

Reprinted from July/August 1998 Circuit Rider

# And the Congregation Makes Three

Marjorie L. Kimbrough

Most of the time we think of a marriage as being between one man and one woman; however, when that man or woman is a pastor, the congregation is also a partner in the marriage. I have been a United Methodist minister's wife for thirty-three years, and the congregation has always been a third party to our marriage. You see, the congregation believes that the minister belongs to them at all times. Of course, there often is conflict.

What each marital party must do is compromise. The congregation must agree that certain times belong to the spouse and family, and the spouse must agree that other times belong to the congregation. Both congregation and spouse must agree that some of the minister's time belongs only to the minister and meditation, for their marriage partner is a co-worker with God in kingdom building.

There is one block of time, between the hours of 11pm and 6am, during which I always hope the congregation will resist the urge to call or visit. Unless it is an emergency, the congregation ought to respect that time and regard it as exclusively for rest and renewal. Other times that ought to be respected include the minister's day off and during his or her vacations. On the other hand, the minister's family must realize that the congregation needs a spiritual leader and their family member will not always be available to them. The minister has a job to do and, hopefully, the family has agreed to be partners in doing that job.

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Respect for each partner in the relationship is key. This means that the congregation must show love and respect for the minister's spouse. I remember one congregation that sent me flowers at work on Valentine's Day. Neither I nor my husband has ever forgotten that, and I found that simple gesture to be a source of strength in our joint relationship with that congregation. There have been other gestures like providing me with a reserved parking space, remembering my birthday or Mother's Day, or volunteering to babysit so that I could attend an event or just have a little time alone. The congregation can also encourage its ministerial family to observe a family night and provide an occasional gift certificate to a local restaurant. I have found that ministers love their congregations more if they express their love for his or her spouse.

The spouse must respect the needs of the congregation by being faithful in relaying messages and in offering encouragement and support to the minister. I feel that the spouse does not help the marriage by belonging to another congregation or by not belonging to one at all. How can you offer encouragement and

support when you do not think enough of your spouse to entrust your own spiritual growth to him or her? The spouse needs to know the members of the congregation, for together--minister, spouse, and congregation--you constitute a family. The family is strengthened as it shares in joys and sorrows. The spouse can only become an authentic member of that family as he or she participates in worship and ministry with the congregation. The minister is always assured when he or she assumes a new appointment that there will be at least one new member on that first Sunday--his or her spouse. After our sons were born, my husband was always sure that he would get at least three new members. I know that he found that to be a source of comfort.

The minister must respect the feelings of the spouse and the congregation by loving both in a way that clearly reflects his or her love for God. The minister must constantly ask, "What would Jesus do? How can I respond so that I show my love for my family, my congregation, and my God?" There will be times when the family needs the minister more than the congregation does, and the minister must be in prayer that he or she will be able to determine which has the greater need. If the spouse truly loves the minister, and if the congregation truly loves the family, it will be easy for the minister to make that determination.

I know that I am asking for all three marital partners to love unconditionally. But then, that is all that would be acceptable among those engaged in making disciples for Christ and participating in a marriage of three.☛

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