

Running the ministry marathon: Looking around

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In the [first article](#) in this series, I described ministry as a marathon, not unlike the Boston Marathon, and I promised four “looks,” or perspectives, that have helped me stay in the race.

The first “look” is inward—[looking in](#) spiritually and physically.

The second “look” is around—looking around relationally and maritally.

Look around relationally

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV).

Every good marathon runner knows it’s better to train for the race with a “running buddy.” When those “walls” hit during the race, having someone there to support and encourage you really does make all the difference in the world.

And so it is in life and in ministry. The fact is we need others, and we need each other as fellow ministry runners.

After many years of being a rather casual runner, a few years ago I ran in a real-life marathon. Notice I say running “in” a marathon, not actually running “a” marathon.

I got together with some former high school track mates, and we entered the relay portion of the Dallas Marathon. Just before the finish of my fourth leg of the race, runners hit what is called the “Dolly Parton Hills.” The name itself says it all about the topology of the land on that section of the course. Climbing those two grueling consecutive hills was definitely the “hitting the wall” moment in the race for me.

What kept me running? What helped me make it to the finish line? It was the simple realization I knew I was not running alone. Fellow runners were right there with me, plugging away, climbing those hills, never giving up, never quitting. And all along the race route, spectators were there, shouting out words of encouragement for all of us weary runners.

As I finally made it over that last hill and approached the finish line, the most encouraging sight of all was seeing friends and fellow teammates there at the end, encouraging me to finish the race.

Out of all those “hitting the wall” ministry statistics mentioned earlier, these two have to be the most troubling ones for me:

- 75 percent of all ministers do not have someone they consider [a close friend](#), and
- 75 percent don’t know [where to turn](#) when they have a family or personal conflict or issue.

Yes, to effectively run the ministry marathon, runners need to “look around” and look to, learn from and lean on their fellow runners.

Look around maritally

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25, NIV).

As ministry runners are busy “looking around” while running the race

course, they need to be sure to be looking out for the most important “running buddy” they have. The typical “job posting” for today’s minister’s wife would probably look something like this:

HELP WANTED: [Pastor’s wife](#). Must sing, play music, lead youth groups, raise seraphic children, entertain church notables, minister to other wives, have ability to recite Bible backward and choreograph Christmas pageant. Must keep pastor sated, peaceful and out of trouble. Difficult colleagues, demanding customers, erratic hours. Pay: \$0.

Consider these [statistics](#) relating to the marital part of the ministry marathon:

- 13 percent of active pastors are divorced.
- Those in ministry are equally likely to have their marriage end in divorce as general church members.
- 25 percent of pastors’ wives see their husband’s work schedule as a source of conflict.
- The clergy has the second-highest divorce rate among all professions.
- 40 percent of pastors and 47 percent of spouses are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules and/or unrealistic expectations.
- 45 percent of pastors’ wives say the greatest danger to them and their family is physical, emotional, mental and spiritual burnout.
- 52 percent of pastors say they and their spouses believe being in pastoral ministry is hazardous to their family’s well-being and health.

Eight in 10 pastors’ wives say they feel unappreciated or unaccepted by their husband’s congregation, according to surveys by the Global Pastors Wives Network. The same number wish their husbands would choose another profession.

“Wives’ issues” is the No. 1 reason ministers leave their ministries. The [divorce rate](#) among ministers and their wives is 50 percent, no better than

that of the general public.

Fellow runners, we simply cannot let ourselves become so preoccupied with seeing to the well-being of our flock that we end up neglecting the most important shepherding role we have, caring for our marriage relationship.

In the final article in this series, I will share the third and fourth “looks” and an encouraging finish.

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