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CONGREGATIONS AND NON-MEMBER WEDDINGS

PROBLEM: Congregations are often approached by non-member couples seeking to have a church wedding. While many congregations desire a more visible presence in their community, these weddings can be problematic.

SOLUTION: Many congregations decline all such requests by non-members, while others will host such weddings only under certain conditions.

Recently, James R. Clark, pastor of Zion Evangelical United Church of Christ in Indianapolis, married a couple whose connection to his church was remote, at best. Several decades ago, the bride's grandparents had been faithful members, but she was not a member and did not attend the church.

Zion receives dozens of inquiries every year from engaged couples with little or no connection to the church. Its convenient downtown location and its elegant, spacious sanctuary make it a particularly attractive space for weddings.

Clark usually declines such requests, due in part to bad experiences in the past, and in part to philosophical qualms. "They have a tendency to look at us as just a hall for weddings," he says. "But this is a faith community, and we're concerned that what we do here is a faith experience. We're not interested in being a marriage mill."

In this case, the family connection, though distant, was sufficient for Clark to waive his policy against marrying non-members.

Similar scenarios are familiar to many congregations, and so are the inherent dilemmas. While congregations are often approached by non-members requesting use of their facilities and their leader's services for ceremonies, weddings create tensions not associated with the early- and end-of-life rites in which congregations often participate. Infant baptism, for example, is far from a universal practice, and parents who present their child for baptism are likely to have some prior connection to a congregation. In the case of funerals, clergy are reluctant to turn people away in a time of acute grief and distress. However, congregations receive numerous requests from non-members for use of their sacred space for weddings, and clergy have broad leeway in responding to the request.

Hosting a wedding in its sanctuary, under the authority of its clergy, confers the congregation's blessing on the ceremony in a formal sense. Some congregations reasonably want to reserve that sanction for members. But what constitutes membership in a faith community? Is there a gray area for weddings? Is it enough to hold the same beliefs? Is a historical family tie sufficient?

In most Catholic and Episcopalian congregations, marriage ceremonies are reserved exclusively for people who are already a part of their faith community—though in many cases this is required of only one partner. Sr.

Jean Marie Cleveland, the parish life coordinator of St. Patrick Catholic Church in Fountain Square, reports that the church has received no inquiries from non-Catholics about the church's wedding policy in her seven years of service there.

In the Jewish community, intermarriage between Jews and Christians is a perennial source of tension, and policies on that issue vary widely. And, like Protestant congregations, synagogues face the dilemma of how to handle weddings of couples who are not members. At Beth-El Zedeck Temple on West 70th Street—where the policy is that the couple must both be Jewish—rabbis occasionally perform weddings for non-members. However, non-member weddings are held in the chapel rather than the sanctuary, and couples are strongly encouraged to join a synagogue before marriage.

Among the majority of Protestant congregations, however, there is a wide range in their responses to non-member wedding requests. Most want to be open and welcoming to the community, and weddings are one way of showing hospitality. They also present an opportunity to establish relationships with a group highly prized by congregations: young people about to start families.

Yet many clergy are skeptical of the idea that weddings can be a tool for building a congregation. Some report that they started with an open-door policy but reversed it after they began feeling “used” by couples who, after the wedding ceremony, never showed up for worship services.

Some have the opposite experience. Robert McMillen, associate pastor of Old Bethel United Methodist Church on the east side, on a recent Sunday counted 12 couples that he had married in the church who now attend regularly, but did not before their wedding.

David Schnepf, pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ, also on the east side, conducts about 25 non-member weddings a year. He receives three or four times that number of requests, but is selective about whom he accepts: “I'm looking for couples who are looking for a church home, not just a beautiful building,” he says. He estimates that up to half the couples he marries eventually become members of his church.

MAKING ACCOMMODATIONS

How a congregation defines “community” is a better indicator of their wedding policy than theology or denomination. Some expect couples to be part of their faith community at the time of marriage, however such participation is defined. Such congregations view the wedding as chiefly a religious ceremony at which the faith community confers its blessing on a couple who share their beliefs and practices. As a brochure distributed by Tabernacle Presbyterian Church puts it plainly: “A wedding here at Tabernacle is a Christian service of worship and so it is essential that the bride and groom profess faith in Jesus Christ.”

Some policies are common to virtually all congregations. Premarital counseling is a congregation's opportunity to put its own stamp on a marriage. Congregations typically require that any couple married by its leadership, in its building, submit to counseling. Some congregations see this as a chance to evangelize; others see it as a necessity, given the high incidence of divorce.

Most congregations enforce a policy prohibiting tobacco and alcohol at wedding ceremonies. Most charge non-members a fee for use of the sanctuary but waive the fee for members. Fees vary considerably, but usually fall within the range of \$100 to \$250.

The following accounts capture some of the range in philosophy about weddings and describe some of the strategies that congregations have developed to handle them.

Castleton Church of the Nazarene

Andy Lochary, pastor of Castleton Church of the Nazarene on Allisonville Road, receives half a dozen calls a year from non-member couples interested in using the church for their wedding. He works with these couples if they're willing to take part in a counseling regimen that lasts up to 12 weeks.

At the outset, Lochary promises only that he will meet with the couple and decide whether he can marry them in good conscience. If he cannot, he tells them by the fourth session. The determining factor is whether he believes they are fully committed to making the marriage work.

“If two people are serious enough about their relationship that they want to develop the best tools they can develop for their marriage, I would rather marry that couple than a Christian couple that isn’t willing to develop the tools for their marriage,” Lochary says. “I think that willingness is more honoring to Christ and to what marriage is supposed to be.”

Lochary can understand why clergy grow weary of receiving requests from non-members; the counseling sessions, in particular, can become “a hassle.” But he doesn’t understand why a congregation would completely close itself off. “That’s diametrically opposed to what Jesus was about. I always saw him as being inclusive. If we can have that attitude toward people, in the end it’s going to pay off for them and for the church.”

Crooked Creek Baptist Church

Michael Snow was the associate pastor of Crooked Creek Baptist Church on North Michigan Road for 14 years before becoming head pastor. When he assumed the new position, he kept in place the church’s very liberal policy toward non-member weddings. Essentially, if there were no scheduling conflicts, he would marry a couple.

But after about a year, he grew uneasy and disillusioned with the policy. He rarely saw any of the couples again after their wedding, and decided that he should become more selective.

“I feel that the couple should take it at least as seriously as I do,” Snow says. “Oftentimes they’re just looking for a building. It’s not much different than if they went to the justice of the peace. It really doesn’t mean much to them.”

His preference is to perform weddings for members and for people who attend the church regularly. But he remains open to other couples, provided they have a good reason for holding the wedding at Crooked Creek Baptist.

“Membership is not the issue,” Snow says. “I will invest myself with couples if I feel they truly are believers and want to have a Christian wedding. But if they are believers, the question is, ‘Why aren’t you having a wedding in your church, with your pastor?’”

Snow’s approach is to “challenge couples to take more seriously” the commitments they are about to enter into. “I feel very strongly that for marriages to succeed, they need the spiritual foundation,” he says. “I don’t like to give a superficial blessing or endorsement to a couple who doesn’t see a commitment to the church or to Christ as a high priority in their relationship.”

Northminster Presbyterian Church

Northminster Presbyterian on East Kessler Boulevard will host about 10 non-member wedding ceremonies in the next year. The Rev. Nancy Howard will perform the majority of these. “There’s always this moment of uneasiness when I first get together with a couple,” she says, “because they don’t know how I’m going to react.” Often, a nervous future bride or groom will begin talking about his or her grandparents’ connection to the church.

Howard says that, although “it’s disconcerting that they would come here only for the wedding,” she tries to relieve their anxiety. She wants them to find Northminster welcoming, she says, “We hope that they will return and see that this church is a place where they can center their lives.”

Howard meets with non-member couples at least twice before the ceremony. The first session is devoted to getting acquainted, choosing vows, and going over the order of the service. In the second session, she

reviews the scriptures and the vows they've chosen for the ceremony, because "I want them to be very clear about what they're promising to one another." Discussion of the vows often leads to discussion of the issues that the couples will soon face. "What is for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer?" Howard says. "What is the worst situation that you can imagine?"

Non-member couples typically choose Northminster for its beautiful sanctuary and well-kept grounds. Howard doesn't expect them to return soon after the wedding, and they rarely do. "But if their wedding has been a good experience—and we certainly strive for that—they will often return as their life settles into a pattern. As they adjust to living together and get into a routine, some of the things we've talked about begin to crop up. So, sometimes within six months or a year, we see them again."

Howard understands why some ministers become cynical about the whole routine. In many cases, she says, "The church is the last thing a couple picks. They pick the florist and the photographer before the church." Nonetheless, she enjoys performing the ceremonies. They can be a refreshing change from the more discouraging aspects of ministry, she says. "Weddings are an opportunity to make a positive impact on people. The church is here to serve them and be a part of their covenant—and I emphasize that word. Covenant means that you make unconditional promises to one another. We have an opportunity here, and I don't turn them away. I don't make them feel small for coming."

Southport Heights Christian Church

Southport Heights Christian Church on McFarland Road hosts up to 10 non-member weddings each year. That number seems low, relative to the size of the church, which has a large facility and several hundred members, but the church is not clearly visible from the road, and its profile in the community is low.

Many requests come from people who have never seen the church at all. They've simply looked in the Yellow Pages for a church that will agree to marry them. Other requests come from people who once attended a wedding at the church. Southport Heights is open to these people under certain conditions.

One is that they agree to a counseling program, which has been revamped recently. Southport Heights has contracted with a counselor specifically for this purpose. The counselor meets with the couple for four sessions, and with each of them individually for one more session. The cost of the counseling is \$150 for members and \$200 for non-members.

Couples who are living together must find separate living quarters until they are married—a requirement that reduces the number of interested couples considerably at the outset.

Southport Heights is open to marrying two Christians, or two unbelievers, but the church strongly discourages a Christian from marrying a non-Christian. In explaining this policy, associate pastor Charles Cline cites a Bible passage about two partners being "equally yoked."

In addition to attending counseling sessions, couples meet at least once with the pastor who will perform their ceremony. Cline says that he takes the opportunity to share with non-members "what it means to be a Christian and how they could be a Christian." The church rarely sees tangible results from this outreach, he says, but "It's still important to do what we can to share the good news."

Englewood Christian Church

Only a handful of non-member weddings take place in its building each year, but Englewood Christian Church on the near east side considers itself open to more.

"We're not closed off," says Michael Bowling, the church's pastor. "Our goal is to serve people in real ways. That means walking down the road with them as far as they're willing to walk."

Englewood Christian will rent its building to non-members, even when the church's minister is not performing the wedding ceremony. This policy is rare. Most congregations that once had open-door

policies dropped them long ago because of disruptions or abuses to their buildings. Englewood, on the other hand, sees it as “a matter of being a good neighbor.”

In these cases, Bowling doesn’t ask many questions of the couple, and no premarital counseling is required of them. But when Englewood’s pastor is asked to perform a ceremony for non-members, the situation becomes more complicated.

For Bowling, the key is that the couple be sincere in their reasons for wanting to have a church wedding. “If they’re not interested in being part of a church—if they just want a Christian wedding for the sake of having the traditional vows said over them—I would say they need to find a congregation where that’s acceptable,” he says. “We’re not doing people a favor if we just slap a Christian stamp on the wedding. It’s like selling them a false bill of goods, sending them out thinking that they have a Christian marriage without their understanding what one might be.”

What Christian marriage provides, according to Bowling, is a support system of fellow believers—a community of faith that a couple can both contribute to and draw strength from. If two people consider themselves Christians but don’t have a church, he says, “I try to be gentle and polite, but I ask them what version of Christianity doesn’t involve participation with a local body of believers. I tell them that marriage is a tough go, even in the best circumstances, and if you get into really difficult situations, you need to be around people whom you are submitted to and who are submitted to you. And that doesn’t exist if you’re out there on your own.”

DRAWING THE LINE

For congregations of all denominations and faiths, wedding policies reflect their religious beliefs. They also expose a variety of tensions within congregations, and between congregations and the larger culture. The desire to evangelize conflicts with the impulse to protect the community of faith. Regard for the wedding as a sacred ceremony conflicts with the secular view of it as a cultural norm.

It isn’t surprising, then, that non-member weddings can leave congregations feeling diminished. “What the couple wants done is what they want done,” says Zion Evangelical UCC’s James Clark, “and often that doesn’t have much to do with anything beyond a legality.”

Despite such slights, many congregations persevere in their policy of openness to non-member weddings. Each, after all, can be viewed as another seed planted.

“This is a way that the church can reach out,” says Tammy Neighbors of Epworth United Methodist Church on the northeast side. “If we were to say, ‘You’re not members, so we’re not going to offer you anything’—that’s not what the church is about. There is a tension there, and a struggle. But we want to be a welcoming community, no matter what needs people have. What better way to say to them, ‘Come on in.’”

¹ Intermarriage is an issue of increasing concern in the Catholic community. A 1999 survey found that 30 percent of Catholics are married to non-Catholics, and young Catholics are much more likely to marry non-Catholics than their parents were. Also, having a church wedding is becoming less important to Catholics; only 59 percent of young Catholics were married in a Catholic ceremony.

²The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey caused alarm for many in the Jewish community. The survey found that over the previous 20 years Jewish intermarriage had quadrupled; by 1990, one in four Jews were involved in an interfaith marriage, and only 38 percent of these couples reported raising their children as Jews.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

Wedding policies are not rigid; a “closed” congregation will sometimes make exceptions, and “open” congregations do not automatically agree to marry every couple.

- Many congregations find that non-member weddings attract few new members, but others find it an effective way to build membership.
- Virtually all congregations require couples to go through premarital counseling sessions.
- How a congregation defines itself as a community is the best indicator of its non-member wedding policy.
- Protestant and Jewish congregations are divided between closed and open; most Catholic and Episcopalian congregations are closed.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

Congregation Beth-El Zedeck
600 W. 70th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46260
(317) 253-3441

Castleton Church of the Nazarene
7848 Allisonville Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46250
(317) 577-8890

Crooked Creek Baptist Church
5540 N. Michigan Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46208
(317) 251-7804

Englewood Christian Church
57 N. Rural St.
Indianapolis, IN 46201
(317) 639-1541

Epworth United Methodist Church
6450 Allisonville Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
(317) 251-1481

Northminster Presbyterian Church
1660 E. Kessler Blvd.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
(317) 251-9489

Old Bethel United Methodist Church
7995 E. 21st St.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
(317) 359-9651

St. John's United Church of Christ
7031 S. East St.
Indianapolis, IN 46227

(317) 881-2353

St. Patrick Catholic Church
950 Prospect St.
Indianapolis, IN 46203
(317) 631-5824

Southport Heights Christian Church
7154 McFarland Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46227
(317) 783-7714

Zion Evangelical United Church of Christ
416 E. North St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
(317) 639-5411

Fatima Retreat House sponsors a pre-marriage counseling session for couples called Tobit Weekend. Though Fatima is a Roman Catholic institution, the three-day program is designed for Christians of all denominations. Tobit Weekends are held about once a month. The cost per couple, including meals and overnight accommodations, is \$225. For more information, contact Fatima Retreat House, 5353 E. 56th St., Indianapolis, IN 46226-1405. (317) 545-7681.

The survey on Catholic intermarriage is summarized in the October 29, 1999, issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*.

For a helpful summary of the Catholic Church's view of marriage, see "The Touch of God: Marriage as a Sacrament" in the April 19, 1997, issue of *America*.

A summary of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey is found in the Winter 1995 issue of *Sociology of Religion*.

The January-February 1997 issue of *Tikkun* features a roundtable discussion on Jewish intermarriage.