

## weddings and blessings – the unitarian way



“UNITARIAN WORSHIP LEADERS ENCOURAGE THE PARTICIPANTS TO EXAMINE THEIR OWN MOTIVES AND EXPRESS A ‘HOLY ACT’ IN THEIR OWN WAYS.”

how do **unitarians** say ‘I do’?

Unitarian services involve many of the elements normally associated with church weddings. They may entail the exchange of vows and rings. They might also include prayers and music. But they are different in several important ways.

Unitarians do not view wedding ceremonies as sacraments. This word, from the Latin for ‘holy act’, means an ‘earthly and visible sign of a spiritual reality’. Marriage in mainstream denominations is seen as something that is ordained by God but enacted on earth.

By contrast, Unitarians emphasise that marriage is a freely chosen act by two individuals in relation to their communities and their own ideas about spiritual meaning, rather than an act of conformity to religious codes.



### why marry in a **unitarian** church?

Recent years have seen an explosion in the popularity of weddings that don’t follow the old choice between registry office or parish church. It is now possible to be married in a number of sites, including stately homes and castles. But many people feel that a secular service in one of the new sites lacks a spiritual dimension, while the ancient rites of many mainstream churches are too restrictive and not reflective of the personally held beliefs of the participants. That’s why a Unitarian service is becoming such a popular way to celebrate this important act.

“UNITARIANS EMPHASISE THAT MARRIAGE IS A FREELY CHOSEN ACT BY TWO INDIVIDUALS IN RELATION TO THEIR COMMUNITIES AND THEIR OWN IDEAS ABOUT SPIRITUAL MEANING, RATHER THAN AN ACT OF CONFORMITY TO RELIGIOUS CODES.”

Based on our long tradition of reliance on reason and conscience instead of holy books, marriage in a Unitarian church is a matter of adding a spiritual dimension to a legal act. Because of this, Unitarian worship leaders encourage the participants to examine their own motives and express a ‘holy act’ in their own ways. Couples are actively encouraged to decide the form of language and the elements to be included in the ceremony.

### same sex blessings?



Many of our churches are pleased to conduct blessings for couples of the same sex, either as a complement to a legal civil union or simply as a way to celebrate a relationship. Information is available from Essex Hall (see overleaf).

“READINGS FROM WALT WHITMAN OR KAHLIL GIBRAN MIGHT REPLACE VERSES FROM THE BIBLE OR THE KORAN.”

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## you decide

On first contact, many couples are relieved to find that there are no tests of faith to authenticate their ceremony. Often people who have been divorced, or couples coming from different religious traditions (Anglican and Jewish, for instance) are fearful that they will be turned away. The worship leader will only want to be sure that both parties have thought seriously about their marriage and wish to celebrate it in a spiritual context. Because we believe in the right of each person to determine their own religious beliefs, there are no tests to pass, and no 'right answers' at all.

The worship leader will assist in constructing a meaningful form for the ceremony, encouraging the participants to choose their own music, readings and vows. These may come from many religious traditions or from none. Readings from Walt Whitman or Kahlil Gibran might replace verses from the Bible or the Koran. There are two short phrases which the state requires to be used in each ceremony, but all other elements are open to discussion. If the couple wish, suggestions and guidance from the worship leader are available.



## what about the law?

Weddings in England and Wales must take place in a licensed location. In Scotland and Northern Ireland the laws concerning venue are more liberal, and can even happen outdoors at the discretion of the authorised person. If a couple wishes a wedding blessing, following, for example, a ceremony in a registry office, then most worship leaders are happy to lead a service anywhere that appeals, including the garden of your home.

## getting in touch

Many Unitarian congregations have an authorised person who can help with specific questions. You may also wish to contact our headquarters (see below).

You will find that a Unitarian wedding is a liberating way to celebrate a vital rite of passage. Why not get in touch?



**Published by The General Assembly  
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Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY

**tel:** +44 (020) 7240 2384;

**fax:** +44 (020) 7240 3089;

**email:** [info@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:info@unitarian.org.uk)

**websites:** [www.unitarian.org.uk](http://www.unitarian.org.uk); [www.unitariansocieties.org.uk](http://www.unitariansocieties.org.uk);

[www.nufonline.org.uk](http://www.nufonline.org.uk); [www.icuu.net](http://www.icuu.net)

Written and revised by Art Lester 2008

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