

How Involved Should a Spouse Be in a Spouse's Ministry?

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Patricia Wood, a Pennsylvania minister's wife, recently wrote an article on "Growing Parsonage Children." She rued the fact that children often get neglected in the busy-ness of many parsonages and said: "We get so involved in our work as ministers, we often have little time left to love our children." Notice that "our work as ministers." She made no claim to being a woman minister, such as when, in some denominations, both husband and wife are co-pastors. But she claimed that her husband's ministry was *her* ministry.

She even ascribed some of her husband's ministry to their children, such as when she said: "We have found in our ministry that each of the children has added greatly to the ministry in his own way." She spoke of children helping in the kitchen and said: "We have done a lot of entertaining and the children felt they had a part to play in this part of our ministry." She included this line: "There was a time during our ministry that I had to go to work outside the home."

Obviously this wife considers that she shares in her husband's ministry. No doubt that idea prevails today in many corners of Protestantism.

A recent syndicated article (Copley News Service) shows that Judaism also allows for this shared ministry. Esther Jungreis is the wife of a rabbi. The article said: "Jungreis and her husband, Theodore, are descended from a long line of rabbis who flourished in pre-Holocaust Hungary. They are the parents of four children and serve an Orthodox congregation on Long Island, N.Y." (Emphasis mine).

Another example, remote admittedly from our topic, might be cited from the world of politics. In November John Spellman was elected governor of Washington. His wife, who was not endorsed by any party, whose name was not on the ballot, was the subject of a pre-election news item. Here are the first lines from the article: "Mrs. John Spellman wants to be first lady of the state who will do more than simply remodel the governor's mansion. If her Republican husband is elected governor in November, she would like to pitch in and help him face up to problems of the mentally ill and abused children. 'I hope to open up Olympia and have a dialogue with people,' Lois Spellman said yesterday. 'I'd like to be a troubleshooter.' "

Should a minister's wife in the congregation or a principal's wife in the school fancy herself a "troubleshooter," or, with the best of intentions, can she by her intrusions into her husband's work too easily become a troublemaker?

It is probably here that we get to the real subject matter of our topic. To what extent is a wife covered by a call extended to her husband to be a pastor or a teacher in a Lutheran congregation? Are there duties for her implied in that call? Are there privileges for her implied in that call? Should the congregation conceive of a "role" for her to play in their midst by virtue of their call to her husband? What are the limitations of that "role"? What happens if she doesn't live up to her "role," or if she exceeds its limitations?

In a nasty little book, but a book as true as it is sad, called "Divorce in the Parsonage," the woman writer (Mary Bouma), herself a minister's wife, included the words of a certain minister who was doing a postmortem on his own broken marriage. He seemed to be saying that congregation matters were always tended to by him and his wife at the expense of their own marital relationship. Now, in retrospect, he was bitter at what the congregation had expected of his wife. The author said that "he became quite vehement when he talked about 'this business' of hiring one person and getting two. He heatedly explained that when a hospital or clinic hires a doctor, it doesn't get a receptionist thrown in free. And a factory doesn't get a man's wife along with the man who was hired."

There no doubt is such a thing as a Lutheran minister who exploits his wife. He may do it without realizing he's doing it. She may have a lot to offer, and he knows her skills and abilities. So he volunteers his wife for the class still needing a Sunday-school teacher. Or she's a typist, and he tells himself: "With her good help I can have that report done in time for the annual meeting."

She may permit herself to be exploited without fully realizing what's going on, that is, until she has a sticky situation on her hands. Maybe only then does a too naive minister himself realize that he should have been more aware of his wife's involvement in the ongoing affairs of the congregation.

Assume, for example, that a pastor's wife has singing ability. In addition, she can play the organ. A natural is that, with her abilities, she should become the choir director. All goes smoothly in the choir until the weaknesses of human nature begin to surface, or until the devil tries to take up the baton. Soon there is jealousy in the choir over who shall sing the solo, or why the pastor's daughter should be permitted to skip rehearsals and still get to sing on Sundays. And there's his wife—right in the middle!

A minister's wife can misuse rather normal situations despite the best of intentions. For selfish reasons she can assume a protective attitude toward her husband's health and drop remarks to parish people about how he's overworked, or why a proposed meeting isn't all that necessary. It falls to her to intercept some of his phone calls in the parsonage, and she may find it difficult to distinguish between the role of relayer of messages and that of appointment secretary. On occasion she may even slip into the role of spiritual adviser on the telephone, which would be an usurping of her husband's duties, but which she does in the name of friendship toward the caller or of trying to spare her husband what she judges to be a minor detail.

A ministerial spouse can become a victim of loneliness, a loneliness not at all understood by members of a congregation. A minister's wife often feels that she doesn't have a close friend. She may live hundreds of miles from her relatives and parents. She may live in a climate which isn't attractive to her. There is no one to whom she can bare her soul, flaws and all, and still be accepted. She must be the chief smoother-over of the tensions and stresses created by a move to a new parish and during the time it takes for her children to make new friends and adjust to new schools. Meanwhile she herself may be under the greatest stress due to the move. She may be vulnerable to hurting her husband's ministry at just that critical time by her remarks about the former parish, for instance, or this new parish, or about how hard it is to get adjusted.

It is probably a rare minister who has the sensitivity to understand, day in and day out, his wife's craving for a friend, someone with whom to share thoughts without having to remind herself, "I almost forgot; I'm the minister's wife."

He must not forget that she is sealed off in certain ways from free and easy associations within the congregation or a body of school parents. She cannot pick her friends as freely as she would if *he* had not accepted his present call!

Probably many ministerial wives sublimate this craving for intimate friends without even realizing it by losing themselves in the daily needs of their children and husband and, they rationalize, of the congregation. Yet the felt need for a companion, a no-barriers-friend, remains. Blessed the woman whose husband is her understanding friend under such needs!

A rare wife indeed is one who can divorce herself completely from her husband's work. The wife of a principal or pastor will have a natural and very proper interest in the daily affairs of school or church. She wants to know who's sick, who's getting married, who's having a baby, who was in the auto accident, what new children enrolled in the school.

I do not feel, however, that the business content of every board meeting is necessarily proper conversational material back at the teacherage dinner table or the parsonage living room. Confidential matters may have been discussed at an elders' meeting or by the board of Christian education. A wife can sense when a matter was of a sensitive or confidential nature and should respect her spouse's reluctance to talk about it. Trustee Smith may have made a fool of himself at the meeting, and it's best if nothing is said of it. Neither would it be wise or proper for a ministerial wife to cozy up to some delinquent parent and slip in a good word on child-raising or church attendance or on "what my husband thinks" by way of trying to help her principal- or pastor-husband with his chores!

The ability to refrain from talking about other people's private affairs is not easy to come by. Not all principals are good at it. Not all pastors are good at it. Woe to the congregation that has a pastor, privy to the disgraces of this or that congregation member, who is also cursed with a loose tongue! Now imagine the poor spouse, who may be ill-equipped to evaluate everything she or he hears, who just may not be blessed with the

gift of discretion. Then consider the source of misunderstanding or hurt, of betrayal or of gossip that is now unleashed in that school family or congregation.

The Bible says quite a bit about how we handle other people's private information. If this is true in everyday affairs, think how it must be true in a congregation's affairs! Proverbs 11 says that "a talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter." I can conceive of a time when a child might confide a most personal matter to a teacher, such as something relating to a parent, or an embarrassing matter involving physical things. If that teacher goes home to her husband and says: "I heard the cutest thing today, and Susie was so serious when she told me," and then proceeds to relate it to her spouse, I would feel that she has betrayed the child. Not all would agree with me and might say: "Where's your sense of humor?" But I say there are times to keep confidence, even with a child.

A spouse can become meddlesome, either a man or a woman. A husband who says to his teacher-wife: "Well, what did the little monsters say today?" may be more interested in turning in on the storms and strifes of various households than he is in conducting his own harmless version of a well-known Art Linkletter book.

A meddlesome spouse can be a pain to a pastor or a teacher. What is needed is not only a minister, but a spouse, too, who can live according to that description of a Christian man in Psalm 15. He is one "that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbor, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor."

Any Christian, husband or wife, ought to shy away from making small talk within the home, especially around children, at the expense of other people, certainly of fellow Christians, and most pointedly of family members or other relatives. Psalm 50 describes such an inconsiderate person: "Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son." Surely I'm not going to protect a parishioner's reputation if I deal carelessly with that of a family member.

How involved should a spouse be in a spouse's ministry?

Somehow a line of demarcation must be drawn between the two marriage partners. There are areas of privacy, sometimes of sensitivity, that pertain to the preacher's or teacher's calling, and the spouse should be taught—and should learn!—what those areas are.

The Bible says that a man filling the office of a "bishop" should be patient, not be a brawler, should be one who rules well his own house (1 Tm 3). That certainly means that he ought to be considerate of the weaknesses of his spouse. But it also means that he should know how to guide his spouse so that she does not easily, or worse yet, carelessly intrude into the things of her husband's call. When we go by the Scriptures rather than by the trends and pressures of our times, we will acknowledge that God does not want any wife to dominate her husband. If a woman's "involvement," as our title puts it, is clearly a case of a bossy wife trying to run her husband's affairs, particularly his professional affairs, then she is clearly out of her element and her conduct must be labeled sin. If her husband doesn't understand this situation, or is helpless to cope with it, then correspondingly he will have problems in his ministry. For a minister to rule well his own house means that he, together with his wife, must work out a *modus operandi* that is suitable to them and to that particular call. There is no one Bible passage, I am sure, that would cover all situations for all marriages and every call. And, by the way, please understand that what many of our Reformed neighbors speak of as a ministerial "call" is not at all what we mean in our circles when we speak of a call extended by a congregation.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy that a deacon's wife must be grave, not a slanderer, sober, faithful in all things. The deacon himself should be the husband of one wife. He should rule his children and his own house well (1 Tm 3). The implication in these latter words is that a principal, for instance, or a preacher, should exercise a certain headship in his marriage and, in addition, a certain rulership in his calling, so that he sees to it that his spouse's involvement in his own field of work does not become an inordinate one. She is to assist him, comfort him, be an help meet for him. But she is not to be one who, like the quote about the governor's wife, says, in a role-usurping way: "Just wait till I become the first lady of the parsonage—or the teacherage!"

When Paul asked rhetorically: "Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles ...?" (1 Cr 9:5), he was making it all too clear that that hypothetical wife would not interfere with his calling, namely, to preach the gospel of Christ to men. He could allow her to become involved with him, but she wouldn't hinder him from his calling.

This is the apostle who told the same Corinthians (1 Co 14:34) that their women were to keep silence in the churches, yet who also said that a servant of the Lord must be gentle unto all men (2 Tm 2:24), which would surely include that minister's spouse. Then he instructed any husband (minister, teacher or ditch digger) that he should love his wife with a tenderness and fervency, a solicitude and dedication like that of Christ himself, who "loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Ep 5).

So, if Paul were to be married, his wife would have her role over against him, but he would still have that calling to which Christ had appointed him. Paul would also have a responsibility to see to it that his wife did not usurp any portion of that charge Christ had given him and that, by default or otherwise, he did not delegate away any portion of his duties to a wife.

Sapphira willingly overstepped her bounds, no doubt at her husband's bidding, when he hatched a scheme to sell a piece of land in an underhanded way. Where she should have said: "Husband, I'll have no part of this," instead both she and her husband were wrong, and were at the same time fools! It made her a momentary widow, then cost her her life (Acts 5).

Jezebel went even farther, completely dominated her pouting husband's affairs, and by a combination of goading (1 K 21) and brazen usurpation (such as when she said: "I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth," and then wrote letters and helped herself to her husband's royal seal) proceeded to get herself thrown from a window to a pack of dogs (2 K 9).

I am not suggesting that a modern ministerial wife, by overstepping her bounds and involving herself in the affairs of her husband's ministry, will bring upon herself swift execution. The stories of Sapphira and Jezebel are not even true parallels, since their husbands were not ministers of God.

But consider them a kind of extreme examples as you consider also such a pious example as Elizabeth, wife of Zacharias the priest. Surely she, as a ministerial spouse, was no meddler, no overstepper, when Luke could write of both her and her husband: "They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Lk 1:6). You have to read between the lines there, but this daughter of Aaron knew her role as a priest's wife and played it commendably.

Again the parallel is faulty on at least a couple of scores, but watch Mary as she came, not to her husband but to her Son at Cana, and said to Jesus: "They have no wine" (John 2:3). Life's closest relationship, apart from marriage, is that of mother and child. But notice how delicately Mary approaches Jesus. She is no doubt aware that he is far more than just her son. Yet she makes no demands. A request, yes. A need, yes, and that not for herself. But no bossiness, no taking of matters into her own hands, no crossing the lines that probably were vague even to her. But this was the One she had heard an angel name "a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11) and Simeon call "the glory of thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32). How circumspectly she walks. Whatever his ministry, whatever his role is to be, she will not intrude. She will not grasp not demand to share it. It is only: "They have no wine."

His answer to her was: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come." There Jesus puts an office out in front that is more, much more, than the relationship of Son to mother. It is Holy God to sinner. It is Creator to creature. It is Lord to servant. It is almighty Miracle-worker to humans in need, and only a petty need at that! "Woman, what have I to do with thee?"

To me, the title of this paper need not seem all that formidable, if it really seems so to any of us at all. Servants of God are entitled to spouses, and it ought to be a foregone conclusion among us that, when a congregation, acting in the name of God himself, calls a teacher or a pastor to labor in its midst, the spouse ought to give the utmost respect to that call. Other things ought to take care of themselves quite readily, especially under the guidance of common sense sanctified by God the Holy Spirit.

A teacher, a pastor, ought to get mental, physical and spiritual nourishment from a spouse. The Christian home of that servant of God ought not be a place where one's work is criticized, that is, destructively, but rather a place of refuge and support, a place of rest and refreshment to which one can retire before returning to labors with the Word on the morrow.

May God help us to prize anew the great privilege of being teachers and preachers of his Word, and help those of us who are married to have, by the working of his Spirit, spouses who do not overstep and intrude, but are there to support and assist.