Stress and Purpose: Clergy Spouses Today

by Marilyn Brown Oden

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More than two decades ago in The Minister's Wife: Person or Position? (Abingdon, 1966) I wrote about a group of nine clergy spouses who met weekly to share their hopes and hurts, difficulties and dreams. At the time none of them worked outside the home, and each one's self-image was linked strongly to the role of minister's wife.

Today those women would tell a different story. Those who remain clergy spouses see themselves as committed laypersons, but their self-image is no longer tied to their husbands' ministries. All of them are employed; one is now a minister herself (she and her husband serve different churches): and three are divorced. Eight of the men left the ministry; three recently returned. This group of nine couples can be viewed as reflecting in microcosm the changes that have taken place in clergy families.

Historically, the role of minister's wife offered the chance for full-time Christian service to women who were forbidden to be ministers. It offered a socially appropriate channel for women's leadership gifts and abilities. Accordingly, books for clergy spouses in the 1940s and '50s spoke of the minister's spouse as "high priestess" the "shepherdess," the "uncrowned queen." But as women's opportunities increased, so did the vision of clergy wives. Charlotte Ross's book "Who Is the Minister's Wife? A Search for Personal Fulfillment" (Westminster, 1980), points out that in more recent times, a higher percentage of clergy wives has been employed outside the home than is the case for the general public. Another book, Donna Sinclair's The Pastor's Wife Today (Abingdon, 1981), speaks of the toll of divorce, citing one former clergy spouse who said, "Every time I prayed, I would see the vision of a back door. Finally I went through it."

While clergy wives have been walking out the parsonage door -- psychologically if not physically -- clergy husbands have been walking in, and their role is still unclear. The usual images of and expectations of "the first lady" of the parsonage are not cast upon "the first gentleman," so in this way, too, the identity of clergy spouses is becoming less determined by traditional assumptions.

Despite these changes, however, the role of clergy spouse continues to be influential in the congregation. Clergy spouses touch members' lives in ways positive or negative, of which the former may not even be aware. They are respected and trusted simply because of their relation to the pastor. And though their position in that role is now more likely to be merely one aspect of their lives, rather than the main focus, the situation is still demanding and frequently stressful for them.

In leading retreats and seminars over the years, I have had an opportunity to keep in touch with clergy spouses' changing perceptions of their position and its effects upon their lives. I recently asked some 200...
clergy spouses to write anonymous letters expressing the things they would like to say to their congregations if there were no fear of reprisal. These letters certainly do not represent a systematic survey. Yet they do provide some insight into the current situation and concerns of clergy spouses. Judging from the repeated references in the letters, clergy spouses' three major difficulties are: dealing with unrealistic expectations; loneliness; congregations' lack of a sense of urgent purpose.

**Unrealistic Expectations.** This concern, the most frequently expressed in the anonymous letters (43 per cent), also ranked first for clergy wives in a study done by David and Vera Mace in the late '70s ("Marriage Enrichment for Clergy Couples," *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 30, 1982). Some of the letters indicated that the problem increases when the spouse is employed. They also acknowledged that it is further compounded by unrealistic self-expectations.

Illustrative of how parish expectations take a toll on clergy spouses are these remarks:

- "We are expected to give so much. It's hard to give joyfully anymore."
- "I wonder if I can hold up any longer under your unrealistic expectations on me and my husband. I'm not willing to let my children grow up without a daddy. If things don't change, then I doubt our calling. I feel sad."
- "I was so used up that I wanted to withdraw. I got a full-time job to escape the hassles. This concerns me. I used to be the positive one, excited about ministry, and now I feel like the negative minister's wife I have never understood."

Clergy spouses who do try to limit their activities at church frequently feel that the congregation does not understand their reasons.

"I'd appreciate your understanding of my working outside (and inside) the home which allows me little time to be involved as you'd like me to be in women's circles. (I'm already going in circles.)"

One of the signs of health among clergy spouses is their growing recognition that many of the expectations they attribute to the congregation are actually ones they place on themselves. "I know a lot of these pressures are self-inflicted ones."

But this awareness does not in itself solve the problems or alleviate the anxiety -- though it does reduce the likelihood of the anxiety's developing into hostility or resentment toward the parish. The previous excerpt continues: "Sometimes, though, I feel like I'm going to burst under the stress of it all. It would be so good to be able to share these pressures with you, but I feel like you would not understand some of my feelings. I don't mean to sound negative. You have always shown me your great love. I just feel like I'm in this alone."

Though employment demands a large chunk of their time and energy, clergy spouses tend to expect themselves to do just as much at church as before they took a job.

"I'm still having to teach Sunday school and do the music. I celebrate that God has gifted me, but I resent the time it takes."

Even with the awareness that high expectations are often self-inflicted, many clergy spouses still strive
to be a super-spouse, super-parent, super-career person, super-church partner -- and they end up being super-stressed.

"I expect superhuman perfection from myself. This comes from the saying that your gift to God is giving your best for God. But what happens is I expect too much of myself."

Being aware of the relationship between parsonage-family dynamics and church-family dynamics can reinforce the demands one already feels. Edwin Friedman, in Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (Guilford, 1985), observes that clergy are simultaneously involved in a "triangle of families," which includes their own family, the congregation itself and family units within the congregation; though each of these families is distinct, their emotional forces interlock. Health (what Friedman terms "wholeness") in one of these families can in turn promote health in the others; but unhealthy dynamics also tend to reproduce themselves. Aware that the negative relationships within the church affect the parsonage family, clergy spouses expect themselves to be ballast in the waves of church family problems. Also, knowing that the dynamics within the parsonage family can spill over into the church, creates pressure -- and can foster a sense of guilt -- when such spillover takes place. Sometimes clergy spouses feel they are drowning, and while parishioners stand on the bank expecting them to walk on water, clergy spouses cannot even cry for help, for that would show too much vulnerability.

Loneliness. My reading of the clergy spouse letters points to an increasing sense of loneliness, especially as they are contrasted with the Maces' findings. Not only was loneliness not a major issue in the Maces' study, but they found lack of privacy to be a major concern -- the third-most important. In contrast, the letters I read reveal loneliness as a predominant concern (privacy is mentioned only twice). This reversal can be explained partially by the increasingly harried schedules of all families. Dual-career families don't stay home enough for their privacy to be invaded, and parishioners don't have time to invade it anyway. We travel in our own fast tracks, and though we may want close relationships, we are too weary to take the initiative.

Loneliness also arises from the fact that images and assumptions are still thrust upon clergy spouses, not only in the parish but in the secular world. When I was recently called for jury duty, the attorney, after asking my husband's occupation, repeatedly prefaced his interrogation by saying, "As a minister's wife, I assume you . . . " These assumptions and images affect all of our relationships to some degree, at least initially, and can be a continuing obstacle to attaining close relationships. Wrote one spouse:

"Oh how I wish I had a real friend among you to share all these jumbled feelings and thoughts with. Someone to laugh and cry with. Someone who might understand that I can't and don't want to be perfect -- someone who can need me as a friend. Members are afraid to get too close."

Both younger and older clergy spouses expressed this concern:

- This is our first church, and after a year with you, I still feel so lonely. Does everyone feel this loneliness? Does it last forever?

- "I wonder if you will like me. Out of this concern I overextend myself. I'm also concerned that I'm so cautious from being in a parsonage so many years that I over-respond to events and personalities and attach strings to others, blocking relationships. "

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• "Our entire society has grown away from sharing. But there seems to be a sense of fear to reveal one's heart especially in the ministry -- fear of condemnation."

• The loneliness of clergy spouses may reflect a growing problem in society as a whole, but the sense of isolation is intensified for clergy spouses because it occurs in the midst of people and activity.

• "Do you ever realize how lonesome (in spite of all the activity) the parsonage can be?"

**Lack of Urgent Purpose.** The third-most frequent concern voiced in the letters was with congregations' lacking a sense of urgent purpose -- a concern that did not appear at all in the Maces' study. This difference may be a result of the shift in spouses' priorities noted by Bonnie Niswander: "their husbands' ministries are no longer the most important thing in their lives" (*Clergy Wives of the New Generation* in *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 30, 1982). This new viewpoint freed clergy spouses to participate in church from a faith-centered instead of spouse-centered stance. It broadened their vision of the world beyond the church, and concomitantly shrank their illusions about the world within the church.

Clergy spouses generally have a strong commitment to the church and high expectations of it as the body of Christ. But the typical parish is just that: typical. It is not likely to be an outstanding example of faithfulness. It will resist movements for change, and even develop counter-movements to protect itself from change.

Clergy spouses (as do clergy) often experience a disturbing gap between what they envision for the community of faith and the reality they actually encounter.

"After 25 years I feel fewer pressures to do, and more freedom to be. I guess my dissatisfaction now is my disappointment in your expectations of yourselves-not getting the vision of your own greatness, or the power of your own commitment. Sometimes I think the ruts you've entrenched for yourselves are insurmountable."

The inner whisperings revealed in the letters cast judgment on today's community of faith, its lack of fervent commitment and sacrificial zeal. Even a quiet determination to bring the love of God to a small corner of the world seems to get lost in trivialities. In some letters this judgment is soft-spoken:

"I feel like we need to renew our commitment to others -- to begin reaching beyond ourselves again."

In other letters, intense feelings steam from the pages:

• "You stymie the church with your pettiness!"

• "Don't expect me to attend the women's group, where you dry your eyes after a program on hunger -- and then vote to stash your bazaar money in a C.D.!!"

The level of commitment they see in the church troubles clergy spouses partially because of their loyalty to and empathy for their spouses:

• "I see so many uncommitted who are willing to let someone else keep things going in the
church. Without being too judgmental, I see my spouse being overworked and underappreciated."

- Seeing that "the minister is the only one ministering," or that the minister is "continually bumping his head against a brick wall," generates stress, at the very least, and at times gives rise to cynicism.

The demands of ministry also require family sacrifices, as one letter vividly indicates:

We truly love you, but sometimes I don't think you understand the sacrifice we made to go into ministry. We have essentially rescinded our personal, private lives to share in yours. Our future is not in our hands. Our house does not belong to us. Our salary is public knowledge, discussed and decided on as casually as whether to paint the fellowship hall yellow or white."

When clergy spouses are involved in a church with a sense of purpose, the sacrifices are meaningful; they are a gift gladly given. But when the church seems to be adrift, the sacrifices seem pointless.

Henri Nouwen has said that participating in the church is the most important discipline in developing one's spiritual life. Yet for clergy spouses, the very church they love and which nurtures them is also that which can cause pain and stress. Ambivalent feelings toward the church are understandable but still distressing. Perhaps by acknowledging them and understanding them better, we can reduce our sense of isolation and guilt and prevent these feelings from festering into a basically destructive relationship -- not only for the clergy spouses but for all members of a parsonage family, and for the church as a whole.