



## The Two-Career Marriage: Implications for Ministry

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Ministers and their spouses have experienced a sort of side shuffle in roles during the last several years. Sometimes the minister is a man; sometimes she is a woman; and sometimes both are ministers. Each combination has its own set of problems. More often than not, however, it is the husband who is the minister. It is this situation that this essay addresses explicitly, although the conclusions can be relevant for either of the other situations as well.

Today over half of the women married to ministers are employed outside the home. Like the general public, these couples have met the economic necessity of becoming a two-income family. Wives of ministers have seen employment as economic security, personal fulfillment, and a legitimate reason for reduced involvement in their husbands' churches.

This essay will first discuss the historical role of the "minister's wife" for the light it casts on the present. Then it will review present realities. Finally, it will cite examples of couples in ministry who have forged new paths without role models. Altogether it will attempt to paint a bright picture for persons who continue to be called to minister, to love, and to marry.

### I. THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE MINISTER'S WIFE

One of the first minister's wives was Katherine Von Bora who married Martin Luther in 1525. Katie Luther signalled the future for successive ministers' wives who saw marriage to clergy as a calling in itself—a vocation or career. Even Martin Luther admitted, as would so many ministers about their wives, that he relied more on her than on Christ. "In domestic affairs I defer to Katie," he said. "Otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation, in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971) 27.

Luther declared, as early as 1520 in his "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," that clerical marriage should be allowed. Katie was then 21, Luther 37. At the age of 10 Katie was placed in a convent at Nimschen. At 16 she became a nun. A group of nine sisters (including Katie) were influenced by the writings of Martin Luther and sought his counsel. Ultimately he helped them escape the convent. A trusted layman helped smuggle them through Duke George's territory of Saxony in which a man had been executed for assisting the escape of nuns. The story goes that he hid them in a covered wagon carrying herring barrels.

Luther felt responsible for the escaped women and tried to find them homes; some married. Katherine spent two years in Wittenberg learning household management. When one

romance did not end in marriage, Luther suggested someone else for her to marry. She took matters into her own hands, turned down Luther's suggestion for a partner, and offered her own choices, one of whom was Luther himself. Presumably she believed him ineligible because of his age.

Luther claimed to have avoided marriage because he daily expected "the death of a heretic."<sup>2</sup> "But in June of 1525, on hearing that Albert the Archbishop of Mainz, against whom the Ninety-five Theses were directed, was contemplating matrimony, Luther wrote to say that if his own marriage would be an encouragement, he was ready."<sup>3</sup> Katie's hint paved the way. Luther's father, who was eager to have progeny, was delighted. So, at the age of 42, Luther married for conviction. He would "please his father, rile the pope, make the angels laugh and the devils weep, and would seal his testimony."<sup>4</sup>

Luther's letters show how he grew to love Katie and to depend on her. He refers to her sometimes as "Dominus" or "My Lord." Her skill as a form of silent partner enhanced his ministry. She managed with what little money they had and ran a 40-room boarding house inhabited by their own six children as well as relatives and friends Luther would bring home. She slaughtered their meat, milked the cows, grew the rest of their food, and cared for the sick so well that their son, who became an accomplished doctor, praised her as half a doctor. Katie dealt with Luther's depressions and with his absences. She was well read and enjoyed engaging in conversation with him and his colleagues. Katie devoted her life to a man who changed history. One can't imagine how he would have fared without her.

Leonard Sweet categorizes four broad definitions of roles held by women married to ministers in 19th century America: Companion, Sacrificer, Assistant, Partner.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he says:

Long before feminists began speaking out against the imprisonment of wives in kitchens of dependency and for women's rights to manage financial affairs, assume business responsibilities, make important decisions and con-

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Leonard Sweet, *The Minister's Wife, Her Role in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelicalism* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1983) 3.

verse intelligently with their partners, ministers' wives had learned to embody these values and virtues.<sup>6</sup>

Today we have people who marry ministers as *companions*—not because they are clergy, but in spite of it. We have people who *sacrifice*—who give up personal goals, material gains, and opportunities for their marriage to a minister. We have spouses of pastors who *assist* their partner without being paid. And we have two-clergy marriages where they are professional *partners* in ministry.

Ministry has been more than a career; it has been a life calling. A woman involving her life with that of a pastor has traditionally taken on a life centered around his work. In this sense,

two-career marriages have been thriving in the ministry for hundreds of years. Sweet has put it this way:

Women who married ministers or missionaries often chose not a husband, but a career, and the men who married them were much like [the minister] who interpreted his marriage as choosing a wife for the church.... Somehow deep affection grew out of marriages built not on feelings, but on commitment.... Their primary criterion for selecting a spouse was not love or faith, but a joint vision of usefulness.<sup>7</sup>

The contribution by women, however, was gratis except for the underlying financial implication of their converting new members.

Wives of ministers developed their own ministry by leading Bible studies among women. These supportive and nurturing groups helped them learn to pray publicly and to speak on Scripture. It was believed that female nature was intrinsically religious—that is why the raising and teaching of children was entrusted to them. Motherhood and ministry co-existed in practice, expanding women's sphere of influence. Again Sweet has written:

One of the reasons women dominated churches in both America and England was that Evangelical religion gave women something of universal significance to do with their lives at a time when economic and social forces were sabotaging their traditional roles.... Herein lies the central paradox of antebellum revivalism: at the same time that Evangelicals idealized the feminine attributes of self-denial, humility, submission, purity, and meekness, their commitment to the notion of 'women's sphere' led to their endorsement of female involvement in public activities that were not very submissive, humble, meek, self-denying, or even pure.<sup>8</sup>

Itinerant ministers set a different stage for their wives' involvement in their lives and their ministry. They could be away from home 51 weeks of the year. This was a difficult marriage, though many women endured it. The hardier, more assertive women took to the road with their husbands if family circumstances permitted it. Parishioners looked forward to receiving the traveling minister into their homes, but to see his wife and, perhaps, children arrive was another story.

The full story of the transition in America from a celibate to the conjugal Methodist ministry is in need of an author. Although almost any stick

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 88.

was good enough to beat Methodist ministers who stepped toward matrimony, itinerants married in increasing numbers as the nineteenth century advanced. They

took the blows because even worse were the beatings of the flesh and loneliness. Further,...the notion of female character as distinctively religious “helped to establish a climate of opinion where clerical marriage could be seen not as a necessary evil but, in fact, as a desirable goal.”<sup>9</sup>

But only after thousands of itinerants’ wives—sacrificers and Assistants alike—showed that they would not stand in the way of their husbands’ vocation did opposition to marriage disappear, and then it did so with a vengeance. For by the 1860’s there had emerged the opposite pressure: pressure from the congregation and the hierarchy for ministers to marry.<sup>10</sup>

Women who found personal fulfillment and self-expression in the career of minister’s wife may very well have had daughters who chafed under the role. Soon enough, freedom in church work became legislated by manuals, disciplines, and public opinion. The bottom line, however, was always that one be supportive of the ministry of one’s husband and that one’s own involvement be from personal commitment, dedication, and sacrifice with no regard for professional recognition. That has remained true.

## II. PRESENT REALITIES

Public support of the ministry is the single most important aspect of the role that exists today. Whatever the involvement level of the minister’s spouse, it must show support for the church and for the minister or risk his or her undoing. This has always been a subliminal fear: there is very little a woman can do to further her husband’s career in the ministry, but there is a lot she can do to harm it.

When a minister is married to a working person, such support cannot usually be shown in traditional ways. Gone are the days when it can be assumed that the wife of the minister will preside over women’s meetings; many of the women who might participate in such groups are also working. No longer can a minister necessarily take his wife with him to call on shut-ins, the sick, the lonely, or those they both might enjoy as personal friends. (Her presence, in the past, might have been a safeguard for the minister’s reputation if he were calling on single women or assisting in childbirth.) Today women married to ministers might not attend all church services or, for that matter, any. And men married to ministers are easily forgiven if they must spend Sunday mornings at the office or on the job.

If one understands the traditional minister’s wife’s active role in ministry as a public demonstration of her Christian commitment, then one can be sympathetic to the conflict which sometimes occurs around the hesitancy of ministers’ wives to continue in the traditional role. Discord occurs if lay persons perceive that the spouse no longer considers ministry important—at least, not important enough to be committed personally. This perception of the changing involve-

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<sup>9</sup>Hilah F. Thomas, Rosemary Skinner Keller, *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) 143.

<sup>10</sup>L. Sweet, *The Minister’s Wife*, 50.

ment of the minister’s spouse causes such pain because it throws in doubt lay persons’ commitments to the church.

While the minister’s wife is creating a new life of economic security and personal

fulfillment, she may be mystified and hurt by parishioners' hostility. Yet the expression of hostility is understandable, since her involvement has traditionally been a highly visible statement of the importance of ministry and, especially, lay ministry.

We have, then, a conflict where there is no agreement even as to what is in contention. The laity see it as an issue of unfaithfulness to the vital work of the church, while a woman understands the tiff as a reactionary attack against her right to personal growth and fulfillment.

The question becomes, "Can a minister's spouse fulfill the traditional role—to support the ministry—as well as seek a new position economically and personally?"

The answer is "yes" if we accept the fact that the role has shifted from active involvement in ministry to public support of both lay and clerical leadership.

What is meant here by public support of the ministry is to be seen as effectively witnessing to the importance of the church's work. The following examples are traditional tasks asked of women married to ministers: (1) being asked to give devotions or pray; (2) being asked to teach Sunday School; (3) being asked to sing in the choir; and (4) being asked to be a figurehead for women's groups.

It is essential that she respond to these in ways which will testify to their importance without taking charge herself. One way to show her support of such activities—without having to do each one—is to choose, before being asked, in what way she would like to be involved in the life of the church and then *volunteer* to do what she would like to do. This reinforces the idea that she is a lay person with her own gifts, interests, and Christian commitment to her church.

Then if asked to do something else, for which there isn't the time or interest, it will be less difficult to say "no." She can say that she is looking forward to doing whatever it is that she, herself, has chosen. Then it is legitimate and understandable when she says that she doesn't have the time. What they are asking her to do is so important that it need be done by someone—it is helpful to suggest a name—who has the special talent and time it would take to do it best.

Another reason churches have difficulty accepting the employment of a minister's wife outside the home is that it represents to them that she feels their financial support inadequate. A church determines the salary and benefits of its pastor. Many parishioners see themselves as benefactors to the parsonage family. After all, by their way of thinking, they are providing a tax-free home, utilities, pension, and other perquisites for which the minister's family should be grateful. There are cases in the 19th century in which a pastor's family had to leave a town in disgrace because the church could not pay him enough to support his family. This was a reflection on his ministry.

Not so much has changed. A pastor is paid by the very people he or she serves. When the wife of a minister opts to be gainfully employed, it symbolizes—at least to the church—their inadequacy as a provider. And in many cases

churches are not providing adequately; they are defensive because they feel guilty.

Even the clothes the minister's wife wears to work symbolize change that is hard to accept. Historically,

a modest simplicity became the norm. Costly jewelry and gaudy frills were forbidden. The wife of a minister ought to so dress that the poor would feel

welcome in church, the reasoning went. The money that went to purchase that piece of jewelry might have better gone to send tracts to China.... Furthermore, it was believed that fashion squandered a woman's time and diverted her energies from morality to manners, from substance to style, from reform to recreation, from values to vanity, and from intellectual and spiritual improvement to social dissipation....Their modest simplicity announced their active, serious, sturdy, and independent vocation.<sup>11</sup>

Apparel, fashion, or concern about the interior of one's home is still considered frivolous for the minister's wife. Her working is interpreted to mean that economy, spartanism, and simplicity are given up.

If the working person has a career which can be construed to be a calling, it is easier to accept than if the minister's wife works simply for the added income.

A minister, whose wife began working in a greasy spoon in the small town in which he was serving, endured a year of criticism about her taking this job. It embarrassed the congregation to have their minister's wife working in such a place, and they felt it was undignified for her to do so. Only after her husband pointed out to the parishioners that four people had joined their church for having met her at this restaurant did the complaints subside.

This leads to another aspect of the role existing today for people married to ministers. Some lay people look to the minister and his/her spouse for permission. They want authoritative approval before they do things with their lives. Influence over other people exists because the pastorate is a public position on which are placed privileges and obligations unique to the ministry. It is like being royalty. This is why the parsonage is called a fishbowl, and it is why pastors' families complain of having little privacy and different standards of behavior expected of them. It can be excruciating if one wants to please everyone.

And, of course, one can't please everyone. Therefore, it is best to be as true to oneself as one can be. If we live honestly—seeking to know and to be ourselves—we will set an example for laity that does not compromise ourselves or cause conflict within us. Parishioners will ascertain that they too can, and should, be true to themselves. Lay couples need good role models too.

While it is well and good to talk of being true to oneself, it can be very impractical when trying to fit two lives together. Women married to ministers have a special dilemma. Clergy have been dependent on their wives' ability to adapt to the demands of the ministry. If this conflicts with her opportunities or her understanding of God's will for her life, the couple is faced with superhuman decisions. He may have made a commitment to the church apart from the marriage vow. He may feel that the call to the ministry should come first and that it is, in fact, more important than other considerations. She may feel that her own

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<sup>11</sup>L. Sweet, *The Minister's Wife*, 95-6, citing from *Ladies Repository* (1871).

needs and desires cannot be measured, because she recognizes them as hers and not God's. She may resent this inequity, never intending to. At the same time, her husband may wonder if his decisions are the right ones.

The institutional church does not have a solution for this. Only prayer, commitment to

work through modern day challenges, and genuine creativity can address the situation we have today. One would not want to give up the good aspects of ministry because of its inherent problems. At the same time, we cannot live as if the problems do not exist. The increasing divorce rate among clergy brings home that point quite clearly.

### III. NEW PATHS

“The successful dual-career family is the one that finds some way to fulfill most of [the functions mother and father did] within the family,” writes Patricia McGinn, therapist, teacher, mother of two, and wife of a university professor. “If too many are missing or are inadequately accomplished, the family will have a sense of scarcity and deprivation and will begin to lose stability.”<sup>12</sup>

McGinn teaches a religion class on marriage at a Catholic college. She asked several dual-career couples to speak to the class out of their own experience. McGinn and her husband made the transition from a traditional marriage, not unlike that of their parents, to one where both husband and wife support the family financially, care for their children, accomplish household tasks, and sustain their individual interests.

The Barkers, a couple comprised of a minister and lawyer, spoke to the class on making career decisions together from the start in order to live together and have opportunities they both wanted for their careers. It involved compromising on location, taking turns commuting great distances while attending school, taking bar exams in several states, accepting the church’s demands on their precious little free time, and delaying higher education while their first child established herself in their lives.

The class then heard of our lifestyle, which is to live apart during portions of the year so that each of us can pursue careers dependent on location. We both come from traditional and very happy families, making it easy to fall into patterns we witnessed as children. But we soon learned that our marriage was dependent on each of us maintaining the interests for which we were highly trained. They would not diminish in importance because of our love for each other—especially when our initial attraction to one another was because of our individual gifts.

Pursuing our careers meant living in separate cities three months of the year. This brought criticism from church people whose own marriages were threatened by our lifestyle. It meant the person with the most flexible schedule (the minister in our case) had to be religious about taking time off for visits. What it said to parishioners was, “Time with one’s spouse and family is important enough to risk criticism and letting things go undone.” It said to them,

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<sup>12</sup>Patricia Ferris McGinn, “Love, Work, and Family: Perspectives on the Two-Career Marriage,” *Criterion* 22/1 (Winter, 1983) 9.

“We value each other so much that we will risk what may happen by our being apart.” It said, “We are human beings with human frailties and are trying to live out God’s plan for our lives just as you are with yours.”

Out of that class on marriage came several helpful hints for couples who are juggling careers, family, and a relationship with a church. Because we are all unique people with different circumstances, the creative possibilities are endless. But here are some issues we determined crucial to healthy marriages.

1. Time management. A pastor's time is not his or her own unless it is claimed on a calendar for all the world to see. Barring emergencies (of which there will be plenty), both partners should keep calendars to which they refer together regularly. They should set aside time that both expect to have together. When they were dating they set aside time; why should it be different after marriage? They should make this time public so that church people will know when not to disturb them. Parishioners need to do the same with their lives and should have the reminder even if it inconveniences them.

Time must also be set aside for children so that they will have the confidence that, even though both parents are busy, their time to be with their parents will come, and it will be quality time. Good child care by persons other than their parents can instill in children the security and trust traditional families have given if that care is accompanied by parenting which assures them of their place in the family and of their parents' love for them. Sometimes couples sacrifice time with each other because of children. But children need to see their parents' love for each other too, and leaving them with a sitter in order to express that is a great lesson for their future.

2. Household chores. Couples should take advantage of modern appliances and services that offer convenience. Laundering shirts and diapers can be done better by professionals and even more economically if we consider what one's own time is worth. House cleaning, even though mother may have always done it, is a generic task which cannot be avoided. But someone can be hired. There is nothing like returning home to find the bathrooms sparkling.

3. Meal preparation. This depends somewhat on the talents and/or interests of the individuals involved. The Barkers devised a system of "cooking weekends." Two or three times a year they would spend the whole weekend preparing food. They would have a turkey in the oven, spaghetti on the stove, pot roasts in slow cookers, potatoes in pressure cookers, etc. Then they packaged everything in one-serving portions, which they froze. They diagrammed the contents of the freezer so they could find things easily. Then they could choose what meal they wanted—which might not be the same between them—pop it in the microwave, and have dinner. This system also allowed one of them to be on a diet without causing the other any problem.

We eat out a lot, which is expensive but justifiable, because it frees up our time and eliminates the problem that neither of us likes or is particularly good at cooking.

4. Fidelity. Couples need to work at bringing home some of the dynamic, attractive attributes which they take to work. Too often we share only our frustrations, fears, and tiredness with the person with whom we are the closest. The fear each person has that their partner may find someone preferable at work

is not unfounded. It happens. It is easy to forget that our colleagues, who seem so remarkable at work, also let down when they leave work. There will be attractions and desires no matter how much a person is in love with his or her spouse. There is nothing wrong with that; it is to be expected. But the surest way to keep a marriage viable is for each partner to put a check on the grievances brought home from work, except when seeking guidance about a specific problem which has to be solved. Each person needs to work at presenting a positive, enjoyable disposition at home.

Another issue which must be solved on an individual basis, and which is crucial to clergy, is how to make career decisions if they affect either partner. Such decisions may have to do with



logistics, advancement, or time commitments. Probably the least successful plan would be to have one person do all the adapting. It may mean taking turns, which is a difficult option to make fair. Most assuredly it will mean doing things differently than our parents did—which is hard to do, no matter how dissimilar from them we think we are.

Organization and flexibility are the key words to making a dual-career marriage feasible. There will be flaws in well-orchestrated plans. Someone will, inevitably, get sick when there is no one to stay home with him or her. The car will break down. A parishioner will die, get sent to jail, walk out of a marriage, or fall ill, and there will be nothing to do but attend to needs that seem to be the greatest at the time. This is when compassion and understanding can save the moment. It may mean that one's vacation is delayed or that one appears incompetent or irresponsible at work for having adapted to one's partner's need, as, for example, when a two-year old is suddenly thrust into the church office. There are even extreme cases in which one may have to totally miss work because the minister-spouse is at the hospital with the car visiting a parishioner who has had a stroke, and feels it would be wrong to leave. It may mean the loss of opportunity or even credibility at work. And it may not seem worth it to be flexible if it happens very often.

But there will always be intrusions in our lives. Henri Nouwen, in his book *Solitude*, cites a pastor who was aggravated with all the interruptions in his work until he realized that the interruptions were his work.

This is the essence of life with a minister. We can either fight it all our lives, or rejoice that we are so closely associated with something so important. We *can* control much more than at first it may appear. It takes the kind of strength of character and clarity of vision that our foremothers and fathers had in order to survive what sometimes seem insurmountable odds. But the very nobleness of our tradition and the grace of God give us hope when we most need it.