

The Wedding Program

When I became a pastor, in my training, we never even talked about the practical things like a wedding program or actually meeting with a couple that's going to get married and what do you actually do. What are the questions? How do you do that? A lot of it was find a mentor somewhere. So you try all of that. But I remember the struggle at first of trying to figure out how you actually do this. How do you do a wedding program? What do you do? What's included?

I think the first thing you have to think about is kind of who you are, the tradition that you're from, what you're comfortable in terms of doing as a wedding ceremony. And you sort of develop that canon—I'm going to call it canon, your own wedding canon—first. How do you see a wedding? What's your tradition? What is your local context, your local community? How a wedding's done in America is often very different than how a wedding is done in Africa or Asia or Europe. Each place, sort of the local Christian body has sort of come together and they have sort of like how they do it here.

Now what I'm going to do is talk about what I would use. In fact, I've given a sample PDF and a Word document of Pastor Henry's canon, sort of what I do, how I think of weddings. Now, understand that people come to you and there will be changes. But I always like to believe that you got to know what you feel comfortable with to be able to communicate as a leader. Now that doesn't mean you bully over whatever they want to do. But it sort of helps to go into talking with a couple knowing what it is you believe a sample ceremony looks like. I'm going to talk about as if this is what makes sense to me. I want you as a leader to develop what your canon if there's something that you can use from what I do, praise God. I'll be happy to share it. But understand. Develop your own wedding canon.

So, what would I do to basically get a program together, a wedding ceremony? Well, I would hold a meeting at least two months in advance if possible. Now sometimes they will just get married and you meet one week in advance or someone's traveling. I understand that. But I find that if you hold a meeting two months in advance, what it does is there's not the pressure of the wedding happening next week and I just find that everything flows better.

Now, what's the agenda of the meeting? Well, first of all, you want to share the outline and content of what you're comfortable doing first. Now, why do I say that? It's because if you just go the other way and say, "Okay, what do you want?" In early minister, I did stuff like that. We had all sorts of bunny trails and there was even conflict between the bride and the groom because basically the bride and groom

don't know really what they want. They might know one thing. We want sand instead of candles. Well, great! Fine. But they don't really know all the things that go into a wedding ceremony, so you come forward first with basically your sample outline.

After you do that, again, you look at the sample outline that I use, then you can share that with the couple and ask if there are any changes that they can perceive. You'll find that most of the time they will be so happy with what they have seen that they'll adopt most of it with a few of those added changes that just kind of make it personal for them.

Get the details. After you sort of go through some like your ceremony and program and so forth, start getting details. How many people are standing up and what does that mean? Hey, do the parents all get along? Will they actually sit together? In the western culture, many times people are getting married and there's been a divorce. So you have to figure out where the parents are going to sit and where things can happen that does not create conflict on their wedding day.

What type of feel does the couple want? Traditional, contemporary? Those are different feelings in the west. Traditional will be the traditional music, and then in the lighting of the unity candle for instance they might sing the Lord's Prayer in their traditional style. Or contemporary. Might be a contemporary Christian song that's sung or there's a flavor of music as the processional occurs.

When you get the details, you talk about what time and you talk about why. In the west, you might say, "Well, our gathering time is three." And that might go on the program, and three might be an awesome time because that's the time when the hair can get done for the gals and the guys and it's not too late on a Saturday for the evening or a Sunday. Talk about time. Even such issues as "Well, if we say three, will your family get there by three in a way that we can start by three thirty, or is your family a prompt, on-time family and three is three?" Those are all part of those details that when you talk about when you're planning everything, it goes a lot smoother on the wedding day.

What about family volunteers doing the reading or are part of the ceremony? You might have the general ceremony down and you can figure it all out. But there's always what about a scripture reading? What about a family volunteer? What about a song? What about a solo? What about the whole question of musicians vs. canned music? In places that have computers in the back of the church or sanctuary, you can do the whole thing canned. But what about the debate?

Here are some of the things that I've observed during lots of weddings is that a lot of times you can put a canned music and somehow a flower girl won't do what she's supposed to do and it takes longer.

The music stops. So I always recommend couples to use live musicians because they can react and play the verse again. Even such questions as what about videotape or photo? What's comfortable for the bride and groom? These are important types of questions. This is a great time to get the exact pronunciation of the names. I would say get it as soon as you can so it gets into that noggin, that brain of yours as to how to pronounce the name.

This question, are there any health issues at the ceremony for anybody? Do you know of anybody who is prone to fainting? What about the bride and groom, if the bride and groom are just open to a longer wedding, a shorter wedding? What are all of those issues that affect the health of everybody in so far as they know?

Now, when you're putting the ceremony together, it's often at times ask questions about certain grief issues and address them. You might find that one of the parents are having a really hard time letting the young lady go or the man. Those are just issues that you can talk about and how at the wedding those issues might be addressed. Even setting the expectations. Like for instance to say your dad may really cry, or one week before the wedding your father could act really strange, young lady. And she can look at this.

Or even things like in the last three weeks before the wedding, you may not even feel like you love each other anymore just because all of the stress that's going on. Even talking about money issues. Encouraging them t don't spend all your money on this day. Think of it in a sober way, in a sober judgment and think about being a steward. Now if they really want to spend their money and they have it, then on the other hand, it's their money. But you're trying to be the sound in the permission place that says, "Look, the most important thing is you're married before God."

This is often the time to get into any other pastoral care types of issues, any other questions. And ask do you have any questions about the ceremony, about getting married, about your family that you as a pastor can help out. Now, when you meet with them, you're going to talk about methods issues and you ask a question about "Do you have a favorite verse?"

Message length. Up to ten minutes is where it is right now sort of in the west, and you can go five, ten minutes. I'll tell you. In the west at least, long messages are not considered helpful right now. So I would say ten minutes maximum, maybe fifteen. Bit five to ten minutes in at least in America is really considered perfect right now. Wherever you are, find out what the message length is appropriate for this couple?

When you're putting that message together while you're talking to them, this meeting about the ceremony, already when you asked about the verse and message length, already be looking for an angle. What I'm going to do is I'm going to upload a wedding message that's about five minutes of a real ceremony that I did, and you can click on it and see sort of how I processed a wedding angle and how I took this couple's favorite verse. It was about giving thanks and all things and you can see how I would do a wedding message.

As we're thinking about putting together a ceremony, the thing about it is it's about meeting with the couple. It's about forming relationships, asking questions. It's about putting together what is appropriate to serve the couple that we are performing the ceremony for. It's a time off to build relationships for future involvement in the church. So as you put together the ceremony, remember the forest from the trees. Don't be that perfectionistic person who is uptight about every detail to the point where you put stress on yourself and the couple.

Instead, take that opportunity to allow them to have a wonderful day on their wedding day. And yes, you will deal with getting it right and you will deal with being very strong and how you will pay attention to details. But set the mood as one of how do we make this day special and how does the personality of the ceremony reflect you, reflect wonderful wedding tradition, a family culture. You have an opportunity to put together something special that will bless the lives of the young couple that God has brought before you.