



Tying the Knot: Marriage Matters



Hearty congratulations on your engagement and every best wish as you seek to celebrate and cement your love for one another. You have chosen to enter the estate once described by Martin Luther as 'the nearest thing to heaven on earth'!

A Church wedding is a joyous mix of the traditional and official on the one hand and the personal and intimate on the other. First and foremost it is an act of Christian worship involving praise, prayer and the reading of God's Word. Many of the elements familiar to the Marriage Service are very ancient but not particularly Christian in origin: the giving of consent, the joining of hands, the exchanging of vows and the giving and receiving of rings. Although the clergy are licensed by local government to oversee the legal formalities, on the day it's you who marry one another. Everyone else is present simply to witness your oral contract. The primary role of the clergyperson is to call down God's blessing in the name of the Church.

This booklet is designed to help you decide whether you would like to approach the parish clergy about the possibility of getting married in St Columbanus. If one of you has been married before you are asked at this point to get in touch with the clergy directly and they will give you a leaflet specially tailored for you. Enquiries about Marriage are always welcome, whatever your personal situation and they are best initiated with the clergy on your way out of Church on Sunday. It is you we would rather speak to by the way, rather than well-meaning parents or other relatives. Please don't be shy!

Getting married: are we mad?

We all know the statistics. The increase of selfishness and infidelity, coupled with modern portrayals of marriage on the big screen and small, have made society pretty cynical about Marriage. Yet there is no denying that for the vast majority of people Marriage is still very much the ideal for those who desire a secure and steady basis, not only for their own relationship, but also for any children they might hope to raise. Not that Marriage is an exclusively Christian institution and an increasing number of engaged couples happily go the civil route. They can write their own vows and, effectively, define the terms of their relationship in terms of what Marriage means for them. While others go through the motions of making the traditional sickness and health promises, in reality they have a much more 'fluid' notion of what they're getting into. At the end of the day they don't consider themselves bound by what they are saying, at least not in any way that could be described as permanent.

And they shall become one

In one sense everyone has their own idea of what Marriage is about but for those who want to get married in Church it's different. There is and always has been a distinctively Christian view of Marriage. The Church of Ireland Prayer Book describes it as a permanent union of two people who love each other. The Introduction to the service lays out a Scriptural understanding of marriage as part of God's creation and a holy mystery. It goes on to say that Marriage was ordained so that husband and wife can comfort and support each other through bad times as well as good times. The joy of a Bride and Groom's bodily union, it insists, will strengthen the union of their hearts and lives. In a Christian understanding, Marriage remains the safest and richest spiritual space for the raising of children. These are the kind of elements on which Christian Marriage lays stress and it is for you to decide whether or not you subscribe to them.

Church or Registry Office?

These days many are perfectly content to leave God out of their relationship and they are entirely free to do so. It can never be right for a couple to be pressurized into getting married in Church, just to please one or other set of parents. However, the very fact that you're reading this booklet probably means that the idea of getting married in Church has a draw for you. Your dream may be for a quiet affair involving just the two of you, your respective witnesses and a clergyman (the legal minimum). Perhaps you're planning a gathering of the clan, long-distance relatives and friends flying in from around the world. Either way, you want to explore the undertakings involved in a Church wedding. You have come to us either because St Columbanus is the place to which you now belong or it is the Church in which you have grown up since childhood.

But what if you have fallen away from Church and no longer worship there regularly? First of all, the Church is God's House, not yours, ours or anyone else's. It is not something to be 'hired' by those who feel like using it for a joyous but ultimately serious spiritual occasion without any real understanding of Christian teaching on the subject of Marriage. If a couple want to be married in Church then it should be because they realize that they are taking vows not only for life but for better or worse. They want to make those vows in the face of Almighty God and in the full realization that that it is only with God's continued blessing that they can make the best go of things together. Of course you don't need to wait until you're dressed up in white veils and monkey suits in order to begin to seek God's blessing on your relationship! Accordingly, the clergyman who first meets you will ask you to sign a straightforward Promise Form undertaking to do two things.

Firstly: to try to get to Church for worship together each week. It's very nice that your mother has been Churchwarden or that your father reads the lessons but you can't expect to trade on their goodness, especially as you step up to the plate in your own right as an adult to make serious public commitments. Not that it makes any difference if your own parents never come to Church at all – it is you we are primarily concerned with in this instance, you and your own responsibility towards the God who gave you life, and the God who gave you your relationship. To put it simply, to be married in Church is to be married on God's terms, not our own and not those of the world around us. We hope no one would want to abuse a privilege for the sake of a few pretty photographs and fairy tale memories.



Secondly: to set aside a short time each day (as little as two minutes) when you will pray for each other and know that each is remembering the other in the presence of God. The pressures bearing down on married life in our generation are extremely great. Whoever we are we need to acknowledge that it is only through God's power and guidance that we can make any sort of real and lasting happiness out of life. As a Church, that is the happiness we want for you above all else; but like everything else that's truly valuable it has a cost. No doubt these few paragraphs seem rather blunt and a bit demanding. Yet as the Church sees it, those getting married are setting out on a new spiritual journey and as all those who have ever set out on a journey know, the hurdles and obstacles are never far away.

No one 'needs' to get married in Church. The truth is, fewer and fewer couples are choosing to do so. This means that those who opt for a Church service these days are actually making quite a statement. First of all, if you think about it, you are saying very directly to one another, to your friends and families and to the world, that you believe in God. More even than that, you are also saying that getting married is not a journey you can travel on your own and in your own strength. Boil it right down and a Church wedding is about asking God to bless your relationship. To your own true love for one another you are seeking to add the truest love of all: the love Christ showed on the cross. It's that sacrificial love that the Christian Scriptures use as a picture for Holy Matrimony and without it, both as an example and a source of strength, no marriage will ever reach its full potential.

Perhaps you're still not clear which way to go? The list of FAQ's which follows may shed some more light on things for you. It might also help for you to take a closer look at the service in the green Book of Common Prayer on page 416. Alternatively get in touch for a chat with the parish clergy – they will always be pleased to make a time to see you.

What if we live in another parish?



Normally, only couples who are part of the parish family may be married in St Columbanus. In other words if you are not yourselves members of the parish we will be glad to welcome you as new members. If you live somewhere else and belong to another Church but for good reason wish to be married in St Columbanus, perhaps because you have strong family ties to Ballyholme, you will be asked for a letter from the church you attend locally to confirm (1) that you are committed members there, and (2) that we have the permission of that minister for us to conduct the wedding in Ballyholme. (The parish clergy have a standard letter that they will post out to your minister once you give them details.) This is not just a matter of professional courtesy between clergy but if you live somewhere else the Ballyholme staff will not be in a position to offer follow-up pastoral care. The fact that you were baptized in St Columbanus or that your parents were married there is not in itself a compelling reason and it in no way gives anyone a 'claim' to be married there when their turn comes. The rules which bind all Church of Ireland clergy do not give them general licence to marry anyone who does not live within the boundaries of their respective parishes.

What if we're new to St Columbanus?

We were all new to St Columbanus once upon a time! For many people thinking about a church wedding can be a way back into the Spiritual life of the parish, a time of seeing the value of faith in a fresh way and of acknowledging what was good and true in the values of Christ imparted by well-intentioned parents the generation before. Also, many new couples join us as members at the point when they get engaged and we are delighted to welcome them. All we ask is that a reasonable pattern of regular worship be established over a period of months.

Fixing a date



While we understand the need to make bookings and arrangements in good time, especially with families and friends often travelling a long way to be present, the Parish cannot 'hold' a date for a service unless the couple (or at least one of them) are regular members of our Sunday congregation. Since most of our weddings take place on a Friday or Saturday in one of the summer months your first preferred date may not always be workable so please speak to the clergy before setting your hearts on a day that may suit you and your family but simply may not be possible for us. Other weekdays are often more readily available. A service of Christian Marriage is rightly seen as a special gift for people who do their best to be committed to Christ and His Church. It is never a right to be demanded for its own sake and we would ask that a new couple respect the sanctity of what they are asking for. Please bear in mind it is not unusual for a date to be agreed one or two years ahead or sometimes even longer.

Marriage preparation

All locally-based couples are asked to make time to attend a three session Marriage Preparation Course run by an organisation called Christian Guidelines. In more than ten years of asking people to attend this course so far no couple has reported dissatisfaction with the material offered. The format is not interactive: you go as a couple and leave as a couple. Northern Ireland being Northern Ireland, chances are you will know some other faces when you get there but there is no group-work as such. You will be asked to discuss things as a couple and hopefully you will go home with something practical to talk about. The emphasis is not directly spiritual. The issues explored concentrate on the nuts and bolts of your relationship with a focus on communication and dealing with differences. The consensus seems to be that while couples may arrive feeling nervous and sometimes a little sceptical, they find the wisdom offered both valuable and practical. As you'd expect the attitude of the individual couple is the key. There is a cover charge to pay (£60) and you will need to book a place (02891 468846). Dates and venues are available on the web www.christianguidelines.org/marriage/. For couples based across the water there is a similar course co-ordinated centrally by a well known Anglican Church in London, Holy Trinity Brompton. It's called the Marriage Preparation Course and it is now widely available up and down the country and offered by an increasingly large network of churches: check out the marriage preparation course on www.relationshipcentral.org.

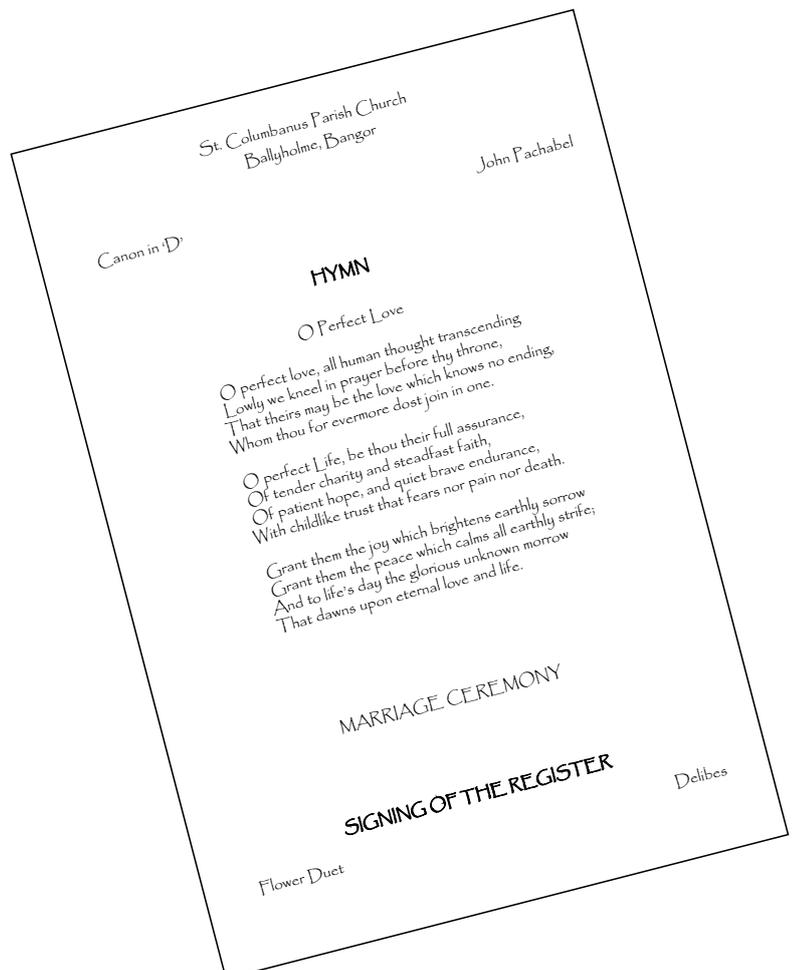
The paper work

In the first instance, contact the Registrar of Births, Deaths, Marriages and Civil Partnerships in Bangor Town Hall (www.northdown.gov.uk or telephone 02891 270371) for advice about opening hours and what they need you to bring. You will have to call at the office in person with specified ID and an administration fee so it is always worth phoning first – to save yourself two trips. They will issue you some blue forms and these need to be signed by whichever member of the parish clergy has agreed to conduct your service. Providing a couple has been faithful in attending Church and has arranged to attend their Marriage Preparation Course the clergy will duly give their written agreement to perform the ceremony – although it must be understood this does not constitute a binding legal undertaking (to allow for the fact that circumstances change eg clergy do move on periodically). The couple return these blue forms to the Town Hall and are given in exchange the all important 'Marriage Schedule'. It is this piece of paper which must be signed and witnessed at the wedding itself. Crucially, to make your marriage legal, this document will need to be returned to the office which issued it (by the couple or their family) within three working days of the service.



The Order of Service

The clergy person who signs your blue form will be the one to help you with your Order of Service and you should arrange to meet with them to look at options, to agree a final draft and to cast a proof-reading eye over the text before you print it off. While both the 'old' and 'new' Church of Ireland marriage services are available, most couples these days choose Marriage Two from the green Book of Common Prayer (page 416). You will find a template for your service on the 'Marriage' section of the Parish website. You will need to choose at least one Bible reading, either from the list suggested or another passage that's personal and precious to you. If you are choosing one Bible reading only, then it should be from the New Testament. If there is another reading or a poem you would like to include (as well as the reading(s) from Scripture) it will need to be in keeping with the principles and spirit of Christian marriage so as a courtesy you are asked to show it to the clergy. It is always lovely to ask special friends or members of your family to read the lesson(s) and in choosing who to ask do bear in mind the stress and pressure there can be on such highly charged emotional occasions! Holy Communion may also be celebrated as part of the Marriage Service and couples should liaise with the clergy if they wish to explore this option.



Booking the Organist

It falls to the couple to make contact with our Musical Director Ian Bell and the best time to do this is in Church after Sunday service. If Ian is not available on the day to play for you himself, he will direct you to someone else who is but it is your responsibility to 'book' that organist and to pay them for the service (see Fees). If you plan to make alternative arrangements for the music (perhaps you have a talented friend or relative you want to play or sing, or maybe you want to hire a quartet or use CD's) you will need to speak to our Sexton Ann Browne. Ann will advise you on all matters relating to access to the Church building, and where your musicians should set up their equipment and she will explain the possibilities and limitations of our PA system. Once the service proper has begun, only sacred music is appropriate.

Choosing the hymns and the music

Most people remember the hymns they sang at their wedding for the rest of their lives. It's important to pick hymns or songs that you both like and that mean something personal to you. The red Irish Church Hymnal offers you more than 700 to choose from though it may be you have one in mind from some other source and that is equally good. It is normal to sing one at the beginning, one at the end and, ideally, one in the middle. The purpose of the middle hymn is to break up the words of the service. It follows immediately after the marriage ceremony itself and gives everyone a chance to breathe a sigh of relief after the formality of the promises and the rings.



It makes sense to choose hymns which you feel most people will know and be able to sing. So far as walking in and walking out goes (the 'processional' and 'recessional') our Musical Director will be happy to make suggestions.

The rehearsal

To acclimatize to the Church, this will usually be arranged for after a Sunday service in the final run up. As many of the Bridal party as possible (Bride, Groom, Best Man, Bridesmaids, parents and readers if possible) should come to the Church service on the Sunday and the rehearsal afterwards. It is always disappointing if your guests cannot bring themselves to make it to the service itself before or after the rehearsal but all you can do is ask them.

Flowers and access to the Church



As a general rule, less is more when it comes to flowers in St Columbanus. Again, Ann Browne our Sexton will be on hand to advise on what vases and pedestals you can borrow. Ann will also help you with access to the Church for visiting florists. For your information, the Church is open on weekday mornings (except Public Holidays) from 9 to 12.30 and you and your florists are free to come and go as they please, or to meet Ann for a chat by prior arrangement with her. It has become the tradition in Ballyholme that wedding couples leave two of their floral arrangements in place for our Sunday services. If you plan to remove all your flowers straight after the service, families are asked to give a £25 gift to buy a replacement bouquet for the Sunday.

Photographs and videos

Your official photographer and/or videographer is free to record all the highlights of the service. They are welcome on Church premises with the permission and on the authority of the presiding clergy person. On the day they will be asked to make every effort not to cause a distraction during the ceremony itself and – most importantly of all – not to move around physically once the



worship has begun. So far as your guests are concerned, once the Bride has made it to the top of the aisle and the service is under way the congregation are asked not to take photographs or use video cameras until after the final hymn and the signing of the register. Once the Bride and Groom are making their way back down the Church, guests are welcome to snap all they like. Please note, if you are hiring your own musicians for the service they may charge you an additional copyright fee where their performance is being recorded on tape or video.

What time should the service begin?

No doubt you have found yourself as guests at a wedding where there's felt like quite a lot of waiting around. Since it will turn out to be the fastest day of your lives our advice is always to begin as early as you can. Bear in mind that all of your guests will have set aside the day to be with you and some of them will have travelled a very long way to do so. 12 noon or before is not too early. In the shorter days of winter you will be keen to maximise the daylight hours you have for taking photographs. Couples must also bear in mind that sometimes in St Columbanus it is necessary to schedule two weddings for the same day, one after the other.

What time should we arrive for the service?

The Groom and his entourage should arrive at the Church at least half an hour before the service begins. The Ushers will want to be there before the first guests arrive. The soap-opera custom of the Bride turning up late is becoming increasingly unfashionable. Couples should not lose sight of the fact that their day begins with divine worship in the house of God. On a simple practical level it is very much in your interests to arrive on time: arriving late only eats into what we have already stated is the fastest day of your lives. It also unsettles everyone who will be waiting in Church for the service to begin: Groom, Guests, Organist and clergy – some of whom may well have other appointments and duties to attend to – and especially parents and young children. Brides should please do their best to arrange to arrive at Church on time. Being so early that you need to sit for 10 minutes in the car park of the Royal Ulster Yacht Club really would be better than arriving 10 minutes late to Church. After the Bride makes herself ready and some preliminary photographs have been taken in the porch, there will always be a token of lateness – a good compromise!

Confetti

We know that this is a traditional part of the festivities when the bride and groom leave Church for the first time as a newly married couple. We have no desire to rob anyone of their exuberance but would ask respectfully that nothing be thrown until your guests are off Church grounds! Before the service begins the officiating clergy person will ask that your guests hold back on the confetti until they are on the other side of the Church gate on the Groomsport Road.

Tea and coffee after the service

Providing the busy Parish Centre diary allows it, we will be happy to organise a small reception. Please phone the Parish Office and ask to speak to our Pastoral Assistant Karen Baker to discuss what we can offer you and how much we will need to charge.

Disabled access, car parking & toilets

There is graded slope access to the Church itself all the way down from the main Church car park. This is located behind the Church and the Parish Centre and easily accessed from Grove Park. There are some parking spaces marked for disabled drivers immediately adjacent to the Parish Centre. Providing we know we need to, we will be happy to reserve space for any wedding taxis outside the Church gates on the Groomsport Road. Parking for other cars on the Groomsport Road is always limited and visitors to the area probably won't be familiar with the layout of Ballyholme so you might like to direct your guests to the Parish Centre Car Park. On the day, the Parish Centre itself will be open and Ladies, Gents and Disabled toilets will be available there.

Are there any charges or fees?

There are no charges as such. Weddings are part and parcel of Church life for faithful parish families. As with Baptisms and Funerals, since Christian Marriage is for those who belong to the parish as members and give regularly to our running costs anyway, the clergy would ask not to be offered any 'payment' for conducting the service. Unlike some other Churches, fees for 'occasional services' do not make up a separate element of clergy stipends in the Church of Ireland so there is no need to remunerate the rector or curate. However, unlike the clergy, the salary the parish pays to our Organist and Sexton takes no account of 'occasional services'. Accordingly, there are only four Church-related items to allow for on your wedding budget and you will probably find that in terms of your overall outlay they will turn out to be the smallest items of expenditure.

Organist: £100

This is a set fee and ideally should be paid in advance of the day itself.

Sexton: £40

A wedding can require our Sexton to be present for at least three hours on the day itself – and very often right in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. They are 'around' all through the service (at the door and operating the PA system) and then tidying the Church afterwards.

Marriage Preparation Course: £60 (payable to Christian Guidelines at the first session)

Flowers: £25 – only if you are removing all your flowers from Church after the service

Who do we speak to, to get things started?

The first thing to do is have the Bride-to-be flash her engagement ring to the parish clergy on your way out of Church some Sunday morning. After a first meeting to talk through the preliminary practicalities a number of follow-up conversations will unfold as the months pass by and as the big day itself draws closer.

**For all follow-up enquiries, to speak to our Organist, our Sexton,
our Pastoral Assistant (about a reception)
or to arrange a time to meet with a member of the clergy
please call the Parish Office
02891 274912**