



# ST. THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

## The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage

(rev. 13 September 2022)

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is one of the truly joyous ones for the Church and for two people seeking the blessing of God on their union as spouses. It can also be a time of confusion and false expectations. This Guide to the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church is designed to answer some of the most asked questions about marriage within the Episcopal Church in general and at St. Thomas' in particular.

### MARRIAGE IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Episcopal Church requires that at least one of the parties be baptized, that there be at least two adult witnesses, and that the marriage conform to the civil law and in accordance with the canons of the Episcopal Church. **Marriage ceremonies are conducted at St. Thomas' in accordance with the rites approved by the church.** It is a beautiful liturgy, crafted with care over time. The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage from *The Book of Common Prayer* has been the standard form since 1979. Since 2015, three alternate and gender-neutral rites of the blessing are available which closely follow the structure of the original. Since same-sex marriage is now the law of the land, we handle same-sex and opposite-sex marriages the same.

### BELONGING TO ST. THOMAS'

Since marriage is a sacrament of the church, our policy at St. Thomas' is to marry members of the congregation. Many people find that civil marriage is a more suitable expression of their vows. The Church fully recognizes civil marriage, and in many countries it is the norm. A civil marriage may be blessed by the Church later whenever it seems appropriate. Only when a couple intends to take on the exceptional obligations and responsibilities expected by the Church should their marriage be a Christian one.

If you are coming to us as non-members who are curious about the life of a worshiping congregation, we welcome you wholeheartedly and would like to introduce you to the many ways you can get involved at St. Thomas'. We are happy to help you engage all your questions.

### SETTING THE DATE OF THE SERVICE

Technically, the priest is not supposed to give consent to performing the service until after the canons have been fulfilled (e.g., pre-marital counseling). The date is subject to the schedule of the priest and the church. Because of the penitential nature of the season of Lent, it is not appropriate to perform weddings from Ash Wednesday until Easter. **Do not announce a date without the priest's agreement!**

## **THE WEDDING IS WORSHIP**

The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, and the alternate rites, are public services of worship in the Episcopal tradition. Therefore, the ceremonial customs associated with the worship of this church apply, especially those for processions, entering or leaving the church. A Crucifer is normally provided by the church. However, a Crucifer may be a relative, a friend, or anyone who is trained for this function.

Every church wedding is a public worship service. It is customary to allow St. Thomas' to publish an invitation to your wedding in the service leaflet on the two Sundays prior to the wedding. You are not required to invite everyone to the reception, of course, nor need you expect a flood of extra people at the ceremony. But neither is your wedding a private event. It is one more occasion for the congregation to celebrate together.

## **THE MARRIAGE LICENSE**

The couple getting married is responsible for fulfilling the requirements of the State of New Jersey to be married here. It is recommended that a wedding license be obtained and delivered to the church office two weeks before the wedding.

## **DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**

The Episcopal Church teaches that marriage is, by intention, lifelong and each couple signs a declaration of intention which affirms this teaching. However, divorce does occur in spite of the best and most solemn intentions. The Church regards divorce very seriously and encourages married persons to do all they possibly can to effect healing and reconciliation before divorce. When divorce does occur, the Church seeks to provide pastoral care to assist each of the parties during a most difficult and painful time of their lives. The Church allows remarriage after divorce, but the period of premarital preparation with the clergy may be a little longer. Written permission from the Bishop must be obtained by the priest before the priest is allowed to solemnize the marriage. **The request for the priest to officiate must be made to the Bishop not less than sixty days before the marriage.**

If either party has been divorced twice before, premarital counseling must be completed with a licensed marriage and family therapist. St. Thomas' will take no further steps towards your wedding until this process is completed and the therapist makes a report to St. Thomas' clergy.

## **PREPARATION FOR THE MARRIAGE**

While your wedding ceremony itself is very important, the development of a solid foundation for your ongoing marital relationship is of greater significance. Because we want to support your living into your wedding vows in an intentional and faithful way, the Episcopal Church requires pre-marital preparation of all couples. Pre-marital counseling should be coordinated with the priest. In some cases, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) will require several sessions before providing a general statement of support to the priest.

## **THE MINISTER**

Weddings in an Episcopal Church are conducted under the authority of the priest in charge of the congregation where the wedding takes place. Episcopal priests in good standing may serve as the primary officiant for the wedding. Clergy of other denominations may take part, but may not serve as the primary officiant. Please do not invite other clergy to participate unless you have made specific arrangements to do so with the priest.

## **THE EUCHARIST**

Because the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is the Sacrament of unity, it provides an exquisite context for the wedding service. You are encouraged to celebrate the Holy Eucharist in connection with your marriage. What better first act for a married couple than to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion together, with family and friends who celebrate the occasion with you! It is possible, however, to celebrate a wedding without the Eucharist.

## **BEFORE THE SERVICE**

It is our tradition that the congregation keeps silence before worship in order to prepare through prayer. Appropriate sacred or classical music may be played. A hymn or other sacred music may be sung or played by the musicians. The ushers may help worshipers to their seats. If the family of the bride and groom are not to be in the procession, they may be ushered to their seats prior to the beginning of the service.

## **THE ENTRANCE PROCESSION**

Since marriage is an act of worship, our entrance procession looks similar to our processions on Sunday. As the congregation sings a hymn or as instrumental music is played, the ministers of the service enter down the aisle from the back of the church. The use of a processional hymn of praise, or organ fanfare, is particularly encouraged to highlight the worship aspect of the service. Here is the order of procession:

- [Thurifer with incense]
- Crucifer with Cross
- Priest [and First Member of the Couple]
- [Torches]
- [Gospel Book]
- [Choir]
- [Parents of the Couple]
- [Lay Reader(s) / Chalice Bearer(s)]
- [Attendants]
- Maid / Matron of Honor and Best Man
- [Ring Bearer / Flower Girl]
- [Priest]
- The Couple
- or if the Father escorts the Bride, Father and Bride

The procession enters in a smooth and dignified manner as one act of procession. Usually we give the couple (or the Father and Bride) as much as half the aisle for their entrance at the end of the procession using the same music as the procession.

## THE READINGS

There will be between one and three readings. At least one will be from the Gospels if the Eucharist is to be celebrated. Suggested readings include:

### First Reading:

- Genesis 1:26-28 (Male and female he created them)
- Genesis 2:4-9, 15-24 (A man cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh)
- Song of Solomon 2:10-13; 8:6-7 (Many waters cannot quench love)
- Tobit 8:5b-8 (*New English Bible*) (That she and I may grow old together)
- Ruth 1:16-17
- 1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a; or 1 Samuel 18:1-4
- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
- Micah 4:1-4

### Second Reading:

- Romans 12:9-18
- 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Love is patient and kind)
- 2 Corinthians 5:17-20
- Galatians 5:14, 22-26
- Ephesians 3:14-19 (The Father from whom every family is named)
- Ephesians 5:1-2, 21-33 (Walk in love, as Christ loved us)
- Colossians 3:12-17 (Love which binds everything together in harmony)
- 1 John 3:18-24
- 1 John 4:7-16 (Let us love one another for love is of God)

### Gospel Reading:

- Matthew 5:1-10 (The Beatitudes)
- Matthew 5:13-16 (You are the light . . . Let your light so shine)
- Matthew 7:21, 24-29 (Like a wise man who built his house upon the rock)
- Mark 10:6-9, 13-16 (They are no longer two but one)
- Mark 12:28-34
- Luke 6:32-38
- John 15:9-12(13-17) (Love one another as I have loved you)
- John 17:1-2, 18-26

Appropriate Psalms include 65, 67, 85.7–13, 98, 100, 126, 127, 128, 133, 148, or 149.1–5.

## **FLOWERS**

It is the responsibility of the couple to contact a local florist and have them provide appropriate altar flower arrangements. “Flowers by Thomas” (856) 243-2621 is our preferred florist and can deliver without an appointment. The altar arrangements are considered gifts to the church in thanksgiving for the marriage and remain on the altar for the Sunday services following.

There is very little room for additional flowers in our church buildings. Persons in the wedding party may carry flowers or wear boutineers. If additional flowers are desired, it is suggested these be used at a reception only. Flower petals, confetti, birdseed, or bubbles may not be used inside the church building. No artificial flowers may be used.

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## **DECORATIONS & CANDLES**

One of the joys of liturgical churches is that they are already dressed up special! The church will be vested in white, with ample candles appropriate to the liturgy. Additional candles or decorations are not appropriate. A runner is not permitted. If a unity candle is desired, it should be used at the reception.

## **MUSIC**

The Canons of the Episcopal Church specify that the music used in all worship should be an offering for the glory of God and as a help to the people in their worship. Only sacred music is allowed at a marriage service. In addition, the traditions of the Church serve as a guideline as to the appropriateness of music selections. The Organist of St. Thomas’ will provide consultation regarding the possible choices of music suitable within the limits of Church Canon and tradition. The final authority for music is with the clergy as advised by the Organist. The couple should contact the Organist at least three months before the wedding date to consult about the music. Arrangements for soloists and other musicians must be made in consultation with the Organist. *Please note that we do not use Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” from A Midsummer Night’s Dream or the “Bridal Chorus” (“Here Comes the Bride”) from Wagner’s Lohengrin. Their use is an invention of Hollywood filmmakers in their quest for music with no historically religious use. In the Wagner opera, the new bride betrays her husband's trust and is abandoned by him. The Mendelssohn march was written for the marriage of a young woman to a satyr – half man and half horse!*

## **THE REHEARSAL**

Every wedding requires a rehearsal to provide an opportunity for all of the participants to learn their parts in the service. This is a time for the priest to meet the wedding party and to prepare them for the liturgy. The time for the rehearsal is set in consultation with the priest and is usually the day before the wedding at 4pm. The rehearsal typically last about an hour. If a rehearsal dinner is planned and the priest and spouse are expected to attend, it is customary to send a written invitation (likewise for an outside wedding reception).

## **THE WEDDING COORDINATOR**

The Priest is responsible for the rehearsal. There is no need for a professional wedding coordinator during the rehearsal or the marriage ceremony itself. Although an outside wedding coordinator may consult with the clergy and guilds, he/she does not have authority over ritual matters. A wedding coordinator (often the maid/matron of honor) can be a helpful coordinating point of contact.

## **PHOTOGRAPHY**

Photographs are an important part of most weddings, and St. Thomas' has a particularly beautiful building. But Holy Matrimony is a Sacrament: flash pictures during the service are distracting and, therefore, inappropriate and prohibited during the wedding ceremony. Likewise, parishioners are not permitted to shoot photos or video with any device during the ceremony. One video of the wedding is allowed, from a fixed recording location so that the recording is unobtrusive during the service. If the couple has an official photographer, that person may shoot non-flash photos from the back of the church with a silent shutter during the ceremony. Artificial light for photography is inappropriate for a wedding. The key is for the photographer to remain unobtrusive. Failure to observe these rules may result in an interruption of your ceremony and removal of the photographer. This includes professional photographers as well as guests.

The priest will be happy to help stage photos before or after the ceremony if it is desired to re-create scenes from the liturgy.

## **FACILITIES**

The nave at St. Thomas' (our primary worship space) can comfortably seat 60 people and feels full at 75. Up to 100 may be crammed in with difficulty. Streaming online, or to a secondary seating area, is available upon request. Any additional decorations or items brought into the nave for the marriage liturgy must be removed within 30 minutes of the ceremony's end.

The Parish Hall is available for receptions. The use of alcoholic beverages must follow the parish policy. Cleaning service is not provided: you must arrange for thorough cleaning of the hall, bathrooms, and kitchen immediately following a reception.

There is no particular "bridal lounge" available at the church building. Space in the parish hall (half a block away) may be used by the wedding party. This space should be cleaned up immediately following the liturgy.

**FEES**

There is no cost for the use of the church or for the services of the clergy person. However, donations to the parish (suggested: \$150 for a wedding, \$300 for wedding and reception), and to the Altar Guild (\$100 is suggested) are always appreciated. An honorarium for the clergy (\$150 is common) is not expected, but appropriate.

Donation Recipients \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The fees associated with a wedding at St. Thomas' follow:

Crucifer \$25 \_\_\_\_\_

Servers (opt.) \$50 for two \_\_\_\_\_

Sexton \$50 for service only  
\$100 for service and reception \_\_\_\_\_

Organist (opt.) \$150 organ and/or piano only  
\$200 if soloist/choir is added \_\_\_\_\_

Soloist (opt.) \$75-\$150 per soloist (see Rector/organist) \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL \_\_\_\_\_

Please submit a copy of this form with your check made out to *St. Thomas' Episcopal Church*. Either a single check or multiple checks may be written. Payment is customarily made by the best man, handed to the priest at the start of the rehearsal.

FOR OFFICE USE: Checks Requested by \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_

Usher: \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  
Crucifer: \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  Paid  
Servers (2): \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  Paid  
Musician: \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  Paid  
Sexton: \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  Paid  
Soloists: \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  Paid  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_  Notified  Paid

**DECLARATION OF INTENT**

Each couple intending marriage in the Episcopal Church is required to sign a copy of the following declaration:

“We, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
desiring to receive the blessing of a Lifelong Covenant, do solemnly declare that we hold this covenant to be our lifelong commitment as provided by The Episcopal Church gathered in General Convention. We believe that our covenant is intended by God for our mutual joy, for the encouragement and support given one another in daily life and changing circumstances, for bringing God’s grace to our community, for the deepening of faith as we experience God’s love in our love for one another, and (if it may be) for the physical and spiritual nurture of children. This covenant shall be nurtured and characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication, and the holy love which shall enable us to see in each other the image of God. And we do engage ourselves, so far as in us lies, to make our utmost effort to establish this covenant and to seek God’s help hereto.”

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date