

Marriage ministry: The best and worst part of pastoring

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

This issue of the *Century* engages an important conversation about the state of marriage and the effects of divorce. Ministers, of course, are regularly and directly involved in marriages and divorces. When preaching, ministers must bear in mind that the congregation includes happily married couples, divorced people (whose ex-spouses may also be in church), single people and children of divorce. [Elizabeth Marquardt points out](#) that children of divorce hear the parable of the prodigal son in their own way. They recognize the act of leaving, she says, but in their experience it was a parent who left. A brave high school boy taught me that lesson in my first congregation. I had said in a sermon that everybody can understand what the prodigal experienced, because parents are like that father and we all have or had parents. “My Dad isn’t like that,” he told me. “My Dad doesn’t even like me.”

We pastors get involved in marriages when couples seek us out for counseling. Often one partner is looking for help in a relationship that has already badly deteriorated. Our job often turns out to be supporting the wounded more than helping to renew a broken relationship.

And of course we are involved because many people, even those who don’t attend church, want to be married in a church. The church I serve has Gothic architecture, a long center aisle and a wonderful pipe organ. It makes a handsome backdrop for wedding pictures and is located in the midst of hotels that specialize in wedding receptions. A lot of people want to be married in this church.

We have spent a lot of time at our church discussing what is a faithful response to these requests. At one time our policy was to marry only church members. Then it became apparent that people were attending membership class and joining the church, and then disappearing after the wedding. We discontinued that policy. Now we give church members preference in selecting a wedding date, but also accommodate nonmembers, asking them to make a contribution to our ministry and

mission. Our hope is that through our hospitality and support we communicate something of the love of God.

One of the worst parts of ministry is the realization that some couples regard the officiating minister as a hired hand and the wedding service as an inconvenience, necessary to satisfy convention before getting to the main event, which is the party. But one of the best parts is standing in front of a couple who understand that their love for each other is a reflection of God's love and who are surrounded by a community of faith that gathers in prayer, love and support.