

Gift list: A stewardship wedding and an altruistic registry

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

"Pay attention: These are our values." That's what we're saying when we make decisions about spending money or ask others to spend money on our behalf. For an engaged couple, it all starts with the wedding. *Brides* magazine reports that the average cost of a wedding today exceeds \$19,000. That amount includes more than \$4,000 for rings, \$7,500 for a reception, \$1,500 for flowers and—much lower on the budget list—\$250 for clergy.

The wedding industry involves florists, jewelers, invitation printers, restaurants and country clubs for receptions and wedding meals, as well as limousine companies, wedding shops, travel agents, photographers and professional wedding singers. Professional photographers are available for videography (average cost \$1,311 and up) and photography (\$1,500 and up), which provide a permanent record of the occasion even as they turn a religious event into a photo shoot. Couples once rode in the best man's car; now they rent a limousine (\$400).

What if a couple want to begin their family on a foundation that looks outward, thinking of others rather than of themselves? There is no better way to begin than by thinking of a "stewardship wedding." The couple could begin their wedding plans by balancing the significance of the event with the needs of others—starting by trimming nonessentials and reducing expenses to bring down that \$19,000 average cost.

The possibilities are limited only by a lack of imagination. Consider these: A church hall is less expensive than a country club; if special music is desired, use the church choir. If the hall is too small, cut the invitation list. Let the best man take over the driving duties; save the limousine for the 50th wedding anniversary. Use volunteers as photographers, and make sure you have backups in case one camera fails to function; you don't want to spend a lifetime blaming Uncle John for the camera glitch.

Then there are the wedding gifts. The Association of Bridal Consultants reports that the average wedding present costs \$85—a figure inflated by an industry that convinces couples to create wedding registries that list pricey china and silverware patterns, kitchen appliances, furniture and comforters. These days the lists may be customized as never before: if the couple loves the out-of-doors, for example, they may request tents or scuba diving equipment.

The “family for others” can turn those wedding registries into a stewardship gift list that gives testimony to what sort of new family is being formed. Couples could follow the example of Jenny Elliott, 24, and Justin Alexander, 28, described by Kirsten Scharnberg in the *Chicago Tribune* (July 16). Scharnberg writes that Elliott and Alexander developed a unique registry, one that included these items:

- several dozen sheep and goats
- donations to pay for the wedding of a Palestinian refugee
- money for medical aid for Iraqi children

Elliott and Alexander met and fell in love while doing volunteer work in Palestine’s West Bank. Alexander has also worked for the United Nations in both the West Bank and Iraq. For their wedding, they created an “altruistic gift list” that reflected “the people, places and values that are important to us.” They included Heifer International, the nonprofit Arkansas-based organization that works to end world hunger “by training people in the developing world in sustainable agricultural techniques.”

Heifer International receives financial gifts from individuals, U.S. church groups and other organizations to buy “sheep, cows and other animals in the hope of helping [families] build a herd that can sustain them.” The organization recently started an online registry that assists people “who want to use a special occasion to encourage friends and family to donate to the charity.” Heifer media director Drew Patterson says that among the several thousand registries started since the program began, “a significant portion” have been for weddings.

Elliott acknowledged that she and Alexander knew that some of their invitations would go to relatives and friends who might not feel comfortable providing credit card gifts to charities, so after their requests were met for the sheep and the goats, the refugee couple and the Iraqi children, they added a wish for themselves: a night at the St. Lucia hotel where they planned to honeymoon. As Elliott says, “We have

been really amazed at how people not just of our generation but our parents' generation have taken to the idea of giving to charitable causes.”

Couples who don't want to make too large a break with convention could still list some needed household items in their wedding registries, but also ask for gifts to specific charity organizations that reflect their interests and priorities. Some of the prewedding energy could be devoted to deciding which charity best reflects the interests of the bride and groom. In choosing, the couple would be testifying to the core values that they will use to plan their future.

An economically pared-down wedding and something equivalent to sheep and goats and medical aid to Iraqi children on the registry list may not guarantee a long and joyous marriage. But it's a good beginning.