**Are you Legally Married?**

*The ULC in North Carolina*

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You might want to consider giving your Officiant a call.

Many people rely on friends and family to give them their nuptials.  But if the Universal Life Church (ULC) ordained your minister and you were married after July 3, 1981, you are not legally married in the state of North Carolina.  No matter what you were told by your minister or anyone else, for that matter, ULC ministers do not currently have the power to solemnize marriages in the state of North Carolina.

Many people enjoy the personal touch of having a family member or close friend perform their wedding ceremony.  Since not everyone has a family member or friend that is “of the cloth”, the easiest way to become so is through the [Universal Life Church](http://ulc.org/).

Currently, ULC ordination is a bit more complicated and meaningful than it used to be.  Before the age of the Internet, the ULC would advertise in magazines, in the classified sections.  You sent in your name and address along with $5.00 and were ordained and received a credential of ministry.  Then once ULC was online one could fill out the online form.  The latest addition is being able to listen to the ordination ceremony.  The ULC also provides a video in American Sign Language so those who are hearing impaired can have a more significant ULC ordination.

While the simplicity of ordination doesn’t lend the church a lot of credibility, the ULC is a means to an end for many people wanting to perform marriages, either for friends or a little extra cash, or even those who want to found their own churches.  Many people have used the ULC ordinations to give them legal status in their states to further serve their religious communities.

The reason ULC isn’t recognized in NC is the result of a 1981 ruling deciding the mail order ordinations were not proper.  *North Carolina v. Lynch* is the case that creates all the problems.  Ms. Lynch, married by her father, who received his ordination through ULC, sued her husband when he left her and married another woman.  Mr. Lynch’s defense was that, since a mail order minister married him, the marriage wasn’t legal.

The NC Supreme Court judge accepted this defense, and the marriage and all other ULC marriages were dissolved.  Then a statute that would re-legalize all marriages prior to the *North Carolina v. Lynch* case was added to the NC General Statutes, thus preventing a mass dissolution of marriages in the state:

[***North Carolina General Statute***](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/statutes/generalstatutes/html/bychapter/chapter_51.html) ***§ 51-1.1.  Certain marriages performed by ministers of Universal Life Church validated.***

*Any marriages performed by ministers of the Universal Life Church prior to July 3, 1981, are validated, unless they have been invalidated by a court of competent jurisdiction, provided that all other requirements of law have been met and the marriages would have been valid if performed by an official authorized by law to perform wedding ceremonies. (1981, c. 797.)*

According to the general marriage laws in NC:

*“Any ordained minister of any faith who is authorized to perform marriages by his church may do so. --- Ministers must complete the marriage license and return it to the register of deeds who issued it. --- For questions see the Register of Deeds. “*

I contacted the Register of Deeds in Wake County, NC, as my own ordination neared, to see what needed to be done as far as paperwork, for me to be able to officiate at weddings in NC.  The person I spoke with told me if my church body ordained me, I could legally perform weddings in North Carolina.  When I questioned her about further qualifications such as paperwork or registration of some sort, I was told there are none.  I walked away from this conversation believing that anyone ordained by a recognized church had the power to solemnize a wedding in North Carolina.  I’ve heard from several NC residents essentially the same story.  Each County Register of Deeds has told them time and time again their ULC ordination is on the up and up.

ULC minister Cheryl Kornegay, in Franklin County, recently began her own search for the truth.  Rev. Kornegay works closely with the Franklin County courthouse and questioned the Register of Deeds in her county, as well as, other members of the Franklin County offices.  Not one could find any reason why her ULC ordination wasn’t valid.

How hard should a ULC minister have to search to find out their ordination is invalid in North Carolina? Rev. Kiesha Sistrunk, of Boone, NC, stated her ordination packet came with a message telling her to  “check with state and local authorities” on the status of ULC ministers in her area, yet she didn’t expect the search to be as difficult as researching case law.  Where does the responsibility of the minister and couple end, and the ULC’s or states begin?  Fortunately, for Rev. Kornegay, she was ordained by two different organizations.  Therefore, all her previous and future marriages aren’t in jeopardy of being invalidated.

Even *North Carolina General Statute § 51-1.1* listed above was ambiguous to Rev. Kornegay and the officials she contacted. Upon initial inspection *General Statute  § 51-1.1* looks like it could be a law accepting ULC marriages before and after July 3, 1981. However, according to the NC Attorney General’s office, this statute was added as a result of the State v. Lynch case, to “grandfather” in anyone married before the case.  Any marriage performed in the state after July 3, 1981, by a ULC minister, isn’t recognized.

So what does all this mean?  First, to perform an illegal marriage is a misdemeanor and carries a fine of $200.  It also leads to the invalidation of the marriage.  Pyredon, in Ft. Bragg, brought up the following potential issues:  should you choose to let a ULC minister marry you, subject yourself to a possible myriad of legal hassles later in life, problems which could cost you insurance coverage, inheritance and  probate problems, even the ability to make health care decisions for an incapacitated spouse.

But if you were married by a ULC minister and don’t do any thing to correct it odds are nothing will come of it.  Marriage licenses in North Carolina have a portion for the minister to sign their name, title and address, however there is no place to list their affiliation.  Because the state of North Carolina doesn’t keep tabs on the people who are allowed to solemnize weddings, the only way the State of North Carolina will figure out you weren’t married by a legally ordained minister is if you or someone else draws their attention to it.  The question is, “Later on down the line, do you want to risk someone fighting the validity of your marriage because you were married by a ULC minister?”

There could be so many potential problems if you have a ULC officiated marriage.   ICU visits and power of attorney could be denied if the validity of your marriage is challenged.  Should your spouse die your marriage and/or any family member that didn’t approve of you, your marriage or religion could challenge Will.  In the case of a deceased spouse, last wishes could be challenged and burial and estate distribution issues ignored or completely discarded.  And don’t expect your family to take care of you should your spouse die.  I’ve seen the absolute worst come out in people when a family member dies.  It’s an unfortunate fact, but many people look at someone’s loss as a chance for their own personal gain.  Protect yourself in every way you can, and start at the beginning.  While it might be fun to have Uncle Hector perform your wedding service, it won’t be worth it when you are fighting your sister-in-law for your family home.

According to a 2001 press release by the National Center for Health Statistics, 43% of all first marriages will end in divorce within 15 years.  So there is even the potential your spouse could use the fact you were married by a ULC minister against you and dissolve the marriage rather than divorce.  All the taxes you filed, as a married couple, would then become suspect.

According to the North Carolina Attorney General’s office, this piece of case law will continue to affect the status of ULC ministers until another ruling is handed down in favor of the ULC.  This means a court battle where case law is already working against you.

If a ULC minister already married you, first and foremost *do not call the Universal Life Church*!  In a phone interview with ULC representative Br. Daniel Zimmerman, a ULC minister for 30 years and creator of the [ULC Monastery](http://ulc.org/hq/index.html) in Tucson, Arizona, each individual and Universal Life Church is an entirely separate entity from the original Universal Life Church in Modesto, California and is responsible for its own affairs.  Br. Daniel seemed totally against my researching any article that may again bring up the validity of ULC ordinations.  It appears the ULC’s stance on whether or not ULC ministers are legally ordained in North Carolina is that they are.  Br. Daniel based his statements on the [First Amendment](http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/billrights/billrights.html) and the fact NC doesn’t require ministers to register for state certification, in order to solemnize weddings, he feels this makes the questioning of any ULC officiated unions ridiculous.

Early into the phone interview, Br. Daniel seemed suspicious of the media and didn’t like the direction my questioning took.  When I asked about the *North Carolina v. Lynch case*, Br. Daniel became agitated and abruptly ended the call.  Before completely ending our conversation, Br. Daniel did manage to say that the NC Supreme Court overturned the Lynch case thereby making ULC ordinations legal in NC.

However by my research, Br. Daniel’s statement is incorrect, and, it would appear, he is referring to the civil case brought against the ULC by Sandra Lynch, following the *North Carolina v. Lynch* ruling.  In the civil case, the US Appellate Court in Richmond Virginia, reversed the civil case judgment ultimately favoring the ULC.  The NC Supreme Court case ruling in North Carolina v. Lynch still stands and despite the fervor with which Br. Daniel defends the ULC, ULC ordinations are not valid in North Carolina.

If you were married by a ULC minister after July 3, 1981, one option is to seek out an Officiant who is authorized to solemnize weddings in North Carolina, and have a second service, which you know is 100% legal and not so easily challenged or invalidated as a ULC-officiated union.  Couples who have faced similar predicaments often get remarried on their anniversary and consider themselves married since the day of their first nuptials.

If you are a ULC minister, you can become ordained by another church and become legal in NC.  Until a second case involving the ULC comes along and sets new precedence by a judge ruling in favor of the ULC, *North Carolina v. Lynch* will continue to be case law.  According to my contact at the Attorney General’s office this is the only way to get rid of this piece of state case law and make a ULC marriage legal

It should be made clear in any NC Register of Deeds office that individuals ordained by the Universal Life Church are not recognized as able to solemnize weddings in the state.  Even though couples are ultimately responsible for choosing a minister who is able to legally perform weddings in North Carolina, couples shouldn’t need to dig through 20+-year-old court cases to find the information they need.  It wouldn’t be too difficult to hang a sign in every NC Register of Deeds office stating plainly that ULC ministers cannot solemnize marriages in North Carolina, or provide an insert in the envelope included with the license when the couple is applying for their marriage license.

Ultimately, the Universal Life Church is making claims that their ordinations are 100% legal, which they cannot back up.  The ULC is going to create many misunderstandings.  The ULC continues to proclaim they are legal in all 50 states, even though their own ULC message boards show individuals being turned down for official state certification to officiate at weddings.  Yet the ULC continues to ordain people from states where the ordination is questioned or currently not being accepted, at all.

Reference:

ULC

[http://www.ulc.net](http://www.ulc.net/)

<http://ulc.org/hq/index.html>

<http://www.ulconline.com/forum/>

<http://www.ulc.net/contact.htm>

ULC Questions and Answers:

[ulc.net/qanda.html](http://ulc.net/qanda.html)

Company Information:

[ulcmonastery.safeshopper.com/about.htm?851](http://ulcmonastery.safeshopper.com/about.htm?851)

Info about ULC

[religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/UnivLife.html](http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/UnivLife.html)

For more info on NC’s General statues on Marriage:

[www.ncga.state.nc.us/statutes/generalstatutes/html/bychapter/chapter%5F51.html](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/statutes/generalstatutes/html/bychapter/chapter_51.html)

North Carolina v. Lynch

<http://www.matti.com/gods.html>

<http://www.ulc.net/legalnew.html>

Lynch v. ULC (1985)

<http://www.ulc.net/legalnew.html>

[caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=search&case=/data2/circs/4th/941891p.html](http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?navby=search&case=/data2/circs/4th/941891p.html)

National center for Health Statistics

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/>

Mason, Janet. [North Carolina Marriage Laws & Procedures, Third Edition](https://iogpubs.iog.unc.edu/products.asp?page=stategov&category=State%20Government).  The Institute of Government of The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1994.  ISBN  1-56011-235-2.  See pages: 18, 19 and footnote #9.

This article is also available at the [Goddess Moon Circles](http://www.goddessmoon.org/north_carolina%27s_position_on_ulc_ordinations.shtml) site.  This article may be copied and distributed in its entirety and unchanged as long as the copyright remains.

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