

Online site decrees my sister a minister

BY KARALYNN OTT
SPECIAL WRITER

Ideally, many couples would like to have someone they both know well perform their wedding. But what if neither of you know a church leader, judge, mayor or justice of the peace?

It may be time to do some research.

When planning our wedding, an Internet search led us to the Universal Life Church (ULC), of Modesto, Calif. The Web site claimed that the church had been in existence since 1959, had 18 million ministers in congregations around the world and accepted all spiritual beliefs. Their only tenet was, "Do only that which is right" — within the law. Best of all, the church offered to ordain anyone — on-line!

We were suspicious. We then happened upon the Web site of a ULC minister, Rev. Laurie Weber, who performs weddings in and around Yosemite National Park — the site of our planned ceremony. Before Weber began performing rites herself, she worked as a court clerk for a California federal judge. As part of her duties there, she administered oaths to deputies — who were then able to perform wedding ceremonies. "I could do that," she thought to herself.

Weber got ordained, and has been performing weddings for over six years. She presided over 52 ceremonies in 1999. She calls it the perfect job. "I love meeting the wide variety of people — and learning from each one," she says.

She plans to perform her brother's wedding ceremony later this year. Weber's sincerity and apparent normalcy eased our trepidation. But there were a couple more phone calls to make.

I called the Rev. Brian Empe at Yosemite Community Church, which serves Yosemite Park visitors. "Was a marriage ceremony conducted by a ULC minister really legal?" I inquired. Yes, he said — although his congregation "didn't promote it."

My fiancée checked with the county clerk's office in California and the ULC

got the OK from them as well — so the option was a go. But who would we ask?

Family was clearly a top choice. We proposed the idea to my younger sister. She graciously accepted the challenge, read up on the ULC and got ordained in a matter of days. She performed our ceremony deftly and beautifully. We felt truly blessed.

This process certainly won't be for everyone. Yet there are other routes to having a friend or family member as your wedding official — or solemnization authority, as it is formally termed. The rules depend on where the wedding ceremony will be held. Some states, such as California, allow deputization of lay persons. Others allow a lay person to become a justice of the peace.

In Michigan, marriages may be solemnized by judges, district court magistrates, mayors, county clerks and resident as well as non-resident ministers. In most cases these authorities may only perform ceremonies within the area of their jurisdiction.

To verify the legality of your official of choice, check with the county clerk where the ceremony will be held. Some may require a solemnization authority to register before performing the service.

No matter who performs your ceremony, and how they go about gaining that authority — do your research. Michigan law, for example, provides misdemeanor penalties for persons who solemnize a marriage, or attempt to solemnize a marriage, knowing that they are not lawfully authorized to do so.

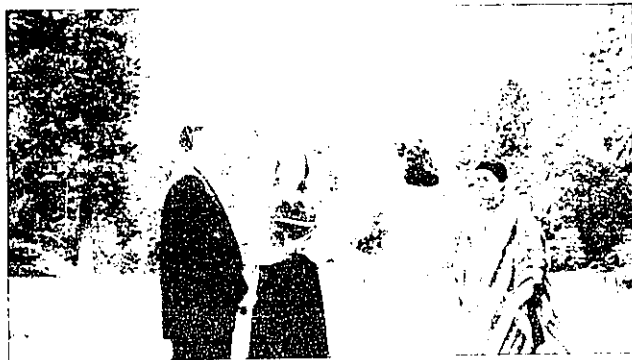
But if you are able work it out, having someone you know perform your ceremony can be the best wedding gift you'll receive.

The ULC can be found at: www.ulc.net. See MCL 551.7 and MSA 25.7 for more information on laws about Michigan solemnization authorities and MCL 551.15 and MSA 25.11 for penalties pertaining to that authority.

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All in the family: The bride's sister, Leslie, reads the couple's wedding vows. Leslie was ordained a minister via the Internet through Universal Life Church in Modesto, California.

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