

Strengthening Clergy Families

An update of this article and resource list may be found at www.marriagelovepower.net under “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources”/”Ministering with Those in Crisis, Transition, and Special Situations.”

Like many professions, especially those in the public eye, ministry offers unique challenges and opportunities for the families of those involved. Learning how others have dealt with similar situations can help clergy and their families respond effectively to the common experiences they share. Unfortunately, clergy families may be tempted to blame all their difficulties on the nature of ministry or on the church, forgetting that every family has struggles - simply because they are human. Clergy and their spouses, like everyone else, need support for healing the emotional baggage they bring into their marriages and for dealing with both anticipated and unexpected life events that may stimulate change and growth or overwhelm them.

The emotional health and the relational skills that clergy persons and their spouses bring into marriage determine how they respond to the specific pressures they encounter in ministry. Those who “need to be needed” will more likely try to live up to unreasonable expectations of others and fail to set healthy personal boundaries. Addictive personalities will fill up their days – and nights - with work, justifying their busyness as a necessary aspect of serving God. Those uncomfortable with intimacy will find it easier to minister to others than to the families they have covenanted – before God – to love and protect. While some spouses speak up in protest, others may collaborate in putting everyone else’s needs before those of the family. Some pastors and church leaders even misuse the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:28 to defend family neglect.

Paul, in his first letter to Timothy (3: 4-5, 12), advises church leaders to care for their families and to be attentive to their children. Like it or not, the clergy family serves as a role model for the congregation and community. Furthermore, an unhappy and unhealthy home life drains a pastor’s energy and detracts from his or her ability to minister effectively. Clergy families do not need to be perfect (a myth that negatively impacts life in many parsonages), but hopefully they relate to each other with genuine love, forgiveness, and supportive care, responding constructively to whatever life brings and asking for help when they need it.

Marriage and family life are considered by some as sacred vocations in and of themselves, perhaps no less important than the call to serve a church. Effective ministries to and with clergy families help them become more aware of their own needs and motivations, improve their skills for communication both within the family and with others, and encourage them to take time for self-renewal and family care. Clergy families who seek to maintain balance in their lives - and those who want to support them - will find helpful insights in the following resources.

Resources for Strengthening Clergy Families.
Organizational

Local Church Expectations and What Clergy Spouses Most Want the UMC to Know (Part II of a study conducted by The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, 2009). This report is based on the responses of more than 1000 persons to the questions asked in this study. The responses, which reflect wide differences between the individuals involved, help deepen understanding of both the joys and the challenges experienced by clergy families. The report ends with nine suggestions designed to support clergy families, with an emphasis on "...treating clergy spouses as unique persons with many visions of their roles, both inside and outside the church..." Both the report itself and a separate reference list are available at the COSROW website: <http://www.gcsrw.org/ClergyFamilyandSpouseStudy.aspx>

Tending the Fire (<http://tending-the-fire.com>). The Preachers' Aid Society and the Board of Ordained Ministry of the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church have been sponsoring "Tending the Fire" events for clergy since 2006 and for clergy spouses since 2012. Participants learn to understand and apply family systems theory to their congregations and to their personal lives. The program requires a commitment of time spread over a number of months, including an Opening Intensive, Deepening Days, and a Closing Retreat, although schedule modifications have been made for the spouses and are under consideration for future offerings. Visit the website or contact the Preachers' Aid Society at 508-830-9500 or www.preachersaid.org.

Recent Publications

Clergy Commuter Marriages: Living Apart, Staying Together, by Tom Mattick with Marilyn Mattick (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2013). The author shares what he learned when he accepted an appointment 150 miles away from his wife's work, requiring them to live apart for two years. He offers practical advice for making such a decision, creating a second home, planning for visits, developing rituals for parting and reuniting, and adjusting to living together again afterwards. His wife shares her point of view as well.

Life in the Fish Bowl: Everyday Challenges of Pastors and Their Families, by F. Belton Joyner, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006). "A solid family life will help pastors focus and attentively minister to the needs of their congregation. Pastors often struggle with conflicting expectations. The most painful of these conflicts is between the expectations of their congregations and the needs of their families. They must, at the same moment, be available to parishioners and carve out private family time. Belton Joyner knows that often the best therapy for pastors caught in this dilemma is to laugh at it. With humorous illustrations and light-hearted straight talk, he helps pastors understand their own family dynamics, the role their families play

in the life of the church, and how to be an effective minister of the gospel AND a responsible spouse and parent, all at the same time.” (back cover)

Families in Ministry: How to Thrive—Not Just Survive by Andreas and Angela Frész (Dresden, Germany: Golden Gate Ventures GmbH, 2009). The authors share out of their own experience as a family in ministry and include testimonies by other ministry families from all over the world. Addressing a wide range of issues, they offer sound theological reflection and practical advice for setting a family vision and priorities, communicating love, integrating God into family life, overcoming stress and crises, managing differences and conflicts, and dealing with challenges specific to families in ministry. This book could be used to facilitate a course spread out over eight sessions or could serve as a helpful resource to individual families. Particularly useful are the clear guidelines for Spouse Dialogue and/or Group Discussion and for Family Activities related to material in the text. Order through YWAM Publishing, 800-922-2143, www.ywampublishing.com. Visit www.families-in-ministry.com for more information.

The Pastor’s Family: Shepherding Your Family through the Challenges of Pastoral Ministry, by Brian Croft and Cara Croft (Zondervan, 2013). The authors address the problem of expectations – not just those held by others, but also those of the pastor and spouse themselves. Internal needs for approval and success may become idols tempting the pastor to neglect his/her family, which the authors declare actually dishonors God. This book contains deep wisdom and practical advice for faithfully balancing family and congregational life.

The Pastor’s Wife, by Jennifer Alee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010). This engaging novel explores a clergy marriage that failed early on because of unreasonable expectations and poor communication. Brought back together six years later by the requirements of a deceased parishioner’s will, the pastor and his estranged wife rediscover each other, realize the part each played in their marital failure, and heal their relationship. Throughout the story, the author touches on issues common to clergy families: clergy preoccupation with the problems of other families to the neglect of their own; parsonage stresses (the feeling of living in someone else’s home); congregational expectations that ignore the individuality of clergy family members; and lack of private time. The author also portrays common marital difficulties caused by failure to communicate honestly about expectations and needs, to accept individual differences and negotiate ways to accommodate them, to build mutual trust, and to connect emotionally.

Classics – Out-of-Print, but Available through Online Booksellers

Clergy Couples in Crisis: The Impact of Stress on Pastoral Marriages, by Dean Merrill (Waco, TX: World Books Publisher, 1985). Although some of the expectations encountered by pastors and their families have softened since the publication of this book, the author presents helpful insights based on case studies, showing the effects of internal and external stresses and - in most cases - how couples learned to heal and strengthen their relationships and deal more effectively

with their situations. In most instances, learning to share openly and honestly with each other was key to their recovery.

Healthy Clergy, Wounded Healers: Their Families and Their Ministries, by Roberta Chapin Walmsley and Adair T. Lummis (Church Publishing Inc., 1997). The authors draw on the Family Systems Theory work of Murray Bowen and Edwin Friedman, who applied it to churches. While they agree that clergy and their families may function better when they understand some of their struggles as common to ministry, they also caution against overemphasizing this perspective to the point that pastors, their spouses, and their children abandon responsibility for managing their lives and blame the congregation or conference for their problems. The healthiest pastors and spouses seem to be those who effectively set boundaries between their relationship with the church and their family.

The Winds of Promise: Building and Maintaining Strong Clergy Families, by Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Edward Powell Wimberly (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007). The authors share out of their own experiences growing up in clergy families and forming their own. Using a story-telling approach, they offer hope and tools for dealing with the challenges of moving, meeting expectations, making family life count, “meaning-making” while living in the public eye, and managing difficult life events.

What’s Happening to Clergy Marriages? by David and Vera Mace (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980). This classic, written by founders of the marriage enrichment movement, grew out of two studies they conducted in the late 70s. The book contains lists of advantages and disadvantages generated by participants in the studies along with practical advice for dealing with the pressures of time, moving, and financial stress. The Maces present a companionship model for marriage, as opposed to the old hierarchical one generally accepted before the rise of democracy, and assert that the spouse’s calling must carry as much weight as the calling of the pastor. The authors also propose that in regard to vocation, the call of a clergy person and spouse to bear witness to Christian marriage may be even more important than the call to serve a church.

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