



First Sundays The Life of PKs

By 9 a.m., we are in the car and headed toward our new church. Last week, we toured the facility but this time the eyes of the congregation will focus on us, watching our every move. As we walk into the fishbowl, Mom's instructions start to swim in my head.

"You never get another chance for a first impression. Remember to act appropriately."

My stepdad whispers a couple of last minute instructions as well. "Make sure you sit up straight in service. Stay quiet during the prayers. Stand and sit at appropriate times, and could you try to stay awake during the sermon?"

We make our way into the sanctuary. Just after we sit down, I can feel the spotlight shining on us. My stomach is in knots, it feels like everyone is staring and whispering about us. Do I have toilet paper stuck to my shoe? Did I tuck my dress into my pantyhose?

The scenario remains the same—only the location changes. On the first Sunday at the new church, we are introduced to our new church family. Due to Mom's remarriage, our last names are different. People will ask why. How many times will they forget? How long before we give up and quit correcting them? Divorces are tricky and not something Mom really wants people to think about. Possible flaws of their pastor do not need to be pointed out. Church people can turn on their pastors in an instant. One minute they love you and the next feelings are hurt because their favorite hymn hasn't been sung this month.

It must be hard for a pastor. They are supposed to be perfect, always available, and always able to say the right thing. But they did go to school to learn how to do all that. And let us not forget

they got the "CALLING." While I am proud of my mom, nothing prepares a kid for this life. No classes are offered for the family. No one pulls the pastor's kid aside and says, "Here's what's expected, here's how you deal with the overwhelming pressure."

As the service comes to a close, the dreaded words are spoken.

"Please take a moment to greet the pastor's family at the close of the service." This means that we will stand at the back of the sanctuary and shake hands with the entire church.

"It's nice to meet you." *Shake. Shake. Shake.*

"What's your name again?" *Hug. Hug. Shake.*

A mother and her daughter approach, "My name is Mrs. Blah Blah, allow me to introduce my daughter."

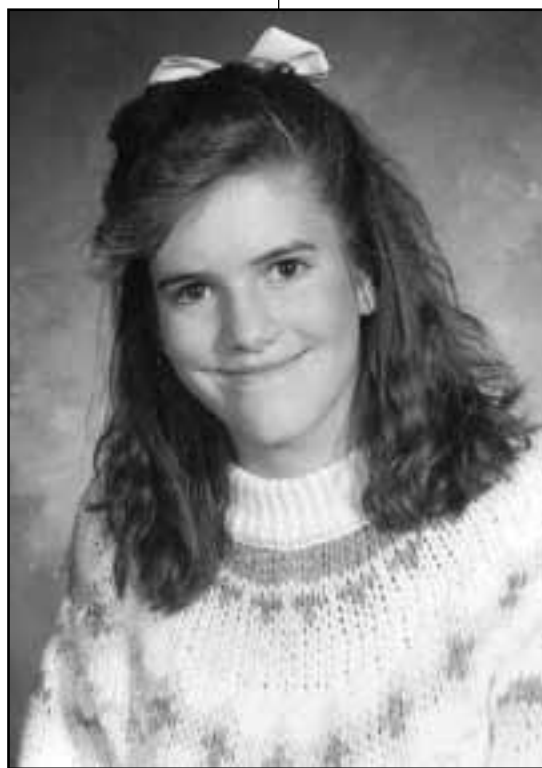
"Hi," awkward at best. We both feel the pressure of a friendship created without our consent. *Nod. Smile.*

"I'm [insert name of fancy lady]; I've been at this church for fifty-seven years. We've never had a woman pastor before." Great, a church with gender issues. Wait until you hear her preach, you'll love her, and you won't be able to live without her. You'll drive us crazy.

I continue shaking hands, nodding, dying to finish my round as display kid.

How am I going to remember all these names? Why don't they wear nametags so I don't have to? How many people in this church have blue

hair, both young and old? Why do they all want to hug me? How many more are there? Do I have to shake everyone's hand? *Focus Jenn. Stop fidgeting, smooth your dress, fix Sister's hair, continue shaking hands, and nod like you're interested. Did she just pinch my cheek? Smile. Nod. Are we done yet? I hope we get to go*



Jennifer Rodriguez

© iStockphoto.com/Sean Locke

Advice to Congregations

- **Wear nametags.** This not only helps PKs but helps all visitors that enter your church. It takes the pressure off others by letting them know your name.
- **There has to be something better than the handshaking marathon.** It can be very overwhelming to little ones. Maybe on the first Sunday greet the pastor and spouse. Ask the congregation to greet the children over the next few weeks. It will be more meaningful and a lot easier to remember names.
- June Cantrell, PK and current pastor, told me of a church that **arranged buddies** with someone their age for the first few Sundays. She has positive memories of those moves.
- A former children's director, Leigh Gregg, tells me that their church **took pictures of the children in the grade level of the PKs and made a booklet** with their picture, name, address, phone number, and their likes/dislikes. They sent it to the new family when they learned of the upcoming appointment. They also made a video of the church, children's area, the adult volunteers, the community, the local school, and the children talking about church. Wow. I would have felt so loved.
- **Remember that they are kids.** We all have our moments and act like kids. Allow them to grow, to learn, to make mistakes, and understand that they are no different from your own kids. It's much better if the chair of the PPR or other church leader offers this reminder, rather than the pastor parent.

someplace good for lunch. Not until after Sunday school. Oh boy can't wait! Time to meet the youth of the church. Is Mom going to be the youth director at this church too? Sounds fun . . . Mom, Mom, Mom everywhere. If my life were a TV it would play nothing but the Mom channel 24/7.

Most youth rooms have a lot in common. Down a dark hall, upstairs, or as far away from the adults as possible (youth get the message.) They are loud and no one wants to hear them. The room usually smells like paint because it's the one thing the kids can change. The furniture is a collection of old sofas, nothing matches, and there's always that one spot where the springs are poking out. The last person in usually has to sit there. After

fulfilling my PK duties, of course that seat belongs to me.

The kids look normal enough, but right away I am at a disadvantage, because they know exactly who I am, but I know nothing about them. My arrival means the departure of another family. Did that family have teenagers? Who just lost a boyfriend/girlfriend, a best friend, an arch enemy? Do I have a hard act to follow?

Then at last its noon. Yippee! Oh, but there are always a few people who want to talk to Mom forever. Aren't they hungry? It's been a long day. Sis balances on the ledge, I balance on one foot, and Stepdad loosens his tie. Our stomachs growl.

My mind wanders back to when we got the news of our new appointment. I didn't react well. "Mom, I don't want to move again. I have friends and a boyfriend. What about dance team?"

"When the bishop calls, you go."

"No kidding," I mumbled. Why doesn't he ever call me? I mean really, no one asked my opinion. I just got thrown into this lifestyle. I just won't make friends at the new place. It's too hard to say goodbye.

"You'll have friends before you know it." Why is she always right and how does she know what I'm thinking?

Life as a PK is different, not good, not bad, but different. It's weird to walk into a place where the first thing said about you is that you're Dr. Jenna's daughter. Yep, that's me. I'm Dr. Jenna's daughter. Does being her daughter change their opinion of who I am? You bet it does. I am now on display like a trophy for all to touch and look at. You get used to it, even grow to sort of like it. I'm famous, even if just at our church. People listen when I speak; everyone is nice to me—well most of the time. I can pretty much do what I want within certain boundaries.

Those boundaries are hard and fast. There can be no breaking them. You keep secrets that you accidentally overhear. You behave in worship service and you attend everything. You usually know what is going on and most importantly, you put your best foot forward all the time.

Somewhere there must be practical advice to help out, but I can't seem to find it. *The Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church has two references to family. One refers to PPRC, which states we can't serve on that committee, thank you God. The other states that "the parsonage is to be mutually respected by the pastor's family as the property of the church and by the church as a place of privacy for the pastor's family" (177). Apparently, this sentence needs to be better publicized.

Are there not more helpful hints? At least that same Sunday, in churches across the country, someone is saying, "Please take a moment to greet the pastor's family at the close of the service." *You are not alone.* □



Jennifer Rodriguez, now thirty-one, offers this reflection out of her memories as a thirteen-year-old. She is the daughter of Dr. Jenna Heart, pastor of St. Mark United Methodist Church in McAllen, Texas, where Jennifer is an active member, currently serving as president of United Methodist Women. Jennifer is also a mother and a high school teacher