

Ours wasn't a particularly religious household. I was raised to do good to others and to behave decently. I've never gone to church. I think I'm a spiritual person in my own way - though I'm not sure what I believe about God. Organised religion has such a bad name these days, So why bother with going to church?

You'd only bother if you were convinced it matters.

Well, now I'm an adult and the love of my life wants us to be married in church. Both our families are pleased with the idea, but neither of us has been christened, or goes to church. I asked my parents why I wasn't christened and they said it was because they wanted me to make up my own mind about it when I grew up. Why do people have to be christened to marry in a church?

It's usual that one or both partners are christened. After all, it is a ceremony for Christian people, and christening is the main sign of someone having a Christian identity, no matter how often they attend church or practice their religion in a committed way.

In way, I can't think of anything more beautiful than marrying in church, but I feel I'm being pretentious, hypocritical, because, to be honest, I've never had to think about christening before, any more than I've thought about getting married, until recently.

You're not pretending you love each other are you?

No, we've been together for several years, and lived together on and off. Now we want to invest in one home to share, and start a family. We've had our ups and downs, but we know we want to be together for good, and we want both our families to know that.

Both your families know about your relationship?

Yes, we've visited each others' parents together, even

separately. And our parents all met for tea when we graduated, but they live so far apart you can't really say that they've properly met - and then there's the grannies and aunts and uncles and cousins - some have and some haven't. That's why we want to put on a proper celebration to have them all meet and start getting acquainted.

So, one way or another, a big party is in order.

Yes. We think we can afford it. We want to afford it. It's just the ceremony part that's the problem. When several of our mates got married in the register office, it all seemed so empty and spare. Someone said afterwards that people are forbidden to do anything religious, or pray during a civil ceremony. That seems odd to me. If a couple wanted something religious, they'd have to slip it in before or after, when the registrar is not around. It's a bit bizarre, don't you think?

For the past 200 years state law has dutifully provided a completely secular alternative to a religious wedding ceremony, and is determined to keep them separate.

We both know this lovely church. We can imagine beautiful music there, and bells announcing to the world that we've tied the knot for good. We really do think love is forever. Sometimes this 'death us do part' thing you hear about troubles me, even though I'm not too sure about what 'forever' really is.

We experience change in so many aspects of life, I guess 'forever' is about things that don't change even though we change.

Yes, something like that.

Churches are supposed to be about getting in touch with whatever it is that lasts 'forever', so maybe it's not so hypocritical to want to get married in a church - somewhere that takes 'forever' seriously, rather than in

a register office, that's only concerned about 'now'.

You think so? But what about this christening business? What's that got to do with getting married? Why do churches have these rules?

You can get christened at any age. Some churches only christen people old enough to answer for themselves. Not all churches have these rules. But in the same measure, not all churches make it possible for you to be married there without first going to the register office or having a civil registrar present. Those that do make it possible are Anglican churches, which were marrying people before civil weddings even existed, and Anglican tradition, since ancient times expects at least one of the couple to be christened.

Well, my partner wouldn't want to. His family would see that as a betrayal of their tradition and culture, though they are tolerant enough to accept that we might not want to get married in their customary ways. Both sets of parents are respectful of their traditions, but also open minded.

That doesn't matter. If neither are christened, whatever ceremony you do, it cannot really be called a Christian ceremony. Marriage is made by a couple committing themselves to each other publicly. Their faith describes what kind of marriage it is - and it could be all sorts of things. A marriage is first and foremost a mutual legal commitment. It can be blessed by prayers of any kind, including the prayers of the Christian marriage service. In fact you can go to a register office to get married and still have a full service of prayers and vows in church.

But nobody does that do they? My cousin would say it's not a proper wedding at all unless it's done by a Vicar.

Yes, that's silly old assumption. The Vicar has legal authority to be the wedding registrar when he performs the authorized religious ceremony. The Vicar can also

hold the same ceremony of prayer and blessing for a couple who've been married in a register office. In fact, that's normal practice outside the UK in European countries.

Would a Vicar do a ceremony for a non-Christian couple then?

It's quite common for people who never go to church and don't really believe to ask for a church wedding and have one because they were christened by their parents and fulfil the residency requirements. They claim rights to a religious ceremony that exist under civil law.

And Vicars don't mind? Isn't that a bit of a mockery?

In principle they could refuse to do it, but would have to allow someone else willing to do it instead. Most welcome the opportunity to work with couples on celebrating their marriage with as much or as little faith as they have, in order to encourage them to do their best.

And if a couple weren't christened, like us?

Well, that may well depend on the couple and on the sincerity of their reasons for remaining not christened.

Well, as I said, my partner has religious reasons for not being christened at present. But that leaves me doesn't it. I'm not christened because, with the best will in the world, it didn't matter to my parents to insist on it for me. But I am now free and old enough to choose for myself, and that would make a difference wouldn't it?

Yes, Christian tradition says that if a Christian marries someone who doesn't share the same faith, it is nevertheless to be recognized as Christian marriage. One person holds the Christian faith, in a sense, for both, as an act of love for them.

It makes a church wedding possible on a technicality, but that still smacks of hypocrisy to me.

But have you really considered what else being christened might mean? It might have something else to offer you, something else to say to you about that experience of wanting to love someone 'forever'. Isn't that worth thinking about? Especially now.

Well, I suppose so.

What you need to do then, is talk to an Anglican minister, learn a bit more about what christening could mean to you, not only for the sake of getting married, but for the rest of your life and what you bring to the children you want to have.

Sure, but I might be expected to adopt all sorts of weird beliefs and be obliged to do things that I find creepy in order to get christened. And if I thought it all through and didn't feel ready to make whatever commitment it involves, what then?

I think you'd find clergy respectful of that decision and willing to go ahead with your wedding in any case. It's thinking it all through sincerely and openly that matters most, just as you have done in coming to the point of commitment with your best beloved.

I'd better do some finding out then.

I wish you all the very best in exploring.

Any questions or comments
arising from this leaflet?
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Christianity for 21st century people

7. Why do non churchgoers get married in church?

The film 'Four weddings and a funeral' stimulated popular interest in having a church wedding among those not raised in Christian tradition, and unfamiliar with religious practices. Some are prompted by witnessing someone else's wedding to consider how the deeper meaning of their own relationship might find better expression than in a register office ceremony followed by an expensive party.

Is all this really driven by a desire to imitate celebrities?

Is it possible to find meaning in an antique ritual when you don't pray or attend worship?

Here, two friends talk about getting married.

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