Well, it just goes to show that churches do not think like businesses.

As of early June, six of the 50 states permit gay people to marry. You would think that given this sudden availability of people who can potentially wed that churches would be falling over themselves in competition to provide that service. They are not. Instead, there is a deafening silence. While I am sure that a few, perhaps smaller, denominations are celebrating marriages, most churches are not. Certainly not the larger, more prominent denominations.

A standard church wedding between a man and a woman brings them together before their friends and family who are present to witness their expressions of love and commitment to each other and to celebrate the joy of their union. The vows they speak to each other are said before God, which makes them in a sense the strongest kind of oath that can be uttered.

By the mid-20th century, the government had long taken over the "marriage business." A couple may get married in a church before God and the community, but until the marriage license fee is paid and the form signed, they are not legally married.

The transformation of marriage into a bureaucratic act has the benefit of allowing greater flexibility in how a couple can get married, but it removes all but the essential core act of saying vows from a marriage ceremony. A "wedding" can take place without the church, without God, and without any witnesses apart from a judge like getting a drivers license. On the lighter side, it permits drive-through, Vegas weddings. But neither of these preserve the sanctity of marriage.

Since American society is largely secular, this is fine. Those who wish a wedding in a church (or a synagogue or a mosque or a temple) can easily obtain one, those who do not want a religious wedding can have their wishes as well. There is no social stigma attached one way or another. Both approaches to marriage are practiced by large numbers of couples.

It is in this context that July's decision by the General Conference of the Episcopal Church's of the United States to permit the blessings of gay marriages by Episcopal priests should be seen. For years, the Episcopalian Church had been out in the forefront on this issue. They had practiced the blessing of gay unions for more than a decade, long before it was legal for gay people to wed.

This practice, along with the ordination of gay ministers and the election of a gay bishop, threatened to split the worldwide Anglican Communion to which the Episcopalian Church belonged. So three years ago it voluntarily agreed to a moratorium on the blessings to provide a cooling-off period to enable the international church to resolve the matter in a way that would not divide Anglicans from each other. Despite much soul-searching, prayer, and meetings of bishops from around the world, the only practical result was the continuation of the moratorium disallowing the blessing of gay unions.

In the meantime, the Episcopalian Church lost its national leadership role on this issue. During those three years, five states decided to allow gay people to marry. With Massachusetts, this brought the total to six states. The Episcopalians saw that the rights which they had championed for gays were now available in these states, but the Church was not there to provide the rites. When the gay struggle was won in these states, the Episcopalian Church was not there at the end; the moratorium put it on the sidelines.

July's decisions to reinstate blessings of gay unions places The Episcopalian Church where it thinks it belongs, on the side of those who believe gay people stand equal before God. It is a matter of justice, but it is also matter of ministry. Gay believers who wish to unite should not be forced into a church-less marriage run by government bureaucrats. The Episcopalian Church wants to welcome them into the church's fold.