

Blessings all around: When my parishioner got ordained online

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue



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Our [wedding issue](#) also includes [B. J. Hutto on truth-telling about Christian weddings](#), [Steve Thorngate on the very liturgical wedding](#), and [Celeste Kennel-Shank on the challenges of interfaith weddings](#).

It was the kind of voice mail that gives a pastor pause. Allison didn't quite sound like she was in crisis, but as she requested a call back I could tell that something was bothering her. After a day of phone tag she caught me at home. By that time my concern and curiosity had escalated, so I set down my onion and chopping knife to take the call.

There was no crisis, but there was a conundrum. Close friends of Allison were getting married. They had asked her husband to be the best man in the wedding, and—in a far more surprising invitation—they asked Allison to officiate at the ceremony. She was honored, flattered, and profoundly uncomfortable. She'd accepted the invitation on the spot, assuming that there must be some sort of process in place for a person who is neither a judge nor a clergyman to obtain credentials to perform weddings.

There is such a process: a person can become either a judge or a clergyman. No one has invented a fast track to judicial authority, but thanks to the Universal Life Church, anyone who agrees to “do only that which is right” can get ordained online for free. After all, the ULC “wants you to pursue your spiritual beliefs without interference from any outside agency, including government or church authority.”

Clergy—real clergy—are notoriously agitated by the ULC and the countless esteemed colleagues it churns out. (“You will receive notification of your ordination status by e-mail. Ordinations are conducted several times each week, so normally you will hear from us within a day or two.”)

It’s not exactly territorialism we pastors feel. We’re still the ones signing the marriage licenses of our own parishioners; many of the weddings these ULC “ministers” officiate would otherwise have taken place at courthouses. And while the reaction may be about pride, it’s an understandable pride. A seminary-trained pastor—who faithfully endured her denomination’s ordination process, who dutifully adheres to her regional adjudicatory’s continuing education requirements—reports that she was recently asked at a wedding reception if she’d gotten ordained online. As if! Clergy are generalists, but weddings are one of our few specialized functions. Furthermore, we offer premarital counseling! Surely we are not entirely replaceable.

Allison felt some consternation at the prospect of a ULC ordination. This was, I’ll admit, a balm to my ego and music to my ears. She explained that she has a deep respect for the office of the clergy. Reducing the ordination process to an exchange of e-mails seemed to her like more than a cheapening of the vocation; it was a mockery of it. What’s more, Allison is an adult convert to the United Church of Christ. Her own sense of religious identity would be compromised by the ruse of joining the ULC as a so-called religious leader. And yet it was such an honor to be asked by her friends that she couldn’t bear the thought of refusing.

I suggested that she might ask her friends to have a private legal ceremony with a judge, after which she could preside over a public blessing and exchange of vows that subtly excluded legalities. She agreed that this could be a solution. Then she trailed off, her ambivalence apparent.

I realized at that moment that Allison wasn’t looking for my help in finding a way out of doing what her friends were asking. What she wanted—even if she did not yet know it—was my blessing. Not my permission, not my acquiescence. My blessing.

I often underestimate the inherent authority that I have as a member of the clergy. Yes, I preach and baptize and consecrate, but as a pastor in a tradition with congregational polity, I rarely have a vote. Whatever pastoral authority I possess, I don’t wave it around for the world or my parish to see. So the question I proceeded to ask did not come naturally to me. In fact, I felt a bit like I was impersonating the

pope as I haltingly asked Allison if she would like for me to grant her my blessing. Her answer was swift and relieved: yes.

I offered to help Allison think through the wedding liturgy, and she gratefully accepted. When we met several weeks later, our conversation touched on a constellation of related issues as well. We considered the causes and ramifications of the growing trend of couples enlisting friends or family to perform wedding ceremonies. We talked about the role of the church in a post-Christendom society. We lamented some of the ways marriage has been and is being transformed, and we celebrated others. We noted the peculiar custom of vesting legal power in otherwise strictly parochial authorities. I tried to assuage Allison's lingering guilt about having sent off for her ordination papers by reminding her that even American Marriage Ministries—a less polemical alternative to the Universal Life Church, founded by actual religious professionals—must call itself a church and issue ordinations, because that is what most states require.

But we didn't just talk religion and politics and culture. We also talked about the role of the church and marriage in our own lives. I was privileged, as I so often am in my work as a congregational minister, to hear Allison's story. Most important, we prayed together. It was one of the most enjoyable and meaningful conversations I've shared with a parishioner.

Days after the newlyweds departed for their honeymoon, Allison sent me a long note detailing her foray into my world. I laughed at this classic clergywoman moment:

I was told by a 20-year-old sound expert that I would have a lapel-clipped mic. He said it was easy to use and then asked where I would like the small mic and the garage-door-opener-size sound pack to be clipped. I smiled at him and said nothing. I was wearing a form-fitting, boat-neck, silk dress with no pockets. There was a long silence. Then I said kindly, "Please make a suggestion of how this can work." He shook his head and said twice, "Um, I have never had this happen." I took a deep breath and said, "Do you mean you always clip this to a man in a suit?" and he nodded. Alrighty. I resolved that I would clip it to my binder. Because at that moment there was one thing I knew for sure—a woman CAN wear a dress and use a mic.

I cringed knowingly at Allison's minor mistake of forgetting to instruct the wedding guests to be seated, having made the same mistake during my first wedding. I

noded as she marveled at the honor of it all—being a part of such a momentous moment, not only for the bride and groom but for the community that gathered to bear witness and pledge support.

And finally, I rejoiced that officiating at this wedding had the same effect on Allison as officiating at weddings invariably has on me. “Is this selfish?” she wondered. “One of the greatest benefits of this experience is that it brought Dave and me together in such a meaningful way,” she said, referring to her husband.

He helped me write and proofread the ceremony, and in so doing we found ourselves having many long conversations about what love is, why we value our marriage, what we admire about other relationships, and how we can support marriage. And we talked about the strengths and weaknesses of our own marriage. I pulled out our own vows and letters we wrote when we were engaged. Lovely. It was just a lovely moment in our marriage.

I remain ambivalent about the rise of the nonprofessional wedding officiant and the sidelining of the clergy. Should someone dare ask me at a wedding reception if I obtained my credentials online, I would have to concentrate very hard on not kicking that person in the shins. I believe that what clergy offer—spiritual guidance, pastoral care, accountability to an imperfect but holy church—is valuable.

Yet even though I didn’t perform this particular wedding ceremony, I did manage to offer those same gifts to Allison. She gladly received them and passed them on, in a sort of newfangled priesthood of all believers.

Her thank-you note included this Wordsworth quote: “All that we behold is full of blessings.” Inside she wrote, “Thank you for beholding, providing, sharing, and helping me participate in blessings.” I could say the same to her.