



Pressures of family

During a gathering of pastors and their spouses H. B. London Jr. asked, “What is the greatest frustration you face in church ministry?” One minister’s wife wrote,

Loneliness, lack of spiritual kinship with other women, “single” parenting, powerful women in the church bossing my husband around, lack of finances, and identity crisis. I am a non-person, not my husband’s partner in ministry, not a full-fledged member. I’d like to get a lot of stuff going in the church, but I have to defer.¹

Other complaints spouses of clergy often voice is the pressure of living in a fishbowl, especially if they reside in the church parsonage; interruptions at mealtimes; unrealistic expectations some congregation members have for the minister’s spouse; the long hours too many ministers work each week; and the expectation that spouses are to set aside their feelings and needs for the good of the church. Some spouses feel the church is in competition with them for the attentions of their husbands or wives in ministry, which makes their frustration even worse. They could fight for their husbands or wives against other threats to marriage, but how can they fight against the church without appearing to be fighting God?

Lynne Hybels understands the feeling. In the days before her husband, Bill, started Willow Creek Community Church, he was the leader of a youth ministry called Son City. It was a demanding ministry that kept him away from his new bride much of the time. Recalling one evening she writes,

Another lonely meal. Another empty evening. An hour earlier I had begged Bill to stay home. He had looked at me with disbelief. “Kids are dying and going to hell, and you want me to stay home and hold

your hand?" I am too young and too insecure to know how to respond. . . . Six months into marriage, I am convinced I have made a horrible mistake. I love the man I married. I love Son City. But I hate our marriage. I hate the pain of disappointment. I hate mourning the death of so many dreams. And I hate the loneliness.²

Children Feel the Pain Too

Several years ago a movie on TV told the story of a woman who led her city in an effort to help young people with drug problems. As she went about her work in the community, she failed to notice her own daughter reaching out to her. One evening on her way home, she saw messages painted on the sidewalks claiming that her daughter was using drugs. She was furious and knew someone was out to destroy her reputation and the work she was doing. Her anger built as she continued home, but when she walked in the house she noticed a paintbrush and a can of paint the same color as the sidewalk messages. It was the only way her daughter could get her mother's attention. She had to become one of the people her mother wanted to rescue.

Could it be that some children of ministers develop the problems they do in order to get noticed by their clergy parents? Could others be rebelling against the teachings of the church in order to strike back at the organization they believe is responsible for taking their father or mother away from the important events of their lives? I believe either scenario is possible. More than one minister's child has carried bitterness and anger against God and the church into adult life for the harm done to his or her family by the demands of ministry.

The Minister's Family Is Unique

We recognize that every family has problems from time to time. Husbands and wives disagree about many things regardless of profession. Children and their parents will always have issues they have to work through. But there are problems found in ministers' families that are not found in many other homes.

A minister's family relates more to his or her profession than normally occurs with any other professions.³ In a doctor's home, few family members go to the hospital or office to watch the doctor practice medicine. Seldom will the family members of a CPA go to the office to watch him or her prepare tax statements. However, the minister's family can be found in church almost every Sunday watching the min-

ister perform his or her responsibilities. Family members watch how other people respond to the leadership of the minister, and they may be uncertain how to relate to this person who seems larger than life. Tim Stafford wrote about what it was like growing up as the child of a minister: "If your father is the public's person, then it is difficult to have him for your own. He can become more of a symbol, a totem, than a person. You are never quite sure what is real and what is not. He becomes an idealized version of a father. Or, he becomes a hypocrite in your eyes, unable to make his private and public lives match."⁴

The family sees a side of the minister that most of the congregation never sees. They see the hurt and disappointment that comes when people do not follow through. They witness the behind-the-scenes anger when difficult people continue to challenge and block the minister's every effort to make positive changes in the church. They hear the comments at the dinner table about problems and people at the church. The spouse may be able to distinguish the public pastor from the private person, but that does not mean the children are able to do so.

Family as Unpaid Staff

The congregation members may have expectations for the minister's family that they do not have for other families in the church. Some churches expect the pastor's family to serve as unpaid staff. The spouse may be expected to prepare church bulletins, handle certain secretarial duties, or answer incoming calls, especially when the parsonage phone number is the same as that of the church. One of the old jokes of pastor search committees used to be that a candidate had to have a spouse who played the piano. But this was no joke to one committee, who admitted to me that they actually thought it would be very helpful to find a pastor whose wife could play the piano for their worship service.

Many ministers' spouses work outside the home, just as is the case for many families in the congregation who have both the husband and wife working outside the home. Often this is a necessity for ministers because of their low income. We will address that in greater detail in the next chapter. However, in many cases, the spouse may be working in a career of his or her choosing. He or she may feel called to this work just as the minister feels called to the ministry. He or she may have invested years in education preparing to work in a certain field. Churches who believe that the spouse of their pastor should not work

outside the home are simply not being realistic about the changes that have occurred in recent times.

To be sure, both men and women are called to ministry positions (that is why inclusive language is used throughout this book), but for many years churches called only male pastors. Congregations in turn saw the primary role of pastors' wives to be raising children, supporting their husbands, and doing whatever the church needed them to do. Many churches frowned on the idea of the wife working outside the home, because that would take her away from those primary responsibilities. It also told the world one of two things—that the church did not pay enough to support the pastor and his family or that the family was greedy and simply wanted more money. Either option would be an embarrassment to the church. While these were expectations of many churches in the past, and are no longer realistic today, many people in our churches still adhere to them.

Such expectations, while depriving the minister's family of much-needed income in some cases, can also rob a spouse of his or her identity as a person created in the image of God and gifted and equipped by him for service. That service may take place outside the church and in the marketplace as the spouse works in the professional, clerical, retail, or industrial world. Any attempt to deprive the minister's spouse of his or her identity as a person of worth and ability will add great stress to the minister's family.

Family members of the minister must be allowed to find their own level of involvement in the life of the church without pressure from the church. Some spouses will be comfortable taking leadership positions in the church, while others will prefer working more in the background because of their temperaments and personalities. Some may be involved in many different activities, while others may be limited by the demands of family and/or careers. The level of involvement must be determined by the minister and his or her family, not the congregation.

Stresses Related to Housing

If the church has a parsonage, there can be stresses related to that. Some church members believe they have the right to come into the parsonage any time they want, since "this house belongs to the church." Other churches expect to have Sunday school classes meet in the parsonage or that it will be available for committee meetings. There can be issues with repairs and upkeep. Some churches modernize their parson-

ages based upon the wishes of their current pastor and family, and some refuse to update or improve anything. In one extreme case a minister and his wife had to sleep in their camper because the church would not resolve a serious mold problem in the parsonage. In some churches, getting approval to change the color schemes in the parsonage can be a problem, even if the pastor and family agree to do the painting.

Some churches require their ministers to live in the parsonage to exercise control over them. If congregation members can tell the pastor where to live, they may be able to dictate other areas of his or her life as well. The minister may be less likely to create problems in the church knowing that if he or she is forced to leave, his or her family may have no place to live. One pastor lived in a parsonage next door to the church, and he was constantly being watched by congregation members who lived across the street. Because the church paid the utility bills, he was even once asked why he left his lights on so late at night. A controlling church with a parsonage can create enormous stress in the life of its minister and his or her family.

Many churches have sold their parsonages, which can also create stresses for the minister's family. Young ministers just starting out may not have the down payment needed for a mortgage. Their salaries may not be enough to make monthly payments on a house suitable to their needs, especially if the housing costs are high in that part of the country. They may have to settle for a smaller home than they need and find that a growing family quickly requires additional space. If they cannot afford to purchase a larger home, they will begin to experience a number of stresses from feeling trapped by their circumstances, especially if most of the congregation members seem able to live comfortably in their homes.

Stresses Related to Time

An entire chapter will be devoted to time management for ministers, but one of the common stresses for the minister's family is the time he or she is away from home and family activities. Meals are often interrupted by telephone calls. Meetings may be scheduled at the church every night of the week. There are hospital and home visits to make, sermons to prepare, special programs to develop and oversee, and a to-do list that never seems to get done. Many ministers' families feel they get whatever time is left over, and there never seems to be any left over.

Vacations are cut short due to church members dying and the minister returning to conduct the funeral. Ball games, dance recitals, and school functions are missed because a member of the congregation has gone to the emergency room and the family has requested the minister to come right away. Weekend getaways are out of the question, although others in the church never seem to have a problem finding the time for such excursions.

Fishbowl Living

Many ministers' families complain of feeling like they live in a fishbowl. They feel that everyone in the church is watching them and evaluating their actions and attitudes. They may feel as though everyone in the church has an opinion about how they dress, how they wear their hair, what music they listen to, who their friends are, how they conduct themselves in public and in the church, and how they spend their spare time. Such constant attention is grossly unfair. No one else in the church gets scrutinized like the minister's family. It also creates a lot of tension and causes resentment against the church. Some ministers' families have reported that they feel as if they can never measure up to the expectations of the congregation, and they resent that they even need to.

Reducing the Stresses Felt by the Family

Regardless of a person's profession, stresses in the home impact effectiveness and create numerous problems in other areas of life. We have an obligation to protect our family members from unrealistic expectations no matter where those expectations come from. Being called to the ministry does not negate that obligation. One of the beliefs I had throughout my ministry is that if I became the pastor of the largest church in the world but lost my family, I would have failed as a minister. How can the stresses felt by the family of a minister be reduced and even eliminated? There are several things that can help achieve this.

Communication

Some of the questions I always asked pastor search committees had to do with the involvement of previous pastors' families in the life of the church and what expectations the church had about such involvement. A pastor must know this before accepting the call to a church so

there are no surprises after he or she gets there. I knew the activities my wife would be comfortable doing in a church and those she would not be comfortable doing. If a church had expectations that would put undue stress on her or on us, we accepted that as a sign that this was not the right church for us. My questions allowed us to determine that before accepting a call to the church.

I regularly communicated to the congregation and to church leaders about the priority I gave to my family. I reminded them that their church had many pastors before me and would likely have many after me, but I was the only husband my wife would ever have, and I was the only father our children would ever know. I was responsible before God to minister to their needs just as I was to minister to the church. Our church never resented my commitment to our family, and they even seemed to appreciate that commitment.

A Spouse Should Have His or Her Own Identity

A minister's ministry should not determine the identity of his or her spouse. The minister's spouse is a person created in the image of God with unique talents and abilities. He or she has goals and dreams that have also been given by God. Just as the minister has been called into the ministry, so has the minister's spouse a unique calling to fulfill. A minister has a right to expect a spouse to be supportive in the work God has given him or her to do, but a spouse also has a right to expect support from the minister. And that support needs to be publicly stated to the church.

Admittedly, this can sometimes be difficult for a church to accept, depending on the calling a spouse may have. Congregation members of one church struggled with their pastor's wife being called to pastor in another church of a different denomination. They had even more problems with the pastor's children preferring their mother's church over them, and their pastor permitted his children to attend the church they preferred. Sufficient conflict arose so that the pastor felt it necessary to resign and begin seeking another place to serve. To do anything less would have robbed his wife of her own sense of identity and self-worth and would have defrauded her of the opportunity to serve God according to the call he has on her life.

Children Should Be Allowed to Be Children

I frequently told our children that they never had to do anything just because they were the pastor's children. I did expect them to make good choices because they were the right choices to make, but they never had to feel that they were pressured into doing anything because they were children of a minister. A couple of times during my pastorate I was questioned about some decision or action our children had taken, and I was always able to stand up for them and explain why they had made the choices they had made.

When our son was in high school, he had an opportunity to play on an AAU basketball team. The problem was that some of the games would be on Sunday, and he wasn't sure I would let him miss church to play. His coach assured me he would take our son to the Sunday games, since I obviously could not do so. My wife and I agreed this was a good opportunity for him, and we allowed him to play on this team. The first Sunday he missed church I explained that he was playing for an AAU basketball team, and his team had an away game that day. Some churches would have had a problem with that, but we had consistently emphasized the importance of family, and no one said a word about him being absent that morning. Later that day I came into the sanctuary for the evening service, and our son was sitting with my parents. He had returned home in time to come to church that evening, and even though he knew he didn't have to, he wanted to come to the evening service. I believe he came that evening because I had honored him as a person and allowed him to enjoy the experience of AAU basketball instead of insisting that as the pastor's son he needed to be in church.

Housing Issues

Regardless of whether the minister lives in a parsonage or rents or buys a house, that dwelling is the home of the minister and his or her family. Members of the congregation should never feel they have a right to enter that home any time they want to, nor should they think that it is a meeting place for the church. This home is a sanctuary for the minister and family to escape from the world and enjoy one another.

If the church provides a parsonage, the church should maintain it well with regular upkeep and modern appliances. Before a new pastor comes to the church, the parsonage should be cleaned, it should be

freshly painted, and all appliances checked for proper operation. Carpets should be cleaned or replaced. Input from the new pastor's family should be sought before making changes to the parsonage. Congregation members of one church asked their new pastor's wife what appliances she preferred for the parsonage before replacing them. They even asked about carpet colors so that the pastor's furniture would match when the family moved in.

The church should see that repairs are made quickly. A leaking roof, electrical issues, appliance breakdowns, the lack of heating or cooling—all contribute unneeded stress to the family of the minister. The church should have money set aside in the budget and available so immediate repairs can be made.

Some churches have made the decision in recent years to sell their parsonages. Many of these parsonages have been older houses that required too much upkeep, and it was more cost effective to sell the parsonages and provide ministers with housing allowances. Some have discovered that many ministers prefer to own their homes due to the tax advantages they can enjoy and the equity they can build up in the house.

Time Issues

We will explore time issues more thoroughly in a later chapter. Here we will simply say that ministers' families deserve more than just the time left over from ministry. Ministers must set aside time to attend activities that are important to their children. They need to schedule vacation times and take them. They must set time aside for a regular date night with their spouses to keep their marriages healthy and exciting. All congregations have an idea of how ministers should spend their time, but only the ministers can determine the priorities that really matter. The ministers are the only ones who can schedule their days and weeks, and if their families are a priority to them, that will be seen in their calendars. Do plans ever get changed when emergencies occur? Of course, that is one of the stresses of ministry that will never go away. But emergencies should not be a regular part of life. If a minister always seems to be responding to an emergency, someone isn't doing a good job of planning.

If the minister's home has an answering machine, he or she doesn't have to answer the phone every time the family sits down to dinner. The machine can get the message. If it is a true emergency, the minister can pick it up or immediately call the person back. If it is just someone

wanting to talk, as it usually is, the minister can return the call when it's convenient. Letting that answering machine take some of the calls will send a powerful message to the family that they are important. If a minister doesn't have an answering machine, getting one might be one of the best investments he or she can make for the family.

Escape from the Fishbowl

Ministers and their families have the right to live like normal human beings, especially since they are! As long as their clothing is tasteful and modest, it is no one's business how the minister's children dress. The same is true of the spouse. Hairstyles, the type of car a person drives, hobbies, where a person shops, the music a person enjoys, and what a person eats are all matters of personal preference and not anyone else's business.

Too many ministers' families feel suffocated by self-appointed watchdogs in the congregation who watch their every move and report their findings to anyone they think will listen. To protect the families, these watchdogs must be confronted. It is usually best if lay leaders in the church can do this confrontation, but if they are unwilling, then the ministers themselves must do it with great sensitivity and firmness. Otherwise, the families will continue to experience unneeded stress, which for ministers may cause long-term damage to their ministries and to their relationships with family members.