

The wedding flees the church

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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So, 34 couples got married in a live, mass wedding during the Grammy Awards. Queen Latifah (no, not ordained) officiated at the ceremony, against a projected image of stained glass windows. A gospel choir joined in singing behind Madonna while the couples, old and young, gay and straight, exchanged rings.

I'm not going to lie: I have mixed feelings about this spectacle. I'm clergy, so performing wedding ceremonies, along with all the preparation and education that goes with them, is a job I take seriously. I develop a personal relationship with every couple, helping them converse about everything from their parents' marriages (and divorces) to who's going to take out the trash. I pray *with* them and *for* them, write their unique wedding liturgies and sign their licenses. For some couples, marriage preparation will be the first time they've been in church since their confirmation—or baptism—and may be the last time they drop in until their first child is born, or ever. I value that fleeting opportunity to reach out to people who are making a significant emotional and spiritual turning point in their lives, and let them know God is walking beside them.

So the idea of having a live, televised group wedding in which the participants are selected by a casting agency comes off to me as a little crass.

But then, I have to admit, *crass* is a mild word for the way the institutional church has behaved in response to many people who long to form life partnerships. The church has had its chance to be present in the lives of different configurations of family, and for the most part, we have said: if it doesn't look like the 1950s, go someplace else to get your blessing.

So I guess we shouldn't be surprised that some people *are* going elsewhere to get God's blessing. They are getting married on the steps of courthouses, in parks and roller rinks, in abandoned churches recast as wedding chapels, and anywhere else they please, including the Grammys.

Part of me is sad that the church is losing its hold on being the place where this rite is enacted. I like the oversight and protection the church has to offer to couples making their way in the world. Being married is hard and, well, “it takes a village” to keep a marriage strong. The church can be that village.

But the reality is, the church has refused to be that village for gay and lesbian couples and others who don't fit the mold. And now, the sacred ritual of forming families has broken out of the walls of our churches and is being celebrated in the open, where everyone can see the beautiful thing God can do with two people in partnership. Couples may be finding new ways to support their families spiritually and emotionally outside the church.

Or, maybe not. I don't know. Maybe someday, couples will bravely venture back to the church looking for a community that fosters every shape of family. Maybe they will find churches like the one I'm at now, where every creative configuration of family is welcome.

Maybe someday, weddings will come back to the church!

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