

VI. Pastoral Resources for Preparing Couples for Marriage

adapted from

Liturgical Resources 1, revised and expanded edition (2015)*

Contents

Pre-Marital Preparation: Introduction

Presenters

Session One: Getting to Know You and an Overview

Session Two: Learning from the Past, Part 1

Session Three: Learning from the Past, Part 2

Session Four: Looking to the Future

Session Five: Liturgical Decisions and Wrap-up

Handouts

1. Declaration of Intention for Marriage (Canon I.18.4)
2. About Presenters—For the Couple
3. Information for Presenters
4. Model Congregational Guidelines

* Prepared by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, 2009-2012

Pre-Marital Preparation: Introduction

Below is a guideline for a five-session, pre-marital preparation that may be used along with the materials described above. These materials were originally prepared by the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music during the 2009-2012 triennium as part of its work of developing theological and liturgical resources for blessing same-sex relationships. They have been revised for use with any couple

Pre-marital preparation sets as its goal the strengthening of a lifelong, monogamous partnership rooted in Christ. General Convention Resolution 2000-D039 addresses the hope—the Church’s and the couple’s—for such relationships:

Resolved, That we expect such relationships will be characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God; and be it further

Resolved, That we denounce promiscuity, exploitation, and abusiveness in the relationships of any of our members; and be it further

Resolved, That this Church intends to hold all its members accountable to these values, and will provide for them the prayerful support, encouragement, and pastoral care necessary to live faithfully by them.

Ideally, sessions last 60 to 90 minutes each, and both partners should be present for all sessions (although the preparer may decide to meet with one of the individuals to address specific issues). Those with experience preparing couples may choose to adapt, combine, or reorder this outline.

Presenters

Presenters are people chosen by the couple to support and present them to the presider and the assembly during the marriage. Presenters may be friends, parents, family members, or drawn from the local congregation. This option gives a voice to important people in the life of the couple during the liturgy and enriches the experience for all present. Presenters can also serve an important role in supporting the couple before and after their marriage ceremony. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful to a couple starting life together. The couple, together with the clergy or lay preparer, should talk as soon as possible about selecting presenters, so that the prayerful work of the presenters can begin early on.

Two short handouts provided in this pastoral resource (one for the couple and one for presenters) detail the role of presenters and are intended for use at the conclusion of the initial preparation session. They are designed for use with “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage.” Congregations offering presenters for “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” or “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2” can use these handouts by substituting the text of the presentation from the Additional Directions (BCP p. 437; above, p. xx).

Session One: Getting to Know You and an Overview

This session focuses on getting to know one another. It also starts to address the details of the rite, offering the couple and the clergy person an opportunity to study the rites together, looking at their meaning and choices and affirming that the marriage blessing, grounded in God, is given through the Church. Some clergy, however, may prefer to do a very general overview of the rites in this session, then study them more intensely later in the process.

Addressing the practical issues of the marriage at the outset helps to build trust and allows the couple to open themselves to the substance of the next four sessions. By providing even a general overview of the rites, the preparer can address questions and alleviate anxieties about the actual day. The couple and clergy person officiating will need to decide, either in this session or later in the preparation, which rite to use.

Session One includes a great deal of material, some of which may be moved to another session.

Handouts for this session include:

- The liturgies “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” (BCP, pp. 422-32); “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage” (above, pp. xx-xx); “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 2” (above, pp. xx-xx)
- 2. *Declaration of Intention* (found at the end of this outline)
- 3. *About Presenters—For the Couple* (found at the end of this outline)
- 4. *Information for Presenters* (found at the end of this outline)

Outline of Session One

- Pray together.
- Get to know one another (varies as to how well the preparer knows the couple).
- Explore the couples’ religious backgrounds, their experiences with the church(es), and their reasons for being in this congregation.
- Reflect on the theological significance of the couple’s relationship. The *Declaration of Intention* and the marriage liturgies may be useful in this discussion. (This reflection might be moved to a later session.)
- Review and ask the couple to sign the *Declaration of Intention*.
- Walk through the marriage rites, raising theological issues and naming liturgical choices:
 - Discuss the eucharist as normative in the service. However, including a celebration of the eucharist may not be appropriate if only one member of the couple is Christian.
 - Emphasize the difference between a civil service and the ecclesial blessing that is part of the marriage service.
 - Answer general questions regarding details of the service and the Church’s practice.
 - Introduce the possibility of presenters.

At the end of the session, provide written handouts and suggest “homework” topics for the couple to think about for Sessions Two and Three:

- Families of origin and growing up in them

- What worked and didn't work so well in their families of origin (this topic may also influence work in Session Four)
- Family church/religious history as well as each individual's history—positive and negative—with the church/religion
- Marriages of family members, particularly parents
 - Parents' ways of dealing with conflict
 - Parents' styles of child-rearing
 - Family tolerance of children's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Session Two: Learning from the Past, Part 1

This session provides a time for one member of the couple to speak and for the other to listen. Session Two opens with prayer, then looks back to focus upon the relationship of one partner with his/her family of origin, including exploring the marriage(s) of his/her parents and siblings and, if possible, grandparents and close friends. This discussion includes what the individual would or would not replicate from the past in his/her own ongoing and future relationships, particularly the relationship that is to be blessed. In addition, the individual can look at levels of acceptance of his/her relationship by his/her family and at other issues from family of origin and childhood.

The guiding assumption underlying this analysis is that certain issues are replicated from generation to generation, and that, once the issues are identified, individuals can choose to continue those patterns or deliberately alter them. This session works most effectively if the conversation flows naturally, rather than following a rigid interview, and if it includes the following important areas:

- Family: number and birth order of siblings
- Money: its role and influence in the family
- Sex: attitudes in family of origin about monogamy, fidelity, and the role of sex in relationship
- Alcohol and drugs: their places within the family as children grew
- In-laws: relationship with in-laws and greater family
- Children:
 - agreement or disagreement between parents about child-rearing
 - the individual's feelings about being a child in his/her family
- Conflict: parents' methods of arguing and disagreeing.

As the conversation concludes, the preparer invites the individual to identify what he/she would or would not replicate in his/her own adult relationship with the life partner. Following that, the silent partner is given the floor to comment on what he/she has heard and learned, especially any surprises.

Session Three: Learning from the Past, Part 2

This session continues the look back by extending the chance for the other member of the couple to speak about his/her family of origin. Both members of the couple need the opportunity to explore the topics and to hear each other's stories so that each can learn and appreciate more deeply what the other brings to their relationship.

Session Three, which also begins with prayer, duplicates with the second person the process with the first from Session Two. If time permits at the end, the couple might discuss the impact of family history on their own relationship.

Session Four: Looking to the Future

This session, an opportunity to look at the relationship today and into the future, invites the couple to name areas in the relationship that appear strong and supportive while also opening a space to identify and address areas that may be problematic. Thoughts, questions, and new information from previous sessions may help determine where the couple is today and where their relationship and household may need attention in the future.

After opening with prayer, this session should include discussion of:

- The couple's relationship in general: in-depth exploration of where they have been and where they are now
- Role of sex and intimacy in the relationship (for example, potential changes of sexual behavior as a result of committing to a monogamous relationship)
- Role of alcohol and drugs in the relationship
- Money (for example, household finances and financial planning)
- Legal protections (for example, medical and financial durable powers-of-attorney, wills and living wills, insurance)
- Household roles (for example, who takes out the trash, who keeps the social calendar?)
- Communication:
 - How the couple talks things through
 - What happens when they disagree
- Concerns for the future
- Decision-making as a couple
- Dealing with families as individuals (one's own as well as one's partner's) and as a couple
- Support networks, now and in the future.

Session Four concludes with a discussion of the need for boundaries between generations so that the couples' life as a unit may be seen as distinct from older and younger generations.

Session Five: Liturgical Decisions and Wrap-up

Session Five, focused on the marriage service itself, is an opportunity to make choices for the liturgy, based on the discussion at the first session. The depth of this discussion will be determined by what was or was not addressed in Session One. In addition, as the final session, Session Five serves as a time to consider questions that may have arisen from previous sessions.

Outline of Session Five

- Pray together.
- Address questions and concerns regarding previous sessions and other issues that have arisen.
- Review theological reflections in light of previous sessions and what is to come. The preparer can help the couple connect the spiritual practices of their life as a couple and the “staging” of the service. For example, will they process into the service together or separately, or will they be already in the worship space as the liturgy begins? Will they sit together during the Ministry of the Word or across the aisle from one another?
- Discuss details of the service itself:
 - Scripture (which passages speak particularly to the couple’s life together?) and whether non-biblical readings may be included
 - Will the liturgy take place at the congregation’s principal weekly celebration? Is celebration of the eucharist to be omitted for pastoral cause?
 - Other liturgical choices, especially:
 - Which collect will be used?
 - For the Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage, which of the two vows will be used?
 - Will rings be exchanged, or, if rings have already been worn, are they to be blessed?
 - What music, if any, will be included? (The couple should consult with the congregation’s musician.)
- Discuss presenters and their roles in supporting the couple in the service and in their ongoing life.

In closing, the preparer can assure the couple that they have done hard and important work together, work that is a gift both to the preparer and to the couple. The preparer can express his/her eager anticipation of the couple’s marriage and of meeting their close and extended families, seeing them with their friends, and celebrating their relationship in the sight of God.

Handouts

1. *Declaration of Intention*
2. *About Presenters—For the Couple*
3. *Information for Presenters*
4. *Model Congregational Guidelines*

The *Declaration of Intention* requires the replacement of N.N. and N. N. in the first sentence with the couple's names.

Handouts 2 and 3 are designed for use with the liturgy "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage." These handouts may be modified if one of the other marriage liturgies is to be used.

Handouts 2 through 4 are samples that may be adapted for the use of a specific congregation. In these, "N. Episcopal Church" should be replaced with the congregation's name, and a similar change made for "Episcopal Diocese of X."

Handout 1
Declaration of Intention
(Canon I.18.4)

We understand the teaching of the church that God's purpose for our marriage is for our mutual joy, for the help and comfort we will give to each other in prosperity and adversity, and, when it is God's will, for the gift and heritage of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of God. We also understand that our marriage is to be unconditional, mutual, exclusive, faithful, and lifelong; and we engage to make the utmost effort to accept these gifts and fulfill these duties, with the help of God and the support of our community.

Signature

Signature

Date: _____

Sample Handout 2
About Presenters—For the Couple

At N. Episcopal Church, we consider “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage” to be a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by all the members of the Church. Just as those who are baptized are initiated into the full life of the Church, those who receive the Church’s blessing upon their marriage are embraced in a new way in the faith community.

The Marriage Liturgy

The presentation takes place immediately after the sermon, as follows:

The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them

Presider Who presents N. and N. as they seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

Presenters We do.

Presider Will you love, respect, and pray for N. and N., and do all in your power to stand with them in the life they will share?

Presenters We will.

Choosing Presenters

There are a variety of possibilities for choosing presenters who will stand with you and present you at the liturgy. It can be helpful to choose at least one member of this faith community to walk with you through this process. If you are new to the congregation, the priest (or other person designated) can help you discern whom you might consider. The selection of a couple mature in their relationship can be particularly helpful if you are just beginning your life together. Often, couples will choose their own parents, children, or other supportive family members to be their presenters.

Presenters can pray for you during the period of preparation before your marriage, keep you connected to the congregation, and continue to support you in your ongoing covenanted life together.

Finally, in choosing, remember that these people will stand with you during the liturgy and present you at this rite. Also remember that, immediately after you are presented, the entire congregation will vow to support you as you, in turn, become a blessing and bear grace to the entire congregation.

Because presenters serve an important role before and after the marriage, you and your clergy person should talk early about selecting presenters, so that your prayerful partnership may begin as soon as possible.

Sample Handout 3
Information for Presenters

At N. Episcopal Church, we consider “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Marriage” to be a celebration supported by the congregation, much as candidates for baptism are supported by all the members of the Church. Just as those who are baptized are initiated into the full life of the Church, those who receive the Church’s blessing upon their marriage are embraced in a new way in the faith community.

At the marriage, you present the couple to the presider and to the assembly, as follows:

The couple comes before the assembly. If there is to be a presentation, the presenters stand with the couple, and the Presider says to them

Presider Who presents N. and N. as they seek the blessing of God and the Church on their love and life together?

Presenters We do.

Presider Will you love, respect, and pray for N. and N., and do all in your power to stand with them in the life they will share?

Presenters We will.

As a presenter, your role begins even before the marriage. We encourage you to pray for the couple both privately and in the Prayers of the People at Sunday services during their period of preparation. You can continue to support their ongoing life by acknowledging the anniversary of their marriage and offering your presence whenever their household experiences times of difficulty or celebrates occasions of joy. If you are a member of the congregation, you also have a role in keeping them connected to others in the congregation.

As a presenter, you promise to support the couple as they become a blessing and bear grace to their families and friends, the Church, and the world. In this role, then, you are a witness to the blessing given and received in the marriage liturgy and carried forth by the couple into the world.

Sample Handout 4

Model Congregational Guidelines

NOTE: Most congregations adopt some form of marriage policy expressing norms and guidelines for couples preparing for marriage. All congregations may engage in a helpful and fruitful exercise to develop guidelines that reflect the Christian community in which they worship; the guidelines that are developed should apply to all couples. Obviously, such a policy is optional at the discretion of the clergy in consultation with the vestry or bishop's committee. As always with liturgical matters, final decisions are the responsibility of the clergy. Following is a model of a guideline that applies for all couples preparing for marriage. It may be modified to meet specific situations and needs.

Information for Couples Seeking Marriage at N. Episcopal Church

A. Introduction

The Christian community at N. Episcopal Church understands that relationships are complex and that making a lifelong commitment to a relationship through a marriage is a significant, exciting, and wonder-filled event in people's lives. We also believe that a Christian community that agrees to bless such a relationship needs to be intentional about supporting the couple as they prepare for the marriage and as they live out their lives.

We understand that committed, lifelong relationships, whether for gender-and-sexual-minority couples or different-sex/gender couples, are to be outward and visible signs of an inward, spiritual, and God-given love. In this context, N. Episcopal Church seeks to support all couples in their commitment to one another and to help make the love of God more visible for the whole community.

B. Guidelines

The following guidelines have been adopted by the lay and ordained leaders of N. Episcopal Church:

1. As required by the Canons of The Episcopal Church at least one member of a gender-and-sexual-minority couple must be baptized.
2. It is desirable that at least one member of the couple be an active member of this, or some other, Christian community. We hope this membership might include giving serious, prayerful consideration to supporting the congregation through time, talent, and/or treasure.
3. Approximately six months' notice should be given to allow for planning and pastoral preparation.
4. If the couple has no connection with N. Episcopal Church but wishes to have their marriage at N. Episcopal Church or to use the services of N. Episcopal Church's priest:

- they should be able to show that at least one of the couple has active membership in another Episcopal or Christian congregation;
- they need to complete marriage preparation with their own or other clergyperson or a qualified lay preparer;
- they might consider making a financial contribution to N. Episcopal Church in thanksgiving for their marriage and for the ongoing support of the Church, its ministry and mission. A creative formula to calculate this contribution might be to consider a tithe (10 percent) of the budget for the entire celebration. *[Clergy have discretion here, as resources vary greatly from couple to couple. Also, if a couple is returning to Church for the first time, an unconditional welcome may be the best pastoral response.]*

In all cases, it is important that all concerned comply with the laws of the state, the Canons of the Episcopal Church, and the canons and policies of the Episcopal Diocese of X as well as the directives of the diocesan bishop, including compliance with diocesan policies for cases in which the relationship is not the first marriage for one or both people.