

Church(y) weddings: When worship is the main event

by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue



Adam Frieberg and Heidi Haverkamp's wedding guests try to sing a processional hymn while the couple walks in. Courtesy of Heidi Haverkamp

Our [wedding issue](#) also includes [B. J. Hutto on truth-telling about Christian weddings](#), [Katherine Willis Pershey on a parishioner who got ordained online](#), and [Celeste Kennel-Shank on the challenges of interfaith weddings](#).

Nadia Stefko and I got married in her hometown, at an Episcopal church we had no particular connection to. “You are free to personalize the service in a number of ways,” the rector explained in our first conversation. “But we do require that you include at least one reading from the Bible.”

Nadia smiled. “How about three of them, plus a psalm? We’ve already narrowed it down to five or six choices.”

For some couples, the ceremony is an afterthought. Some approach it as a celebration of themselves and their love. We saw it as a worship event at the center of the day’s festivities. Sure, we obsessed over the reception menu and seating chart. But the ceremony was where our planning-fixated hearts were—and we understood it to be a worship service first and a wedding second.

In our case, this meant the traditional eucharistic ordo, so the assembly did a lot more liturgical praying than some were used to. The preacher gave us not five minutes on marriage but 15 minutes on the good news of Jesus Christ. There was what some might call an excessive amount of congregational singing. The whole

thing took 80 minutes.

It wouldn't have killed us to keep the ceremony under an hour, but we were pleased with how it all went. The people closest to us were convening at our invitation, and a ritualized celebration of ourselves seemed like the wrong activity. Festive worship was what this occasion called for. So we tried to relinquish most of the spotlight to Christ, to proclaim his good news rather than ours. We did this by giving word and table their full due, by choosing readings and songs we would also choose on a Sunday, by encouraging the preacher not to talk about us too much. The ceremony did reflect us personally, of course; we are personally and deeply invested in liturgy.

During the planning process, Nadia and I observed that the priority we gave the ceremony was sort of our little secret: our families expressed more interest in the reception, rehearsal dinner, accommodations, and all the rest. When the ceremony did come up, any pushback we got came couched in appeals to tradition—an odd thing given that what we basically wanted was to get married in the context of the ancient ordo of the faith our families gave us.

The most notable bone we threw to this alleged traditionalism was the bridal procession. Nadia made the usual grand entrance, complete with theme music and a standing cue. The presider—and the cross—stood idly by.

Since our wedding, we've seen other liturgically minded couples forge ahead where we balked, jettisoning even the bridal march. Instead, the bridal party and the presider followed the cross in—while the rest of us sang a processional hymn. One couple even began at the font with the Thanksgiving for Baptism liturgy.

Our friends Heather Bixler and Dave Allen processed to a hymn. "A wedding is not a celebration of us as a couple," says Dave, "but a celebration of the God who made us and called us together. There would be plenty of time to celebrate us at the reception." As Dave sees it, multiple readings and an untruncated sermon were there to "proclaim something significant"; the congregational hymns let all those gathered participate in this proclamation; and communion ensured that the service would "center on the grace of God."

Others frame their attention to participatory liturgy as an extension of why they had a church wedding in the first place.

“The way we build our family, in the day to day, should be a microcosm of how we want to build our society,” says Kate Paarlberg-Kvam. “Committing to that isn’t something that can be done by just two people and a preacher.”

Kate and her spouse, Dave, eschewed the bridal procession altogether. By including communion and multiple congregational hymns, Kate aimed to make the service feel “like a community gathering and a collective commitment to life together—not just Dave’s and mine, but all of ours.” Kate emphasizes that wedding vows, like baptismal vows, can’t be made outside community.

Meagan Sherman-Sporrong echoes this point. She and Isaac got married shortly after difficult losses in both of their families. Meagan saw the gathered assembly as a significant expression of support and community at a tough time—one that practically demanded a eucharistic service. “It just felt like communion was needed to bring this new community together,” she says.

Heidi Haverkamp and Adam Frieberg’s choice to have a very churchy wedding was about the wider Christian community as well. “Setting our wedding in the context of church traditions made our marriage feel bigger than just we two and our two families,” explains Heidi. Instead, she and Adam saw themselves as “part of the body of Christ, and part of generations of Christians who’ve been celebrating the milestones of their lives inside churches and church liturgy.”

It’s no coincidence that the quotes above all suggest a certain level of theological formation. When I asked around about people whose weddings looked roughly like mine, I heard from two groups. A few were Catholics, for whom a full eucharistic order at a wedding is common and who don’t necessarily expect to take the lead in planning the ceremony. The rest were mostly clergy and others with some seminary training.

Is such a ceremony just a niche within the culture of the personalized wedding, the liturgy lover’s version of a special day? Or might it function as a corrective to that culture?

If it’s going to be the latter, this would seem to be fundamentally a project of liturgical formation, not wedding planning. It’s hard to imagine selling that many people on a longer ceremony with more praying, more singing, more standing up and sitting down again. But if people are growing more deeply engaged in the life of worship—if they see it shaping their spirituality and their very lives—then the idea

that a wedding is primarily just another communal service starts to make sense.

When Heather and Dave got married, Dave was on staff at a university chapel, and some students attended the wedding. One reacted to the ceremony with enthusiastic surprise. “It was like a church service,” he told a colleague of Dave’s, “but they got married in the middle of it!” Exactly.

There’s at least one way, however, that such a wedding remains unlike an ordinary church service: it usually isn’t fully public. While I doubt any of us liturgi-couples would have turned away the odd wedding crasher, even the churchiest weddings tend to be planned with a carefully crafted guest list in mind. And ultimately, good worship is never by invitation only. Yes, a lot of couples issue open invitations to the ceremony; some churches require this. Yet add this basic hospitality question to our whole line of thinking so far—the importance of community, the focus on the gospel, the comparison between marriage and baptism—and the logical conclusion is clear: sooner or later, you’re going to end up at a Sunday morning wedding.

Or more precisely, at a wedding that takes place within a regularly scheduled service. When I searched for “Sunday morning wedding,” Google didn’t catch my drift. Instead, I got a lot of advice about how to save on vendors or book a desirable room by choosing a less popular day. On one forum, someone asked about etiquette for a wedding within a regular service; her respondents didn’t seem to comprehend the question. Soon I was reading a couple’s complaints about a pushy pastor who seemed confused about the difference between a wedding and a Sunday morning. Just where did this guy think he was?

The wedding industry, of course, has a far more powerful hold on betrothed Americans than the church does. The idea of renting a room for a Sunday-morning special event might sound crazy to *Century* readers. But to the wider public—and the Google algorithms that reflect it—the far stranger notion is reducing your special day to a bullet point in the week’s church bulletin. Yet people do this.

When Adam Copeland and Megan Thorvilson decided to get married at a Sunday service, they were thinking about having a wedding that honors God. “What does that better than Sunday morning worship?” asks Adam (yet another ordained minister). Their decision was also an intentional rejection of the wedding industry’s expectations. Adam’s goal was to make it clear that “we were all there in service to God and neighbor, not mammon and one particular couple.”

“So often, weddings are out of control,” says Angel Sanchez, who married Andrew Youngman at a Sunday service. “All of the pageantry and consumerism can strip away the true meaning, which, for us, is a living, breathing covenant with God and with each other.” The idea of a truly open guest list also appealed to Angel: “I loved knowing that anyone could walk in on that Sunday and be a part of our wedding.”

Jodi Montgomery recalls that “there were at least two couples who were attending church for the first time” the day she and Ben Baker got married during worship. “Imagine their surprise.”

I did try to imagine it, and I realized that my first reaction would be to feel very out of place, casually dressed at a stranger’s wedding. But as it sank in that this was indeed a public worship service—and that I was welcome there—I think it would feel just right to witness someone’s wedding in the context of something as meaningful as the Sunday assembly.

“I liked the idea of getting married on Sunday morning,” says my friend Bob Francis, “because I think marriage itself is lived in the everyday, not on the mountaintop.”

Whatever else Sunday worship is, it’s something that happens all the time. So when Bob and Yvette Schock were planning their wedding, Bob liked the idea of “having the marriage happen during something as routine as weekly worship rather than some whitewashed, catered event.” To Bob, a “special event” wedding seemed symbolically off.

Bob’s emphasis on mundanity points as well to something else: a wedding doesn’t actually have to cost a small fortune. The problem with the wedding industry is not just its relentless focus on you and your personal dreams and tastes; it’s that it exists specifically to sell you this vision, at the highest trim level it can. A positive take on the mundane presents an alternative to more easily monetized ideas like the magical or the glamorous: a wedding is something that happens every day, right here in the real world.

Weddings are part of life as it is actually lived—much like gathering for word and meal. Financial constraints may seem distinct from liturgical concerns as an angle on weddings, but they work together here. As we’ve seen, downsizing the wedding industry’s emphasis on a two-character fairy tale is a theological issue. It’s about redirecting our gaze toward Christ’s work through word, table, and assembly. It’s about embracing the idea that a church wedding is about worship, not a one-day

immersion in finery and opulence.

In a 2011 blog post, Taylor Burton-Edwards, director of worship resources for the United Methodist Church, took a pastoral approach to this subject, offering the Sunday-morning wedding as a way to give people permission to bypass wedding-industry madness. He concluded:

I can't help but imagine that weddings might rise a considerable bit on the pastor's preferred list, that congregations might feel much more empowered rather than used primarily for their space, and that the couple and their families may have saved thousands of dollars that could be put to better use during their lifelong discipleship to Jesus.

Burton-Edwards doesn't propose tightening restrictions on Saturday weddings, and I wouldn't either. But I wonder what it would take to nudge expectations of church weddings in a churchier direction. When people's lives grow deeper liturgical roots, perhaps there is space to nurture an attitude more like that of the Catholic couple who wouldn't show up at the church expecting a blank creative slate. Maybe a few more people will start to expect church with a wedding in it instead of a personalized wedding with (perhaps) a dose of church.

This won't always mean pursuing the Sunday-morning option, and it might not even mean pushing a typical Sunday order, with the marriage vows filling the baptism slot. For some it might mean preserving the (also very old) order more typical of weddings—but with a higher priority on communion, a substantive and gospel-focused sermon, and multiple Bible readings and congregational songs. Maybe it's simply about having church, about somehow conceiving of the day primarily in these terms.

If a church wedding is an everyday function of the life of worship, can it also be special? Chrysostom said that it's the gathered worshipers that make a church holy. For people formed by worship, perhaps the same could be said of what makes a church wedding special. Jodi Montgomery summarizes her Sunday ceremony as "a church service that just happened to also be a wedding. And that made it special to us. We wouldn't have had it any other way."