

Choosing a Wedding Officiant

by Rev. Jeanne Lloyd, M.Div., M.A.¹

It is exciting and can be a bit nerve wracking to plan a wedding. So many things to do, without a lot of experience to back you up. You have a lot to think about in terms of what to wear, where to have the ceremony, what food to serve and so on . . . Choosing an officiant is on your list as well. I've written this article to help you understand the variety of things you might want to consider when choosing an officiant. I hope it helps the process go smoothly for you.

So, let's start . . .

Usually, you have two basic choices when choosing an officiant for your wedding. You may be married by an ordained clergy person who represents a particular faith tradition or you may be married by a (secular) justice of the peace, who is appointed or elected by the town. In some states, a friend or family member may also apply to marry you.

Question: *What Makes a Wedding Legal?*

Answer: *The Officiant (as governed by State Law)*

According to the dictionary, an officiant is someone who is authorized to perform a religious service, or other ceremony, and by their presence sanctions the event in the eyes of the religious tradition they represent. In the United States, ordained ministers who meet State standards, are also authorized to act as agents of the State to officially sign your marriage license, thereby making your marriage legal in the eyes of the State and by extension, the federal government.

Who can act as an officiant?

- **Ordained Ministers.** When couples choose to be married by a minister they are usually looking for a ceremony that: (a) makes reference to 'the holy'; (b) calls them to live by religious standards that promote compassion toward one another and in the larger world; (c) includes meaningful ritual(s) and music in the ceremony; (d) is larger and more expansive, including many family and friends of different faiths; and/or (e) grounds them in the spiritual promise that they are committing their lives to the welfare of the other person and possibly, future children.

Ministers are usually ordained by a church/denomination following completion of four years of post-graduate study at an accredited seminary culminating in receipt of a Master of Divinity degree and successful completion of 'orals' conducted by the denomination's credentialing body. With ordination, the minister is granted the authority to represent the denomination on all religious matters and the State for the purpose of signing marriage licenses. [Beware of "Internet ordinations" acquired by someone who has simply paid a \$5 fee.] The minister of your family church (if you have one) is an obvious choice for conducting the ceremony and may be required if you intend to use the church building for your wedding. If you are planning on being married in a church where you are not a member, the church should be able to provide you an approved list of recommended religious officiants (often starting with the minister of that church). If their list is not suitable, you may ask whether you are allowed to have an outside wedding officiant conduct your ceremony in their church building?

¹ "Unitarian Universalist Wedding & Civil Union Ceremonies." This article draws on an interview conducted by Sarah Feldberg with Rev. Lloyd, published in "I Do" Magazine, Valley Advocate, August 3, 2008, and includes additional information from Rev. Lloyd.

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- **Judicial Appointees.** Justices of the Peace are commonly authorized by municipalities to take jurisdiction over extremely limited judicial acts, such as joining persons in marriage and taking depositions. These acts are considered “secular” or “civil” and such officiants are widely available. A list of Justices of the Peace can usually be found at the town or county office where you get your marriage license. In addition, all judges in Connecticut may legally join persons in marriage in their jurisdictions, as well as family support magistrates, and state referees.² If your wedding must be conducted quickly, check with the town hall. They may be able to conduct a brief ceremony within a few days.

FAQ for Choosing an Officiant

Ideally, couples will begin looking for an officiant for their ceremony, one year in advance. If you plan to choose a minister to marry you, and the minister serves a church (as opposed to a hospital, the military, etc.), their church schedule is often tightly set for the entire church year, starting in September. For the same reason, the church building schedule, which may be independent of the minister's schedule, should be booked as early as possible.

Some Questions to Ask a Prospective Officiant:

General Questions for All Officiants:

- Are they duly authorized to officiate at marriage ceremonies on behalf of their faith tradition and State? What is their background?
- Can you write your own vows? Or, will they custom write the vows for you?
- Will you get a chance to read or hear your ceremony before the wedding day?
- Is premarital counseling required? If so, what is its purpose and what does it involve?
- Can they provide references?
- Are they planning on or expecting to attend the reception?
- Do they have a ‘back-up system’ in place, in case of illness or emergency that prevents them from performing your wedding at the last minute?

Questions for Ministers:

- Will they marry you even if you are not members of their congregation or denomination?
- If you and your fiancé are of different faiths, or one of you is not religious, does their religion allow them to marry the two of you to one another?
- Will your non-religious friends be allowed to participate in the ceremony, including offering readings, singing, and (if appropriate) taking communion?
- If you are of different faiths and want two different officiants (each representing one of the religions) are they willing to work with another clergy person? If so, how will that effect the terms of the contract?

The Contract

- Do they have a contract? Are there hidden charges? It is good to be cautious and thorough. Nobody likes surprises or misunderstandings, after the fact. The National Association of Wedding Officiants states, “Everything should be laid out from the beginning and agreed upon. Make sure the price is inclusive (travel, time, script writing). Most officiants request a non-refundable deposit, this is normal and it covers their time in the event your ceremony is

² <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2005/pub/Chap815e.htm>

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cancelled or moved to another date.”³ Interestingly, very often the officiant’s fee is the least expensive part of your special day. Though the ceremony itself may be conducted in ½ hour or so, a ceremony that is conducted by a minister is probably custom tailored to your values and traditions, requiring 12-15 hours of preparation in meetings, writing the ceremony, travel, coordinating the rehearsal and finally, conducting the ceremony. Thus, ninety percent of a minister’s time is spent *in preparation* for the ceremony.

Qualities and Common Practices of Ordained Unitarian Universalist Ministers When Officiating a Wedding

Unitarian Universalism is an ancient faith tradition that played an important role in establishing principles of democracy and religious tolerance in America (some of the early U.S. Presidents were Unitarian). As Unitarian Universalists, we respect the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and therefore respect and support each person's journey to seek and find for themselves their spiritual grounding for their lives. We believe in civil rights for all people, regardless of color, gender, gender preference, ability, ethnicity, religious background, etc., and we make every effort to put our beliefs into practice. Further, we expect people to treat one another with respect for each other's values so long as those values call them to live in wholesome and healthy ways with one another. Ultimately, our religious values call us to work together with others to bring healing and justice to this world.

Not surprisingly, Unitarian Universalism is very often a place where people of different faiths meet, and sometimes fall in love. Often, we are the only religious faith that will marry couples of different faiths. The minister will work with couples to incorporate into the wedding service those values that specifically resonate for each of them, drawing from premarital counseling sessions to illuminate those values. The purpose of this counseling is not for conversion to Unitarian Universalism, but to assure one another that the couple’s separate values and life goals are congruent with one another.

Thus, as you may well imagine, weddings conducted by Unitarian Universalist ministers come in all sorts of formats and themes. A typical Order of Service for a wedding ceremony is likely to be about a half hour long with the following outline: Processional, Welcome, Declaration of Intent, Minister's Charge to the Couple, Vows, Rings, Prayer, Closing, Pronouncement, and, Recessional. Because we believe that revelation is not sealed nor owned by any particular religion and that each person has a "spark of the divine" within them, sacred texts may draw from many sources including (among others) the Hebrew and Christian Bible, the teachings of Jesus and/or Buddha, Celtic traditions, poetry, and philosophies that promote caring and compassion between the couple and for other people. Specific rituals within the wedding ceremony may draw respectfully from several faith traditions, subject to approval by the couple and minister, and are sometimes conducted with clergy from another faith tradition. Because our theology includes the concept that the Sacred is found in nature as well as in church, Unitarian Universalist ministers are usually amenable to performing weddings in a variety of outdoor settings.

Fees for performing on-site church weddings for Unitarian Universalist church members are minimal. Fees for non-members are established individually by each minister, and can fluctuate widely, depending on the distance traveled. Typically, this fee does not include the fee for the musician, use of the church building for the ceremony, and/or reception. The fee for the minister to perform a wedding ceremony for a non-member may range from \$200 - \$800 or more, depending on how customized the ceremony is, how far the minister has to travel, and whether there is a rehearsal or not. For this fee, the

³ The National Association of Wedding Officiants “Tips”.

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minister often provides two or three counseling sessions, assists the couple in discerning their spiritual/philosophical values and grounding, writes the wedding ceremony, assists the couple in making arrangements for the ceremony, conducts the rehearsal, conducts the wedding ceremony, and travels to the wedding site for the rehearsal and again for the wedding.

A Personal Note from Rev. Lloyd

Each wedding ceremony is unusual in its own unique way. Yours will be, too. I like to include special rituals that may reflect the ethnic culture of the couple, or their unique qualities.

I remember with fondness the wedding of a Korean woman (whose father was a Presbyterian Elder) who married a man who did not belong to a particular faith. I researched traditional Korean wedding rituals, and found that it is customary for the groom to give his future mother-in-law a goose for the wedding. The groom in this case, was a third generation manager/owner of a brass factory, whose grandfather had made a brass goose 60 years earlier. Early in their ceremony, we therefore created a suitable time for the groom to give his grandfather's brass goose to his soon-to-be mother-in-law.

In another wedding, I married a woman of French/German descent to a man who is Russian. Both were extremely articulate in several languages, and their guests included people of several European backgrounds who also spoke several languages. The ceremony therefore included French and Russian readings (in the original language), as well as the shawl of the groom's Russian grandmother, given to the bride. Tender moments such as these may be created and inserted into the ceremony, so long as they do not undermine the sacramental nature of the ceremony.

Very often couples choose officiants and/or ceremony sites because they are inexpensive and/or because the space looks nice. Truthfully, these are insignificant factors compared to making sure that your ceremony reflects those values upon which you, as a couple, will build your life together. When looking at the broad arc of your lives together, your wedding is simply the beginning, but an important milestone, nonetheless. It offers you the opportunity to mark a time and place, where you will start your journey together, carrying forward into your lives the spirit and commitment of your vows to one another.



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