

Inclusive Marriage Services

✿ A WEDDING SOURCEBOOK ✿

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Introduction

Marriage is not for everybody. Some find fulfillment in singleness, and Mothers choose to avoid the institution for personal or legal reasons. In recent years, however, more people who want to marry are allowed to do so. As same-sex marriage has become legal across the United States, and as more churches welcome same-gender couples and diverse families, more and more Christians are asking for inclusive wedding services.

The inclusive wedding services in this book provide language that can be used by gay and straight couples alike. These marriage rites sound like the church weddings you have heard before; they echo Christian convictions about covenant, commitment, fidelity, and love. They were written by people who treasure their denominational heritages and appreciate good liturgical language. What is different about these services is that the language for couples is not gender specific. There is little emphasis on procreation as a chief purpose for marriage. Some services are appropriate for all kinds of couples, and others are intended for couples who are blending families or who have been together for a long time. This book, then, does not seek to reinvent the wedding or redefine marriage. Readers will find that the services here echo historic marriage rites while using language that is broadly inclusive.

This book is designed to offer complete liturgies, additional liturgical material, and brief essays to guide pastors and couples as they plan weddings. The contributors are:

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Four newly composed inclusive marriage liturgies are included here. While all of the services can be used or adapted for a wide variety of situations, each was written with particular concerns in mind:

- Marriage Liturgy A is for general use, or for couples who are marrying for the first time.
- Marriage Liturgy B is for couples who have been in a long-term, committed relationship.
- Marriage Liturgy C is for couples who have children living at home and are blending families.
- Marriage Liturgy D is for couples in which one partner is not Christian (useful for interfaith couples or those with little or no connection to the church).

Five additional services from ecclesial bodies around the world also appear:

- The order for marriage from the second edition of the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship*
- An adaptation of a wedding service from *Celebrate God's Presence*, the worship book of the United Church of Canada
- An adaptation of a gender-neutral service provided by the Uniting Network Australia, a national network of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people working for safety and equality in the Uniting Church in Australia
- An adaptation of the First Order of Marriage found in the *Book of Common Order*, the worship book of the Church of Scotland
- An adaptation of Rite I in the *Book of Common Worship*, the worship book of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

We are aware that some denominations are already about the work of making their marriage liturgies more inclusive. In the meantime, the services provided here might be useful.

A sourcebook section provides additional prayers, vows, and other liturgical elements that are not found in the complete services. Material from the complete liturgies is also incorporated into this section. In addition, you will find the texts of four wedding hymns with suggested tunes, two of which appear in print for the first time in these pages.

Several short essays on practical questions related to weddings round out the book. Some of these topics—like “Walking Down the Aisle”—are

simply meant to help with some of the nitty-gritty details of weddings. Others are meant to advise on more sensitive topics, such as whether or not to include children from previous relationships in the making of promises, or how to address issues related to same-gender couples who are only now able to marry. Finally, Scripture readings are suggested, along with ideas for wedding homilies.

Those planning wedding services can use any of the liturgies as they are presented here; they may use a particular service as a starting point and add or substitute other elements found in the sourcebook section; or they may construct a service using elements from the sourcebook. All of the material provided in the newly composed services also appears in the sourcebook section, as well as material that appears only in the sourcebook. A number of selections taken from the denominational liturgies also appear in the sourcebook.

Several principles guide the work that appears here. First, language of husband and wife, or male and female, is avoided. Sometimes this means that there is more focus on action than on naming a person's role. So then, "I, N., take you, N., to be my loving and faithful wife" might become, "N., my beloved, I give myself to you." In other cases, options are provided, as in "I, N., take you, N., to be my love, my partner, my *spouse/husband/wife*."

Second, the services are designed to be flexible, so they can be adapted to various situations. Between the complete liturgies and the additional prayers, vows, and statements found in the sourcebook, couples will be able to shape their wedding services in ways that give praise to God, express their Christian faith, and reflect the particularity of their families.

Third, vows are at the heart of any wedding service. Although the words of the vows in this book have been carefully chosen to be inclusive, you will notice that they also echo the kinds of vows Christians have been making for centuries. We recognize the power of saying words that have been said by other generations of believers, especially when the right to speak them has been denied to some for so long.

Fourth, you may notice variations in the order of elements in the various services. Since our writers are from different denominations, and because we include services from a variety of traditions, we have chosen to let those differences stand, rather than impose uniformity.

Finally, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist undergird these services. Marriage is one way—among many—that Christians live out their baptismal vocations. Christians who marry live out the faith in their marriages, practicing the art of mutual self-giving and seeking to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven them. They also live out their faith as a couple, together

striving to love and serve God, to show compassion to others, and to work for God's coming realm of justice and peace. Furthermore, when Christians gather around the table, Christ is present as guest and host; we share in a foretaste of the heavenly marriage banquet; we are fed for the journey and strengthened to live out our vocations in all of life, including marriage. Only some of the services here include eucharistic liturgy, but Communion can be celebrated in any of the liturgies, and the sourcebook contains several eucharistic prayers.

It is our hope that one day this book will become obsolete, and all marriage rites will be fully inclusive. Until that day, we pray that the words found here will be helpful and that those who speak these vows will be blessed in their marriages.

PART 1

✿ INCLUSIVE MARRIAGE SERVICES ✿
AND
REAFFIRMATION OF VOWS

Marriage Liturgy A

[This service is for general use.]

OPENING HYMN OR PROCESSIONAL MUSIC

GATHERING

Sisters and brothers,
we are gathered here to celebrate the union of N. and N.,
to witness the vows they make to one another,
to pledge our support and encouragement,
and to seek God's blessing upon their marriage.

God created us for companionship
and gave us the capacity for joy.
Jesus Christ showed us self-giving love
and taught us to continually forgive.
And the Holy Spirit, given in our baptism,
renews grace within us day by day
and enables us to grow in faith, in hope, and in love.

Marriage is a gift and a calling
in which two people become for one another
a source of love,
a fount of blessing,
and a deep well of grace,
bearing each other's burdens
and sharing in each other's joys.

As N. and N. commit their lives to one another,
families are joined,
friendships are forged and strengthened,
and a new community of love is formed.

As we bear witness to the vows being made today,
let us surround N. and N. with affection and prayer,
giving thanks for all the ways
that God's love is made manifest in our lives.

DECLARATION OF INTENT

[Asked in turn to each person]

N., do you freely choose N.
and intend to enter the covenant of marriage?

I do.

AFFIRMATION OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Do all of you, the family and friends of N. and N.,
pledge to uphold them in their marriage
and encourage them in their life together?

We do.

PRAYER

God of life and love,
thank you for leading N. and N. to one another,
for planting in them the seeds of mutual love,
and bringing them to this day of promise making.

We love because you first loved us;
we dare to make vows because
you have made a covenant with us.
In Jesus Christ, you showed us how to give of ourselves to others
and taught us how to forgive.

Shine your light on us today,
and especially upon N. and N.,
as they bind themselves to one another.
By your Spirit may they know the promise of your deep and
abiding love
this day, and through all the days to come.
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

READINGS FROM SCRIPTURE

SERMON

[A hymn may be sung.]

VOWS

A

**N., I give myself to you.
Through joys and sorrows,
triumphs and troubles,
in times of plenty and times of want,
I will remain faithful to you
and love you through all of our days.**

B

**N., I bind myself to you this day
and promise to love you and cherish you,
to support you and comfort you,
to honor you and keep faith with you
as long as we both shall live.**

EXCHANGE OF RINGS

**N., I give you this ring
as a sign of our unending love
and abiding trust.**

PRAYER

Eternal God,
we give you thanks for all the ways you fill our lives with love,
and especially for the love you have given to N. and N.
Bless them in their life together,
that their love for one another may deepen
and their trust in you may grow.

Give them wisdom in their common life
and nurture in them the gift of your grace,
that together they may learn
to love with an everlasting love.

When they hurt one another,
enable them to show mercy.
Cultivate in them a habit of forgiveness,
and lead them into ever-deepening and mutual self-giving.
Teach them to honor one another in all things
and enable them to keep the vows they have made this day
through whatever joys they share or troubles that befall them.

May this marriage be a gift to all who know N. and N.
Make their life together an expression of your own love for this world,
that in their esteem for one another,
their relationships with neighbors,
and their service to those in need,
all who know them will see a glimpse of your coming reign
of justice, peace, and love.

Bless those gathered here today,
that all who witness these vows
may find their hope renewed
and know the depth of your love and care
for them and for this world you cherish.
All praise to you, triune God,
who created us for love,
became love for the world,
and nurtures love in us all. **Amen.**

DECLARATION OF MARRIAGE

N. and N. have made promises to one another
in the presence of God and this assembly
and have sealed those promises with the giving and
receiving of rings.
Let their marriage be held in honor by all.

CHARGE

Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rom. 12:9-13, 18

Rejoice in hope,
be patient in suffering,
persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all.

BLESSING

May the grace of Christ attend you,
the love of God surround you,
and the Holy Spirit keep you,
this day and forevermore. **Amen.**

[The couple may seal their vows with a kiss.]

SENDING HYMN OR RECESSIONAL MUSIC