

SHADOW DANCING: Life as a Clergy Spouse

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Midwest Ministry Development Service continues to recognize the significant dynamics of professional ministry on the clergy family, especially on the clergy spouse. Every Midwest program for church professionals includes an opportunity for the spouse to participate in some way. Yet we have seen a decline in spousal participation during the past few years.

We recognize that today more spouses are employed and may have a lack of available time to participate in the two or three-day career development program at our Centers. We also hear the refrain, "It's not my career, so why do I need to participate?"

It is true professional ministry is not the "career" of the clergy spouse, but his or her life is bound up in the church by virtue of marriage to a clergyperson. Our society and world have changed at an accelerated pace and have changed the traditional role of the "minister's wife." The clergy spouse today, must balance a life dancing in and out of the shadows of a spouse's career, the church and its expectations, and his/her own spiritual journey. Like dancing, life is a constant struggle to keep one's rhythm without stumbling. Life as a clergy spouse can be a waltz between tremendous satisfaction and deep frustration.

My own "dance" began when I met this charming man with passionate dreams for the church. I had my own career and naively believed I could marry the man without marrying the church. Today, as more individuals come into ministry as second careers, some spouses find themselves in very new roles; and despite previous active participation in the church, life takes on a whole new dimension as a clergy couple. The career planning process allows couples to intentionally look at both of their careers and relationships in a journey of discernment. The process can assist couples in understanding their similarities and differences, in articulating expectations and needs, and assist them in developing shared goals.

In the past thirty years men and women have been pioneering new identities as clergy spouses, developing their own careers and, at times, earning more than their clergy husbands or wives. This has placed the spouse in a more prominent, respected, and visible position in the community. Clergy spouses are also taking more prominent positions of lay leadership in both the congregation and

denomination, thus moving away from the traditional musician, church educator, and youth sponsor roles.

While the spouse may be committed to share in a ministry partnership, it is always a delicate balance to make choices that will support both careers. If the clergy spouse is earning the higher salary, transitions for clergy can present a very real financial dilemma. In the career development process, we attempt to assist couples as they struggle with the issues of transition. The spouse may choose to sacrifice his/her own career position for a favorable opportunity for the clergy husband or wife. This reality can be especially true for those who enter ministry as a second career.

We also help couples explore some of the other transitional issues, like first-call placements which may be difficult to find in locations appropriate for dual-career couples. Whether the denomination has an itinerant system or a call system, the couple will need to explore how to maintain communications and be open to change in the process. It can also be helpful for the denomination or local congregation to assist couples by networking on behalf of the spouse coming into a new community. If the church sees this professional couple as an asset rather than a liability, all will benefit from the gifts they can bring to a congregation and community.

The clergy programs with couples also allow us to explore the realities of life and the greater demands on the clergy's time and emotional energy. The issue of family time is another area of need often expressed by clergy spouses. The following composite letter, authored by Mary L. Honstead, Ph.D., is excerpted with her permission from *The Circuit Rider*, March/April 1998.

My Dear,

I am writing you about this because sometimes (as you know), it is easier for me to express myself on paper.

Lately, you have been looking fatigued and I know it is stress related to the church. Sometimes our lives go by in a blur and suddenly it's Saturday night—you're working on your sermon (last minute as usual!)—I'm worrying about what crowd our sixteen-year-old is with tonight and wondering how I'm going to accomplish all

that I need to before Monday morning. We won't talk tonight, tomorrow morning will be its usual whirlwind, and tomorrow afternoon you'll fall asleep in front of the football game on TV out of sheer exhaustion . . . by tomorrow evening, the kids will be asking for help with their homework. We'll fall into bed, and then it's Monday morning. You may have some time off on Monday, but I have to be at the office by eight . . . and so it goes.

I want you to know that I love you and miss the conversations we used to have before church and family responsibilities overwhelmed us. And I do mean overwhelmed. Our three children have plenty of needs, my work is stressful, and there are always people in the church with needs and crises. You had two late night hospital calls in the last week, one of which kept you out until 3:00 A.M. Too often, we're both feeling stretched and empty. Its hard to express genuine caring when you are running on vapors. Even our social life revolves around the church. When was the last time we had a date by ourselves or spent time with friends outside the church?

The ministry certainly places emotional pressures and time demands on family life, especially on evenings, weekends, and holidays. The expectations and demands from the church on time can create a competitive dance partner which invades the amount of personal time for family. Today we see many clergy couples working hard to maintain shared parenting and setting boundaries on family time. Holding firm to such boundaries can lead to criticism for not being available to church members; consequently, it is always a balancing act that stresses the relationship of the couple.

At Midwest we use a number of techniques to explore dealing with time and relationships. The various personality inventories can help couples understand their similarities and differences. This understanding can give greater clarity about what frustrates one partner but not the other. We can also look at the communication of boundaries and motivations which impact choices. At times clergy and their spouses may feel guilty if they choose out of personal need over the church.

We know there are other careers which place high demands on the spouse; yet, the demands seem more exaggerated for the clergy family. It is difficult to be supportive of your spouse amidst the multiplicity of expectations by congregational members and still maintain positive relationships with those members. It is a most difficult paradox to be "close" to parishioners and yet maintain professional boundaries. This paradox is true for the clergy spouse as much as for the clergy since it leaves both clergy and spouse isolated from meaningful relationships. We hear most frequently from couples a sense of despair over the lack of friendships. While they know many people and share intimately in those lives, there is no place for them to share their own feelings and needs without the possibility of threatening others. Clergy and spouse will usually rely most heavily on each other as sounding boards about church-related matters. If there is no support system outside of themselves as a couple, they are left carrying the frustrations, stresses, disappointments and other "emotional baggage" in silence.

Other boundary issues relate to time demands on evenings, weekends, and, especially, traditional family holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Laypersons have a hard time recognizing that these traditional "times off" are actually some of the busiest work times for clergy. Spouses who do not have children may learn to make a life of their own, but those who have children learn to live like a single parent. Having to share one's parenting partner with the larger congregational family is probably one of the most challenging aspects of marriage to a minister.

The more illusive issues deal with feelings of powerlessness as a clergy spouse. Whether in an appointment or call system, to have no real sense of control over one's future creates a feeling of always living on the edge. I can remember the knot in my stomach each year during the stewardship campaign, listening to members' complaints about the church asking for money, yet knowing the success or failure of the campaign meant our very existence for the following year. When we lived in the parsonage, there was the ever-present knowledge that the roof

over our heads was dependent on the will of a

Times have changed, and the novelty of the clergy husbands has enabled both male and female spouses to impact and change traditional expectations. It is still difficult for the spouse to find a genuine place for himself or herself in the church. The gender of the spouse often contributes to the demands and expectations placed on them. A male spouse may be expected to keep up the church property or repair equipment. A female spouse may be expected to direct the choir, teach Sunday school or provide pastoral counseling and care. Even though parishioners are clear who the minister is, they can often expect the spouse to function in the place of the pastor. In general, members may assume the spouse of a minister to be more pious, comfortable with leadership, and familiar with scripture passages. Clergy children are expected to have exemplary behavior in comparison to their peers. These expectations usually extend beyond church members to their teachers or coaches as well.

As a clergy spouse one is able to experience a perspective on the church, as institution, that others never would have access to. Although this can be quite interesting and meaningful at times (learning more about denominational structures and church history), at other times it means experiencing close-up the negative and even mean-spirited side of the church (low compensation, inadequate housing, poor benefits). The pain experienced by a clergy spouse can result in a spiritual woundedness that goes very deep. There can be a need for one's own spiritual sojourn to explore and reconnect with God's love and grace. If a couple makes a transition to another congregation without completing the necessary healing, it is easier to find disappointment in the next call. At Midwest we work with couples at these times of grief and spiritual pain knowing how essential their healing will be to a future placement. Honstead's letter continues:

I can tell I'm feeling angrier than I thought when I started to write this. I think this has been building for a long time. You know how Bobby gets when he's tired and no one's paying attention to him? He starts to howl! Sometimes, I regret that I'm too old to throw a tantrum like

congregation or small group of leaders.

our seven-year-old. But perhaps you could consider this letter my version of a howl!

I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me how much you love me. I want you to say No to one church committee and tell them that you have plans with your family that night. I want you to find someone to substitute for you on a Sunday this spring so we can have a weekend getaway and have a chance to catch our breath and find our own sense of renewal. I want you to pay attention to your own health, so we can enjoy years together in retirement.

Please don't add these requests to your list of burdens. I say this to you out of my deepest love and concern for your future. Let's find a time to talk tomorrow; I'll bring the calendar!

Your loving spouse,

In the career/life planning process with ministry couples, we give opportunity for them to talk and explore ways to maintain better communication around boundaries, expectations and needs. We believe it is important to provide programs of growth and development, and we encourage more spouses to participate in the future. The invitation is offered in order to support the clergy spouse as a vital partner in this dance called ministry.

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