

Pastors' spouses experience mixed blessings

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—Being married to a pastor means a life filled with joy, purpose and a lot of headaches, a new LifeWay Research study reveals.

Most pastors' spouses feel a call to ministry and enjoy their roles inside and outside their church, the study shows. Many also have few friends, think they yell at their kids too much and worry about money.

The LifeWay Research study about the lives of Protestant pastors' spouses reveals their complicated lives are filled with blessing and stresses, said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

"Despite their challenges, most pastors' spouses say they are happy," McConnell said.

A diverse group

The survey focused mainly on spouses of a senior pastor or solo pastor at Protestant churches from a variety of denominations, including Baptist (29 percent), non-denominational (15 percent), Methodist (9 percent), Lutheran (9 percent) and Assemblies of God (7 percent) congregations. The survey also included spouses of Presbyterian (4 percent), Pentecostal/charismatic (3 percent), Church of Christ (3 percent) and Church of God (2 percent) pastors, among others.



Most of the spouses are married to pastors who work at least 35 hours a week for the church (90 percent). Half have children at home (53 percent). Nine percent have seminary degrees. Half have spent at least 20 years as a pastor's spouse (51 percent). Eighty-six percent have responsibilities at their church, including 19 percent who are on the church's staff.

More than half work outside the spouse's church (55 percent), and of those, a quarter work for a church, ministry or other nonprofit (26 percent).

Most are women (96 percent). Most also feel a strong call to ministry (81 percent).

And in the big picture, they're satisfied with their lot in life.

Among the findings:

- 93 percent believe their spouse is a good fit for the present church.
- 90 percent think ministry has had a positive effect on their family.
- 85 percent say, "The church we serve takes good care of us."
- 83 percent enjoy their ministry work.

- 79 percent are satisfied with their role in ministry.

Still, there are many challenges. Conflict in a church and a sense of loneliness are commonplace.

Among the issues:

- 72 percent say their spouse has experienced resistance in the church.
- 69 percent say they have few people they can confide in.
- 68 percent worry about having enough money for retirement.
- 59 percent say church commitments limit family time.
- 49 percent say, “If I were honest at church about my prayer needs, they would just become gossip.”

Finances and friends



Like many Americans, pastors' spouses say money is one of their biggest worries, the LifeWay Research survey found.

About a third (36 percent) say they worry every month about making ends meet. Forty-six percent say they worry about not being able to save for the future. Sixty percent say the compensation paid by the church isn't enough

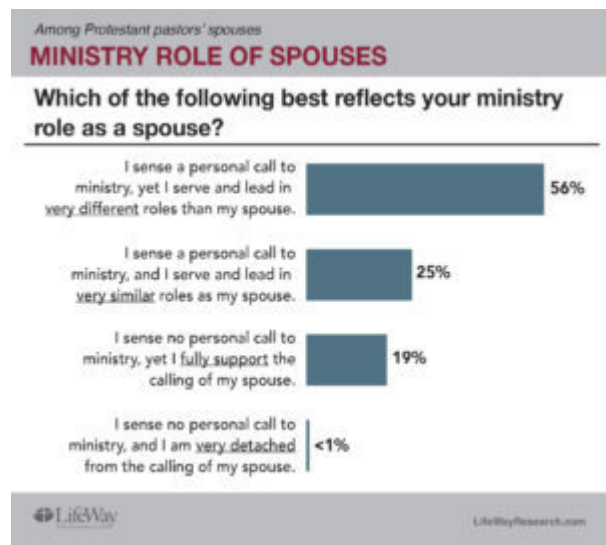
to support their family.

Many also feel isolated, with few close friends other than their spouse. Sixty-two percent, for example, say they can count on their spouse “a great deal” when they feel under stress. Fewer say they can depend a great deal on other family members in their household (14 percent), other relatives (12 percent), friends at church (10 percent), friends outside church (12 percent) or other ministers’ spouses (9 percent).

Half say they don’t confide in people at church because they’ve been betrayed in the past. About half (55 percent) also say they don’t have enough relationships where they can be themselves.

Life in a fishbowl

That’s in part because there is constant pressure to keep up appearances, according to the LifeWay Research survey. Seventy-nine percent say their congregation expects their family to be a “model family,” while 86 percent say they are expected to have a model marriage. Half (49 percent) feel they live in a fishbowl.



Often churches have unrealistic expectations for a pastor’s spouse, said Kathy Litton, a national consultant for pastors’ spouses at the Southern Baptist Convention’s North American Mission Board.

“They feel like their family needs to be perfect,” said Litton. “When congregations paint that picture for you, that’s a lot of pressure.”

Litton, who has been a pastor's spouse nearly four decades, said when she was younger, she often felt some pressure to present a good example as a family. In reality, they just needed to apply the gospel in their family, she said.

"Pastors and their spouses don't need to try to keep up appearances at church or at home," she said. "It's especially critical for our kids to see us as human frail parents who need Jesus and the gospel like anyone else. Our homes need to be places of vulnerability and reality."

Finding your calling

The LifeWay Research study provided clues for how pastors' spouses can thrive in their roles. Those who feel a strong sense of personal call to ministry tend to be more satisfied with their role. Those who have strong marriages and friends they can count on also are more likely to thrive.

By contrast, those who feel burned out by their ministry, have experienced conflict or struggle to balance church life and family are much less likely to be happy.

A sense of calling to ministry is key, Litton said. It's hard to survive as a pastor's spouse without it, she said.

"The ones who struggle are the ones who don't feel a sense of call," she said. "There's no safe place for them to talk about that."

Pastors and the spouses can also thrive by putting their own family—not the church—first, said Mark Dance, executive director of LifeWay Pastors. It's a model that other couples in the church can follow.

"Creating a culture of healthy marriages starts in the pastor's home," he said.

Janet Dance, who leads retreats for pastors' wives, said planning ahead is key.

"If you don't plan ahead, it's not going to happen," she said. "We have to give pastors' spouses permission to put their families on their calendar."

Many of the challenges pastors' spouses face aren't unusual, said McConnell. Lots of Americans worry about money or feel lonely, he said. They struggle with conflict at work and have a hard time balancing work and family responsibilities.

But few have the added pressure of being role models or spiritual examples, he said. That makes the role of a pastor's spouse unique.

Despite the complicated nature of their lives, ministry remains rewarding for many pastors' spouses.

"They feel a sense of joy and satisfaction in their work," said McConnell. "And they see that as a blessing."

Houston's First Baptist Church, the North American Mission Board and Richard Dockins, M.D., sponsored the study. The mail survey of spouses of Protestant pastors was conducted June 21 to Aug. 2. The mailing list was a random sample drawn from a list of all Protestant churches. Each interview was conducted with a spouse of someone working in a ministerial role within a Protestant church.

The completed sample is 720 pastor spouses. Analysts weighted responses by denominational group to reflect the population more accurately. The sample provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.7 percent. This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.