



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Can a civil marriage be blessed in church?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Can a civil marriage be blessed in church? Yes. In many parts of the world, a civil marriage, conducted in the presence of an authorized official of the state, is the legally binding form of marriage. Christians who desire to celebrate their marriage in the context of a worshipping Christian community schedule a second celebration in church.

In the United States, most states authorize ordained ministers (sometimes others as well) to act as the state's representative in witnessing a marriage and filing the requisite legal papers and certificates. This means that in addition to acting for the church, the ordained minister acts as the state's official witness. This legal role sometimes requires pastors to receive credentials from a state or county court or to register with the county clerk.

Those Christians who have chosen to be married in a civil ceremony by a justice of the peace or an official of the courts may seek to have the marriage recognized in a worship celebration. *Occasional Services for the Assembly* (pages 373-377) offers a rite for this purpose: Prayer and Blessing after a Civil Marriage. The notes on the service make it clear that the rite does not constitute a "remarriage" in any sense.

The pastor is strongly encouraged to discuss with the couple the nature of a blessing of a civil marriage, making it clear that it is not a remarriage. The understanding of marriage outlined in the minister's opening address to the couple would be a helpful starting point for such discussion.

Christians today understand that the man and woman entering into marriage marry themselves to one another by their exchange of vows. The civil official or the ordained minister is an official witness to that exchange.

The church also provides for a service for celebrating the anniversary of a marriage (*Occasional Services* pp. 378-381). An explanation for using such service can be found in the notes following the printed service.

When these services are set within the liturgy for Holy Communion, they become a wonderful way for the congregation to affirm and pray for the married couple. The practice also provides a way to bring a sacramental and corporate Christian context to marriage. As a part of worship, the marriage is not, as is so often the case, a matter of a celebration by invitation only. Rather, the congregation extends an invitation to the married couple to pray with the congregation and to do this in the context of Holy Communion.

In our complex and rich cultural context in North America, couples from differing religious traditions or denominations or even religions may also be looking for ways to affirm both their cultures and backgrounds. These services provide resources for use in such situations as well.

The church attempts to encourage careful planning and consultation as well as premarital counseling for those contemplating marriage, especially in the context of the church and its faith. Conversations with the pastor prior to making important decisions are a resource that should not be overlooked. Most pastors are only too happy to engage a couple in planning and conversation prior to these important and lifelong decisions.

RESOURCES

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Bockelman, Karen G. *Marriage: A Worship Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.

Other Resources

- 📖 Anderson, Herbert, and Robert Cotton Fite. *Becoming Married*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Revised January 2013

Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. www.elca.org/worshipfaq.

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.