

Wedding season

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We are in the thick of it: Friday evenings have been given over to wedding rehearsals and to discreetly bowing out of the dinners afterwards. Saturdays are dedicated to joining couples in holy matrimony. This year marks my first season in a big-steeple church. Thanks to its beautiful stained glass and its air conditioning, there is a demand for our sanctuary—and for my colleagues and I to serve as officiants, even for nonmember weddings.

It's

a shift for me. Most weddings I've presided over have been for friends or congregants I know well, folks who were willing to entertain the clerical presumption that I had something to share with them and who trusted me to put together a ceremony that spoke to both the particularities of their relationship and the richness of the Christian (sometimes very broadly defined) tradition. It's a different game now.

An increasing number of American couples [aren't bothering](#) with a religious or even civil presence at all, preferring to ask friends or family to "get ordained" on the Internet. I suppose I should be grateful that unchurched couples come through our congregation's doors, however briefly.

But I often feel the need to defend our congregation's premarital counseling requirements for young couples. Many of them are either sure they've got it all figured out, thank you, or question what wisdom about relationships could actually come from clergy.

A

good part of this rejection of pastoral insight may simply come with being deeply besotted. As a colleague's pastoral care professor says: "Most couples are too blissed out to listen to anything you've got to say. The best you can do is make a good impression, hand them your card and hope they'll come back if they need you."

I fear, though,

that the majority of clergy doing premarital counseling and wedding preparation may be failing even in this basic requirement. Adam Hamilton, [writing wisely](#) about how pastors ought to consider weddings opportunities for evangelism, offers instructions that essentially boil down to "don't mail it in."

The

real challenge, however, is not attention and care but knowing what to say. Pastors—single and married alike—may be reticent out of a keen

awareness of the limitations of their experience. Marriage is a complex thing and will challenge and stretch even those of us who put "Christ at the center of the relationship." Simple platitudes are woefully insufficient, while the Christian scriptures and tradition are ambivalent on the subject. What are we to say?

I've been going over the [Prepare/Enrich](#) inventories of some of the couples who will soon be in my charge, and I'm surprised at how optimistic many of them are. They want to have children, and lots of them, and they do not anticipate any arguments about money or hobbies. And yes, they will always have as much romance in their relationship as they do now.

I worry that their unmet expectations and their surprise in encountering the familiarity of a faithful life together will prove too heavy for them. I [read](#) of the casual way folks use technology to saunter into infidelity, and I feel responsible for sharing whatever resources I can to help them build a healthy marriage and see the church's commitment to walking with them.

Last month the church lost a great teacher in [Don Browning](#), who [did](#) much to explicate the complex nature of the institution of marriage, the impact of modernity on it and its relationship to Christian faith. Browning's work brought theology and social science into conversation about the pressing issues of our daily lives, including the way in which we marry and form families. I pray that his voice will continue to be heard whenever clergy model practical theological reflection with the newlyweds in their care.