



# FACE . . .

## Non-Member Weddings: A Moment of Opportunity

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**M**OST DECISIONS PASTORS MAKE ARE PRAGMATIC, THOUGH OCCASIONALLY WE choose to act for theological, or even evangelical reasons. This article is an invitation to think about how pastors can officiate at weddings for couples who are not (yet) members of their congregations. Many will decline to do so just as a means of calendar control. But what if the Christian celebration of marriage is viewed as an opportunity for the gospel to be applied graciously at one of the most stressful moments in peoples' lives? What might happen then?

My last pastorate was in a California beach community, where couples came from all over the west to be married overlooking the beautiful Monterey Bay. I was on the "preferred list" at a local resort that is a popular wedding destination. Joining me on this list was a local justice of the peace and a Unitarian minister. Under my name it stated clearly, "willing to do weddings for those who want a Christian service officiated by a Christian pastor."

When couples contacted me by telephone, I told them that a service of Christian marriage included prayer, Scripture, vows of life-long fidelity, and a message that focused on God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, who wants to be at the center of our lives and marriages. The celebration of Holy Communion as part of the ceremony was always mentioned as well. This opened the door to conversation about open communion and the sacrament as a sign of Christian unity instead of division. It is hard to describe how powerful this was for many couples, especially divorced Roman Catholics. But our talks included more than just these "ingredients"; they underscored the fact that Christian marriage is defined as two people choosing to join their lives together. This is the heart and center of the way the marriage service is constructed in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, which I use with adaptation.

If this sounded appealing to the couple, we would agree to meet. I encouraged them to attend one of our Sunday morning worship services as a way of "seeing me work and getting a sense of who I am and what I believe." Almost without exception, couples were pleased to attend and meet in this way.

In anticipation of the first face-to-face meeting, I would e-mail a wedding in-

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# TO FACE

## Non-Member Weddings: A Time for High Expectations

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**I**F PUBLISHED CLERGY LETTERS TO “DEAR ABBY” ARE TRULY INDICATIVE OF OUR ATTITUDES regarding pastoral duties, weddings are pretty low on our list of fun things to do. Should the truth be told, I would personally much prefer driving a golf ball down the center of a fairway (or even into the rough) on a Saturday afternoon to watching a bride come down the center aisle in a warm and crowded sanctuary.

Every pastor knows what it is to be “used” by couples in the wedding process. Weddings can also become an ordeal as we witness the civil war between the bride and her mother; or we personally engage in a tug-of-war with the strong-willed photographer who has no knowledge of, or appreciation for, worship protocols; or we realize that we will never again see the bride and groom who are only here because we have “such an adorable church and beautiful stained-glass windows.”

Twenty years ago our congregation decided to re-evaluate our wedding practices and expectations. As a result we published a booklet entitled “Wedding Guidelines.” Whenever a couple contacts us regarding the possibility of having their wedding in our church, we begin by providing them with a copy of the booklet. If, after studying the booklet’s content, they still desire to pursue being married here, we invite them to schedule their first counseling session with one of the pastors.

Our wedding guidelines are based on several assumptions:

- we have an obligation to seek to assist couples in establishing a Christ-centered marriage service
- the marriage bond is strengthened when both husband and wife belong to the same church and both are active in it
- the church’s commitment to walk with the couple, far beyond their brief stroll down the aisle on their wedding day, must be clearly portrayed to them before *and* after the wedding service

One of the biggest steps related to those assumptions is our expectation that any individual who is not a member of the congregation will commit to twenty hours of instruction on the basic teachings of the Christian church. Our “Wedding Guidelines” state:

In those cases where one or both persons desiring to marry are not members of

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formation questionnaire that included family of origin, church affiliations, and baptismal date and place. This allowed us to discuss the grief of deceased or divorced parents who would not be in attendance, the couple's basic orientation toward God and the church, and, if they had not been baptized, their openness to being instructed and entering into the faith. I did several baptisms as a part of wedding rehearsals that were quite joyous occasions.

Our second meeting, again after church if possible (and usually it was), focused on the wedding ceremony itself—what Scripture, other readings, music, and symbolic acts might be appropriate. We talked about how funerals are an opportunity to reflect on our own mortality and in the same way how weddings are a chance for all families to reflect on their own relationships. We discussed how the service could be constructed to transform those in attendance from spectators into participants. We added the vow of the family and friends who were there to “surround the couple with love, speak well of marriage, encourage them to get help when their marriage came to the inevitable difficulties that even the best of marriages do.” And, again, the inclusion of Holy Communion was a dynamic and evangelical witness.

All couples were asked to take the Meyers-Briggs Personality Inventory. I have since added the Taylor-Johnson Inventory. Given the choice between the practical dynamics revealed in this testing or a course of instruction in the Christian faith, I made the decision to give them practical help in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship. This third session gave me the opportunity to remind them, as the date was drawing closer, “to put as much, if not more, energy into the life-long relationship as the planning of the one-day celebration.” At the end of this two-hour session, I offered to meet with them again after six months of marriage. Much of what I would like to see covered in premarital counseling would better be done, and more realistically assessed, after a few months of real marriage. This is especially true for couples who have been living together before being married.

Of the over one hundred weddings performed in almost nine years at the beach, three couples became members of our congregation. We also received several other family members into our worshiping community. Dozens more connected to churches in the towns in which they took up residence. I would encourage all pastors, if they can make the time, to be warm and inviting to couples that may ask them to officiate at their weddings. Couples remember the pastor who performed their wedding with rancor or love. Gracious conversations, practical advice, a realistic view of Christian marriage, and a straightforward witness to Jesus Christ are more likely to win people to the faith and our congregations than required courses and the arbitrary declining of all non-member weddings. Reaching out to these couples in love is one of the most practical ways a pastor can “leave the ninety-nine...and go after the one that is lost until it is found” (Luke 15:4). ⊕

the church, the pastor will ask you to make a commitment to take a course of instruction prior to or immediately following the wedding. This is a ten-week course of instruction on “What Lutherans Believe.” Upon completion of the course you are *not* committed to join the church, although the classes do fulfill the requirements for adult church membership. Our purpose in asking for this commitment is that hopefully through this course we can assist you in your understanding of the Christian faith and consequently to also establish a Christian home.

It is probably safe to assume that some couples will be put off by such an expectation. They will undoubtedly not call for an appointment with the pastor and will be married in another church.

Some who do choose to pursue their wedding plans with us (15-20 per year) find themselves for some reason unable to attend the classes prior to the wedding. In that case we tell them that we trust in their integrity and know they will fulfill their commitment to take the course. Only three times in all these years have couples subsequently failed to take the classes.

We make it very clear from the beginning that upon completion of the course we will never “lean on them” to join the church. Even though we scrupulously adhere to that pledge, 80% join the congregation following the classes. (This month we received ten adult members, eight of whom will be married in our church this summer. Two of those eight joined by baptism, five by adult confirmation, and one by reaffirmation of faith.)

Experience has taught us that it takes a lot of follow-up to keep these couples active after they join. Experience also has taught us that when couples give birth to children, we will see them more often and they will settle into more active membership.

In the majority of cases, these situations involve a member of the congregation who is marrying someone from another tradition or without any previous church affiliation. But an increasing number of couples come to us with neither one having a Lutheran background.

Is it *fair* for us to insist on such a sizeable commitment just to be married in our church? I would strongly argue that it is. More than that, I would argue that we owe it to couples to seek to share Christ and the meaning of the Christian faith with them without being manipulative in the process. To do less may be to cheat them out of an opportunity to establish a Christian marriage.

In all of these years I’ve never had a single complaint from anyone who has taken the classes, even those who have chosen not to join the church. In fact, one “bride” returned sixteen years after taking the course and asked to be baptized. She said that what she had learned in class, namely, “Faith comes by hearing,” was indeed true. She said it just takes longer for some than for others!

Performing marriage ceremonies still isn’t my favorite pastoral activity, but I no longer feel “used” in the process, and I feel more confident that the church hasn’t cheated the bride and groom. Weddings can even be kind of fun! ⊕