

# Universal Wedding Service

*Written & compiled by Ana & Tod Gobledale*

## Information for the Minister or Officiant

The following wedding ceremony components have been used in weddings held for same-sex couples over the past twenty years. Some ceremonies were held after legalisation, some before (in church services not recognised by the government authority). In all cases, the focus is the same: two people publicly declaring their love for one another and taking marriage vows.

Feel free to use this service in whole, part or changed as it best suits you and the couple being married. Many parts of the service components are applicable for heterosexual couples, also.

## Order of Service\*

Welcome  
Opening Prayer  
Reading  
Reflection  
Words of Intention  
Reading  
Charge & Questions to the family  
Marriage Vows  
Signing of the Marriage Register/Certificate  
Exchange & blessing of rings (or other symbol)  
Pronouncement of Marriage  
Blessing  
Sending forth

**Welcome** – Choose one of the following two options.

**1. Welcome for a couple who have been awaiting legalisation recognizing their right to be married**

Family and friends of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, welcome to this exciting, auspicious and long awaited occasion. Welcome to those who have walked from nearby in (name of town) and to those who have travelled from places far beyond. Welcome to those who have, with \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, waited for more than a decade to come to this wedding.

We come to celebrate, honour and respect the love of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ as they make their vows and promises to one another, as a couple, and as a family, before one another, before God, before us and before the law (one might name the local/federal legal body recognising same-sex marriage, e.g. of England, of Scotland, of South Africa, etc) as witnesses!

**2. Welcome – simplified version**

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_'s families and friends, welcome to this exciting, exotic, auspicious occasion.

We come to celebrate, honour and respect the love of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ as they make their vows and promises to one another, a new couple, a new family in our midst.

## Invocation

I invoke the mystery that is LOVE to bear witness to our bold and joyful witness, and to bless \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ as we bless them today.

## Opening Prayer

Please join me in prayer.

Mystery and Power, Gentleness and Joy, we gather to celebrate your gift of love and its physical presence among us embodied in the love of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_. We delight in the ways you have touched **our** lives with a variety of loving relationships. We give thanks for all the ways we have experienced love through the care and affection of the people who have loved us.

We rejoice that finally our society has made the decision to recognise such undeniable and unstoppable love between two people, as that between \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, as something to be respected and celebrated—true and equal in the eyes of the law.

Even as we celebrate love, we remember how too often we have failed to be loving, times we have taken for granted, even hurt, the people for whom we care most. When we have neglected and strained the bonds that unite us with others. Help us find forgiveness and reconciliation, and renew within us an affectionate spirit.

Enrich our lives with the gracious gift of love so that we may embrace others with love. May our participation in this celebration of love and commitment give to each of us a new joy and responsiveness to the relationships we cherish. Amen

**First Reading** -- Choose one of the following 3 readings.

### 1. *Corinthians 13:1-8, 13*

Hear these famous words about love,  
from Paul's letter to the people of Corinth,  
May we find relevance in this ancient wisdom.  
Paul writes:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,  
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.  
And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.  
If I give away all my possessions,  
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.  
Love is patient; Love is kind;  
Love is not envious or boastful, or arrogant or rude.  
It does not insist on its own way;  
It is not irritable or resentful;  
It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.  
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.  
Love never ends.  
But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;  
As for tongues, they will cease;  
As for knowledge, it will come to an end.  
And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;  
And the greatest of these is love.*

Here ends the reading. May our hearing be blessed with understanding.

2. **The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams**, a selected passage

*Ideally, read directly from the children's book.*

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“REAL isn't how you are made,” said the Skin-Horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become REAL.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin-Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are REAL you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin-Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

3. **Sonnet XVII by Pablo Neruda**

*You have become mine forever.*

*I do not love you as if you were salt-rose,  
or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.*

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret,  
between the shadow and the soul.*

*I love you as the plant that never blooms  
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;  
thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,  
risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.*

*I love you without knowing how, or when or from where.*

*I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;  
so I love you because I know no other way than this:*

*Where 'I' does not exist, nor 'You,'  
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,  
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.*

**Reflection** -- Choose one of the following 2 reflections.

**Reflection 1: Love and Commitment**

Ah, the mystery of LOVE.

Dostoevsky writes: “Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to the love of dreams,” and the love of romance novels, we might add.

Love: harsh and dreadful... who would want it? Can real love, love in practice, costly love, be desirable?

Well, obviously it is, otherwise you would not be standing here, the way so many of us have stood before you. \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, you follow where others have led, parents, siblings and friends. LOVE has brought you here.

Yet, the mystery of LOVE, REAL LOVE in practice is a harsh and terrible thing.

For REAL LOVE in practice explodes the assumptions we have about what “our ideal” — child, parent, lover will be like.

Love in practice invites us to “cross-over,” and stand in the shoes of the one we love, especially when they step out of our dreams, our romance novel, our fairy tale for them, and enter into the reality of the world around them, our real world.

The mystery of LOVE, “When someone loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, not just to toy with, not just for fun, or for their own self-satisfaction, but really loves you, then YOU become real.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, you enter into this relationship with the promise to love each other for a long, L—O—N—G time, because in that love you have for one another YOU become realised as a person. You become the person that LOVE meant you to be.

Does it hurt? Does becoming realised as a person, does becoming your real self hurt? Does loving for a long, LONG time hurt? asks the Rabbit.

Sometimes. Some of the times... but you work through those hard times, through, around, over, those hard times of hurt because love is the greatest of all things.

Ah, the mystery of LOVE, sweet LOVE.

Emily Dickinson brings a thought to LOVE’s mystery. She writes, “That LOVE is all there is, is all we know of LOVE.”

LOVE is all there is.

What love joins together may no one separate.

**Reflection 2: Love cannot be chained!** --for a couple waiting, perhaps for years, for their love to be recognised within a legal marriage.

Today we stand in a circle of love – family, friends, betrothed.

In most weddings, we glibly say, “Marriage is a gift from God.” But through harsh and cruel experience, we have been taught, we have learned, we have seen, that marriage is an entitlement, coveted and controlled by governments and voters.

But hear this, as we stand here today God’s truth is breaking through, the truth of Love that cannot be chained, the truth of community that will not stand by, the truth of goodness that will moan and groan until it breaks free.

Let no one break asunder that which God has joined together. Today we put a seal on a love blessed by God, by whatever name you would call that God – love, mystery, eternity, the cosmos, the force, the power we can never understand, the power we can only experience through the Love we experience.

Today we assert that indeed Love is more powerful than hate. That Love is a universal gift, showered upon all people, like a winter’s snow or summer rain.

While some would attempt to build bigger dams and control that flow, love is a power to be reckoned with, a power that will not be dammed up, that will not allow itself to be shut up in dark places.

No, love will seep out, will swirl through the air, will continue to assert itself until the world stops just long enough to recognise it in its full glory, between \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (*Insert first names of another same-sex couple known to the marriage couple, if friends have preceded them in legal marriage*), between lovers old and young.

Love is a gift. Marriage is a gift, but not from the state. Love is a gift from a power that knows no boundaries, that builds no walls, that leaves no one outside.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, loving and allowing yourself to be loved -- all of you, the best, the worst and everything in between, holding your heart out to another person, that is risky, even when it is legal. When “two people are one in their inmost heart,” to use a phrase from Confucius, it is a deeply vulnerable place to be.

But it is also a place of grace. To experience the fullness of life’s possibility and the depths of its joy, we must risk, we must be willing to step into the unknown, the uncertain. And even when there are times of hurt and heartache, love can carry us through.

Exchanging vows today means that you, \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, are going to keep trying to “make it work,” as they say on Star Trek, no matter how hard it gets.

Love takes many forms: love of family, love of friends, love of God, and love in marriage. As Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, which we just read, “Love is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast. It is neither proud, nor rude, nor self-seeking, nor easily angered. Love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres.” Indeed, these words, almost 2000 years old, still ring true today.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, may they, always, be true for you. May your marriage be made strong by interwoven threads of love.

Amen.

**Declaration of Intention** -- Choose one of the following two options

*Be sure to confirm the requirements of the certifying authority. Some countries require specific words to be exchanged for the marriage contract to be valid.*

**Declaration Option 1:**

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, you are entering not only a formal covenant of marriage, but a legal contract as well, now that [*name the certifying authority: e.g. government of Scotland, the State of Washington, the South African Parliament, etc.*] has finally caught up with the reality of your love that could not wait for any law. So I ask of you both, are you lawfully free & willing to enter into this marriage? One at a time...

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1 (full name)*, are you lawfully free and willing to take \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2 (full name)* to be your partner of life? If so, please say, I am.

*I am.*

Will you love her/him/them, comfort her/him/them, honour and protect her/him/them, and be faithful to her/him/them? If so please say, "I will."

*I will.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2 (full name)*, are you lawfully free and willing to take \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1 (full name)* to be your partner of life? If so, please say, I am.

*I am.*

Will you love her/him/them, comfort her/him/them, honour and protect her/him/them, and be faithful to her/him/them? If so please say, "I will."

*I will.*

**Declaration Option 2 – simplified version**

*This option may be used where there is no legal requirement for each partner to declare that he/she/they are lawfully free and willing to enter into this legal contract.*

Will you, \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2*, take \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1* to be your life partner in marriage?

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2: I will.*

Will you, \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1*, take \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2* to be your life partner in marriage?

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1: I will.*

## For the Families: A Charge & Questions

Two people do not live in isolation. This family is interwoven and linked in numerous and wonderful ways.

Louis de Bernieres writes in Captain Corelli's Mandolin, "*Love ... is both an art and a fortunate accident.*" This combined/new family is truly both a work of art and, for all of you, a fortunate accident.

Whether you are part of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_'s families by birth, by accident or by intention, or for some of you it may be more by default!, you are blessed to be part of such a family as this, an 'intentional family.'

- [*Name all (or significant) members of each family, one by one, or couple by couple, and look at them.*]
- And all of you who are part of this special fortunate accidental intentional family circle!
- And we mustn't forget \_\_\_\_\_ [*the dog/ or any other important pets*]!

The love shared by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ is a source of strength with which they may nourish, not only each other, but their intentional family, their wider circle of friends, and the world around them. And in turn, we, their community of friends and family, have a responsibility to them. By our steadfast care, respect and love, we can support their union and the family they are affirming today.

Family and friends, you are here, not just as spectators, but as participants. You are here to acknowledge and affirm the love that binds **you** to \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, to be part of this risky and vulnerable thing called love, called marriage.

So I charge you: do not be fair weather friends. Strengthen and encourage \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ when winds blow and the tree shakes. Help them weather the gales that beset any relationship. Help them keep their love strong. Help them maintain the integrity of their love and their marriage.

As family, you are part of this union. \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ask for your love and support in the days and years ahead.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, take a moment to look around at those who have gathered with you today. (*Have them look at the people.*) You are surrounded by people who know and love you both.

[*Direct this to everyone.*] I invite all of you to show your intention to love and support \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ with resounding applause – [or barking if that is appropriate -- (*if animals/pets are present*)].

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, this is your family, who journey with you into this joyful and risky place called marriage. Remember that you are not alone.

**Exchange of marriage vows --** Choose one of the vow options, using the word preferred by each party: *life companion/spouse/husband/wife/partner*

*Invite couple to come forward.*

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, you have affirmed your willingness to enter this covenant of marriage and to share all the joys and sorrows of this relationship, whatever the future may hold. You have stated that you both are lawfully free to marry. Now I invite you to share your covenant promises before these witnesses, uniting yourselves in marriage.

Face one another and join hands to exchange your wedding vows.

And to all of you gathered here today, as you hear their vows exchanged, I invite you, if you are married or in partnership, or hope to be, take the hand of your beloved and recommit yourselves in love.

Repeat after me. [*Note: the slash marks note where to pause after a phrase allowing the person to repeat back.*]

**Option 1:**

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2*, you first. Repeat after me.  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1*, I take you / to be my  
(*choose one phrase*) life companion/spouse/husband/wife/partner/  
through tears and laughter, /  
sickness and health, / work and play. /  
I promise to be faithful and open to you. /  
I will respect & trust you. / I will help and care for you.  
I will share my life with you./  
I will lead with you/ a just and peaceful life.  
I will love you / and be thankful /  
for the blessing of your love. /  
This is my solemn vow.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1*, repeat after me:  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2*, I take you / to be my  
(*choose one phrase*) life companion /spouse/husband/wife/partner/  
through tears and laughter, /  
sickness and health, / work and play.  
I promise to be faithful and open to you. /  
I will respect & trust you. / I will help and care for you. /  
I will share my life with you./  
I will lead with you/ a just and peaceful life.  
I will love you / and be thankful /  
for the blessing of your love. /  
This is my solemn vow.

**Option 2 - short & simple**

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ repeat after me. (*separately, one after the other*)  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1/ 2*, I take you to be my partner in marriage, to  
love and to cherish, from this day forward as long as we both shall live



## Exchange and blessing of rings (or other symbol)

*(Source of these words is unknown.)*

May I have the rings, please? *(Hold in open hand.)*

A ring is a circle, sacred and absolute, reminding us of the roundness of the planets and the circle of their paths around the sun, of CD's, LP's and 45's, of hula hoops and beach balls, of the full moon, the human eye, and the period/ full stop that ends a sentence...reminding us of the path we make when we leave and come back to where we started, and this round earth from which we are born and to which we shall return.

The circle, and these rings, symbolise the unity in which your lives are now joined and to which, wherever you go, you shall always return.

*If a different symbol is exchanged, e.g. necklace charms or another item, include a relevant explanation.*

### Ring Option 1

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1*, please repeat after me as you place the ring  
on \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2's* finger:  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2*, with this ring, / I thee wed. OR I marry you. /  
May you wear it, / as a sign, / of our love / and faithfulness.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1*, please repeat after me as you place the ring  
on \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2's* finger:  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2*, with this ring, / I thee wed. OR I marry you. /  
May you wear it, / as a sign / of our love / and faithfulness.

### Ring Option 2 -- Adapted from Sacred Union Ceremony, Uniting Church in Australia

\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1*, please repeat after me as you place the ring  
on \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2's* finger:  
Just as this circle is without end / my love for you is limitless. / My commitment to  
you will never fail. / With this ring I take you to be my best friend, / lover, and  
partner for life. / Let it be a way for us to hold hands / even when we are apart.  
\_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 2*, please repeat after me as you place the ring  
on \_\_\_\_\_ *Partner 1's* finger:  
Just as this circle is without end / my love for you is limitless. / My commitment to  
you will never fail. / With this ring I take you to be my best friend, / lover, and  
partner for life. / Let it be a way for us to hold hands / even when we are apart.

### Signing of the Marriage Register/Certificate

*The Marriage Register and certificates may be signed at this point or after the Declaration of the Marriage at the conclusion of the service. Move to a quiet table on the side or in a separate room. Two witnesses are usually required. When these have not been pre-arranged, the attendants may step in.*

## Pronouncement of Marriage

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, you are united and bound together,  
body and soul, in a union of love and trust.

Above are the stars and below you the earth.

Like the stars, your love will be a constant source of light.

And like the earth, a firm foundation from which to grow.<sup>1</sup>

As you have consented in this ceremony in the presence of friends and family to be partners for life, I now pronounce you married in the eyes of God and in the eyes of the State/government, united and bound together, body and soul.

May nothing divide what God has joined together.

*Alternatively:* May nothing divide what has been joined together here today.

\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, we pronounce you married!

And to seal this holy and legal covenant of love, you may kiss.

It is my pleasure and honour to introduce to you \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_, legally married!

*The couple may choose how to be introduced: Mrs & Mrs Surname; Mr and Mr Surname; 'The X Family' e.g. The Gumedede Family, or using first names. If they are creating or choosing a new surname, it can be shared at this time. If they are keeping their own maiden names or any previous names, using only first names works well.*

And let all the people clap with joy! *Encouraged those gathered to applaud!*

<sup>1</sup>from a Celtic wedding handfasting ceremony

## Words of Blessing

May the words of this Hindu Love Poem be a blessing upon you both:

Yes, we have become partners.

I have become you, and you have become me.

We are word and meaning, united.

You are thought and I am sound.

May the nights be honey-sweet for us.

May the plants be honey-sweet for us.

May the earth be honey-sweet for us.

And today we add--

May the wine at the reception be honey-sweet for you both!

Let the people say, Amen! *Amen!*

*To the couple:* God bless you both!

## Dismissal

*The couple walks out first, and all follow.*