

Altar plans: A vacuum of authority

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

On the day I read through [Valerie Weaver-Zercher's review](#) of books about the wedding industry, I encountered a young woman at the church reception desk who was breathlessly explaining that she had just secured the Cigar Bar at Ditka's Restaurant, next door to the church, for her wedding rehearsal party. Walking by our building, she suddenly thought about how "neat" it would be to be married there—next door to Ditka's! How much does it cost, she asked, and what kind of church is this?

We had to tell her that there were already several weddings scheduled for the Saturday in question. Apparently it had not occurred to her that her wedding might not trump whatever plans we had for the sanctuary.

Something like that happens frequently. The church I serve is located near a number of hotels with upscale accommodations for wedding receptions. We have a long aisle and a Gothic cloister which makes an attractive backdrop for photographs. A lot of people want to be married here, and we try hard to be helpful—and to be a faithful church. That is a challenge, because whether we like it or not, we are part of the wedding industry.

Weaver-Zercher cites Rebecca Mead's observation that there is a "vacuum of authority" regarding how people should marry and notes that commercial interests have stepped in to fill this vacuum. Every pastor has experienced the results of that cultural shift.

Our response to the situation has been to prepare a folder containing all the information a couple needs about getting married in our church. We tell the couple that a wedding is an act of worship and will be conducted according to the liturgy in our Book of Common Worship and guidelines established by our worship committee. We tell them that it is appropriate for their wedding to incorporate hymns and that the presiding clergyperson will read scriptures and deliver a homily. We insist that one of our ministers participate if another clergyperson is invited. We provide a list of music selections from which to choose preludes, postludes and solos. We also

provide guidelines for photography and videotaping, and we say what that will cost. For a while we required that one member of the wedding couple be a member of our church—and then discovered that every new-member class included at least one person who was there simply to fulfill the requirement. Now we give members preferential treatment in scheduling weddings, and we add to the charge for nonmembers an amount that allows them to share in the support of the church's mission. We fret a lot about the whole process, particularly the financial part.

Despite the challenges, I continue to be grateful that people invite ministers into their lives at such important and intimate occasions. A wedding is a mysterious and holy moment, and it is a privilege to be part of it.