



### Marriage at St Peter and St Paul after Divorce

Thank you for your enquiry about getting married at St Peter and St Paul, Seal. Before going further I think you will find it helpful to know the Church's position on the marriage of couples where one or both parties has been divorced. This letter outlines the sort of criteria I use for deciding whether to conduct such a marriage at St Peter and St Paul.

The Church holds marriage in the highest regard and believes that, ideally, it should be for life. This is the aim of those who come to get married too - no one wants their marriage to break up. It used to be the official position of the Church that people could not have a second marriage in church after divorce, no matter what the circumstances, and some priests still hold this view. However, increasing numbers of priests also want to affirm those who have found new and enriching relationships after the break up of a previous marriage, and enable them to celebrate that new relationship in church. Christian faith teaches that, with God, there is always a chance to start afresh in our lives. Because of this, some priests, including myself, are willing, under certain circumstances, to conduct the wedding of those who have been divorced.

This is not an automatic right, however, and I will want to talk carefully with you about both the previous relationship and the new one before making a decision on whether or not to conduct your marriage. Any discussion we may have about possible dates for the wedding **should not be regarded as definite** until I have met with you and given the go-ahead. Please **do not** book reception venues until after this meeting. The legal position is that the decision about whether a second marriage can take place in church rests with the parish priest concerned and that their decision about marriage in their church is final.

I have outlined below the kind of criteria I will use to make my decision. These are in line with general practice in the church, and the guidelines of the Bishop of Rochester, under whose authority parishes in this area come. I use the same criteria to decide whether to offer a service of blessing after a civil marriage – if I feel unable to conduct your wedding I will not be likely to be willing to conduct a wedding blessing either. These criteria are as follows: -

1. Any previous marriage should clearly have ended not just legally but in the sense that all the loose ends have been tied up, In other words it is truly dissolved and the person concerned is free to move on. For that reason, I would not normally agree to a marriage shortly after the dissolution of an earlier one.
2. All issues relating to the custody of children of a previous marriage must have been resolved satisfactorily.
3. The present relationship must not have been a direct cause of the breakdown of the previous marriage.
4. If a person's previous marriage ended as the result of their violence - mental or physical - towards a former partner I would not normally agree to conduct the wedding.
5. The person concerned must show signs that they have learnt from the experience of their earlier marital breakdown and that the issues that led to the divorce have been fully discussed by both members of the new couple. The last thing we would want is for you to go into a new marriage and find that the cycle of difficulty and breakdown repeats itself because you had not reflected on it together.

In addition, a couple must fulfil the usual legal preliminaries required to get married in church. I will explain these to you when we meet. If you feel you fit the criteria above, and would like to explore further the possibility of marriage at St Peter and St Paul, please contact me to arrange a meeting. I will try to be as sensitive and gentle as I can, recognizing that these matters are often painful and complicated. It may help you to know that I am divorced and remarried myself, and so have some personal experience in these matters!