

The Most Vulnerable Woman in Your Church

We're all vulnerable.

Everyone who walks in the church door can be helped or hurt by what happens during the following hour or more. Whether saint or sinner, preacher or pew-sitter, old-timer or newcomer, child or geezer, everyone is vulnerable and should be treated respectfully, faithfully, carefully.

However, no one in the church family is more vulnerable than the pastor's wife.

She is the key figure in the life of the pastor and plays the biggest role in his success or failure. *(Note: I am fully aware that in some churches the pastor is a woman. In such cases, what follows would hardly pertain to her household.)*

And yet, many churches treat her as an unpaid employee, an uncalled assistant pastor, an always-available office volunteer, a biblical expert and a psychological whiz.

She is almost always a reliable helper as well as an under-appreciated servant.

You might not think so, but she is the most vulnerable person in the building. That is to say, she is the single most likely person to become the victim of malicious gossip, sneaky innuendo, impossible expectations and pastoral frustrations.

The pastor's wife can be hurt in a hundred ways—through attacks on her husband, her children or herself. Her pain is magnified by one great reality: She cannot fight back.

She cannot give a certain member a piece of her mind for criticizing the pastor's children, cannot straighten out the deacon who is making life miserable for her husband, cannot

stand up to the finance committee who, once again, failed to approve a needed pay raise, or the building and grounds committee that postponed repair work on the parsonage—often called a parsonage, if your church provides one.

She has to take it in silence most of the time.

It takes the best Christian in the church to be a pastor's wife and pull it off. And that's the problem: In most cases, she's pretty much the same kind of Christian as everyone else. When the enemy attacks, she bleeds.

The pastor's wife has no say-so in how the church is run and receives no pay, yet she has a lot to do with whether her husband gets called to that church and succeeds once he arrives.

That's why I counsel pastors to include with their resume a photo of their family. The search committee will want to see the entire family, particularly the pastor's wife, and will try to envision whether they would "fit" in "our" church.

The pastor's wife occupies no official position, was not the object of a church vote, and gives no regular reports to the congregation on anything. And yet, no one person in the church is more influential in making the pastor a success—or a resounding failure—than her.

She is the object of a world of expectations:

- She is expected to dress modestly and attractively, well enough but not overly ornate.
- She is expected to be the perfect mother, raising disciplined children who are models of well-behaved offspring for the other families, to be her husband's biggest supporter and prayer warrior, and to attend all the church functions faithfully and, of course, bring a great casserole on potluck night.
- Since her husband is subject to being called away from

home at all hours, she is expected to understand this and have worked it out with the Lord from the time of her marriage—if not from the moment of her salvation—and to have no problem with it. If she complains about his being called out, she can expect no sympathy from the members. If she does voice her frustrations, what she hears is, “This is why we pay him the big salary,” and “Well, you married a preacher; what did you expect?”

- She is expected to run her household well on the limited funds the church can pay and keep her family looking like a million bucks.

And those are just for starters.

The pastor's children likewise suffer in silence as they share their daddy with hundreds of church members, each of whom feel they own a piece of him, and can do little about it. (But that's another article.)

Here is what we owe the pastor's wife:

1. We owe her the right to be herself. She is our sister in Christ and accountable to Him.

My wife was blessed to have followed pastors' wives who cut their own path. So, in some churches, Margaret taught Sunday School and came to the women's missionary meetings. In other churches, she directed the drama team and ran television cameras. A few times, she held weekday jobs while raising three pretty terrific kids.

And, as far as I know, the churches were always supportive and understanding. We were blessed.

Allow the pastor's wife to serve in whatever areas she's gifted in. Allow her to try different things and to grow. But do not put your expectations on her, if at all possible.

Do not try to tell her how to raise her children. Do not try

to get to her husband through her with your messages or (ahem) helpful suggestions.

2. We owe her our love and gratitude. She has a one-of-a-kind role in the congregation, which makes her essential to the church's well-being.

Recently, as I was finishing a weekend of ministry at a church in central Alabama and about to drive the 300 miles back home, a member said, "Please thank your wife for sharing you with us this weekend. I know your leaving is hard on her."

How sensitive—and how true, I thought. That person had no idea that my wife underwent surgery two weeks earlier and I had been her nurse ever since, and that in my absence, my son and his family were taking care of her, and that I was now about to rush home to relieve them.

Church members have no clue—and no way of knowing—regarding the pressures inside the pastor's family and should not investigate to find out.

What they should do is love the wife and children and show them appreciation at every opportunity.

3. We owe her our love and prayers. While the Father alone knows her heart, the pastor may be the only human who knows her burdens.

Pray for her by name on a regular basis. Then, leave it to the Lord to answer those prayers however He chooses.

If we believe that the Living God is our Lord and Savior and that He hears our prayers, we should be lifting to Him those whose lives are given in service for Him.

Ask the Father for His protection upon the pastor's wife and children—for their health, for their safety from all harm, and for Him to shield them from evil people.

Pray for His provisions for all their needs, and for the church to do well in providing for them.

Pray for the pastor's relationship with his wife. If their private life is healthy, the congregation's shepherd is far better prepared for everything he will be asked to do.

4. We owe her our responsible care. What does she need?

Do they need a babysitter for a date night? Do they need some finances for an upcoming trip? If they are attending the state assembly or the annual meeting of the denomination, are the funds provided by the church budget adequate, or do they need more? Is the wife going with the pastor? (She should be encouraged to do so, if possible.)

Ask the Holy Spirit what the pastor's wife (and/or the pastor's entire family) needs, and if it's something you can do or provide, do it. If it's too huge, rally the troops.

5. We owe it to the pastor and his wife to speak up. Sometimes, they need a friend to take their side. If your pastor's wife has a ministry in the church, look for people to criticize her for: a) dominating others, b) neglecting her home or c) running the whole show. To some, she cannot do anything right.

You be the one to voice appreciation for her talents and abilities, her love for the Lord and her particular skills that make this ministry work.

Imagine yourself standing in a church business meeting to mention something the pastor's wife did that blessed someone, that made a difference, that glorified the Lord.

Imagine yourself planning in advance what you will say, asking the moderator (who is frequently the pastor) for a moment for "a personal privilege" without telling him in advance.

And, imagine yourself informing a couple of your best friends what you are planning to do, so they can be prepared to stand up “spontaneously” and begin the ovation. (Hey, sometimes our people have to be taught to do these things.)

The typical reaction most church members give when someone is criticizing the pastor’s wife is silence. But you speak up. Take up for her.

Praise God for her willingness to get involved, to not sit at home in silence, but to support her husband and bless the church.

6. We owe them protection of the pastor’s days off and vacations. After my third pastorate, I joined the staff of the great First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi, and quickly made an outstanding discovery. The personnel policies stipulated that the church office would be closed on Saturdays and the ministers were expected to enjoy the day with their families.

Furthermore, when the church gave a minister several weeks of vacation, it was understood at least two full weeks of it would be spent with the family in rest and recreation and not in ministry somewhere. As one who took off-days reluctantly and would not allow myself to relax and rest during vacations, I needed this to be spelled out in official policy.

When a pastor is being interviewed for the position and when he is new, he should make plain that his off-days are sacred. The ministerial and office staffs can see that he is protected.

The lay leadership can make sure the congregation knows this time is just as holy to the Lord as the time he spends in the office, hospitals or even the pulpit.

7. We owe them the same thing we owe the Lord: faithful obedience to Christ. Pastors will tell you in a heartbeat that

the best gift anyone can give them is just to live the Christian life faithfully. When our members do that—when they live like Jesus and strive to know Him better, to love one another, to pray and give and serve—10,000 problems in relationships disappear.

Finally, a word to the pastor's wife ...

It's my observation that most wives of ministers feel inadequate. They want to do the right thing, to manage their households well and support their husbands, keep a clean house, sometimes accompany him on his ministries, and such, but there are only so many hours in a day and so much strength in this young woman. She feels guilty for being tired and worries that she is inadequate.

The Apostle Paul may have had pastors' wives in mind when he said, "Not that we are adequate to think anything of ourselves, but our adequacy is of God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

We are inadequate. None of us is worthy or capable of this incredible calling from God.

We must abide in Him, or nothing about our lives will go right.

One thing more, pastor's wife: Find other wives of ministers and encourage them. The young ones in particular have a hard time of it, with the children, the young husband, the demanding congregation and sometimes, Lord help us, even an outside job.

Invite a couple of these women for tea or coffee. Have no agenda other than getting to know one another. See what happens.

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imaginable Christian publication.

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