**How to do Weddings and Funerals**

**Intro** – As a person ordained by our church, you are able to do weddings (the legal word is *solemnize* vows) because of your status as a minister recognized by our church. A wedding is the only thing you need legal standing to perform, because you are confirming that two people entered into a civil contract to marry. A funeral does not require any legal standing to oversee. Weddings and funerals come from friends and relatives who may ask you, or referrals that other officers of the church may refer to you.

**Weddings**

Lets’ talk about weddings first. The state of Pennsylvania has no test or standard which they require ministers to pass before allowing them to officiate a ceremony according to the customs of the religious institution or church. This is a light-handed governance based upon the idea that governments, from the earliest times when patriarchs ruled tribes, had some sort of societal rules which helped marriage be more than just a momentary sexual impulse. Jacob served a “week” of years to win Rachel’s hand. Jesus recognized the unspecified but obviously existing marriage standards of the Samaritans, who didn’t know God, when he talked to the woman at the well (she had been with five men but wasn’t married to any of them). Some form of government has always been there, probably set in place by God, to help stabilize the process of creating and raising children in human families. Pennsylvania laws serve the same purpose. It is interesting that “common law marriage,” basically just living together, is no longer recognized in Pennsylvania. Today’s Pennsylvania laws specify **who** may solemnize vows within the state:

**“*each minister, priest, or rabbi of any regularly established church or congregation, is hereby authorized to solemnize marriages between such persons as produce a marriage license issued by the clerk of the Orphan’s court.”***

In our church all elders, deacons, 5-fold ministers, and those with a limited or specialized ministry permitted by our church may solemnize wedding vows. In weddings, you function as a glorified notary public by hearing the couple make their professions to each other and signing the state’s forms stating that you heard them say so. Concerning what the couple must say, the only requirement is that

**“*it must be evidenced by words in the present tense uttered with a view to and for the purpose of establishing the relationship of husband and wife*.”**

So, in an entire wedding ceremony, the only legal necessity is the foregoing statement. All the rest of the ceremony is done to create a great memory for and ministry to the couple.

**Planning the ceremony**

1. **Meet** **the couple** – Are they legally and morally able to be married? *Whether a couple is legally able to marry* is a question solved by the courthouse where they apply for their marriage license. The Clerk of the Orphan’s Court will require that they present a divorce decree or similar evidence before they issue a license if they were previously divorced. The couple needs to apply for a marriage license at any courthouse in Pennsylvania. The license is good for 60 days. The state is really strict on this, so they can’t get it earlier than 60 days before the ceremony date and they shouldn’t wait any later than three days before the ceremony to allow for processing time. Be sure to tell them to bring the license to you at the rehearsal or before, because you must see it. Check the date to be sure it has not expired. If it has, you can do the ceremony. You’ll just have to have them get another current license and then do a short, three person recitation of vows in front of you, so you can legally file the return.

*Whether a couple is morally able to be married* is something determined by you and our church’s beliefs. God considers gay relationships sinful, so we do not believe that same-sex partners should be given legal status the same as heterosexual couples. We love gay people and invite them to our church, but for the purpose of changing their sinful ways to conform to the Lord’s standards. A second, and vaguer question of morality, concerns the reason for a previous divorce. Jesus specified that physical adultery is the only permissible reason for one spouse to divorce another. Paul added a second case, saying that if an unbelieving spouse left a believing mate, that the believing mate was not bound to the unbeliever. I have learned to be gracious in these situations, realizing that it in most cases the offended spouse is the one who has the evidence of adultery and that the matter is really handled between the offended person and God. I, the officiant, am not the judge. If the couple’s consciences are clear, in most cases I will serve them by solemnizing their vows. Even if a couple is not saved, I will solemnize their vows, as long as they are both not believers in Christ. If one is saved and the other is not, I decline because they will be “unequally yoked” (2 Corinthians 6:14). These are rare situations. Most couples have resolved their beliefs by the time you meet them.

Find out about *them.* How they met, what attracted them to each other, how long they have dated, how is their faith? Are they from large families or small, Christian or not? Do they have children? What are their hobbies, what do they like to do together? Do they have any prayer needs they would like you to pray for during the ceremony?

2. **Get the details** - It’s important to meet with the couple to establish the date, time, and location for the ceremony, as well as if they want a religious or non-religious ceremony. There is nothing wrong with a non-religious ceremony. You are simply providing a service to the couple, much like an appliance repairman, and have the honor of making their acquaintance. Keep in mind that there is no “official” ceremony for a wedding in the Bible. Ceremonies evolved within each culture and religion in the world, so we are involved in our Western Christian version of a wedding.

Go over the ceremony with them (sample ceremonies attached). There are multitudes of wedding ceremony ideas on the internet. Just be a bit careful when it comes to the vows. The couple can write their own, which I really encourage, but they must be sure to say words which comply with the statement required above. Carefully note everything they want, including how they want their names throughout the ceremony (Bobby or Robert, Betty or Elizabeth, etc.) and how they want to be introduced as you present them to the congregation (Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Robert and Julie Smith, Mr. and Mr. Robert and Julie Smith, etc.). Find out if they want any special actions done during the ceremony (giving flowers to the mothers, a moment of silence for a lost loved one, special songs, a sand ceremony, a unity candle, etc.) If it is a large ceremony, you’ll need to set a date for a rehearsal, usually the evening before the wedding. If the wedding is at our church, you will need to send the couple to:

* John Gaspich, our coordinator for special events (724-344-2305) and
* Jeff Woods, our sound system manager, for tech support and recording of the service (724-309-1593)

We ask for a $250.00 donation for non-members for use of the main auditorium ($150 for members) and an additional $150/$100 donation for use of the fellowship hall for a reception. John has the couple sign a simple agreement locking in the date. Jeff Woods negotiates his own fee for doing the sound, usually $50.00.

**3. Personalize it** - Once you understand what the couple wants, you’ll need to personalize the ceremony so it is just for them. No one wants to have a generic, one-size-fits all monologue for their ceremony. If they are Christians, it’s appropriate to choose verses from Scripture and have a short, informative teaching for them. A wedding sermon should be to the point, not a display of your eloquence, probably not longer than about 10 minutes. Here are some useful verses and textual points to go with them:

**Genesis 2:18, 24** – These verses are written for the man. He is to leave mother and father and cling to his wife, establishing a new household. A good marriage starts with a distinct new household, independent from the parents.

**Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** – A threefold cord is not quickly broken. This is an allusion to the making of rope. When a couple has a third person (The Holy Spirit) involved with them, it makes the strongest possible human alliance.

**Ephesians 5:21-end –** A real message of freedom and protection for the woman. Her man has the heaviest assignment here, giving up his life first, after which she becomes the beautiful, powerful person God intended here to be. Many people don’t understand these verses, remembering only the “be subject to” parts.

**1 Corinthians 13:4-8 –** A beautiful bit of prose, which is great to make a bit more practical. I like to add a great insight from a wonderful book, His Needs, Her Needs, by Willard Harley. Summarizing, I like to tell couples the five needs by gender covered in Willard’s book:

Her Needs His Needs

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Affection | 1. Affection (especially physical) |
| 2. Conversation | 2. A recreational companion |
| 3. Openness and Honesty | 3. An attractive spouse |
| 4. Financial Security | 4. A home that is a place of rest |
| 5. A Family Commitment | 5. Admiration |

The verses above are only suggestions, you’ll find many more within the Scriptures. Just keep in mind brevity, and your message should be something the congregation can learn from.

Since weddings are very creative by nature, you can find lots of books to give you and the couple creative ideas to make their wedding very unique and personal. I have officiated weddings at the top of a fire tower on Mt Davis, Pennsylvania’s highest point; on a dock on an Alaskan lake with a scuba diver emerging from the lake to take pictures; outdoors in parks; in the dark and cold with a flashlight in a small wedding chapel in mid-January; with ceremonies having dogs as ring bearers; and in the ballrooms of the most expensive resorts and hotels in the state, just to name a few varied settings.

**4**. **If warranted, do a simple ceremony** – This is probably what you’ll encounter most often. It’s just you and the bride and groom, or maybe a couple family members. Just assemble in your office, or their home, or wherever and, at the minimum:

* Pray
* Ask them the Questions from the question section of the ceremony
* Have them turn to each other and hold hands and repeat their Vows (phrases read by you and repeated by them)
* Have them exchange Rings if they have them
* Pray over them if they desire it
* Pronounce them husband and wife
* Have groom kiss the bride.
* Give them your congratulations
* Complete the paperwork

If the ceremony is larger and more complicated go on to step 5 below:

**5. The rehearsal –**  At your initial interview, request that the couple figure out ahead of time how they want the bridal party arranged (by height, by age, by family relationship, etc.). This will really cut down the time which the bride will have to spend making decisions at the rehearsal. Once all the participants arrive for the rehearsal, greet them and explain how you’ll conduct it. **Here’s a slick tip which has saved me much wasted time: have everyone assume the positions they will be in as if the ceremony is in full progress. Once everyone (bride, groom, parents, ring bearer, etc.) knows where they will stand, they can easily walk to it. You then dissolve the formation and send everyone back to the corners of the room from which they will enter.** The order to come in is usually this:

1. Mother of the groom and father of the groom are escorted in by an usher

2. Mother of the bride is escorted in by an usher

3. Pastor and groom walk in together

4. Best man leads the groomsmen in to their places on the groom’s side of the formation

5. Bridesmaids walk in one-by-one to preselected music

6. Pastor asks the congregation to rise as the bride and father enter

7. The bride and her father walk down the aisle and stop just short of the pastor and groom and the bridal march fades

**6. The Complex Ceremony –** On the wedding day,you’ll hopefully execute steps 1-7 above. The first thing the officiant does after the bridal march music fades is to ask “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” The bride gives her father a kiss; the father takes the bride’s hand and escorts her to the groom, giving her hand to the groom. The father then takes his seat by his wife. **Another tip: Dads are notoriously nervous, and forget this simple gesture about 50% of the time! You almost always have to nod, or gesture with your hand to get them to move.** The bride assumes her position by the groom and you are running the show from here!

You just stick to the ceremony script, having it folded open in your Bible. In this simple order you move it forward:

* Pray
* Have the guests be seated
* Greet everyone and thank them for coming
* Greet the bride and groom and spend the next 10 minutes just talking to them, imparting wisdom with warm and personal insights: what brought them together, insights from the Scriptures verses you’ll use, application of 1 Corinthians 13 (love chapter) etc.
* Ask the Questions. After the short sermon, transition to “Now, concerning what you just heard, I have some questions I’d like to ask both of you. I’ll ask you first, Bob.”
* Repeat Vows. After the questions are done, you have them turn to each other, hold hands, and repeat their vows to each other. Go slow and use the phrase divisions in the ceremony or divide up their own vows into phrases
* Exchange Rings. After the vows are completed, you can say “I understand that you have rings to exchange. May I have them please?” The best man or ring bearer usually has them. It’s good to untie them from the typical pillow before the ceremony so you’re not fighting with them during the ceremony. Have the groom place his ring on the bride’s hand and repeat the phrases in the ceremony very slowly. Have the bride do the same.
* Pray for the couple. After the rings are exchanged, invite the congregation to pray for the couple along with you, as you lay hands on them and speak blessings over them. I usually pray for their bodies, souls, and spirits, that they might have health, emotional richness, and find their spiritual place in the Body of Christ.
* Pronounce them Husband and wife: After the prayer, you are almost done. Summarize things, reflecting on how beautiful it was to hear them saying their vows, looking at each other, seeing the expressions on the guests’ faces, etc. “In as much as Bob and Judy have consented together in holy wedlock, before me, before God, and all you witnesses, I now pronounce you husband and wife”
* Have the groom kiss the bride.
* Turn them around and introduce them to the congregation: “ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to be the first person to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Smith!”
* The couple exits as the recessional music starts.
* After the couple, bridal party, and parents are cleared and down the aisle, thank everyone for coming and dismiss them to the reception at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
* You did it!! Relax!

**7. Execute the Documents –** After the ceremony, sit down with the license. It contains three parts: A certificate, which you type in and sign. This is the most nervous part of the whole wedding for me! It might be good to have a secretary do it for you. I have a suitable typewriter which can be used. The certificate has little legal value. It is a wall-hanging. The second part of the license is for the church records. It is embossed with a raised seal and has the official names and the couple’s previous marriage history on it. It has the date which the license issued and when it will expire. Use it to fill out the Certificate. *The third part concerns the most important responsibility you have concerning the license*. It is called the “Return of Marriage.” It must be filled in with legible printing, signed and mailed within 10 days, or you will be fined $50. The courthouses are pretty easy to get along with if this is late. They usually call to remind you. I fill the Return out immediately after the ceremony and take it to a mailbox immediately out of respect for the couple. Note: witnesses are not needed in Pennsylvania. The only signature needed on the Return of Marriage is yours. The bride and groom don’t have to sign.

Give the couple the completed, signed Certificate. Explain to them to call the courthouse in about 10 days. This gives the mail and the processors time to file it. The couple should ask how to get their “certified copies.” Each county is a little different. Some create an entirely new set of documents unlike the license. Others simply emboss the Certificate.

**8. Enjoy the Reception –** You willprobably be asked to pray over the meal at the reception. I like to refer to Jesus’ first miracle, turning water to wine, which was accomplished in a setting just like the reception. You’ll develop your own ministry for the time and circumstance.

**Wedding Vow Renewals -** These are very similar to weddings, usually held at some significant anniversary to commemorate the couple’s renewed dedication to each other. The ceremony is the same as a wedding, except that the

Verb tenses in the vows are changed to reflect the fact that the couple is already married and they are simply re-committing their loyalty to each other.

**Funerals, Memorial Services**

Funerals, like weddings, are special appointments made by God for the reaching of people with the gospel. I like to call both of them “Going Home Celebrations” if the deceased was a Christian. Usually, the term *funeral* is applied to a service which follows on rather immediately after a person’s death. A *Memorial Service* is what the service is called when someone is remembered some period of time after their death. Here are some pointers which will help you do well if you are called upon to be an officiant:

**1. Your presence is vital –** You’ll probably get a call notifying you of the death and the family’s desire to have you minister at the funeral. Either the funeral home will call you or the family will call directly. As soon as you can, visit them at their home and find out what they want. **It is not a time for preaching!** The best ministry is to “weep with those who weep.” (**Romans 12:15**) Listen, weep with them, comfort them, and suggest a format for the service when they are ready to talk. As in a wedding, find out important facts about the deceased. What type of a person was he/she? What good memories do they have of the deceased? What accomplishments did the deceased have? Did the deceased know the Lord, etc?

**2. The funeral service (long version) for a funeral home or church –** They will rely on you toprovide the outline. Here’s a simple one, adaptable to our church or as in many cases, the funeral home (see also the attached program): The funeral director will conduct the visitation, usually before the funeral, if the service is in a funeral home. If the service is in our church, the director brings the body in and usually lets you run the entire service, removing the body at the end. It is customary for the officiant to lead the body out, walking ahead of the pallbearers until the body is placed in a hearse.

* Pray.
* Welcome everyone, thank them for coming
* Invite them to testify later, sharing a good memory or a particular honor or thanks they’d like to bestow
* Read an opening Scripture. **Colossians 3:1-4** is a great one, which tells us to think on heavenly things. It is good to get everyone’s mind off the personal loss and grief they are experiencing and onto the freedom, glory, and excitement of the new life the deceased is experiencing.
* Read the highlights of the obituary. I usually just read born on\_\_\_\_\_\_, died on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, at the age of \_\_\_\_\_\_. Highlight some of the major accomplishments or loves of the deceased’s earthly life (church offices held, civic organizations, athletic accomplishments, number of kids, grandkids. Recognize the immediate family survivors (wife/husband, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, etc.)
* Songs are useful, inserted just about anywhere. Sometimes the family has favorite hymns or contemporary songs the deceased loved.
* Your chance to minister is the sermon. It should be short, hopeful, personal, and sincere. In most settings, I like to answer four questions: Where is the deceased? What is it like there? What does it take to get there? And how long will it be until we see them again. Here are some Scriptures which help to answer the questions posed above:

**Where is the deceased? / What is it like there?** – **Revelation 21-22** contains a description of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. This is the home of the Christian. It is a huge city, 1500 miles long, high and wide. We come and go from it to help Jesus rule after He returns. It is full of mansions, never needing light, because God is the light of the city. The description of the walls and gates is very detailed. Even if everyone knows that the deceased was not a believer, we are to exhort people to “judge not” because we do not know the person’s heart like God does. God is not willing that any perish (**2 Peter 3:9**), but that all come to repentance. All it takes is a brief instance of faith to be saved. Near death experiences (NDEs) are fascinating and hopeful to share if you can find credible ones. They give people a much more realistic picture of what dying, meeting Jesus, and entering heaven is like.

**What does it take to get there? –** Just a moment of belief, whatever circumstance God arranges, is all that is needed. Period!  **“**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (**Acts 16:30-31**) He has left evidence of Himself and His nature in the creation (**Romans 1:20**), so that men are without excuse. This means that it is possible for natives in remote villages in remote countries who have never encountered a missionary to be saved. They must eventually come in contact with other believers to experience the life of the Body of Christ, but they can certainly be justified just by a simple moment of belief. Being a good person does not get one to heaven.

**How soon will we see our loved one?** Bible prophecy tells us that we are generally in the Last Days. The formation of the last four great gentile kingdoms (a northern confederacy, a southern confederacy, Kings from the east, the kingdom of the beast) is a reality. It may be only a decade or two until God removes the church from the earth. (**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**) We’ll see our loved ones then.

* Ask for testimonies, shared memories, things the congregants appreciated about the deceased’s character.
* End with a song
* If there is an interment (a visit to a graveside, either to bury the body or bury the cremains) walk out to the hearse ahead of the body. You will usually ride to the grave with the funeral director. He will assemble everyone at the graveside.
* The main task at the graveside is to give the body back to the Lord who made it. I usually read parts of **1 Corinthians 15,** which talks about the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the body. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory, etc.
* Invite everyone to come forth and lay hands upon the casket, praying and thanking God for the body’s potential resurrection.
* Invite people to lay flowers on the casket as a goodbye gesture
* Dismiss everyone

3**. The funeral service (short version) for spreading of ashes, or burial of cremains –** This is the service you’ll probably be involved with most often.

* Assemble the group and pray
* Read Genesis **3:19b** (second half of verse) and **1 Corinthians 15:35-44 and 51-57** and explain the resurrection of the dead.
* Invite the family to place the ashes in a shallow grave and throw a few handfuls of dirt over the urn. Or, if they’d rather, spread the ashes wherever they wish.
* Give thanks for the Lord’s promise to raise the body again. Pray a blessing on the remaining family
* Dismiss everyone.

The funeral is just the starting point for ministry to some families. Your follow-up calls, invitations to church, offers of help, etc., may be the next doors God wants to open for the deceased’s family to find a new life in Christ.

**Conclusion:** Weddings and funerals are both ministries you are all capable of. Funerals and weddings come in all sizes and varying complexities. God will probably involve you in small, simple ones at first, but later in more complex ones. If a person asks you to serve them in either of these, please undertake it. I look forward to the day that most of our weddings and funerals (called sacerdotal functions) are done by deacons and elders, men and women, in varied settings, rather than solely by the five-fold ministers in our church within the church building.

Pastor John

Attachment 1 – Wedding Ceremony, Standard

Attachment 2 – Wedding Ceremony, Non-Religious

Attachment 3 – Funeral Service Program

Attachment 4 – Wedding Vow Renewal Ceremony