

# Paying Attention To Your Own Marriage

Like most people, pastors have difficulties in their own marriages. For the past twenty-four years of doing marriage counseling, both in a clinic setting and now, working primarily with clergy families, I have found there are some differences that tend to surface more with clergy families. What I would like to highlight are three common topics that seem to surface when a pastor and spouse come in for marriage counseling.

## CLAIM TIME WITH YOUR SPOUSE

One of the topics I hear is that they are not spending enough time with each other. Several research projects we have conducted in our office indicate that a little better than 50% of United Methodist ministers work over 60 hours per week. When we asked what conflicts pastors had had with their spouses, we found that

the number one marital problem is not spending enough time with each other. The lack of time with each other definitely affects many different aspects of the couple's relationship. The wise pastor and spouse will intentionally create significant time to be with each other. It is not just a matter of quantity but, rather, quality of shared time. The paradox is that the work of a pastor is never completed and time with her/his spouse can be limited. Astute pastors will show in word and action that they desire to be with their spouses.

I suggested this to one pastor. He just looked puzzled and then pulled out his appointment book. He said, "There just isn't enough time to do everything that this church wants to be done." I suggested that just as he would be more than willing to make an appointment for a parishioner, he could schedule time to be with his wife. He needed to set the priority of just who is more important. The conflict for the pastor is driven by two often competing needs—to "be there" for parishioners and to be a good *model* for parishioners in his/her role as husband or wife. Every pastor must look inwardly at those ambivalent conflicts as well as emotional needs.

It is important to understand the reasons for not spending time with each other. Is there something deeper going on inside? For instance, how much time have you spent with your spouse (without the children) in the last month? What specific plans do you have for time together in the next 30 days? How often do you make and then cancel time with your husband or wife?

## MOVING IN THE ITINERANT Ministry

We United Methodists have a rich tra-

dition of mobilizing pastors to serve congregations through our itinerant system. Persons who are called into the itinerant system are aware that they will be moved from congregation to congregation. They know that they are serving God by caring for God's people who are placed in their charge.

Somehow, somehow God calls a person into ministry. This call is a burning drive of the soul to respond to God's call to be a pastor. The spouse, on the other hand, has not had the same weighty feeling of that calling. In the candidacy for ministry phase, the hope of the couple generally runs parallel. There is the feeling that God is working in their lives. The next phase is their first appointment. There is feeling and trust of God moving through them as they care for the persons in their charge. The third phase is when they sense the commitment to ministry will be for the long term, or for the rest of their working years. It is at this time when concerns about living in the itinerant system begin to surface.

The itinerant system can have an even greater impact on the second career pastor and spouse. The second career pastor and mate may have a difficult time adjusting to life in ministry. There are many who are coming into ministry today who are in their forties or fifties. Their spouses may have careers of their own that they do not want to give up. They have to leave their work and try to find a similar position in their new community. They become resentful because they have to start over, beginning at entry level of a new company.

## COMMUNICATION

It seems most pop-psychology books talk about the importance of wives and husbands communicating their feelings

and thoughts. Most marriage counselors hear the difficulties couples have communicating with each other. Ministers are no different from other people in this respect. However, clergy bring another set of dynamics to the marriage. Research indicates clergy have a high need to be liked by parishioners. When there is a tense situation, pastors often find it easier to be agreeable and compliant rather than confronting a situation. Then when there is conflict in their marriage, they may come across as being passive by not sharing what they are feeling or thinking during an argument. **The spouse is left feeling something is not right or the issue is not resolved.** Communication breaks down. Neither knows what to say to each other. The marriage then becomes stagnant.

If their marriage does not have the foundation to deal with these transitions, then their resiliency may be limited, which will have ramifications for the family. The pastor will need to be sensitive to his/her spouse's need for family stability. Likewise, the spouses will need to be sensitive to their partner's com-

mitment to ministry. This is the very time for the couple to seek out other trusted clergy couples who have been in ministry longer to process what they are experiencing.

The good news for ministers and their mates is that most conferences provide resources for marriage counseling when it is warranted. There are other church related resources such as Marriage Encounter that can help a couple to communicate on a deeper level. Some conferences have contracts with counseling organizations that are aware of the issues in clergy marriages. The stress of ministry can be lessened for clergy marriages. The first step is to reach out. □



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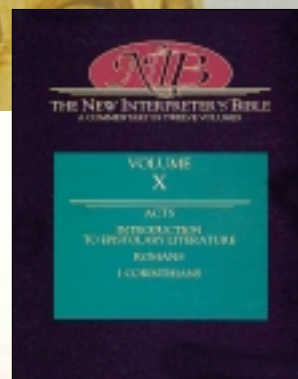
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