LANCE W. ORNDORFF

## Dedicated To

*Katherine (Kit) Cooper. Memories of you give me hope and vision.*

# Special Thanks

This handbook contains many wedding ceremony text examples. Most of the ceremony text examples used, in full or in part, are either direct quotes or loosely based on the body of liturgies by Bishop James H. Burch. His non-Latin approach to Catholicism is refreshing, liberating, and a wonderful resource for clergy and civil wedding officiants alike.

## Special Note:

Wedding Minister Credentials can be applied for at:

[www.streetbishops.com](http://www.streetbishops.com)

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# Introduction

## How to Get the Most Out of this Handbook

You've purchased this book or received it as a gift. In either case, you or someone who cares about your future invested valuable time and hard-earned money to ensure that you have the information you need to professionally officiate weddings.

Now it's up to you to apply the information that follows so that you get the most out of your officiating experience, provide the best service to wedding couples, and ultimately enhance your career as a wedding minister, priest, rabbi, reverend, Friends leader, or civil officiant.

Although what you are about to read in the pages that follows are techniques and examples that will put you in the fast lane ahead of the average officiant, nothing can replace basic good habits and attention to detail. Those habits should likewise be applied to the use of this book.

What is suggested here should be how you approach every new book or manual that is placed in your hands from this day forward.

Begin by looking over the Index or Table of Contents. This will provide a brief map of what is contained in the book. Then, flip through the pages, allowing your hands to pause at certain points, reading a sentence here and there. Then move to the glossary in the back. Glance down the list of words from A to Z.

When you are satisfied that you've made a comfortable initial survey of the book, choose one chapter or entry from the index that initially caught your attention. Turn to that page in the book and begin reading. Read several pages to get a feel for the style of the writing, the sentence structure, the type style, etc.

With this book, there is a list of action items at the end of many chapters. These action items are between the chapter end and the Notes page. These action items are critical reminders of what you should focus and act on. If you commit to following these action item lists at the end of each chapter, you will get more from this book than you ever imagined possible!

Then, after you've taken the pre-read steps outlined above, begin at Chapter One and move through to the end. Be sure to have a pen or other note-taking marker in hand. As you come across sentences that spike your interest or have a particular impact on you, underline them and record the location of those sentences or paragraphs at the end of the chapter on the Notes page.

These steps probably sound extensive and unnecessary to you, but once you apply these to every book you read, whether for work, education, or pleasure, your enjoyment and understanding of the material read will skyrocket! You'll never read a publication the same again. And if tasked with going back to that book or report to pick up a piece of information for a report, conference, or just cross reference, it will be a snap!

Now go on and apply these pre-read techniques to this book, then dive into Chapter One and begin what will be one of the most worthwhile journeys of your life!

#### Action Items from Introduction

- ✓ Begin by looking over the Index or Table of Contents.
- ✓ Flip through the pages, allowing your hands to pause at certain points, reading a sentence here and there.
- ✓ Choose one chapter or entry from the Table of Contents that initially caught your attention. Turn to that page and read several pages
- ✓ Review the list of action items at the end of each chapter.
- ✓ Be sure to have a pen or other note-taking marker in hand.
- ✓ Underline sentences that spike your interest.
- ✓ Record the location of that sentence or paragraph at the end of
  - the chapter on the Notes page.



# 1 Your Contribution

Of everything that goes into making a bride's wedding day special, it is the ceremony that you have control over and that you can ensure the guests remember most.

The wedding ceremony, whenever possible, should be an outward expression of feelings of love the couple has for one another. As a wedding officiant, can there be any greater privilege that to assist the bridal couple in expressing their own spiritual feelings and love in their wedding ceremony?

It all begins with an assumption – that no matter what faith a couple individually or together follow, regardless of the their families' religious traditions – Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, other faith or no particular organized faith – they have been blessed with the gift of love and the desire to commit for life and that should override any other consideration – different faiths, different cultures, previous marriage, or bringing children into the marriage.

Nothing should get in the way of you officiating the wedding of their dreams. You can make it a special moment to be remembered for a lifetime!

And what about prerequisites or problems that might impact whether you feel they are “fit” for marriage? Unless you are a clergyman or counseling professional who has specific intimate knowledge of the couple that would

preclude you from officiating, you should commit to observing only what is required by local, state, and federal laws.

As a wedding officiant, you can eliminate the roadblocks that others will place in their way. What you will find after you conduct a dozen or so initial meetings with couples is that you will be a major source of relief and comfort to them. When the couple finds you to be focused on them, their needs, desires, and concerns, when they discover that you are there to remove roadblocks, they will sigh with relief and thank you. They are in love, and to them nothing else should matter – and you as their officiant can show them how true that is.

Here are a few issues and questions that couples will share with you as the officiant that you *can* resolve:

- ☺ Our families are of different religions, we are just spiritual, how do we create a wedding ceremony that will please the families and still honor our feelings?
- ☺ We are Catholic but because of divorce, we cannot get married in the Parish. Can we have a Catholic-style ceremony and have a wedding that our parents will appreciate and be comfortable with?
- ☺ We want a traditional ceremony but the location is nontraditional. What can we do to make this wedding perfect, even if it's in a hotel conference room?

- ④ Can we have just a short spiritual ceremony but provide all the elements that our guests will expect?
- ④ We have children that one or both of us are bringing into the marriage. How do we include them in the ceremony?
- ④ Can we get married now quietly for our personal purposes and have the ceremony for our family later? How do we do that? Who do we contact?
- ④ How can we make this wedding ceremony as Catholic as possible with these additions?
- ④ How do we combine different nontraditional actions, such as
  - ③ coins, veil, and cording
  - ③ breaking of the glass
  - ③ jumping the broom
  - ③ salt & bread
  - ③ honey & dates
  - ③ drinking a cup of wine
  - ③ table ceremonies

These questions and many others give you an opportunity to use the information from this book as well as to draw on your own experience and creativity to pull together and conduct a wedding ceremony which will impress the couple and the audience, making it memorable and meaningful.

What is presented here has been proven a formula for success in over 700 weddings – don't reinvent the wheel. Apply the details of this book and you will be a successful wedding officiant!

#### Action items for Chapter 1

- ✓ List your religious assumptions about marriage.
- ✓ What prerequisites or problems might impact whether you feel a couple is “fit” for marriage?
- ✓ Are you committed to eliminating the roadblocks that others will place in their way, and if not, why not?
- ✓ Review the standard list of marriage couple questions and determine if any will hinder your service as an officiant.
- ✓ Formulate practice answers to each question couples may have.

## 2 Its All in the First Meeting

Now you ask, “What is the next step?” Placing all matters of the “business” of wedding officiating until later in the book, let’s start right where you’ll be starting with the couple once they initially contact you – and that is a meeting by phone or in person.

During this initial meeting, you’ll have an opportunity to get to know more about the couple and they about you. This meeting is critical, because it will provide for that first lasting impression and will typically determine if they want to use you as their wedding officiant on their special day. The meeting or call can be as short or if it needs to be to answer their questions about you and answer any questions you may have about them.

The planning meeting typically lasts about an hour or so. And you’ll want to plan the meeting at a place that is neutral to all parties, such as a coffee house, restaurant, or other public location. For security reasons, you NEVER want to invite them into your home nor accept an invitation into theirs. American society has changed and the perils that accompany that change need not play a role in your meetings. So, suggest to the couple a place that you are familiar with which provides a pleasant, comfortable atmosphere for such meetings.

On arrival, be sure to firsthand them a business card with your name, phone number, email address, and website URL. Depending on where you live or where your service area is, it is likely that there is competition, and you want

to present a professional, organized appearance. If you've taken the time the day before to call the couple and confirm the meeting, you will have yet another opportunity to present yourself as a professional.

Begin the meeting with casual conversation. Avoid diving right into the wedding details. If you are new to meetings such as this, you'll find that setting a foundation of comfort with a few minutes of small talk about the weather, etc., will allow the couple to settle in and get accustomed to your voice, delivery style, etc. And it does create a comfort level that enhances the meeting.

A great starting point is to focus on the couple and ask them how they met. Most of them have a story they love to share, a story that is so important to them and that they are more than willing to tell. Hear them out! Your interest in their individual stories and characteristics will shine through.

Once the conversation moves to the actual wedding, begin by explaining the basic ceremony outline that you typically use. All through the presentation, be sure to enforce your desire for the couple to modify the ceremony, combine it with one of their own, or develop their own that is unique to their desires.

This will win them over every time! And after all, should it matter to you what the content of the ceremony is? If you are taking the position of wedding officiant, your goal is always to provide a professional plan and presentation,

not to convince a couple that it is your way or the highway – they have already had plenty of that treatment from everyone else!

During the meeting, you'll want to cover the following topics:

- ☪ Tradition or family expectations they want to satisfy
- ☪ The type of ceremony they have in mind
- ☪ What they are planning to do for music
- ☪ Details about the photographer and restrictions
- ☪ Pre-ceremony logistics
- ☪ Supporting equipment – tables, chalice, candles
- ☪ The wedding party and procession logistics
- ☪ Children and their involvement
- ☪ Memorial recognitions
- ☪ Licensing and other legal considerations
- ☪ Rehearsals
- ☪ Service payment details

These topics and others will be covered in detail in the following chapters.

You can begin the close of the meeting by once again going over the topics mentioned above and repeating any special requirements, then ending by giving them a clear “to do” list. That list should be fairly short and include

their participation in creating the ceremony, obtaining the license, and getting accustomed to the idea that they just need to relax and enjoy the ride!

Some couples will decide at the end of the meeting to use your services. They will pull out a checkbook and begin to write a check. Be sure to ask them to include date, time, and place of ceremony in the memo section of the check and try as best you can to get a booking agreement form at the same time.

But, if they want to pay a deposit for your services, don't hesitate to take the check without the agreement. Just let them know that to be fully booked, you will need them to fax that signed agreement to your office.

Lastly, before you depart, mention again your website address, ensure that they have your business card and move into about a minute or two of unrelated conversation. Ask them how they plan to spend the rest of their day, etc. By moving the conversation away from the wedding and back to everyday life, you are again reinforcing that you are not just there as a vendor to officiate their wedding, but rather that you are a caring, average person that they can relate to. It is essential.

After the meeting, take 5 minutes to review your notes, organize anything they have left for you, and place all of those items in a folder that is clearly marked with the time, date, and place of the wedding.



You then put together your own unique ceremony on paper, checking to ensure that the ceremony flows smoothly throughout.

Sometimes schedules make it difficult to meet in person the first time and a longer phone call will give you the comfort to book the date. Then, you can meet when schedules mesh to discuss the ceremony in full and make any decisions not made during the phone call. The idea here is to have flexibility, making the officiant shopping process painless where possible!

#### Action items for Chapter 2

- ✓ Order business cards
- ✓ Develop your Bride and Groom Information Form
- ✓ Review the purpose of the first meeting
- ✓ Make a list of the best places to meet couples in your town and travel time
- ✓ Determine what your style of dress will be your standard for meetings
- ✓ Conduct a timed practice meeting with a friend
- ✓ Create an outline of topics to be covered at first meeting
- ✓ Learn the basic ceremony outline
- ✓ Create a take-home to-do checklist for the couple
- ✓ Assemble signup packets to give to couple during meeting
- ✓ Create a meeting journal to record details of every meeting, in person or by phone

### 3 Making Preparations

At least two weeks before the wedding, and more often if you have the time, you'll want to touch base with the wedding couple to ensure, at the very least, they have emailed the ceremony to you, postal mailed their wedding license, and handled any fee balance that is outstanding.

Starting with the ceremony, which is the core of the success of the day, you will want to ensure that you and the couple bring a printed copy to the wedding site. During your follow-up period, some couples will require quite a bit of encouragement to finalize their ceremony and email it to you. Of all the things that could potentially not go as planned, a missing ceremony is one issue that would be most painful.

Make it a practice to print and file the ceremony in their folder, and also to keep an electronic version with their emails. In this way, preparing for the wedding day will not include a mad email search for documents. And if you are officiating several weddings during a year, or even a hundred as this author does, then your organizational skills and those related to getting your fingers on a particular ceremony in short order become a matter of survival.

Having the couple send you their wedding license in advance is a practice that you may not fully appreciate until you break your own rules and allow a couple to bring it on the wedding day. Experience has shown that about half of all couples will forget the license at home, in the hotel room off site, or have some other excuse. Not having the license on hand is a violation of the law, it

can lead to mistakes, and it is just a very, very bad practice. So follow my advice and have all parts of the wedding license and keepsake certificate postal mailed to you at least two weeks in advance. Just make it a normal part of your scheduled requirements.

Once they mail it to you, you can complete their wedding certificate and license and mail back to them any parts that they are to keep. If they have mailed you all parts given to them by the court, you can complete the request for official copies for them and include that with the license to be sent in after the wedding.

This usually means your preparing a self-addressed stamped envelope for the couple and including the several dollars' fee as indicated on the request form. By sending in the couple's request for official copies, you save the bride and groom time and hassle in getting their copies. And if the Clerk of Court is going to touch the license to process it, they then have the request that they can process immediately.

Lastly, the day before the wedding or wedding rehearsal, you will again want to make a follow-up phone call or email. Make contact of some kind and when you do, remind the couple to share with you any changes in time, place, or other details. And, if necessary, have them resubmit to you the Bride and Groom Information Form (we'll go into this form in detail a little later).

Since the Booking Agreement Form that you will use makes clear your requirement for couples to resubmit any changed information, formally, not just with a phone call, you mentioning this the day before will ensure that you do not show up at a location for a wedding that has changed or that was to start an hour earlier.

With all these tasks having been accomplished between the initial meeting and the wedding day, you'll be in great shape, ready to perform professionally.

### Action items for Chapter 3

- ✓ Create tickler file system to track action items through each booking
- ✓ Create a two-week prior checklist
- ✓ Schedule a two-week before wedding date records assessment for all weddings
- ✓ Keep copies of all checks received
- ✓ Print wedding ceremonies and place in couples folder
- ✓ Develop database for electronically stored data
- ✓ Purchase #9 and #10 envelopes for requests for official copies
- ✓ Make day before touch-base phone calls
- ✓ Develop your own booking agreement

## 4 Rehearsals

Rehearsal – this is a subject that there is much debate about.

First, I will share with you what the debate is, then I will take the not-in-favor side of the debate and provide you with rehearsal day instructions. Just be aware from the start that those of us who officiate dozens of weddings each year rarely if ever attend the rehearsals, and for what we believe are strong reasons.

Taking the opposing view first, it is good to ask the question, “Have you ever been to a wedding rehearsal?” If yes, then think back and try to remember what was accomplished. Most of the time, if the couple is fortunate enough to have an experienced wedding officiant, the rehearsal consists of lining people up, walking to the altar, flanking out as would be the case during the ceremony, then walking out.

In between all that walking here and there, the talking and other commotion of the excited wedding party is difficult to control. And that is, of course, once we’ve waited for everyone to even show up. Rehearsals start late, they are often difficult to manage, and at the end of the day, nothing was learned that could not easily be conveyed 10 minutes before the ceremony – oh, except that the bride had an additional social hour for her and her wedding party.

And of course, as an officiant, you just burned up an afternoon when you could have booked another wedding, losing 50% of your potential revenue for that day – not a good idea at all.

The bottom line is that thousands of weddings are officiated every week where no rehearsal took place and they run smoothly, as long as the officiant is experienced and in control the day of the wedding. Yes, attempting to convey that to a nervous wedding couple can be difficult at times. So, from this point on, let us assume that the officiant is not experienced, or is as concerned about the rehearsal, or you are confronting a couple that insists on a rehearsal.

When preparing for a wedding rehearsal, it is imperative that you inform the bride of the time constraints you are under. Insist that you will begin the rehearsal with or without all members of the bridal party having arrived – even if one of those is the bride or groom.

Members of the bridal party arriving late for a rehearsal are a chronic and real problem. Above all else, waiting 20 or 40 minutes for someone to show up is a complete waste of everyone's time and an officiant should never allow their time to be disrespected this way (unless you are being financially compensated for it!).

When the wedding party arrives, have them sit in the front row of seats in the venue. If there are no seats at the venue, then have them stand where the first row would be. Begin by passing out copies of the wedding liturgy or ceremony. This will be their guide and give them something to read, keeping them as orderly as possible through the rehearsal.

Next, go over the overall ceremony from beginning to end. That does not mean reading the entire ceremony, but instead giving an overview of what each section is and how it will impact the wedding party. Once you have reviewed the ceremony and answered any general questions, prepare to practice the procession and recessional in reverse order.

The reason you do it in reverse order is to use the logistics of having them there with you, organized, instead of attempting to move them all to the back and restarting the rehearsal there. Usually there are parents, spouses' parents, girlfriends, etc. who have attended the rehearsal with them and it is best to start with them sitting in the chairs so that you do not have to manage them from the back of the venue.

With the bride and groom in front of you, talk them through the ceremony parts again, showing them how they will stand, who will present you with the rings, who will read, etc. Then, don't read the pronouncement of husband and wife – that kills the excitement for the next day – but instead just simply indicate where that will be said and announce the end of the wedding. Let them know that the music will start, you will ask everyone to stand, and it's now time for them to recess to the back.

Instruct them to wait until you've tapped them on the shoulders and told them to leave. Give the usual slow walk, smile at individual guests on the way out, watch for the photographer's cues, and start walking. After they move towards the back, you will instruct the wedding party, starting with the flower girl and

ring bearer, and moving from inside to outside, to also walk towards the back – but only after you have signaled for them to do so. Your control is being tested here and they should be fully aware that you as the officiant are directing this wedding, no one else. Ah, but then there is the possible presence of a wedding coordinator.

When it comes to wedding and venue coordinators, the experience has been that when they are good, they are fantastic and make your officiating easier. But those that are bad or even just marginal can make your officiating a nightmare.

At the rehearsal, you'll get a clear view of the competency of any wedding coordinator or venue ceremony coordinator that is involved. If you sense that the coordinator knows what they are doing, then stand back and relinquish most all control, not of the entire ceremony, but of the processional and recessional.

If, on the other hand, you find the coordinator to be amateurish, inconsistent, confused, or unsure, then step in and take control of the situation. If you've met with the coordinator prior to the rehearsal start time, then you had an opportunity to get a feel for the situation. And it is at that time you make a decision within yourself about who is going to be in control and convey that to the coordinator.



But do not be afraid to recognize your position as the officiant and the person in charge of the ceremony – it is your option. And if you’ve been prepaid as all officiants should be, you retain that control by default!

Worst case scenario is that you have a difficult bride, groom, or coordinator. At that point, just do your best and completely and totally divest yourself emotionally from the ceremony. Know that if someone else is in control, and you make it clear that you are not in control, if anything doesn’t go as planned, then the bride and groom know exactly who to point at and where to direct their dissatisfaction.

With all the gloom and doom I’ve spread around here in explaining control, etc., let’s not get lost in the whole point of the rehearsal. It is primarily a social gathering for the wedding party. There might be some worthwhile practice, and you will have an opportunity to get a heads up on who exactly will be in control that day. And above all else, it has the potential to provide the bridal couple with some assurance that they and their wedding party know what to do.

If you must attend, then make the most of it and have a great time. You’ll likely score a dinner out of the deal. And if you don’t attend, inquire as to how it went and any concerns the couple may have. In any case, try your very best to discourage a formal rehearsal unless YOU desire one. And after the first several rehearsals and weddings, the newness of officiating will wear down.

Don’t be surprised if the word “rehearsal” begins to give you a sick feeling in your gut! Not because they are grueling, but because you’ll know that nothing

will be accomplished there that cannot be accomplished during the critical hour before the actual ceremony.

#### Action Items for Chapter 4

- ✓ Decide on a rehearsal policy
- ✓ List the reasons you would and would not want to attend a rehearsal
- ✓ Create rehearsal rules to be distributed to couple
- ✓ Create rehearsal plan
- ✓ Develop a handout for rehearsal attendees
- ✓ Make a difficult Bride or Groom plan, and practice with a friend

## 5 The Critical Hour

Arriving at the wedding location approximately an hour before the ceremony is critical to the overall success of the event. There are those officiants who routinely arrive just moments before the ceremony start time, but all they serve to do is freak out the bride and groom.

Sure, you can arrive moments before and, with a well-planned ceremony, pick right up and officiate a decent wedding. But why put the couple through that agony? Besides, you can make great use of your early arrival, whether there is something to do.

During that hour before the scheduled start time, the first thing you should do is to make a visit to the bride's staging area. Just let her know you are on site. She may want to briefly review the ceremony, make last-minute adjustments, or just chat for a moment. This also gives the photographer an opportunity to get some great shots with you and the bride.

Then, you locate the groom's staging area and have a similar chat with him and his groomsmen. It is usually about this time that the flowers are being distributed. It is a rare occasion that men know what to do with the flowers when they arrive. If you are not practiced at putting on corsages, then worry not. In time, you'll get the hang of it. Just remember the wrap and stick technique. Wrap the lapel around the base of the flower and stick it from behind the lapel, one pin up and one pin down.

After you visit with the wedding party, next you'll head into the ceremony venue to make an assessment. If the venue is a regular wedding location, chances are good that everything will be set up satisfactorily. Even in those circumstances, there are times when you'll want to move certain things around.

The unity candle table might not be where you prefer it, the chairs may be too close to the stage, etc. With experience, you'll discover your preferences and begin to make small changes so that the venues you arrive at satisfy you.

Once you've looked over the venue, you'll want to take a minute to introduce yourself to the photographer. Ask him what his needs are, share with her what restrictions you might have. If you are wide open and have no restrictions at all, share that with the photographer – they are so grateful when they can just do their job without any strings attached.

Also, be sure to remind them that when the ceremony is over, you'd like the first picture to be with them. This allows for a quick getaway after the event has concluded....something you'll truly appreciate more on your 50<sup>th</sup> wedding!

Next is the musician. During that critical hour before the ceremony, meeting with the folks who are providing the sound will add much continuity to the

ceremony. Talk about timing, how you will signal them for more or less sound and allow them to share any concerns or needs with you. It is rare that a musician will not ask me what the last thing is I say before they are to start playing at the end.

My usual standard answer is, “When I ask them to stand at the end, that is when you start playing.” Using this answer does not require that they follow what I am saying, they just need to be aware that when everyone stands, they start playing.

So now you’ve made all your rounds. It is time to stand at the entrance to the venue and say hello to guests as they arrive. If your wedding guests are average, they will begin to arrive in large numbers just five minutes before the scheduled start of the ceremony. And by ten minutes after the scheduled start time, the room starts to fill. At this time, you can ask the groom to look over the crowd and give you a five minutes’ heads up when he feels he’s ready for things to start.

Once the groom has decided he is ready for the wedding to start, that he feels the bulk of his guests have arrived, a runner should check on the bride and make sure she is ready and staged. You’ll then close the doors so that all your next actions are not seen or heard by the guests.

You’ll line up the wedding party in the order that has been

preplanned. If there is a coordinator on site, she will either assist you or take control at this time. If she wants to take complete control, let her! It's so nice when someone is in control of the processional and you can just enjoy those few moments. If you are the one running the whole show, then line them up and give some last-minute instructions.

Those last-minute instruction usually include a recommendation that they smile, walk normally, look at guests and not walk like robots down the aisle. They should also be reminded of how much distance they should maintain between themselves and the person in front.

Once everyone has been briefed, you cue the music and in you go. You head for the front, and take your position, and signal for the rest of the wedding party to come down the aisle. As each person arrives at the front with you, casually and discreetly show them where to stand. Once the bride is coming towards you, the critical hour has ended, and you are in the thick of the ceremony – it's show time!

#### Action Items for Chapter 5

- ✓ Create a Day of Wedding Checklist for each couple.
- ✓ Assemble all paperwork the previous night.
- ✓ Map location of wedding using [maps.yahoo.com](http://maps.yahoo.com) or [mapquest.com](http://mapquest.com)
- ✓ Program the location of the wedding in your GPS; record travel time.
- ✓ Arrive at wedding location at least one hour before ceremony start time.
- ✓ Make a visit to the bride's staging area.

- ✓ Locate the groom's staging area and have a similar chat with him and his groomsmen.
- ✓ Assist with flowers if necessary.
- ✓ Assess the ceremony location for proper set-up.
- ✓ Introduce yourself to the photographer.
- ✓ Introduce yourself to the musician.
- ✓ Wait for ten-minute start time warning from Groom of Coordinator.
- ✓ Send runner to check on the bride and make sure she is ready and staged. Close the doors so that all your next actions are not seen or heard by the guests.
- ✓ Line up the wedding party in the order that has been preplanned.
- ✓ Enter the ceremony location.

## 6 Showtime!

The ceremony is beginning and now it is a matter of following the prepared liturgy. Later in this book, the individual ceremony elements will be covered in detail. But, for the purpose of this chapter, only the ceremony element headings will be used and the logistics of moving from one element to another will be discussed.

The music is cued, and the processional begins. You, the officiant, head down the aisle first and take your place up at the altar or other ceremony center focus area. You'll turn and face the audience, smiling and instilling a sense of order, calm, and reverence. Your attitude will carry the day – if you present a happy, joyful demeanor, then the audience will brighten up and expect good things. Do the opposite, and it will be as solemn as a funeral!

You, the music, or the coordinator or assistant at the back will cue the groomsmen to begin their entrance. If they are escorting family, they will seat those individuals and join the officiant at the altar. As they arrive towards you, discretely point to the location where they are to stand. Discretion is the key. There is no need for you to walk them to the spot, just casually and without raising your hand, point in the direction they are to go.

Keep in mind that while others are proceeding down the aisle, especially when the bride is being escorted in, you have opportunities to reach over to the sleeves of the groomsmen and gently guide how they are standing to best suit the overall appearance of the wedding party. So hold your need to do that



until everyone's eyes are fixed towards the back of the venue waiting for the bride to come it.

Any ring bearer will come next and then the bridesmaids begin their entrances, usually after the special music for them has started. As they arrive at the front, they will naturally look to see where the men are and position themselves opposite of that. Next will arrive the flower girl, and she and the ring bearer can either stand with the wedding party or sit in the front row, whatever suits their needs.

Once the wedding party is all down at the front, the doors should have been closed in preparation for the bride's entrance. The music will change to the bridal march selection, and this is when the officiant invites the audience to stand to welcome in the bride. The doors open and the bride begins her walk towards the altar. If you notice the bride walking too fast, using your lips only and not voice, tell her to slow down. That usually is quite effective.

The officiant should step away from, or down from, the altar where the rest of the bridal party is standing and walk about four to five feet towards the bride and escort her. This provides some distance between the bride and groom so that the photographer can capture some of the motion and excitement of the ceremony. If everyone is clumped up at the front, it's nearly impossible for the guests or the photographer to see what is happening.

The bride and her escort will know when to stop – if they don't, they will run right over you! What you want to be aware of is that most escorts will think their job is over as soon as they get the bride to you. They will kiss the bride and begin to sit down! This is an opportunity to make the audience laugh by saying something like, "Oh no, you're not finished yet!" inviting him to stand until you ask him to sit down.

Once the couple has stopped in front of you, you can either wait until the music finds its natural stopping place or just go ahead during the music and ask the audience to sit down. Don't be surprised if in the first dozen weddings you do, you forget to ask the guests to sit. Some of us officiants early on have forgotten to ask folks to sit and the guests stood for part or all of the ceremony! Hey, we all are beginners at some point. And, don't be surprised if the audience takes control and decides when they will stand and sit. It happens often and you just roll with it. The audience can be unpredictable so expect anything and deal with it.

Once the audience is seated, allow a moment of silence to take the ceremony into a quiet place. These brief moments of silence are so important to setting a tone of reverence, and more importantly, to ensuring that the pace of the wedding does not get away from you. Then begin the ceremony by asking who it is that escorts the bride. When the escort makes themselves known, invite them to kiss the bride and immediately turn to the groom and invite him to come bring his bride to the altar.

At that point, you will step back and take your place, waiting for the groom to shake the hand of the escort and the bride and groom to walk the last few steps to the altar as equals.

Next, you will have them face each other and ask the maid of honor to take the bride's flowers. During the entire ceremony, you want the bride and groom facing each other, unobstructed, holding hands, and gazing at one another. Not only does this make for a nice presentation in which the guests can see expressions and looks of love, but it allows the couple an opportunity to gain emotional strength from one another during the ceremony as well as enjoy each other's company during one of the most important moments of their lives.

You then move through the ceremony, element by element. You will be using two voices – your loud announcement voice and your small quiet voice. Unless there is a public address microphone (not a lapel mike for video), which is highly discouraged, you will be speaking the wedding ceremony with your big voice and speaking continuously in between sentences with your small voice. By talking privately with the couple, you accomplish two things.

First, having small talk with the couple helps them to calm down and enjoy the ceremony. Many wedding couples will chat with each other through the entire ceremony! And others will be very quiet but chatting with them gives them a real sense of comfort and relaxes the onstage anxiety that often

accompanies a wedding ceremony. Second, your pauses to chat with them, give them instruction, etc. tremendously helps keep the wedding on a slower, even pace. Wedding ceremonies tend to pick up pace and the chatting slows that down.

When speaking to the audience, use a clear, loud volume of voice. As you read from your liturgy, or ceremony text, hold the text out in front of you so that you are looking more outward than downward. Resist using a podium – it only creates a barrier between you and the couple and severely reduces the intimacy of the ceremony.

When you transition from one element to another, allow for a long pause. You might even announce the element you are entering. If the couple has prepared a ceremony program and distributed it as guests arrived, they can then follow along. Guests who have a program to follow tend to enjoy the ceremony and are more alert. They don't have to wonder what progress has been made and how much longer it will be until the cocktail hour.

When it's time for the rings, walk out in front of the couple, ask who holds the rings, and then face the audience when you pray or say words over them. This helps the photographer get the picture and it makes it possible for everyone to see what is happening. If you stand behind the couple through the process, only the couple and wedding party can see what you are doing.

During the vows, it is most effective to have the couple exchange the rings while they are saying their vows. They place the ring halfway on the finger then repeat after the officiant. What makes this approach so effective is that not only does the photographer get an entire minute or more to grab that *money shot*, but the rings then take center stage and have much more significance.

As the officiant reads the vows to be repeated, the officiant should stand behind the bride or groom who is repeating what is being read. By placing the officiant's shoulder at the back of the one repeating the vows, it removes the temptation for the one repeating vows to look at the officiant.

This is a natural occurrence; they are paying close attention to the vows being spoken. The natural tendency is to look at the person speaking. Standing at their back completely removes that issue and as is so important, allows the photographer a clear, unobstructed angle to get the ring shots.

Other elements of the wedding will precede or follow the ring and vows exchange, and those elements are more fully covered in a following chapter. The officiant will at some point reach the end of the ceremony, when the last words are spoken, and make the presentation of the bride and groom as husband and wife. The musician will start the recessional music.

Once the music starts, turn to the maid of honor, and ask her to give the bride back her flowers. This too you will forget a dozen times so make it a point to ask the maid of honor to remind you! Hold the couple for a good 15 seconds

before tapping them on the shoulders and letting them know it's time to recess out. Try to avoid them rushing right out; it tends to make the entire recessional go fast and sloppy.

Once the newlyweds have left the altar, cue the flower girl and ring bearer to go behind. Then the bridesmaids and groomsmen will follow out, in pairs. As you begin to exit, stop at the first rows and invite the parents to recess out before you. Sometimes just the parents will go, sometimes the entire row. However, it works out is fine. Smooth is better than as planned!

Of all the things that happen in a ceremony, what is most important is that you appear in control. Even when you make a mistake. You and the couple have planned out the ceremony and that is what it should be taken as – a plan. If an element of the wedding happens out of order or does not happen at all, everyone will survive and get over it. And if you have to stop what is happening to insert something you forgot earlier, do it. No one but you and the couple will know that it wasn't planned.

Lastly, what makes a ceremony enjoyable for everyone, including the wedding couple, is the officiant's relaxed, happy, let's-have-a-goodtime attitude. Make no mistake that, along with a well-developed ceremony which we will now cover, it is the officiant that turns a ceremony into something interesting and fun, or reduces the 45 minutes to boring and regretful. So put on your fun hat, a good attitude, and expect a good time – and you'll have one and so too will the guests!

## Action Items for Chapter Six

- ✓ Practice the ceremony text several days prior
- ✓ Cue music
- ✓ Take your position at the front of the venue
- ✓ Cue wedding party
- ✓ Remember to ask audience to be seated
- ✓ Follow wedding ceremony text
- ✓ Remind Bride to get flowers from maid of honor before the recessional
- ✓ Stand by for photographs at conclusion of ceremony
- ✓ Provide Bride and Groom with wedding certificate

## 7. Developing a Style

As you advise the couple and begin to assist them in preparing the text for their wedding ceremony, it is best to begin by providing them with several examples which they can read over, talk about, and then decide. Having the starting point of a standard ceremony, then making modifications based on their input and venue requirements or restrictions, makes the process smooth and even enjoyable.

During your initial meeting with the couple, you obtained information about their families' religious traditions, how the couple feels about religion now, and what style or "flavor" of ceremony they desire. As happens most of the time, you'll have a couple declare that they want something "short and sweet." But once you let them know that the average ceremony is only 25 minutes long, they begin to get away from the short and sweet mindset and settle on one of your examples.

No matter which wedding ceremony text they choose, it is helpful to ensure that the ceremony includes the basic elements and flow of a Western style wedding. Those basic elements include:

- ④ Processional
- ④ Introduction
- ④ Presenting or Giving of the Bride
- ④ Exchange of Vows
- ④ Exchange of Rings
- ④ Pronouncement of Marriage



- ☺ Announcement of Marriage

- ☺ Recessional

A ceremony that includes simply the elements listed above typically runs about 10 minutes. Many would find this ceremony to be short and somewhat shallow. But there are some couples that are very pleased with this style and are more than ready to move on to the cocktail hour and reception without any additional formality.

Couples from Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Far East traditions enjoy the short ceremony format since they often will follow or precede this “American” ceremony with a much longer and more complex wedding celebration that reflects their home traditions. In this case, the effort for you the officiant is greatly reduced but with the same rewards.

Couples who come from a more Americanized tradition or from the heartland traditions prefer the fuller Western Christian style wedding. Using the word Christian in describing this expanded ceremony is not meant to indicate that the couple is Christian by faith but is used to identify what is traditionally referred to and recognized as a Christian approach to weddings.

The elements of this expanded style of ceremony include:

- ☺ Processional

- ☺ Introduction

- ☺ Presenting or Giving of the Bride

- ☪ Pledge of Support
- ☪ Parent(s) Involvement
- ☪ Reading #1
- ☪ Words on Love or Marriage
- ☪ Exchange of Vows
- ☪ Blessing and Exchange of Rings
- ☪ Reading #2
- ☪ Charge to the Couple/Affirmation of Love
- ☪ Prayer or Special Words
- ☪ Couple Unity Activity
- ☪ Pronouncement of Marriage
- ☪ Formal legal declaration of unity
- ☪ Announcement of Marriage
- ☪ Benediction/Conclusion
- ☪ Recessional
- ☪ Receiving Line

From this point on, the elements of a Western Christian wedding ceremony become specialized based on the tradition or denomination that the couple is seeking to emulate. The Christian traditions can be divided into three categories – high church, middle church, and low church. These divisions of high, middle, and low are used to refer only to the level of historical formal church tradition injected into the worship practices.

Catholics, Lutherans and Episcopalians are considered high church traditions in that they are highly structured across all services in all churches or parishes

of the same denomination. Methodist and Presbyterians are considered middle church because they have retained some of the Old-World traditions but not all.

For example, middle church denominations do not celebrate the Eucharist, or Communion, at every religious service as high church does. And middle church does not utilize the incense and other mystical cathedric acts like high church does.

All the other denominations such as Baptist, Church of Christ, non-denominational, etc., are considered low church in that they have all but abandoned the structured traditions. This occurred more than a hundred years ago when they threw off the top-down management of the church and took on a members-up government and management style.

In a low church environment, they still take Communion, but only once a month. They simply have singing, and a religious message and step aside from the liturgical elements of the middle and high church.

Understanding the differences in these traditions helps a wedding officiant understand the expectations of those couples who are either still practicing or have a desire to satisfy a practicing parent or grandparent. Knowledge of the differences in traditions allows you the officiant to make the small modifications in the ceremony so that needs are met, even if in a very subtle way.

All this being said, the next list of wedding ceremony elements are what would be found in a high church ceremony, or “Mass,” such as Catholic, Filipino Catholic, South American Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopalian:

- ☪ Processional
- ☪ Introduction
- ☪ Giving of the Bride
- ☪ Pledge of Support
- ☪ Parent(s)/Sponsors Involvement
- ☪ Cording & Veil
- ☪ Old Testament Reading
- ☪ Responsive Reading
- ☪ New Testament Reading
- ☪ Gospel
- ☪ Homily
- ☪ Words on Love or Marriage
- ☪ Exchange of Vows
- ☪ Blessing and Exchange of Rings
- ☪ Charge to the Couple/Affirmation of Love
- ☪ Prayer
- ☪ Couple Unity Activity
- ☪ Communion/Eucharist
  
- ☪ Lord’s Prayer ☪ Sign of Peace
- ☪ Nuptial Blessing
- ☪ Pronouncement of Marriage
- ☪ Formal legal declaration of unity
- ☪ Announcement of Marriage

- ☪ Benediction/Conclusion
- ☪ Recessional
- ☪ Receiving Line

By contrast, what follows is a characteristically religious low church ceremony where the centerpiece of the wedding ceremony is the religious message. Here are those elements:

- ☪ Processional
- ☪ Introduction
- ☪ Giving of the Bride
- ☪ Song and Praise
- ☪ Biblical Reading
- ☪ Message or “Preaching”
- ☪ Words on Love or Marriage
- ☪ Exchange of Vows
- ☪ Blessing and Exchange of Rings
- ☪ Prayer
- ☪ Couple Unity Activity
- ☪ Nuptial Blessing
- ☪ Pronouncement of Marriage
- ☪ Formal legal declaration of unity
- ☪ Announcement of Marriage
- ☪ Benediction/Conclusion
- ☪ Recessional
- ☪ Receiving Line

The differences in the high and low church ceremony may not be immediately apparent to you as you look over the above lists, but once you officiate several of both types, you will have a clear understating of the differences. What could be quite helpful to you as an officiant is to attend several weddings or even just worship services of high, middle, and low church styles so that you might compare the differences as well as experience the commonalities of each.

How you decide to approach your couples is a matter of personal style. If you yourself hold a conservative, structured, legalistic tradition, or philosophy, you are likely to desire to direct couples in that direction. Likewise, if you're a non-religious person, you may direct couples in a more earthly, spiritual direction avoiding the religious elements. Each officiant has their own style, likes and dislikes just as couples do. But it is good to remember always that the officiant is there to serve the couple, not the other way around!

## 8 Ceremony Elements

Having a structure and style of ceremony in mind, you can now assist the couple in filling in the blanks of that style to create a wedding ceremony that reflects their desires, beliefs, family expectations and venue constraints. This book follows the traditional American experience and has been proven by working with more than 1,700 couples.

You should expect variations on the description of the elements that follow based on your geographic location, not just in the United States but worldwide, and based on the couple's needs and desires. What follows is intended for content and not logistics. Therefore, do not take the order of presentation of this material as definitive advice on the order; instead look back to previous lists of order of service.

### The Processional

This how the wedding starts and includes the officiant, wedding party and parents entering the wedding ceremony venue. There is much new debate about whether the bridesmaids should enter individually or in couples with the groomsmen.

Our experience shows that the best presentation of all involved is when the officiant enters first, followed by those groomsmen individually who do not have a parent or grandparent to escort, then groomsmen who do have a family

member to escort, then ring bearer, bridesmaids individually, flower girl, bell ringer, and finally the bride.

Everyone in the processional should walk slowly, but not using that old fashioned bridal step. It's outdated and looks nearly ridiculous. Instead, invite the participants to walk casually, glancing left and right smiling at guests. This form allows the photographer to get more candid, pleasant photos and puts the guests at ease as it sets the stage for a comfortable, warm ceremony.

### Bell Ringer

This is taken from old English tradition wherein a male or female, age 9-15, stands at the entrance to the venue and, just before the bride enters, rings the bell. This cues the music to change and the officiant to ask the audience to stand. Once the bell rings and the doors open for the bride and escort, the bell ringer rushes to their seat somewhere up front. It gives a great effect!

### Introduction

Before beginning the introduction, the officiant should walk about 5-8 steps away from the groom and wedding party to begin the ceremony. As the bride proceeds in, she and her escort stop in front of the officiant as the introduction is delivered. The introduction should be tailored to fit the audience and tone of the ceremony. Here is some example text for an introduction:



*May the Grace and Peace of God the Father, and of our Brother Jesus Christ, and the all-embracing Love of the Holy Spirit be with you all!*

*People: And also with you!*

*Welcome, all of you. We are gathered here today for one of the happiest occasions in all human life, to celebrate before God the marriage of a man and woman who love each other. Marriage is a most honorable estate, created and instituted by God, signifying unto us the mystical union which also exists between Christ and the Church; so too may this marriage be adorned by true and abiding love.*

## Presentation of the Bride

The giving of the bride is just what it states, the hand-off of the bride to the groom at the altar. One of the reasons for having the officiant meet the bride and escort several steps away from the groom is to give the couple an opportunity, after the hand-off, to walk to the altar side by side, as equals. This practice minimizes the historical significance of exchanging a human with dowry and other property.

The text is standard, and it looks like this:

*Who is it that brings this woman to this man?*

*Father or Sponsor: I do.*

*(Father or other kisses bride, shakes hand of groom, then sits.)*

## Additional text

At this point in the ceremony, additional text can be placed. The topic, tone, and content are open to change, addition, or complete deletion:

*Bride and Groom, although life is a gift given to each of us as individuals, we also learn to live together in harmony. Love is a gift to us from our family and friends. Through these gifts of love we learn to ourselves to gift it back. Learning to love and live together is one of life's greatest challenges and is the shared goal of a married life.*

*Mankind did not create love; love is created by God. Therefore, a husband and wife should not confuse love of worldly things with that of Godly love of one another. For even if worldly success is found, only love for one another will maintain a marriage. The measure of true love is a love both freely given and freely accepted, just as God's love is unconditional and free.*

*Today is truly a glorious day which the Lord hath made – as today both of you are blessed with God's greatest of all gifts – the gift of abiding love and devotion between a man and a woman. All present here today – and those here in heart – wish both of you all the joy, happiness and success that the world has to offer.*

## Pledge of Support

Honoring the parents and family from which both the bride and groom have come is very important in a wedding ceremony. Every opportunity should be made to recognize those who made sacrifices for the couple. The pledge is one way to do that. Here is the example text:

*Who presents Bride to Groom to be married?*

*Bride's Parents or Sponsors: We do.*

*Who presents Groom to Bride to be married?*

*Groom's Parents or Sponsors: We do.*

## Parent(s)/Sponsors Involvement

This may be accomplished with the mothers lighting unity candle tapers, receiving flowers from the bride and groom during a mini-parent greeting, or sand preparation for a sand ceremony. This is when the minister talks about the important of parents getting us to this day. Here is a sample text that the officiant can read while the mothers are stepping up to light unity candles:

*Now the mothers of Bride and Groom will come forward to light two individual candles, symbolic of the individuality of those who stand here before me as well as of their families.*

*It is good to recognize those who have made so many sacrifices to bring us to this point today. The love which Bride and Groom share had its genesis in the love first shown to them as children. We thank you mothers for first loving your children in a way that inspired the love they now share today.*

## Cording & Veil

This is a Pacific Rim and South American tradition where the sponsors, Godparents, or mothers pin a veil to the couple then place a cord over their heads. A Blessing is invoked, then the cord and veil are removed in opposite order. Here is an example of that blessing.

*Placing the Cord and Veil:*

*To bind their love, to unite their lives as one, to connect souls – a cord symbolizes these very ideals. It symbolizes unity, infinity – a love that Bride and Groom would share together, forever.*

*(Sponsors put the “figure eight cord” over Bride and Groom’s shoulders.)*

*Removal of Cording and Veil.*

*May God bless this coming together of two special souls, may it forever house love, loyalty and friendship. Let us take some quiet moments to pray for the union of Bride and Groom on this special day.*

## Readings

As a general rule, there are two readings in a wedding ceremony. One occurs sometime before the rings and vows, and the other sometime after. The readings a couple chooses will depend on several factors. Tradition, desire, and family expectations.

If you are officiating a high church ceremony, then they will be Christian Old and New Testament readings. If it is a combined Christian – Muslim wedding, then one may be Old Testament and the other from the Koran. Or, if the couple chooses, the readings may be completely nonreligious in nature.

The couple should be encouraged to choose readings that reflect who they are, how they view their relationship, and their hopes for the future. Ask them to think of their favorite movie, poem, play, or other arts experience and draw something from that. See the reference section in the back of this book for example readings.

## Responsorial Reading

You will find this element in high church ceremonies including Catholic, Lutheran and even Episcopalian. If this is included, it is very helpful if it is briefly explained to the audience before the reading to benefit those who do not come from these traditions. In doing so, they have the benefit of at least understanding what is happening and having the ability to participate fully.

Here is an example of a responsive reading:

*Psalm 71st Psalms*

*All shall read along with Officiant:*

*People. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.*

*My mouth shall be filled with your praise, shall sing your glory every day. Do not cast me aside in my old age; as my strength fails, do not forsake me. I will always hope in you and add to all your praise.*

*People. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.*

*My mouth shall proclaim your just deeds, day after day your acts of deliverance, though I cannot number them all. I will speak of the mighty works of the Lord; O GOD, I will tell of your singular justice.*

*People. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.*

*God, you have taught me from my youth; to this day I proclaim your wondrous deeds. That I may praise you with the lyre for your faithfulness, my God, And sing to you with the harp, O Holy One of Israel!*

*People. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.*

## Words on Love or Marriage

This is a section that should speak to love and the context of love within marriage. Here is one example:

*So what do we mean by love? When we love, we see things other people do not see. We see beneath the surface, to the qualities which make our beloved special and unique. To see with loving eyes, is to know inner beauty. And to be loved is to be seen, and known, as we are known to no other. One who loves us, gives us a unique gift: a piece of ourselves, but a piece that only they could give us.*

## The Challenge

This is a section of the ceremony that many officiants use. As with so many other passages, its origin is not exactly known. But the words are beautiful and evoke some real emotions. Here is an example:

*In this sacred and joyful moment, we call upon the highest in you, and, the divine inner presence that brought you to love and has chosen for you the sweet commitment of marriage. For you we ask every blessing of this moment; a confirmation of the wisdom of your choice; great happiness on the path that is set before you; discretion, kindness and care as you walk upon it, strength to live out your purpose, grace and peace through each step of your journey, and beloved family and friends to support you.*

*Bride, are you here to ask Groom to be your partner, your lover, your friend and your husband? Do you intend to give him your deepest friendship and love, not only when you are feeling bright and alive, but also when you are feeling down? Not only when you remember clearly that you are a manifestation of God, but even in those times when you forget? Do you announce before God and those here present that you will seek always to see the Light of Divinity within Groom, and seek always to share the Light of Divinity within yourself?*

*Groom, are you here to ask Bride to be your partner, your lover, your friend and your wife? Do you intend to give her your deepest friendship and love, not only when you are feeling bright and alive, but also when you are feeling down? Not only when you remember clearly that you are a manifestation of God, but even in those times when you forget? Do you announce before God and those here present that you will seek always to*

*see the Light of Divinity within Bride, and seek always to share the Light of Divinity within yourself?*

## Blessing of Rings

The blessing of the rings is another example of a passage that can either be presented as a prayer or as a statement of blessing. The text would be slightly modified depending on which tone was desired. Here is my favorite example of a ring blessing:

*Let us bless these rings! O God, these rings are circles, symbols that remind us of the Sun, and the Earth, and the universe. Symbols of holiness, of perfection and peace ... that which has no beginning and no end. And so, in this moment, bring your blessing to these rings to also be symbols of unity, of joining and of commitment. Grant that the love which Bride and Groom have for each other now may always be just this way.*

## Exchange of Rings & Vows

The vows can be chosen from a selection you present, words they find for themselves, or something they've authored specifically for their wedding ceremony. The length of the vows should be of no concern. They need to say all that is necessary to reflect their commitment to one another.

No matter the origin, make sure they are in your liturgy so that if they are not repeated, the couple can glance at the liturgy you are holding, allowing them to hold on to each other. You can hold the binder just at their shoulder height so they can read it and still look into each other's eyes.

Here is a basic example:

*(Each places the ring half way on the other's finger as they prepare to repeat these vows.)*

*I, Bride/Groom, take you, Bride/Groom, to be my wife/husband, my faithful partner in life, my constant friend and my one true love. I promise to love you without reservation, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, to stand together in our times of joy and sorrow, always to be open and honest with you, for as long as we both shall live. With this ring, I thee wed.*

*(Then finish putting the ring on the finger, move engagement diamond back to its position.)*

### Charge to the Couple/Affirmation of Love

*As you travel through life together, I caution you to remember that the true measure of success, the true avenue to joy and peace, is to be found within the love you hold in your hearts. I would ask that you hold the key to your heart very tightly.*

*Within the Bible, nothing holds greater importance than Love. We are told the crystalline and beautiful truth: "God is Love". We are assured that "Love conquers all". It is love which brings you here today, the union of two hearts and two spirits. As your lives continue to interweave as one pattern, remember that it was love that brought you here today, it is love that will make this a glorious union, and it is love which will cause this union to endure.*

### Sign of Peace

This is another example of a high church tradition. It can be very appropriate in any wedding ceremony with just a modification of the words of invitation. During the sign of peace, everyone is invited to greet one another. It is a wonderful brief time of fellowship and community.



Here is a Catholic version:

*(Congregation remains standing.)*

*Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles: I leave you peace, my peace I give you. Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church, and grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom where you live for ever and ever.*

*Audience: Amen.*

*The peace of the Lord be with you always.*

*Audience: And also with you.*

*Let us offer each other the sign of peace while the music plays.*

*(Invite All to Show sign of peace while music plays.)*

*Music – Ave Maria (3 min)*

*(Ask them to sit.)*

## Prayer

A prayer can be done religiously or as a spoken blessing from the officiant, a guest, parent, or sponsor. It can be presented religiously or modified to be simply spiritual in nature. Here is one example:

*Oh Lord, our hearts are filled with great happiness on this wedding day. They come before You pledging their hearts and lives to one another. Grant that they may be ever true and loving, living together in such a way as to bring happiness to the marriage.*

*Temper their hearts with kindness and understanding, rid them of all pretense of jealousy. Help them to remember to be each other's sweetheart, helpmate, friend and guide, so that together they may meet the cares and problems of life more bravely. And with the passage of time, may the home they are creating today truly be a place of love and harmony, where your spirit is ever present.*

*Bless this union we pray, and walk beside Bride and Groom throughout their lives together. AMEN.*

## Couple Unity Activity

The couple can light a unity candle, complete the sand ceremony, or drink from a chalice. The drinking of wine or pseudo-wine can be done in a religious, spiritual, or earthly way. No matter what activity is used, it is the couple's first formal act as husband and wife.

Here is an example text:

*At the beginning of this ceremony, two individual candles were lit as the couple at that time were individuals. To show recognition of their commitment to share a future, a vision, a dream under the watchful eye of God, they will light the center candle that symbolizes their love from this day forward.*

## Joining of the Children

Refer to the chapter titled "Including Children in the Ceremony."

## Bridal-couple-only Communion/Eucharist

Refer to the chapter titled "Take this Bread."

## Charge to the Couple

An example of a charge text:

*Bride and Groom, as the two of you have joined in this marriage uniting as husband and wife, and as you this day affirm your faith and love for one another, I would ask that you always remember to cherish each other as special and unique individuals, that you respect the thoughts, ideas and suggestions of one another. Be able to forgive, do not hold grudges, and live each day that you may share it together – as from this day forward you shall be each other's home, comfort and refuge, your marriage strengthened by your love and respect.*

Nuptial Blessing

Some couples are reticent to have prayers in their wedding ceremony. What helps is to explain to the couple that any text can be modified to simply be spoken words of blessing and not prayer. In this way, no one is asked to pray but instead enjoy the words of the blessing. Here is an example of what could be delivered as either a prayer or spoken blessing:

*We, your family and friends, wish for you the very best! We wish that you be filled with joy, And that love abide with you always. May the Lord keep you and bless you all the days of your marriage!*

Benediction/Conclusion

Here is an example of a benediction:

*May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up his countenance unto you, and give you peace.*

Recognition and Conclusion

This is the traditional wrap-up of the ceremony and announcement of marriage with the important kissing of the couple.

As with all elements, it can be modified to suit the needs of the couple.

Example:

*And so now, inasmuch as you, Bride, and you, Groom, have announced the truths that were already written in your hearts, and have witnessed the same in the presence of these, your family and friends, and before God, I announce that you are now ... husband and wife.*

*Congratulations, you may kiss!*

*I present to you Mrs. Bride and Mr. Groom.*

*Would everyone please stand as the couple departs!*

*Please remain in your places until the parents have left the room.*

Recessional

May be a straightforward exiting of the bride, groom, and wedding party or it can include the groom picking up the bride and carrying her away before the wedding party recesses.

Jumping the Broom

This African tradition dates back to before the first Europeans visited West Africa. Jumping the broom represents symbolically “sweeping away” their

former single lives, former problems and concerns, and stepping over the broom to enter upon a new adventure as husband and wife.

This is the typical text used during the jumping of the broom:

*Today, Bride and Groom will jump the broom to seal their covenant as husband and wife!*

### Receiving Line

Receiving lines are where the Bride and Groom stand just outside the wedding ceremony venue or some other location and greet their guests for the first time as husband and wife. Typically, the receiving line includes the wedding party and the parents of the couple. Take caution – receiving lines can take as long as 45 minutes!

### Other elements not mentioned here

These elements of a wedding ceremony are by no means exhaustive. But most other elements you would encounter as an officiant are very specialized for a particular ceremony. The Jewish traditional breaking of a glass is one such tradition.

What is most helpful in identifying these special elements is to do some research on the web specifically for those traditions. In the resource section

of this book, we've provided some links to these and other elements for you to use.

## 9 Handfasting Ceremony

A favorite ceremony among those who shy away from traditional religious liturgies is the hand fasting ceremony. This ceremony, probably dating from the middle ages, is very appropriate for an outdoor venue, such as a garden, amphitheater, or other earthly setting. And it's particularly suited for a presentation in the round, where the couple stands in the middle of the audience which has been seated in rows circling the couple.

This ceremony is best presented as an insert into a traditional ceremony, somewhere between the first half of the ceremony – procession, giving of the bride, unity candle, a reading – and the second half of the ceremony – the second reading, unity candle, and pronouncement as husband and wife. By flanking the ceremony on either side with traditional elements, the audience receives the impact of its unique nature but can still recognize the American ceremony format.

Here is the hand fasting element presented in its entirety:

*Know now before you go further, that since your lives have crossed in this life you have formed ties between each other. As you seek to enter this state of matrimony, you should strive to make real the ideals which give meaning to both this ceremony and the institution of marriage.*

*With full awareness, know that within this circle you are not only declaring your intent to be hand fasted before your friends and family, but you speak that intent also to God. The promises made today and the ties that are bound here greatly strengthen your union; they will cross the years and lives of each soul's growth.*

*Do you still seek to enter this ceremony?*

*Couple: Yes, We Seek to Enter.*

*Please join your hands in the configuration of the infinity circle (circle 8).*

*Dedication (Blessing) of the Hands*

*These are the hands that will passionately love you and cherish you through the years, for a lifetime of happiness.*

*These are the hands that will countless times wipe the tears from your eyes: tears of sorrow and tears of joy.*

*These are the hands that will comfort you in illness, and hold you when fear or grief racks your mind.*

*These are the hands that will hold you tight as you struggle through difficult times.*

*These are the hands that will give you support and encourage you to chase your dreams. Together, everything you wish for can be realized.*

*Groom, will you cause her pain?*

*Groom: I may. (What was actually said was an emphatic yes.) Will that have been your intent?*

*Groom: No.*

*Bride, will you cause him pain?*

*Bride: I may.*

*Will that have been your intent?*

*Bride: No.*



*\*To Both\**

*Will you share each other's pain and seek to ease it?*

*Both answer: Yes.*

*And so the first binding is made.*

*\*First cord is draped across the bride and groom's hands\**

*Bride, will you share his laughter?*

*Bride: Yes.*

*Groom, will you share her laughter?*

*Groom: Yes.*

*\*To Both\**

*Will both of you look for the brightness in life and the positive in each other?*

*Both: Yes.*

*And so another binding is made.*

*\*Second cord is draped across the couple's hands\**

*Bride, will you burden him?*

*Bride: I may.*

*Will that have ever been your intent?*

*Bride: No.*

*And Groom, will you burden her?*

*Groom: I may.*

*And will that have ever been your intent?*

*Groom: No.*

*\*To Both\**

*Will you share the burdens of each so that your spirits may grow in this union?*

*Both: Yes.*

*And so the binding is made.*

*\*Drape third cord across the couple's hands\**

*Bride, will you share his dreams?*

*Bride: Yes.*

*Groom, will you share her dreams?*

*Groom: Yes.*

*\*To Both\**

*Will you dream together to create new realities and hopes?*

*Both: Yes.*

*And so the binding is made.*

*\*Drape fourth cord across the couple's hands\**

*Groom, might you cause her anger?*

*Groom: I may.*

*Will that have ever been your intent?*

*Groom: No.*

*Bride, might you cause him anger?*

*Bride: I may.*

*Will that have ever been your intent?*

*Bride: No.*

*\*To Both\**

*Will you take the heat of anger and use it to temper the strength of this union?*

*Both: We will.*

*And so the binding is made.*

*\*Drape fifth cord across the couple's hands\**

*Bride, will you honor him?*

*Bride: I will.*

*Groom, will you honor her?*

*Groom: I will.*

*\*To Both\**

*Will you seek to never give cause to break that honor?*

*Both: We shall never do so.*

*And so the binding is made.*

*\*Drape sixth cord across the couple's hands\**

*\*Tie cords together while saying:\**

*The knots of this binding are not formed by these cords but instead by your vows. Either of you may drop the cords, for as always, you hold in your own hands the making or breaking of this union.*

*\*Once cords are tied together they are removed and placed on altar\**

There are some couples who will read this example and tell the officiant right away that they are not interested. But it's been found that many will come back after some thought and private discussion and end up choosing this ceremony.

What this ceremony does contain is a very pragmatic approach to marriage. And the ceremony presented with just that tone always results in unanimous approval by those in attendance. Especially if this hand fasting ceremony is combined with all the other traditional elements including sharing a cup of wine at the conclusion.

## 10 Including Children

Include this element in one of the ceremonies you officiate and watch the reactions on everyone's faces, feel the love and understanding they have for the bride and groom, and observe the expression of inclusion from the child, and you'll understand why this element is everyone's favorite.

There can be no greater expression of love in a wedding ceremony than that expressed in the joining of the children. It is here where the rubber meets the road when it comes to married with children. And the public proclamation of each accepting responsibility for the care, as well as relinquishing control of all care to the other, is not only symbolically important, but spiritually important.

During this element, it is not uncommon for the couple to want to present the child with a gift such as a necklace, ring, or medallion. In fact, some couples will replace this element with a medallion ceremony which you can find a link to later in the resource section. This is an example of a joining of the children element:

*Groom, will you promise to guide, nurture and love Bride Child with unfaltering devotion? Will you care for him/her as your own from this day forward? Groom Answer: I will.*

*Bride, will you share the joys and responsibilities of Bride Child with Groom? Will you trust his sincerity and accept his love for Bride Child? Bride Answer: I will.*

*Bride Child, what we have formalized here today is your new family. Will you do all that is in your power to make this a happy, fun, and loving family? Child: I/We will.*

*Let us pray for this Child who is joining their mother and Groom to make this new family life together.*

*O God, we ask you to bless with your great love Bride Child. He/She deserves the warmth, security and environment of this loving family. Give to this family the peace and power and love which you have promised to all of us, Your children. Amen.*

# 11 Timing is Everything

Of the more than 1,700 couples this author has met and discussed wedding ceremony plans with, it is amazing that only one or two couples have been advised by any of their vendors on matters related to timing and start times. They've been left completely unaware of the potential, and mostly predictable, delays.

Brides and grooms are surprised to hear that most weddings rarely start at the time announced to guests or printed on the invitation. And that if they do start at that time, only half of the invited guests will have arrived. When couples are made aware of this fact, they make different decisions about what to list on the invitation as the official start time.

It is simply a matter of logistics. People rarely intend on being late, but they just usually are. They are late for dinner, movies, plays, work, school, doctors, you name it. Timing is a challenge for most, a cultural norm for many. Add to that the natural challenge of typical unfamiliarity with the venue they are driving to and the normal lateness increases.

But this does not mean that you and your couple cannot compensate for the chronic miscalculation of time. There is a mathematical formula that proves true in more than 80% of ceremonies.

Predicted guest lateness can be expressed using the following formula:

*Number of expected guests divided by 25 multiplied by 8-10 minutes equals the total estimated minutes the ceremony will start later than the time on the invitation.*

There are wedding coordinators and other folks who will disagree. But you as the officiant have the duty to inform the couple of this and allow them to make the appropriate adjustments. If the couple chooses to ignore this fact, then it takes you the officiant off the hook for the lateness – and more importantly, allows you to adjust your schedule knowing the lateness will occur.

Invite the couple to use the formula above and add the lateness time to the actual time they want the ceremony to start. If they actually want the wedding ceremony to start at 5:00pm, and they are expecting 100 guests, they would do themselves and their guests a great favor by putting 4:30pm on the invitation. Their guests will be there and settled and the ceremony can start nicely at 5:00-5:15pm.

Be sure your couple doesn't tell any of the guests or wedding party members that you expect the ceremony to start late. And advise the couple not to change the time with the vendors; they will be on time!

Lastly, let your couple know they need not worry about guests who arrive at 4:30pm. They have gone through the trouble of getting dressed up, purchased the couple a gift, and made the commitment to come to their event. If guests



sit and talk for 30 minutes while watching the last minute details being handled, the 30 minutes will fly by. They will not be inconvenienced at all.

Remember, a smooth start to a wedding ceremony will lay the groundwork for a great event. And making the proper timing decisions will prevent a large number of stragglers coming in between the bridesmaids and the bride! Your wedding couple will be sooooo glad you did!

Now a look at the ceremony timing. Many couples want a time line for their ceremony. Of course, the timing depends completely on you, the officiant, but this list will provide a basis for answering their questions. This timeline is from a Catholic-lite ceremony:

- Opening Logistics (3 min)
- Introduction (1 min)
- Pledge Of Support (1 min)
- Lighting of the Unity Candle (Parents or Sponsors) (2 min)
- First Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans 12:9-18 (1 min)
- Responsorial Psalm 71st Psalms (2 min)
- Second Reading First Letter of John 4:7-12 (1 min)
- Gospel of St. John (1 min)
- Homily (5 min)
- Blessing of the Rings (1 min)
- Exchange of Vows (1 min)
- Lighting of the Unity Candle (1 min)
- Charge to the Couple (1 min)
- Prayer (2 min)
- First Communion (3 min)
- Lord's Prayer (ask all to stand) (2 min)
- Sign of Peace (3 min)

- Music – Ave Maria (3 min)
- Pronouncement as Husband & Wife (1 min)
- Benediction (1 min)
- Closing and Presentation (1 min)

Wedding ceremonies can be short, long, or just right. Much depends on the mood of the audience. With experience, you will learn to adjust the pace of the wedding to fit the many circumstances you encounter.

There will be times when it begins to rain, and you push through to save the guests from getting soaked. There are hot days when 100-degree temperatures require skipping some lines here and there and getting right to the point.

Then there will be those ceremonies where everyone is hanging on every word you say...those, you'll want to stretch a little! But remember that you control the timing once the wedding has started.

## 12 The Sounds of Marriage

Music – a wedding is still a wedding without it, but wow, does it ever make a difference! There is a certain kind of feeling that music evokes. Combine that feeling with the dynamics and emotions of a marriage ceremony and the sum is greater than the parts.

We humans associate music with events, and one way to keep the memory of your couple's wedding day alive in their memories is to ensure that there is music. By adding music, from that day forward, any time they hear what played when they walked down the aisle, they will enjoy that rush of feelings over and over again.

Since your wedding officiating services also include a certain amount of wedding planning advice, always ask brides and grooms what they are planning for food, flowers, ceremony, venue, and of course, music. Often, they still have not decided on how to handle the ceremony music.

The DJ for the reception was probably the first vendor chosen after the venue, but the ceremony music is often one of those pesky details left for the very last. The couple's first thought is to use the DJ for the ceremony music. For many reasons I'll not get into here, it is best to have separate music provided for the wedding ceremony and reception. Encourage your couples to seriously

consider live music such as a harpist, guitarist, other strings or a portable keyboard. Talent can at times be hard to find at a bargain, but it can be done.

There is plenty of talent in the music schools at the high school, college and conservatory levels. Couples can usually find several reliable students who will come and play their hearts out for 1/5th the price of the professionals. (Get several; that way if one drops out, you still have at least two.)

Remember that these students are accepted by the schools because they have talent. And as most starving students will tell you, they are usually willing to do some work for that extra college cash.

So, now that you've advised your bridal couple to seek out musicians, they are wondering who to call. Advise them to start by pulling out the yellow pages and looking under schools, colleges and universities, and high schools. Suggest that they call the main number and ask for the music department. When they reach someone in the music department, let that person know they are looking for several students who may be interested in playing at a wedding.

Be sure to tell them it's for pay, not for free. Usually, someone will take your name and number and pass them on to the students or post them on the bulletin board.

This is just one way to cut the costs of your wedding affair. And the students really appreciate the extra cash they make, the professional experience they get, and the recognition that their talents are needed. Be sure to send me an email and let me know how your musical student talent search comes out.

In addition to locating talent, make a strong suggestion that the couple have music play throughout the ceremony. Officiating a ceremony with quiet music being played is a great experience. Officiants find that the music provides a sort of soft background canvas of sound on which to inflect the voice and add dramatic effect.

The music can be used to fill pauses and heighten emotions. If you want to get the feel for it, take a ceremony, turn on the radio, find some easy music and read the ceremony with the music on low. Get the idea? It's fantastic!

It may take some convincing to get the couple to add the music in the background, and often it takes some encouragement to push the musicians in that direction, but once the musicians hear how well it works, everyone is sold! So, make music an important part of the couple's ceremony and they will love you for it.

## 13 Take This Bread

When one of the couple is Methodist, Baptist, non-religious, or non-Christian, and the other is Catholic, there is often a need to introduce a pseudo-Eucharist. For Catholics at least, if there is not a Eucharist (some refer to it as taking Communion), during the ceremony, then it falls short of what they expect and feel is necessary. But there is a wonderful solution to this issue, and it can have a great deal of meaning and appeal to all who attend, not just high church Catholics or Lutherans.

When speaking to a couple where one or both were raised Catholic or one or both of their parents are Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopalian, suggest that the couple give the Eucharist (technically the same thing as Communion) to one another, as opposed to having it administered by you, the officiant. This seems a little odd at first, but when you see it take place in the ceremony, it is beautiful and very rich in meaning and avoids the issue of confession, etc.

What including this element in the ceremony means to the Catholics in the crowd is difficult to overstate – it is huge. And Protestants, who traditionally take the Eucharist only once a month instead of at every Mass like Catholics, also appreciate the act just the same.

Is the couple worried that including the sharing of a cup of wine might be too “over the top” from a non-religious point of view? No, not at all. It is all in how you, the officiant, set up the moment. Couch the act in the meaning of the couple’s celebration together, just as it was Christ’s celebration of unity – symbolic and beautiful.

Don’t underestimate the meaning that this will have for many who attend your couple’s wedding ceremony. Although they might not care at all about the Eucharist, many of their Catholic guests will. It is too simple to do to not do it. And it is very beautiful and will add to the richness of their ceremony. This is one of those elements that once you do as an officiant, you’ll be glad you did and will recommend it every time.

To make it even more meaningful for the couple, suggest that they purchase a chalice to be used at other weddings in their family, including those of their children – make it a tradition!

What follows are two examples of what can be used. One is religious, the other is not:

#### Sharing of the Wine (non-religious)

*(Very nice if background music is played during this portion of the ceremony.)*

*Throughout history, in nearly all cultures and traditions, the sharing of a cup of wine has been used as a universal, central moment of sharing during significant moments. For many it symbolizes the celebration of the harvest, the changing seasons of life, or the ultimate personal sacrifice which others have made on our behalf. Wine is, after all, the result of years of hard work, the tender care of the grape, a thoughtful mix of ingredients, the patient*

*fermenting, and the unique flavors of each year. So it is fitting that the couple take their first cup of wine as husband and wife, to not only celebrate all that has taken place in their lives to this point, but as an expression of hope and faith in the harvest of their lives, the commitment they make, the sacrifice of all who have made this moment possible.*

### First Communion/Eucharist/Sharing of the First Cup (religious)

*A part of the Christian heritage is the taking of the bread and wine, as Christ did at the Last Supper, a coming to the table of God and sharing the very spiritually significant experience of Communion.*

*This Bride and Groom have chosen to take their very first Communion (or cup or Eucharist) as husband and wife in your presence to acknowledge the place that their spiritual heritage will continue to have in their new life together.*

*As tradition tells us, Christ gathered his disciples the evening before his taking to the cross and shared a meal. This meal was different than the others before it in that Christ asked that they make special note of the occasion. Christ knowing of his fate wanted to ensure that each disciple understood that his presence was not fleeting, that Christ was to remain with them always in their hearts, souls, and minds. So that they would not forget the unity of spirit, he asked that they take the bread and wine together in a Spirit of One.*

*Officiant holds up host (bread) and says: Christ said something like “Even as you eat bread, remember me.” And they ate of the bread.*

*Officiant holds out host for Groom and Bride.*

*Groom places the host on the tongue of Bride. Bride places the host on the tongue of Groom.*

*Officiant holds up wine and says: Christ said something like “When you drink this wine, remember me.” And they all took of the cup.*

*Officiant holds out wine for Groom and Bride.*

*Groom holds the cup for Bride to drink. Bride holds the cup for Groom to drink.*

*Officiant: The taking of a meal together, especially when remembering the life and sacrifice of Christ (and others before and after him), ensures that we do not forget that we are all one body, one blood, and one spirit, and that the breaking of bread and sharing of a cup is more than nourishment or the quenching of thirst, but the sharing of ourselves. (End)*



Remember that the sharing of the cup ceremony is one of the most significant ways that an officiant can bridge the divide between Catholics and non-Catholics at a wedding ceremony. That you've chosen to be a wedding officiant says volumes about your desire to bring people together, and this is one great way to do it.

Besides, it looks GREAT in the pictures! That alone is a great reason to encourage a couple to include this element.

## 14 Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What about last-minute requests?

*A. As long as there is room in the schedule, last minute requests are fine.*

Q. Does it matter what religion we practice?

*A. No. Most officiants serve you in a way that brings joy to your day. Officiants are comfortable serving you in the manner that helps you live out your own spiritual experience, whether devoutly Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, or purely spiritual.*

Q. Can we have a non-religious, spiritual ceremony?

*A. This is your choice. Many prefer a “spiritual” and not “religious” ceremony.*

Q. Can we have a dual religion/clergy ceremony?

*A. Yes! Officiants conduct ceremonies with other clergy – Jewish and other faiths. As a wedding officiant, establish contacts with clergy of other faiths so that they are available if you need them.*

Q. Can we include elements of different religions and religious traditions in our ceremony?

*A. Yes! These make for interesting, rich, meaningful ceremonies. The officiant works with the couple and their various traditions to put together a ceremony that truly reflects their wishes.*

Q. Are there any pre-requisites such as counseling?

*A. This answer will depend on the philosophy of the wedding officiant. Many answer no, but if the couple desires counseling, they make it available.*

Q. Does it matter that either of us have been married before, divorced, have children or are already privately married and want to conduct a public ceremony?

*A. No. And if they have kids, how awesome! You can include the joining of the children element as a meaningful way to include them in the ceremony.*

Q. Can we write our own vows?

*A. Of course! Encourage the couple to personalize their ceremony as much as they wish.*

Q. Can I make changes to the example ceremony?

*A. Yes. In fact, encourage couples to create a personalized ceremony using examples you will provide to them.*

Q. How is booking handled?

*A. Tell the bridal couple their ceremony date and time is booked when you, the officiant, receive the \$100 deposit and the booking agreement form. The balance, if any, should be received at least two weeks in advance of the scheduled wedding date.*

Q. Do you attend the rehearsal?

*A. Yes, as the officiant's schedule allows. Keep in mind that officiants usually have weddings Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. So, couples will need to schedule rehearsals around those events or pay a premium to also reserve the rehearsal engagement.*

## 15 The Business of Officiating

For anyone who is approaching wedding officiating as part or whole career, you've chosen a profession that is full of joy! Not many people can say that about what they do to pay the rent. But clearly, there can be no greater privilege than being a critical part of the ceremony that starts a loving couple on the path of their future as husband and wife.

Along with that privilege comes much responsibility. When it comes to a wedding ceremony, the officiant is the only individual, aside from the wedding couple, that must be present for a wedding to take place. When you book a wedding, making a serious commitment to not only show on the wedding day and time, but also to be prepared and capable of moving the ceremony through its paces successfully and professionally.

If the officiant does not arrive, the day, tens of thousands of dollars, and a tremendous amount of emotion is wasted. Set aside the legal liability for a moment; just the human sorrow and disappointment that would result are hard to measure. And the officiant's career is ruined for years to come, at least in that area. All this said to drive home the serious nature of the wedding officiant's choice to take a wedding booking. Yes, it is a blessed privilege, and yes, it is a very serious unbreakable commitment.

This is the reason why we've placed the section on the business of wedding officiating at the end of the book instead of at the beginning. Officiating a

marriage is in most cases a sacred, religious and spiritual act that should be defined by you and your couple's hearts. The business side of officiating is merely a way in which you can organize your services so that you can become an experienced, reliable professional who then better serves those for whom you officiate.

The business side of it is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to an end. It is the wonderful wedding that is the goal, and the business side makes it possible for the wedding to be fantastic instead of amateurish.

Now that you have been duly made aware of the critical nature of making commitments to officiate weddings, and that it is the wedding that is the goal and not being in business, let's move into the business activities and practices a professional wedding officiant must follow in order to make a consistent, life-sustaining income. That includes marketing, organization, follow-up, and post event paperwork. And it all begins with the number one make or break of most businesses – location, location, location!

When we talk of location of course the topic is actually marketing your services. No matter where you live, there are couples getting married every week. Even if you personally live in a small village, there are folks getting married outside your village. The only difference between you and the officiant who lives in the middle of Baltimore, Maryland is that the Baltimore officiant does not have to drive as far to get from one wedding to another,

whereas that officiant living in Nichols, New York has to drive up to 100 miles each way to perform a ceremony.

## Fees

Your advertising reach and the maximum fee you can charge will determine how far you drive for a ceremony. Many couples are so desperate for an officiant that they will pay you the officiating fee plus travel expenses to ensure they can get married on a particular day and time.

The author of this book drives thirteen hours round trip each weekend to officiate weddings in a major metropolitan area. Sure, the expenses and time reduce the net profit on each wedding, but over time, the smaller net fees are equaled out by the absolute joy of officiating weddings. And some living is better than no living!

It is important then to begin by mapping out your potential marketing area, calculating your travel time and costs to move across that market, and establishing first your costs per mile and time to travel from one point on that map to another.

Then you research the officiants in your area to see who is around, do some phone calls and emails to see what they are charging (some mystery shopping), and then establish what your fees will be. Avoid setting fees low

to try to “get business” because that is a major mistake all new service providers make. They think that having the lowest price will get them the job.

That is just not true at all. In fact, you will often be judged by your fees – for many folks, especially those with some money, low fees equal low experience and quality. So set your fees right where, or just above, everyone else is in your market.

## Advertising

Then, take a good look at the ways in which folks are advertising. There is the internet, which will usually be the best for you. Then there is direct advertising, which is flyers, business cards, phone calls, and personal visits, and lastly there is the yellow pages. The yellow pages is your most expensive but most lucrative in terms of response. Most of you will choose the internet approach to begin with and move into direct marketing as you become more confident. And with success, you may find yourself moving into the yellow pages.

A great way to get a jump start and begin booking weddings immediately is to use one of [www.StreetBishops.com](http://www.StreetBishops.com) consulting packages. Be sure to stop by the website and look at all the options. The services there will coach you through the process so that you are not out there alone making mistakes and wasting time. The coaching program will save you not only time and mistakes, but lots of money and frustration.



If coaching is not for you, then look over the advertisements you find on the web for wedding officiants within your chosen service area, and based on your budget, purchase online advertising space and link them to your website.

### Website /Facebook Page

Your website will be the most powerful sales tool you have. Not advertising and marketing, but sales. You need to first get people to visit your site, which is advertising and marketing. But then once they are there, it is critical that you have all the information they need to make an initial decision to contact you via email or telephone.

It is getting that first contact that will make or break your officiating business. And never underestimate the value of an email or phone contact from a prospective client or wedding couple.

Because you've invested time and money into getting that initial contact, you should get as much information about them as possible. If they go ahead and complete your Bride and Groom Information Form (see example later in this chapter) then you are golden!

Having all this information will allow you to continue contact with them and know when and where they are getting married. But if all you get is a phone

number and wedding date details, at least you can continue to communicate with them. What has been found to be critical in booking and maintaining the confidence of the wedding couple is communication.

Communicate, communicate, communicate.

### Paperwork & Follow-through

Next, once you are ready to have that first meeting, follow all the instructions provided earlier in this book. Refer back to that chapter. Now that you have read all the way through the book, you have a greater appreciation on the second read for details that you'll need to pick up along the way. There is huge amount of time and experience that goes into providing outstanding wedding officiating service, and that begins from the first advertisement and phone call on through to submitting the legal documents after the wedding.

Following through with paperwork and communication is one of the most difficult and likely places for breakdown in the administrative side of wedding officiating. If you only officiate two or three weddings a year, it is not as difficult a task to manage the data by hand with manila folders. But as the traffic to your website increases, the inquiries increase.

As the inquiries increase, the back-and-forth emails and notes for each couple increase. Then there are the couple's information forms, the booking

agreements, venue contacts, promises, changes, legal documents, ceremony and supporting documents, and on and on.

If you are determined to handle all this manually, then you are in for a big surprise! Avoid that surprise by learning not only how to manage all this data, but the tools that are out there to help you do that. Again, visit for details on the best new tools to use to begin as a professional with the ultimate online organization plan.

Otherwise, use the form examples presented in the next chapter as a model for the forms that you should use on your website to collect bride and groom information as well as to book a wedding ceremony. Use the same form for every couple and be sure that both you and the couple have copies of these forms.

Maintaining accurate information concerning the couple, their contact numbers, the time and date of the ceremony, venue information, etc. has saved many an officiant from missing a ceremony where a detail has been changed or a detail is needed while driving to the wedding location. Use these forms well!

Let's take a moment to focus on the legal side of marriage officiating. Understand first what a marriage is and the different hats you wear when officiating a marriage.

## The Law

Marriage is a legal term that sets the standards for a particular state on how assets and privileges will be handled between two people. It creates a special legal relationship that has significant impact on issues such as child custody, taxes, property, and medical decisions, just to name a few.

Notice I did not yet mention anything about religion. That is because wedding officiating usually has two purposes – to solemnize the marriage or make it official, and then secondarily to perform a religious celebration. They occur at the same time, not by necessity, but by custom and tradition.

Therefore, no matter what you do as a spiritual or religious act, which is very, very important to the couple and maybe to you as a clergy, getting the legal obligations and process perfected is of critical importance to not only you, but the couple and society as a whole. Your actions as a representative of the state in solemnizing that marriage has an impact that lasts generations, not just the 45 minutes you are conducting that ceremony.

One of your initial responsibilities will be to go the website of your local county court and read all you can find on the processes not only for officiants in handling the legal paperwork for marriage, but also what the couples must do. Become an expert on the matter, including obtaining a wedding license,

the fees, how official copies are obtained, and what the restrictions are in your state or county, if any.

Go to the courthouse and meet the Clerk of Court. Let them know you are planning on starting a wedding officiating ministry and that you'd like to know all you can about the obligations of a wedding minister (I'm using the work minister in the civil sense, not the religious sense).

## Marriage Credentials

If you need credentials to register with the state, you can visit [www.GetOrdained.com](http://www.GetOrdained.com) and apply for ordination there. It is free of course; they are not a business but a religious ministry that seeks to remove the roadblocks to serving the community.

Once you have your credentials, if required, register them with the local courthouse. Usually this requires an ordination letter, certificate, and letter of good standing. If someone starts asking lots of questions, just change the subject to the handling of wedding licenses and avoid any conversation about your status as religious leader, clergy, ordination, etc.

In the United States of America, no one is legally allowed to determine how you practice your religion, how an organization should conduct itself, or what

they should believe. If an organization has appointed you as a minister, then you are legally a minister and that is the end of the subject.

There will be those in some areas of the country that are determined to protect their own house of worship to the point of denying you the right to practice your spirituality in a manner you feel appropriate. Add to that the high and mighty feeling that some folks at the smaller courthouses often take on and you can get into a debate over who is or is not a “real” minister very quickly.

At all costs, avoid this meaningless conversation. If this even begins to happen, take your papers and your request for registration to another courthouse somewhere else in the state.

You will NEVER be able to reeducate someone whom thinks their religion has the exclusive right to marry folks in their jurisdiction. That is what I have discovered from working with hundreds of officiants.

All of this is not said to scare you off, but to make you aware of the issues that swirl around wedding officiating in some courthouses. And to let you know that the best course of action is to find another courthouse!

So now you’ve handled the registration of your credentials, if any is actually required. You’ve educated yourself on the obtaining of and handling of the legal paperwork of wedding licensing, determined your service area, created a basic price list for your services, placed some web advertising, and printed

business cards and flyers. Now you are ready to take inquiries, follow the instructions in this book, and officiate fantastic weddings!

If you want to be ordained for free to officiate weddings, visit [www.GetOrdained.com](http://www.GetOrdained.com) . It is completely free, you only pay if you want to receive hardcopy documents in the mail.

### Handling the License

Handling the wedding license professionally is very important. There are civil penalties for not sending in the correctly completed paperwork within the timeframe indicated on the document. There is no excuse for an officiant neglecting to immediately complete the wedding license and immediately mailing it or hand delivering it to the courthouse of jurisdiction.

Even if you slip up on getting the couple their keepsake certificate or decide not to include for them the request for official copies, you must at the very least submit the finalized license to the court according to the local rules. Be a professional at all times by fulfilling this responsibility.

Now some last words on the business of wedding officiating as a business. At the end of the day, the only thing you have of worth in wedding officiating is your reputation. What others say about you does matter in the case of being a wedding minister.

Your kindness, willingness to assist others, flexibility, respect for diverse religious or non-religious beliefs, and the hope you have for those whom you marry will spread like wildfire in the community. Do everything in your power to ensure that your reputation remains above reproach. If you safeguard your reputation, over time you will become well sought after as the wedding officiant everyone wants to lead their very special day!

### Action Items for Chapter 15

- ✓ Develop calendar of open days for weddings for the next 24 months.
- ✓ Research officiant fees in your area.
- ✓ Map out your potential marketing area.
- ✓ Establish a cost per mile and time to travel from one point on that map to another.
- ✓ Research other officiants in your area.
- ✓ Develop relationships where appropriate.
- ✓ Access other wedding officiant advertising in your market area.
- ✓ Create a mini advertising plan.
- ✓ Visit [www.SuccessWeddingOfficiating.com](http://www.SuccessWeddingOfficiating.com) for ideas.
- ✓ Consider a wedding officiating business coach.
- ✓ Develop a website.
- ✓ Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- ✓ Research need for credentials in your jurisdiction of service.
- ✓ If required, register them with the local court house.
- ✓ Review wedding license handling procedures in your service area.



# 16 Model Forms

## FORM A: Bride & Groom Information Form

Complete the form below and click the Submit button at the bottom. This form comes directly to my desk. It is information I will need to begin a file so we can discuss your needs, plan a first meeting, booking, etc. This information will only be shared with your permission. I know this looks like a lot of information, but this info will help me help you! A valid email address for the bride is required in order for the form to be delivered to my mailbox.

\* Fields marked with an asterisk (\*) and in red text must be completed.

### Basic Info

- \* Ceremony date:
- \* Ceremony time:
- \* Ceremony city:
- \* Approximate number of guests:
- \* Person submitting this form:
- \* Who or what website referred you?

### Bride Info

- \* Bride FULL name:
- \* Bride nickname:
- \* Bride email address:
- \* Bride street address:
- \* Bride city:
- \* Bride state:
- \* Bride zip:
- \* Bride home phone:
- \* Bride cell phone:
- Bride religious background (if any):

## Groom Info

- \* Groom FULL name:
- \* Groom nickname?
- \* Is address same as above?
- \* Groom home telephone:
- \* Groom cell phone:
- \* Groom email:
- \* Groom religious background (if any):

## Facility Info

- \* Name of ceremony facility:
- \* Ceremony facility local contact:
- \* Ceremony facility street address:
- \* Ceremony facility state:
- \* Ceremony facility zip:
- \* Ceremony facility telephone:

Use the space below for any additional information that you would like me to know or do for your Ceremony, arrangements we have made to meet, or any suggested dates and times you'd like to get together for an initial meeting:

## FORM B: Wedding Ceremony Booking Agreement (Example)

This letter of agreement goes into effect and a date is reserved when this form is received along with a deposit or a copy of a check to be sent as deposit. You may submit this form in person at our meeting, by fax to (xxx) xxx-xxxx or by mail to the address listed.

(Please print clearly!)

Date of Wedding:

Time:

Complete Address of Wedding:



Print Officiant Name

Mail original form and deposit to the scheduling staff at:

Officiant

Officiant Address

Wedding Minister Credentials

[www.streetbishops.com](http://www.streetbishops.com)

[www.getordained.com](http://www.getordained.com)

## Final Words

As you use this wedding handbook, always keep in mind that you are providing a service to the wedding couple. Although you have certain ways you like doing things, it is there special day.

Where you can, allow for their wishes and wants. Many of them have been dreaming of this day since they were children and they have a vision for what they want their wedding day and ceremony to be like. As best you can, put aside your own wants and allow for theirs.

This is how you will be of the greatest service to those you officiate.

Blessings and God Speed as you begin your wedding service adventure!

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