

Self-Care Tips for the Clergy Family

by Rev. Frank Schaefer¹

I recently ran across a prayer request by a clergy colleague which went something like this:

For the past ten months I have been a full time pastor. My ministry has been blessed and my congregation is growing but the stress and strain on my wife and son and daughter has led to a recent "family feud" that has left us all with feelings of resentment and estrangement. It seems as though I am being asked to choose between my ministry and my family and there are no easy answers. Please pray for us.

I think this will sound familiar to most every clergy family. Indeed,

It often feels as though spiritual leaders have to choose between their spouse and the bride of Christ, between their children and their "flock of sheep".

The demands of ministry are manifold, they vie for our commitment of time, energy, mental pre-occupation, and even our devotion.

As a result spouses and children often feel neglected, misunderstood, and treated unfairly.

A joke comes to mind that is funny only because it rings so true:

Pastor's spouse: "Honey, let's reverse things on this Sunday morning. You'll be nice to us and grumpy to the congregation."

¹ The website DesperatePreacher.com includes a Talk Forum for pastors and their families.

According to a fall 1992 survey by *Leadership*, the following points were listed as causes for marriage problems in clergy families:

- 81% insufficient time together
- 71% use of money
- 70% income level
- 64% communication difficulties
- 63% congregational differences
- 57% differences over leisure activities
- 53% difficulties in raising children
- 46% sexual problems
- 41% Pastor's anger toward spouse
- 35% differences over ministry career
- 25% differences over spouse's career

It doesn't take much imagination to see that these causes are intricately related to the realities of ministry: according to a 1991 survey (by the *Fuller Institute of Church Growth*), pastors are overworked, underpaid, often working in a conflicted environment, and seem to be some of the loneliest people:

- 90% work more than 46 hours a week
- 80% believed pastoral ministry affected their families negatively
- 33% believed ministry was a hazard to their family
- 75% reported a significant stress related crisis at least once in their ministry
- 50% felt themselves unable to meet the needs of the job
- 90% felt inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands
- 70% say they have a lower self esteem now compared to when they started in ministry
- 40% reported serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month
- 37% confessed to having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend

Of course, our Roman Catholic and Orthodox friends would remind us that these problems are part of the reason for the rule of celibacy which allows the priest to be "married to the church." It may be a little too late for Protestantism to take another look at celibacy,

however. And besides, *if a healthy clergy family relationship is maintained it can become a source of strength and inspiration for clergy, clergy families, and their congregations.*

This article does not aspire to be a comprehensive treatment of the subject matter. It rather seeks to offer a few helpful tips that clergy and their families can put to use in order to avoid some tensions and strengthen their network of love and support:

Tip #1: Reserving Family Times

Keeping up the boundaries between ministry and family life is a tall task for clergy families, especially to those who live in church housing (and even more so when they are connected to the place of ministry). One boundary that needs to be emphatically established and protected by the clergy person is that of quality family times.

We clergy folks must learn to regard family times as more important than church appointments. This is challenging because parishioners may not value the pastor's family time as a high priority in comparison to parish commitments (at least that's how we clergy people think parishioners are feeling).

We clergy people must plan for quality family times and mark them red on our calendars. When scheduling conflicts arise (they are inevitable), we should talk about the family time in terms of a commitment we have. We must not feel obliged to specify what that commitment is.

Tip #2: Protecting Privacy

A second boundary issue is that of personal space or privacy for the clergy family. Privacy issues span a variety of dimensions, from the clergy family's home to the home telephone. Keep your home a private space, avoid (if possible) to have a church office in your home--even if you live in an attached manse/rectory/parsonage. Do not invite unannounced visitors from church into your home during family times (movie/game night, Saturday morning pajama party, birthday parties, etc.).

Also, do not expect your family members to take on the role of phone receptionists. Ask church members

to use your home phone number for emergencies only. Another privacy issue arises in the public arena.

Firstly, do not overuse illustrations from your family life; particularly avoid jokes that come at the expense of family members.

Secondly, when you meet parishioners on family outings, do not feel obliged to strike up a long conversation. This is not the time for parish updates. A short greeting will do.

Tip #3: Clarifying Expectations

Congregations have many overt and covert expectations concerning clergy **and their families**. They vary from denomination to denomination and from parish to parish. Some of them are reasonable, others are not. For the sake of your family, you must identify and clarify those expectations or else they will be tremendous stress factors for you, your family and your congregation. For instance, if there is an expectation by the congregation that the clergy spouse will chair the worship committee and your spouse is not willing or able to do so, then this needs to be clarified from the start. After all, the clergy person is the one who is employed, not the clergy spouse (nor the children).

A congregation should not expect any less of the clergy family, but certainly not more, than of any other member of the congregation.

Tip #4: Building Friendships

We all need to be surrounded by the warm and gleeful presence of friends and loved ones. One of the problems clergy and their families face is that of establishing and maintaining close relationships with friends and family members. This is in part due to the fact that clergy are often "on the move." Fostering friendships and relationships require investments over long periods of time--time we clergy folk often don't have. Add to that the fact that building friendships among parishioners can be very tricky (and painful) and you have an explanation for the above-mentioned

Therefore, clergy and their family must make a more deliberate effort than most other folks toward building and fostering friendships, and it may involve the bridging of time and space.

Tip #5: Seeking Help

Those in "helping professions" are often the last to seek help. This is often true for clergy and their families. The truth is that crises do not stop at the clergy family's door.

The clergy family, as much as any other family, has the right to be human, to have human problems. Clergy families have the right to seek the help of counselors and psychologists.

There are many helpful resources and services available for clergy and their families; the sad fact is that these resources are not often made use of--or not nearly enough. Let me take this opportunity to remind you that I am available to all DPS members for email counsel and support.

Related Resource and Support Group Links

may be found at:

<http://desperatepreacher.org/pastorcare/clergyfamily.htm>

[The Parsonage](#) - HIGHLY RECOMMENDED
[Pastor's Wives Support](#)

where clergy spouses (female and male?) can voice their feelings

[Under His Wings Ministry](#)

Pastor's Appreciation Day Information and more

[How Many Ex-Pastors?](#)

Rowland Croucher was recently asked how many ex-pastors he estimated ...

Recommended Articles:

[Making Friends When You're a Ministry Wife](#)

[Pardon Me While I Fix My Halo](#)

[What's Funny Today, Lord?](#)

Book Recommendation:

[BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING CLERGY STRESS](#), Andrew R. Irvine, 1997.

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