

**“There are many inside who seem to be outside,
and many outside who seem to be inside”
(St. Augustine)**

Peadar A. Dalton

Since my wife Margarita and I established our business called Your Ceremony Matters in 2002, we have officiated approximately 1,400 weddings, 450 memorial services/celebrations of life, and many naming/blessing ceremonies for newborns. Our clients come from around the world for outdoor weddings in the wine country, and 99 percent of them are unattached to any particular denominational practice or religious tradition. Even so, they are seeking spiritual depth in their lives, albeit in a nontraditional way, and they view their wedding commitment, or memorial service for a loved one, or the blessing of a baby as part of their spiritual journey. Many guests who attend these ceremonies are active members of various religious traditions.

Vatican II opened me to the importance of the Church serving and witnessing God’s love to the world community. I was influenced by a theology that understood creation, which includes all of humanity, as the sacrament of God’s Presence. In addition, my decades of active involvement in interfaith and interreligious dialogue have deepened my conviction that each person is a living reflection of God in diverse ways. My almost twenty years of marriage to Margarita continues to teach me and form in me the importance of fostering an intimate relationship while at the same time holding

Rev. Peadar A. Dalton, FCM, LCSW, lives in Sonoma, California.
Email: peadaradalton@comcast.net.

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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on to the uniqueness of self in the marital bond. I see my present entrepreneurial ministry *outside* ordinary religious institutions as an attempt to celebrate pivotal moments in peoples lives in a more personal way.

The vast majority of my clients are deeply spiritual people looking for meaningful rituals to express the mystery of God in their lives. The desire for a personal touch in celebrations is often paramount for the people I work with. As we plan the ritual moment together, I emphasize the uniqueness of the community assembled around the particular celebration. These communities will not come together again, but the meaning and intent of the ceremony, and the love of the assembled community, is an expression of Divine Love and will travel with the honorees and all present forever. Examples of this are the whole community touching and blessing the rings of the bride and groom, rituals for inclusion of children from a previous marriage who are present at the wedding of one of their parents; guests placing their hands on a baby and offering an intention for his or her life; attendees touching the casket or urn and asking the person whose life we are remembering to bless their lives for a special intention.

The particular challenge in this ministry is to honor authentic, well-founded faith beliefs while at the same time expressing them in a language that lands in a meaningful way in the hearts of all present at the sacred gathering. This is a complex task because the people who gather to celebrate a marriage or mourn a death range across the spectrum of religious practice. As a result, each occasion is unique and each once-only gathering is a significant communal moment centered around commitment, gratitude, uniqueness, the universality of God's love, the common needs to belong and to have a meaningful purpose, grieving, celebrating the mystery of life, and the search for intimacy in our lives.

Here are some of the principles that inform how I work with people in one-time-only gatherings:

- I emphasize the uniqueness of the community assembled around the bride and groom, the deceased, or the baby, a community that never in history will come together again.
- I remind the community members that their love and presence will travel forever with the bride and groom, the grieving family, the newborn. Their presence represents a deep, enduring concern and love for the bride and groom, respect for the deceased and his or her family and friends, and care for the newborn, and it is an extension of Divine presence in the here and now.

- I encourage all clients to actively participate in the formulation of their ceremony, which provides them a sense of ownership of the ceremony. This may include their choice of readings, a particular ritual personal to them, personalized vows, honoring deceased family members, and communal involvement.

My authorization to officiate at these nondenominational services comes from my being an active member of the Federation of Christian Ministries and my having been ordained as a Catholic priest almost fifty years ago. I am a licensed therapist in the state of California, and many of my ceremony clients seek therapy for unresolved issues in their lives that the preparation for their ceremony reminds them of. I do not represent the Catholic Church officially in any capacity. The state of California recognizes both my ordination and my membership in the Federation of Christian Ministries as the legal grounds for my performing a legal wedding ceremony.

As an entrepreneur, I am accountable first of all to the clients requesting my services for a wedding or memorial or blessing. I continue to be shaped in my ministry today by a statement made to me by my parish priest almost forty years ago: "Always remember that those we serve are our best teachers." My aim is to integrate the long-standing beliefs entrenched in the majority of faith traditions into these services in a way that brings words and rituals from *inside (the Church)* to clients on the *outside (of the Church)* in a way that is personal and meaningful to them.

All of these clients, even though they are not formally involved in a particular denominational religious tradition, such as a practice, want to emphasize in their ceremonies commitment, family, community, being spiritual, mystery, and prayer, with a focus on gratitude and self-sacrifice for others. All these concepts are also core to formal religious traditions.

My challenge to you, the reader, is to write a short essay on what you think, St Augustine meant when he described the Church by writing, "There are many inside who seem to be outside, and many outside who seem to be inside."