

Post - Covid ... Where to tie the knot?

“It’s our inertia that keeps us going” said the churchwarden to the visiting Archdeacon.

In the same spirit, it could never be said that the mills of the Church of England do anything other than grind slow.

The recent announcement from the British government that civil weddings and partnerships may now be celebrated outside in the open air raises once again the perennial question of marriage in church. Not on this occasion the question of (long overdue) same-sex marriage in church but the more general one of where any religious marriage ceremonies may take place.

Currently, the Church of England follows an historic practice of allowing only licenced premises, that is to say churches, with a tiny number of exceptions such as hospital bedside ceremonies, to be the venue for wedding ceremonies. This explains the often-curious associated readings or poems or music at civil ceremonies where no religious input whatsoever is allowed – hence Winnie the Pooh and the like often feature, offering curious words of wisdom, in readings and poems at such ceremonies.

This restrictive building orientated practice stands in stark contrast with, for example, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and any religious organisations in the United States.

This wouldn’t be of much consequence except that Church of England wedding ceremonies are declining at an alarming rate¹ as people understandably take advantage of much more flexible arrangements in terms of venue and orders of service that are available in a secular setting. In short, the Church is rapidly losing a valuable opportunity for pastoral care and evangelisation. There are few clergy who have not had embarrassingly to refuse couples’ reasonable requests to have the service in a building other than the church.

Ironically, changes are taking place regarding the registration of marriage² but these represent little more than tinkering with the current system, which now cries out for wholesale reform. It’s time for the C of E mills to be electrified before marriage in a church becomes an anachronism.

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¹ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/12-april/news/uk/church-weddings-fall-by-nearly-half-in-two-decades>

² <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/marriage-registration-changes>