

POSITIONS AND SEATING

If a couple hires you as their bridal consultant, the level of formality for their wedding is usually at least semiformal. Clients will rely on your expertise about the proper positions for key players during the ceremony. For example, clients may ask where the maid or matron of honor and best man are supposed to stand during the ceremony. In addition, they may ask for your advice on where their parents should be seated and how many seats should be reserved for each member of the bride's and the groom's families.

Therefore, you must know the proper positions and seating arrangements for the ceremony. The best time to share this information with the bride and groom, their parents, and the wedding party members, is during the *wedding rehearsal*.

The Wedding Rehearsal

Regardless of the size of a wedding, holding a *wedding rehearsal* helps to relieve stress for everyone involved in the wedding. The rehearsal is normally scheduled on the day before the ceremony, so out-of-town attendants and family members can practice their roles for the next day's ceremony. Note that only those who have active roles in the ceremony should participate in the rehearsal. Hangers-on, spouses, and out-of-town guests should sit quietly and observe or, better yet, not be there at all. Other people important to the rehearsal include musicians and special readers. During the rehearsal, the soloist should coordinate with the organist, and the reader should become familiar with the lectern by learning where the light switch is.

The rehearsal is your time to shine. The wedding party will usually be meeting you for the first time at the rehearsal, so you want to make a good impression. You can make a good impression, for example, by preparing a schedule of events ahead of time to convey that you're truly an expert. You can print the schedule on your letterhead, so everyone has your name and phone number for immediate use—this is also a great way to network and generate referrals.

Though wedding rehearsals can be held any day and time before the wedding day, most couples schedule the rehearsal on the day before the wedding.

The rehearsal is also your last chance to confirm that you have all the necessary supplies. Depending on the type of wedding ceremony the couple is having, examples of these supplies include a unity candle, a bag or napkin to wrap the glass in, and a crown.

During the rehearsal, you must explain to the bridesmaids, groomsmen, and ushers their responsibilities. You can begin by highlighting the fact that being asked to participate in the couple's wedding is a special privilege. You can continue to explain that the couple must really love them and they, in return, should show their appreciation by working hard to make the day go smoothly. You can then explain their roles to them by telling them where to stand, what to do, and when to do it. This little pep talk often makes a major improvement in the attendants' performance.

You can practice with all involved in the wedding by using props. For example, you can buy or make a mock train, so the bride can practice turning with a train behind her. You can also use a ribbon bouquet from the bridal shower, or you can take a silk flower bouquet, to use as a mock bouquet. The bride can then practice handing it off to the maid or matron of honor. In addition, depending on the type of wedding the couple is having, they may want to practice certain ceremonial elements, like lighting the unity candle.

If children are in the wedding party, make sure to give them enough time to become comfortable with their assigned roles and duties. They should also be encouraged to playact as much as possible. For example, encourage the flower girl to pretend to throw flower petals, or carry the flower basket.

Make sure to provide the children with enough activities to keep them occupied. You can give them children's books that illustrate their roles, so they have something to read while the adults practice their own roles.

If the ceremony will be long and complex, as is the case with a Nuptial Mass, encourage the officiant to provide cues to the couple and their guests during the Mass. What the couple might do from memory at a regular service can be forgotten because of the excitement they feel on their wedding day.

Although the actual service isn't read during the rehearsal, the officiant should describe each part to the couple and explain what they're supposed to do and say.

Because the rehearsal is a serious event that's designed to prevent embarrassing mistakes at the wedding, and because it may take place at a religious site, advise all participants beforehand that proper behavior needs to be exhibited and appropriate attire needs to be worn.

Likewise, since the participants are present at the rehearsal to learn and practice, they should give the officiant their full, undivided attention, as he or she explains the proper sequence and appearance of a wedding. Paying attention is especially important when the ceremony is personalized and, in religious weddings, when some participants don't practice the faith in which the wedding is being conducted.

Several decisions that affect the wedding's appearance will be made at the rehearsal, including how the processional and recessional will be organized and where the attendants will stand during the ceremony. The organist should also attend the rehearsal so the wedding party can practice walking at the desired pace. The recessional, however, may not have to be practiced because the couple will set their own pace as they leave the church, with all others following their lead.

The couple, guided by the officiant's advice, will choose the best arrangements for the attendants. While the couple is in control of making this choice, especially if they're having a religious ceremony, they should consider the officiant's advice because he or she has experienced what works best and what must be done to meet regulations.

The following list contains other important decisions that the bride and groom must make during the rehearsal:

- Who will fold back the bride's veil if she's using a face veil? Though this person will normally be the honor attendant, the groom or the bride's father may pull it back at the beginning of the ceremony.
- On which side of her father will the bride walk? She normally walks on his right, but doesn't have to.
- Which pace will be used in the processional? How far apart will the bridesmaids be spaced? Although a slow, natural walk is more common, variations are acceptable.

To make sure everyone, especially the children, is standing in the right spot, try drawing chalk marks or using colored tape on the floor. If the ceremony is to take place outdoors, colorful golf tees, for example, can be used to mark their positions.

- If the wedding party will include both a maid of honor and a matron of honor, who will hold the bride's bouquet during the ceremony?
- If the couple will have a double-ring ceremony, who will hold the groom's ring?
- In which row will the parents be seated?
- If the bride will be dressing at the ceremony site, what space will be provided to her? What time will this space be available?
- If there will be a receiving line, where will it form?
- Will the flower girl and ring bearer remain positioned at the altar with the attendants?

Seating Arrangements

At the front of the ceremony site, several pews in a church or rows of seats on either side of the aisle are reserved for immediate family, and sometimes, a few very close friends (Figure 19). The couple can tell family and close friends where to sit by giving them pew or row cards; if they prefer, they can also be told by word of mouth.

FIGURE 19—Make sure to label the rows that are reserved for family.



According to the standard rules of etiquette, and depending on the family's size, either the couple's parents can have exclusive use of the first row or they can share it with the rest of their families. In large families, brothers and sisters who aren't participating in the ceremony would share the second row. Other close family members can be assigned specific rows. Remember to advise the ushers about these assignments during the rehearsal.

If you're standing at the rear of the ceremony site, the bride's family traditionally occupies the pews or seats on the left side of the aisle, while the groom's family occupies those on the right. In addition, the parents should be seated closest to the aisle.

The same number of pews or seats should be reserved for each family. If the number of members in each family is different, you can hand out *in-front-of-the-ribbon cards* to maintain the balance. These cards allow selected guests to sit in seats normally reserved for family members.

Traditionally, each female guest is escorted to her seat by an usher who offers his right arm to her, while each male guest is simply led to his seat by an usher. If a couple wishes to remain together when being seated, the usher can just say, "Please follow me."

Parents and grandparents should arrive at the ceremony at least 30 minutes before the ceremony begins to greet guests and receive boutonnieres and corsages. Approximately 5 minutes before the processional, the groom's grandparents are seated, followed by the bride's grandparents, and then the groom's parents. The mother of the bride is escorted by the head usher and is the last one seated before the processional begins. Note that after the bride's mother is seated, guests shouldn't be seated. Instead, guests who arrive late should wait at the rear of the ceremony site, or they can slip into a back pew or seat from a side aisle.

If the parents of either the bride or the groom, or both, are deceased, close relatives—grandparents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and guardians—should be seated in the first pew or row of seats. If the bride's mother is deceased, whoever has the place of honor should be escorted in last, since he or she would replace the bride's mother.

The terms *groomsmen* and *ushers* are often used interchangeably because both essentially have the same function during the wedding. Larger weddings, with a greater number of guests, will typically include both groomsmen and ushers; this allows ushers to focus on seating guests.

When an aisle runner is being used, it's drawn after the bride's mother is seated.

Mentioning a deceased parent during the ceremony is appropriate. In addition, pictures of that parent may be displayed at the reception—this is a great way to honor his or her memory. Sometimes, the bride or groom may also choose to visit the grave of a deceased parent on the wedding day; this act is considered to be thoughtful. Brides often leave a flower from their bouquet on the grave, though some may choose to leave the entire bouquet.

If a close relative can't attend because of illness, it's gracious and considerate to have flowers—perhaps a smaller version of the bridal bouquet—delivered to this individual at the same time the ceremony is to take place. If the bride's mother or grandmother is unable to attend the ceremony, the bride may wish to deliver the bouquet herself. In such a case, consider asking the florist to make a *toss bouquet*, which is an additional, less elaborate bouquet. A toss bouquet is a great option for a bride who wishes to present a bouquet to a relative who is unable to attend the ceremony because the bride is also able to keep her own bouquet.

Seating Divorced Parents

If the bride has had little contact with her mother, and has lived with her father and stepmother, her father and stepmother usually sit in the first row.

Seating divorced parents requires careful planning, consideration, understanding, cooperation, and—above all—tact. The bride's mother usually sits in the first row on the left. If the bride's mother has remarried, her new husband and her family, as well as her stepfamily, usually sit with her. If she hasn't remarried, she traditionally sits alone—even if she's dating someone—or with chosen members of her immediate family. She also has the option of sitting with an escort, if they have a close relationship. Otherwise, the escort sits with the other guests.

The bride's father usually attends his daughter's wedding, even if he has remarried, because she normally wants to share her joy with all her relatives and wouldn't exclude a parent from the ceremony. After escorting the bride down the aisle, her father joins his family in the row behind his former wife, and his immediate family may be seated in additional rows behind his. If he has remarried, his new wife can be seated with him, though seating the stepmother farther back with her own family is considered more tactful.

The situation becomes complicated if the bride has remained close with each of her parents after their divorce, but the parents feel bitter towards each other. In such a case, you should work with the bride to determine the best seating arrangements.

If the groom's parents are divorced, the same general rules regarding the seating arrangements still apply. Note that these arrangements adhere to traditional wedding etiquette, and that decision makers ultimately decide on the seating arrangements regardless of whether their decision adheres to traditional etiquette.

Show Time!

After the wedding rehearsal and a good night's rest, the day the couple has anxiously been awaiting has finally arrived. Today's weddings can range from a simple ceremony to an elaborate ceremony that can rival a Broadway performance. However, regardless of the size of the wedding, your job is to ensure that everything runs smoothly and that problems are quickly taken care of. All involved in the wedding (including you) are taking part in a solemn ceremony, which should be the focal point of the day, so slight errors won't matter in the long run of the beautiful union about to take place.

The Processional

The positions of all involved in the processional are rooted in tradition and shouldn't be changed, except for good reason. For example, the officiant may recommend modifications because of the layout of the ceremony site. The lineup discussed in this section is used for the most formal wedding; if the wedding party doesn't include certain roles, then the sequence of the positions is still relatively the same.

The processional forms at the rear of the ceremony site, out of the guests' view, while the groom, best man, and officiant or clergyman move to their positions at the front. The groom and best man usually stand on the right side of the aisle, facing the guests. The best man stands to the groom's left, slightly behind him. In some churches, they may stand at the top of the steps leading to the altar.

Each group (bridesmaids, ushers, groomsmen, and so forth) within the wedding party is usually arranged by height, with the shorter individuals in front; this creates a neat, sloping appearance for each group. The processional forms in the following sequence: groomsmen, junior groomsmen, junior bridesmaids, bridesmaids, matron of honor, maid of honor, flower girl, ring bearer, bride and her father, train bearers, and pages. Note that train bearers, pages, and junior attendants are included only if individuals close to the couple can fill the roles. In addition, if the bride's train is long, she can include two young relatives in the processional to carry her train. They should be of about the same age and height, though they don't have to be the same gender.

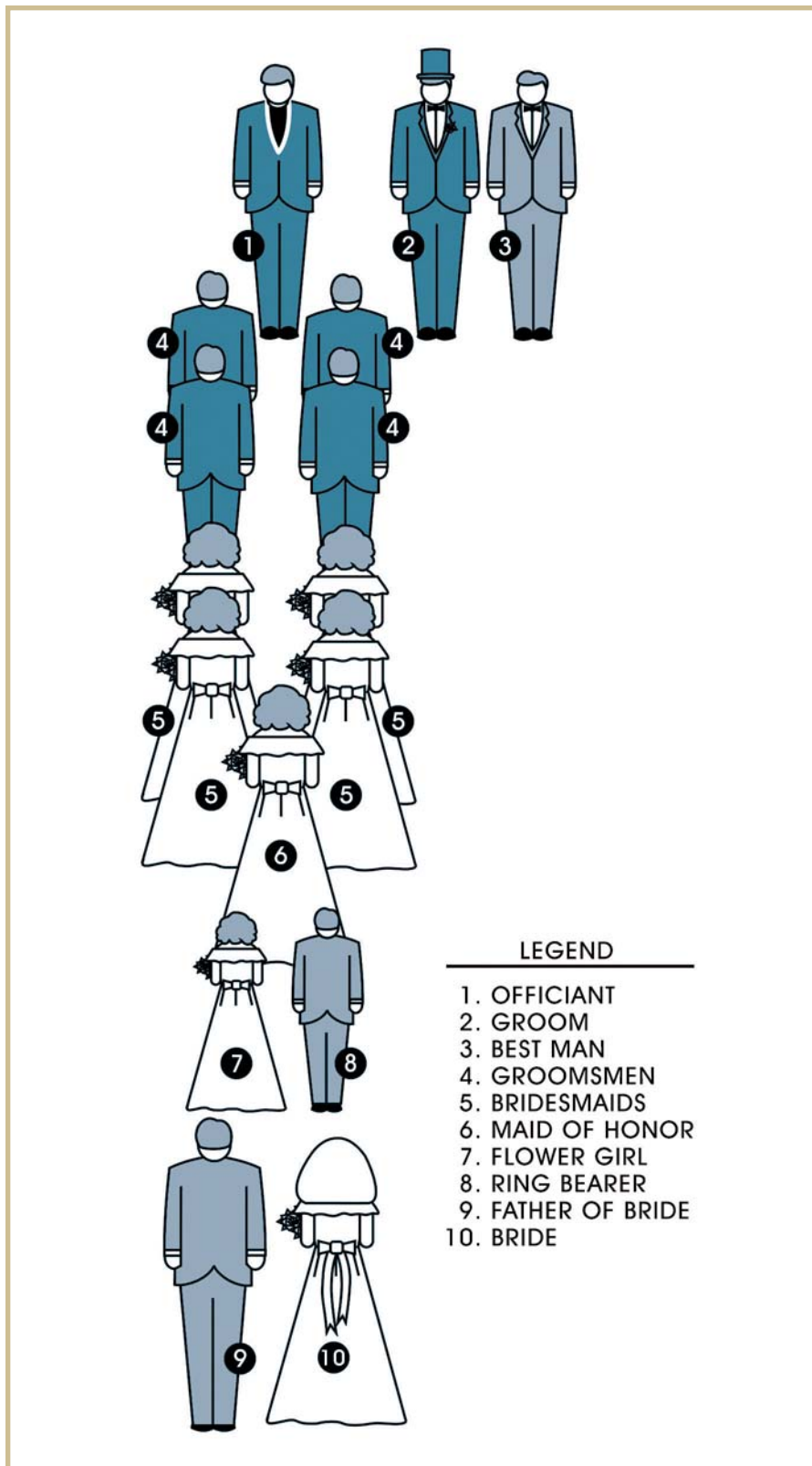
Ideally, when the wedding is planned to the minute, the bride would arrive at the ceremony site exactly one minute before the ceremony. Since this kind of timing isn't realistic, you should instruct the bride to arrive 15 minutes early and relax in a private area. She can use this time to compose herself and check her gown, hair, and makeup.

If the wedding party is large, the groups of attendants usually walk in pairs. For smaller wedding parties, attendants may enter single file. Figure 20 shows an example of a Christian processional.

The bride traditionally stands at her father's right side, as she holds his right arm with her left arm. This position is both practical and traditional. This position allows her to easily join the groom, since she stands at his left side at the front of the ceremony site.

When determining whether the bride should walk on the left or right side of her escort, conflicting reasons make it hard to choose a side. The escort's right side is usually a position of honor; this tradition dates back, at least, to Roman times. On the other hand, chivalry called for a woman to walk on the left side of her escort, so his right hand would be free to draw his sword and defend her as needed. Thus, the bride should walk on whichever side she prefers.

FIGURE 20—A Christian Processional



The processional must be properly spaced, with about four paces between each individual or pair in the line, to give it a neat appearance. The spacing between each group (between the bridesmaids and groomsmen, for example) can also be kept at four paces, or it can be increased slightly—say to six paces. Overall, a slow, natural walk is most appropriate.

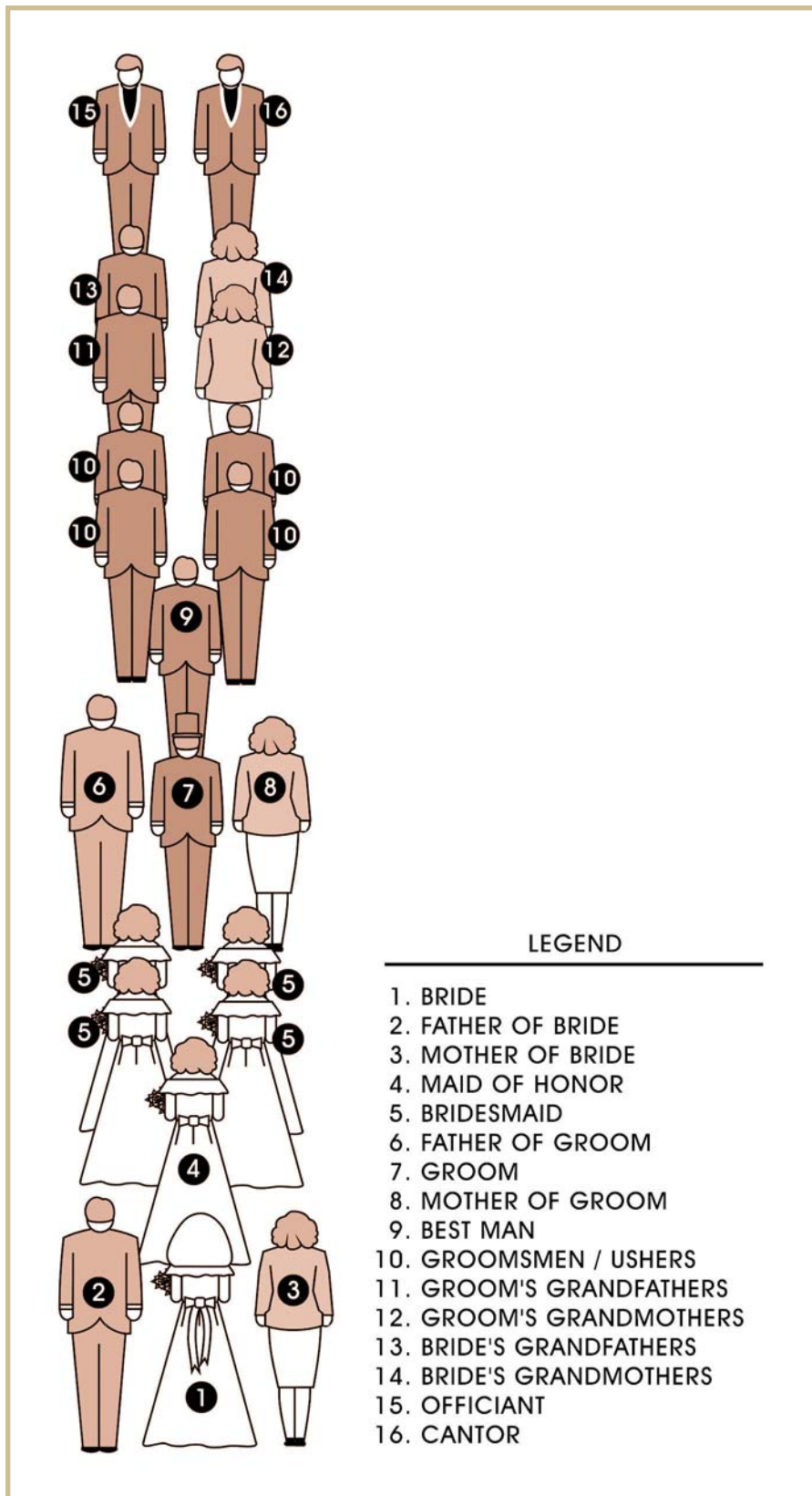
All attendants should be reminded to stand tall and straight, to reflect the pride they feel for being chosen to fill their roles. Female attendants holding bouquets should be reminded to hold the bouquets low, by resting their forearms comfortably at their waists. If they hold the bouquets too high, their dresses may be hidden from view, which can ruin otherwise perfect pictures.

If a site has two aisles, you can handle this situation in two ways. For a larger wedding party, attendants can enter using the right aisle during the processional and exit using the left aisle during the recessional. If the wedding party is small, only the right aisle should be used, and it would be treated as if it were the only aisle.

Once the wedding party reaches the front of the ceremony site, the attendants usually fan out from the center aisle. The party is then split in half, with the males standing on the right near the groom and the females standing on the left near the bride. More important roles, like the maid or matron of honor and the best man, are positioned nearer the center. Specific positions and arrangements vary on the site's exact layout, so discuss the options with the officiant during the wedding rehearsal.

Remember: A Jewish wedding processional includes the groom, both of the couple's parents, and both of the couple's grandparents (Figure 21). In addition, keep in mind that the processional for other religions differs. If a ceremony will be conducted in a religion that you aren't familiar with, be certain to check with the officiant for details.

FIGURE 21—A Jewish Processional



The Recessional

After the ceremony, the officiant congratulates the couple and may announce, “May I present, for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. _____.” The recessional music begins and the honor attendant returns the bride’s bouquet to her. The bride and the groom kiss, if permitted, and then turn to face the congregation. The bride, now married, then places the bouquet in her right hand and slips her left hand through the groom’s right arm, and they proceed down the aisle together.

In a Jewish wedding ceremony, the parents would also follow the newly married couple.

The recessional is formed, basically, in the reverse order as the processional. The children in the wedding party immediately follow the bride and groom. Following the children in the wedding party are the best man and maid or matron of honor, who traditionally pair off. They’re then followed by groomsmen and bridesmaids, who also pair off. Pairing off symbolizes the couple’s new marriage because the attendants are leaving the ceremony site as part of a couple. Note that if the bride and groom wish, they can instruct the attendants to exit in a single file formation instead.

If the wedding party contains more groomsmen than bridesmaids, the groomsmen usually pair off and walk behind the couples. If the wedding party contains an odd number of groomsmen to bridesmaids, however, the extra groomsmen follow the couples in a centered single line.

During the recessional, the bride usually gives her mother and mother-in-law a flower from her bouquet. The groom, on the other hand, usually kisses his mother and mother-in-law, and shakes hands with his father and father-in-law.

After the Ceremony

Sometimes, an awkward period between the end of the ceremony and the start of the reception exists. What’s everyone doing—or supposed to be doing—during this time? Usually, this period of time is used to give the wedding party a chance to regroup before heading off to the reception. However, the best man usually uses this time to take care of the final details before everyone leaves.

If the wedding is held in a church, the best man usually returns to the vestry after the recessional to deliver the officiant's fee and offer a cash gift to each altar server, although this task can also be completed beforehand. In the winter, the best man also announces that the couple's coats are ready in the vestibule, and moves the groom's coat from the vestry if necessary. If the wedding is held at a site other than a church, the best man is still responsible for those tasks.

If the couple isn't having a reception or if many ceremony guests aren't invited to the reception, a receiving line may be formed in the back of the site. If weather permits, it can be formed outside.

While the couple's parents leave the ceremony together, in the sequence of their arrival, groomsmen and ushers may be assigned to escort elderly or honored guests who are attending the reception alone.

Cars that will be used to transport the bridal party from the ceremony site to the reception site are lined up outside the church in the reverse order from the way they arrived. The bride and groom enter their car first, helped by the best man. Next, the bridesmaids, the bride's parents, and the groom's parents—in that exact order—get in their cars. Of course, this arrangement is again dictated by tradition. Many of today's couples may choose to instead rent a horse-drawn carriage, ask the maid or matron of honor and best man to join them in their car, or rent a bus for the entire wedding party and ride along with them.

Other Considerations

Rice, symbolizing fertility, was traditionally showered over the couple as they left the ceremony site; however, it's prohibited nearly everywhere today. Thus, you should be aware of other items that can be used in place of rice. Advise the couple to appoint someone to distribute supplies to the guests as they leave the church or as they're waiting outside.

Rose petals. Rose petals, the ultimate symbol of romance, are often used as a wedding toss alternative. However, be aware that rose petals can be slippery and that they can also stain certain materials.

If formal photos are to be taken outside after an indoor ceremony, the wedding party will usually wait in a quiet place until the photographer is ready.

Rose petal tissues. Rose petal tissues, which are made of biodegradable tissue paper, are designed to look like real rose petals. Though they won't stain clothing, the paper can be messy.

Confetti. Like rose petal tissues, confetti is often made from biodegradable materials and it can also be messy.

Grass seed. Grass seed is a pleasant wedding toss item when a lawn is located near the ceremony site.

Birdseed. Birdseed is a unique wedding toss option. However, you must remember that some types of birdseed have yellow kernels, which can cause permanent stains if they become caught in the bride's gown. So when you're shopping for birdseed, make sure you select the type of seed carefully. A major complaint about birdseed, though, is that it attracts birds, who end up leaving droppings all over the site's exit.

Bubbles. Bubbles are a fun alternative to traditional toss items (Figure 22). However, you must purchase bubbles that are specially designed for weddings. Otherwise, they can leave ring marks on silk material.

FIGURE 22—After the ceremony, the couple can be showered with bubbles as an alternative to rice.



Balloons. Once an environmental hazard, balloons are now made from safe material and are a great alternative to rice. However, releasing a large number of balloons can be dangerous if the wedding site is located in an urban area or near an airport.

Bells. Bells are a novel idea because they sound delightful. In addition, they also make unusual wedding favors.

Butterflies. Releasing butterflies is wonderfully romantic. However, the holding time and temperature of the boxes containing the *chrysalis* (the “pocket” that holds a developing butterfly) must be carefully monitored. About 24 hours before the butterfly emerges, the chrysalis becomes transparent. A few hours after breaking free from the chrysalis, a butterfly’s wings harden and it’s ready to fly.

Doves and pigeons. Though releasing doves after a wedding is popular among today’s couples, obtaining the doves can be quite expensive. Doves may also be hard to locate after they’ve been released.

Instead, you can recommend that couples use homing pigeons (Figure 23). Though pigeons are more reliable and less expensive to obtain, they’re sometimes regarded as being much less romantic. Regardless, couples often join select guests in releasing doves or homing pigeons; note that some couples may choose to release doves or homing pigeons at the reception instead.



FIGURE 23—Homing pigeons, instead of doves, can be released after the ceremony.