

**Clergy Spouses and Families
in
The United Methodist Church
2009**

**Part II: Local Church Expectations and
What Clergy Spouses Most Want the
UMC to Know**



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Clergy spouse participants were invited to answer a number of open-ended questions.¹ While not all participants answered these questions, almost 1000 people did, and common topics were raised and voiced in notably similar ways. Two questions in particular seemed to generate the most interest:

- What expectations are placed on you as a clergy spouse in the local church?
- What do you most want the United Methodist Church to know about your experience as a clergy spouse?

Although there are some common themes that appeared across the two questions, the answers were distinct enough overall to warrant discussion of each separately. We will begin with the more specific of the two regarding expectations, and then move to the more general question, which resulted in more varied responses.

LOCAL CHURCH EXPECTATIONS

Clergy spouses wrote about local church expectations in four basic groups according to the following measures:

1. excessive in quantity and/or unreasonable in nature;
2. significant – more than of normal members but not unwarranted;
3. those of a normal member; or
4. none.

There were also a few miscellaneous themes that arose, unrelated to the above measures. That is, local churches also often expect that clergy spouses:

1. act as uncompensated assistants to the pastor; and/or
2. have certain specific personality characteristics.
3. And if the spouse is male, all usual expectations are suspended.

Let us take up each of these themes, one by one, looking at the participants' most common responses, as well as some of their more memorable comments.

Excessive Expectations

Expectations were described as excessive by 305² of the respondents, making it the most commonly reported of the four measures. In most cases, clergy spouses referred to expectations as excessive in quantity, some saying simply “too many to name” or “Wow! Just about everything!” Some made reference to multiple churches, all of which expected the spouse to be present and active. Others made long lists of specific expectations, including the words “all” or “every” (often in capitals or bolded) to indicate their sense of the extreme, such as the following woman: “Sunday School teacher, music director, piano player, same Biblical knowledge as my spouse, leader in all fields, know my husband’s schedule at all times, his thoughts, all the information on the sick, etc., etc., etc.” Another said that she is expected to “be involved in EVERY program and be there

¹ See the Appendix for the exact questions asked in the full survey.

² Numbers of responses do not add up to the total number of participants who answered the open-ended questions, as several responses were coded under more than one category, especially if they described multiple churches or changes over time.

EVERY time doors are unlocked” while another said “I will be present every time the doors are open or that I will open them if needed.”

While often acknowledging the high quantity of expectations or the large amount of time they required, some respondents were more interested in the quality of the expectations, considering them unreasonable for some other reason. A number felt they were expected to participate in aspects of the church that they would not have chosen for themselves, or tasks that no one would choose to do. One respondent said, “Some expect me to be involved in a lot of things that do not work with my gifts, just because of who I am.” Another wrote, “I am expected to do all things they are not willing to do, to be the fill-in teacher, janitor, cook – whatever.”

Leadership was also a common expectation. One respondent wrote that he was expected “not only to participate in everything, but to organize and run everything.” Another kind of leadership is through role modeling, as expressed by this respondent: “There is the expectation that my family will set the example for the church. We will participate in all activities, attend all events, lead groups/Bible studies, etc.” There were quite a few who were expected to have special wisdom, saying they were “expected to be extremely knowledgeable about the Bible” or to “pray at UMW events because no one else seems to know how.” Regarding the workings of the church, one respondent claimed to be expected to “know what is happening on all committees and activities” while another noted that she has been expected to “know people and their histories/stories very quickly without being told.” One woman summarized it simply as, “I am supposed to have all the answers.”

Some felt the weight of excessive expectations because of the imposition on their secular responsibilities. Regarding work, one participant said that, “One church told me I should not work. My place was in the church helping my husband.” When one spouse cut back on her activities due to work and graduate school commitments, several members went to the SPRC to complain. In another situation, a spouse was unable to move the 90 miles with her husband to his new appointment because of her work. She said, “Therefore, we have a weekend marriage. We have been told by the church that I should quit my job and move there...but we could not make it without my salary.”

Family time and responsibilities were also noted as interfering with excessive local church expectations. One person wrote, “Sometimes church functions take place when we’re on vacation and still there is an expectation that we will be present.” There were quite a few spouses who reported having special needs children who required extraordinary care, something churches didn’t always understand. In such cases, some spouses reported that they were still expected to be present and visible at all functions. Another complaint was about the lack of childcare during church events, making it impossible for some to attend, though their absence was noted and criticized.

A common assertion was the expectation that a new spouse would do the same things and at the same level as a previous spouse, regardless of his/her own desires or needs. One woman wrote that “They have signed me up for the education committee in

both churches, because that's what the last pastor's wife did." Just as comparisons are made with previous pastors, spouses are compared as well. One woman said, "As I have gotten older, I can handle the occasional comment about how the other minister's wife did things and it doesn't bother me." In another case, a spouse tried to assert herself, saying she was not going to be like the previous pastor's wife, and was met with "a great deal of withdrawal."

Surprisingly, a few people noted their displeasure with the fact that they were expected specifically not to participate in leadership or to take a very limited role in the church, even when they wanted to do more. Others said they were "invisible" or felt unappreciated. One woman said, "It's mainly just to be there, but not to really contribute. I'm sure if I didn't show up at things, people would have something to say, but I don't feel needed or wanted in most cases."

How do clergy spouses react to such excessive demands? Some "resent the intrusion into our lives" while others accept them as traditional conventions that take time to change. One spouse said, "The congregation can bleed you dry, if you let them. They don't mean to; it's just expectations that have been handed down from one generation to the next!" In fact, a number of respondents noted that the older members tend to have the highest expectations, having grown up with clergy spouses who did not work outside the home and who were therefore available to take significant leadership in the church.

Finally, it is worth noting that many respondents recognized that expectations varied, not just member to member, but also from place to place. In particular, rural and smaller churches were noted as the ones with the highest expectations, as they simply have greater needs for more helping hands. Similarly, spouses of associate pastors claimed there were fewer expectations on them, partly related to the size of the congregation, but also due to the fact that it seems to be the spouse of the senior minister who is expected to take leadership and be more highly visible.

Probably the most passionate statement expressed many features of this category, and is worth recounting in full. What expectations are placed on you as a clergy spouse in the local church?

To be present at everything, always to smile and nod my head in agreement and never express an opinion different from the prevailing one, to have a spotless house and always be ready (with no notice) to invite in anyone from the church who wants to drop by unannounced (though it may be interrupting dinner or plans for which we are getting ready leave), to send out birthday and anniversary cards to everyone in the church, to get Christmas cards out to everyone in the church within a week of Thanksgiving, to accept broken appliances and inadequate electrical service at the parsonage because "It was good enough for the people who were here before you. You're going to be a complainer, I can tell"!

Significant Expectations

Expectations were described as significant by 185 respondents, meaning more than those imposed on normal members, but not considered overwhelming or unreasonable, as in the previous section. These respondents were more likely to embrace the high demands, and not to be surprised by them. One comment that illustrates this theme well is, “Significant participation in most activities.” Not only is the specific word “significant” present, noting that participation is greater than average, but also the word “most” indicates a separation from the previous theme of excessive, in which respondents talked about doing “everything” and participating in “all” church events.

These comments may best represent the traditional pastor’s spouse (i.e. wife) as characterized by broad participation in the life of the church and community, visible support of her husband/pastor, paired with a willingness to take up leadership in appropriate ways (usually in music, education programs and women’s ministries). Many of these respondents simply listed multiple ways they participate in their spouses’ churches. Others wrote brief but seemingly comprehensive phrases like “participation and visibility” or “be involved and be a leader ASAP.” That is, spouses do not have to take the time a regular member would to prove him/herself as a potential leader in a church. Their leadership abilities are assumed and their service is expected. This visibility extends to the larger community as well. For example, one spouse said that she attends most of the high school sporting events with her pastor husband – important events in many smaller communities where the pastor’s presence (along with his/her spouse) is often noted and appreciated.

Some of these respondents referred to participation in multiple churches, but without resentment. One spouse said that she is “expected to attend each of the four churches in our charge at least once a month.” Note that she does not attend all of them each week, but in some kind of rotation, so that she can be seen as a participant, even if in this case minimally at each one. Also, note that she refers to the charge as “ours.” The ministry is a team effort from her perspective. One simply said, “I am an extension of the pastor. I am expected to be at church and to be active.” Clearly the expectations on these spouses are significant, certainly more than on the average member (who would attend only one church in a charge, for example), but not considered a burden and something they manage with minimal effort, and/or enjoy.

Participation is often described by these respondents as involving leadership, but another common theme is that of helping more randomly, whenever and wherever needed. One respondent noted that “they want you to pitch in and help without taking over.” Another plays the piano when the regular pianist is away, while another describes her role as “filling in as needed, such as organist, choir director, teacher.”

A few of these respondents noted that they are asked to help because everyone knows they enjoy participating in the church. One man noted that like all volunteer organizations, “The more you do, the more that is expected.” Still, when spouses are busy with work and family, these churches seem to understand. Unlike the previously discussed situations in which complaints were lodged with the SPRC or spouses were overtly told they should not work outside the home, these spouses feel supported in

whatever they are able to do. One respondent wrote, “The church would like to see me at most church functions, but I am in graduate school and not always able to attend. The congregation tells me they miss me and seem to understand my other obligations.” Here, the expectations remain high, but absences are accepted and the spouse is therefore satisfied. Therefore, she doesn’t experience the expectations as excessive and meets them to the extent that she can.

There were a number of comments from this group about facilitating the work of the pastor, not as the kind of partner noted above, but more in a back stage role. One respondent said she was expected “to be devoted to the church; to be willing to move where my husband is appointed.” Another said it is her job “to make sure that all is well on the home front so my husband can be available to the church as much as possible.” A third such respondent said she is expected to serve as “occasional liaison between pastor and auxiliaries for conveyance of information and reminders about issues.” All of these are expectations well beyond those of the normal member, but accepted by the spouses.

This group also includes any who mentioned tithing or other forms of substantial financial support of the church. While normal members might officially be expected to tithe, in reality, few do, so tithing is for most members more an ideal than a realistic expectation. For that reason, those who said they were expected to tithe were coded here. One such response stated, “I am expected to support all programs and also contribute to the financial base of the church through tithing, offering, and special donations.”

These respondents also mentioned aspects of family life that might be considered “significant,” specifically their children’s participation as fulfilling expectations and an acknowledgement of parsonage living as an agreeable arrangement. One respondent said, “Our children were great in taking part in activities of each church while they were home,” implying that such participation was expected. Regarding parsonages, these participants said that at minimum, they were expected to live in the parsonage, and others noted that they were expected to maintain it for those who would follow.

I sum, these spouses see the local church’s expectations as significant, and they often noted them quite specifically, but they tend to embrace them and sometimes even see their role as a kind of assistant to the pastor. Perhaps the quintessential quote that best represents these respondents is, “To be active and visible, which for me comes easy. I have not felt undue pressure.”

Normal Member Expectations

There were 251 respondents who claimed to be expected to do that which any normal member would be expected to do. Quite often, they referred specifically to “normal members” and other times they used similar words (“No more than any other parishioner” or “The same that are placed on any Christian”), and in other cases, they simply stated the expectations such that they sounded like the words of a normal member. In this section, normal membership was coded as including things like occasional and

regular church attendance, taking part in one or two church programs, and participation “in only those things God has called me to.”

The membership vow of United Methodists commits members to “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness” (UMC, 2008), and those exact words were cited by one clergy spouse. More often though, some combination of attendance and participation were named. In fact, basic attendance seems to be the accepted minimum among those who have no any expectations at all. One respondent wrote, “To attend church (duh!),” as if attendance is really not optional. At the other end of the spectrum would be highly active members. In that regard, one clergy spouse said, “I have not felt any expectations placed on me. However, I am an active participant; if I wasn’t active, I’m not sure how the church would respond.” And in fact, most of these respondents appeared to be fairly active, with mere attendance being rare, attendance and participation more common, and often a short litany of activities, while emphasizing that they do only what they feel called to do, acting as any other church member.

Although there were a high number of respondents in this group, many are clear that setting and/or maintaining expectations at that of a normal member takes some effort and support of the pastor/spouse. For example, one respondent noted that in her husband’s introduction to the SPRC, he has always told them that she is “not to be expected to do any more than any other member of the church who is living out their baptism.” Another similar comment was that “My husband has made it clear at the beginning of each appointment that I’m not the one being hired and that I will be involved in what I think God is calling me to be involved in and not to place unrealistic expectations on me.” Another described her limits this way: “I try to be a participating member of the congregation, not an assistant pastor.” All of these comments point to the fact that expectations are often for greater involvement than that of a normal member, but spouses try to get churches to be more “realistic.” Oddly, two respondents said that their spouses’ churches find it acceptable for them to miss church when they are “sick and unable to attend.” Are there places where this is not acceptable?

A number of the spouses in this category noted that they are balancing job and family commitments with their life as a clergy spouse, and that they appreciate that the churches seem to understand, and treat them as normal members. One respondent said, “Many of the women’s functions (UMW) are planned during the week and since I work full time, I am not able to attend. Our congregation understands this.” As above, this spouse refers to the congregation as “ours,” but the thrust of the statement is about limited participation and understanding on the part of the parishioners. Another said, “I do not participate in any committees due to my commitments as a full time student and parent; the parishioners seem to understand this and accept me for who I am and what I am able to do, which is lead the youth group.” Again, although emphasizing limited involvement in her husband’s church, she is clearly a highly active “normal” member.

In sum, the expectations of a normal member are somewhat common, though must be specified by some spouses, and what clergy spouses consider a normal member is usually quite active, even if within the range of normal, yet still less than the long lists

of “significant” expectations. Most of these respondents said something like the following: “To be present in worship and active in some way in the life of the church” or “To be there. I am pretty active, so I don’t hear of any unmet expectations.” Indeed, there was only one respondent who said that she did not fulfill the minimum expectation, saying, “Attendance, though I do not attend.” She attends another church where their daughter had previously become involved in the music program and didn’t want to leave when her father underwent an appointment change. Hence, she does attend church, but elsewhere.

Few or No Expectations

Just over a hundred (112) clergy spouses said there were few or no expectations placed on them by the local church, but responses varied widely. That is, “none” did not mean literally “none” in many cases. Many explained themselves further, showing that most spouses who reported no expectations are still very involved in their churches as normal members or more, and that a number have specific reasons for this designation of “none.”

Quite a few respondents said they don’t know if there are expectations, that they don’t listen to them, or that they don’t care about them. In these cases, there are likely to be expectations present, but the spouses effectively ignore them and pursue their own paths. Others actively refuse to accept expectations, saying, “None, I made it clear they were not hiring me,” or “I ‘train’ my wife’s churches to expect very little from me and they are very pleased when I am involved.”

Some respondents noted unique circumstances which led to the absence of expectations. One such respondent implied that she had sensed expectations in her husband’s previous appointments and that having no expectations at the current church was an “absolute first!” Another noted that the current church “doesn’t like us and therefore no expectations are placed upon me.” As noted in previous sections, expectations are fewer in larger churches and for spouses of assistant pastors, which was reported by these spouses as well. One respondent noted that they live an hour away from the church, “so very little is expected of me.” Another said she is Roman Catholic and therefore makes “sure boundaries are set right away.” A few people said that their demanding jobs or small children keep church expectations to a minimum, though more spouses in the “excessive” group complained about just the opposite: churches that were more likely not to take work and family concerns into account when setting expectations.

While many of these respondents wrote simply “none,” others communicated a bit more, leading a reader to wonder if indeed there are no expectations, or if spouses deal with them in such a way as to make them inconsequential. In either case though, the result is the same: it’s as if there were none. It is also notable that many of the spouses in this group are male, and that many churches were confused as to what to expect from the husband of a clergywoman, a special situation to which we now turn.

Gendered Expectations

Forty eight responses about expectations addressed the issue of gender, and almost half of them (23) were men reporting few or no expectations because local churches “were not sure what to make of a male spouse,” allowing them to define their roles as they liked. One male spouse noted that because he is expected to do nothing, his clergy wife works a kind of second shift (Hochschild 1989), serving as clergyperson and as spouse. That is, “There are more expectations placed onto my wife, the clergy. Hostessing, open houses, making items for bazaars, cooking special pot lucks, providing bake sale items, and others, fall upon her and not me, so her work load increases.”

A few men also mentioned awkward situations: one who is always introduced as a “male ‘pastor’s wife’” and another who has been introduced as the pastor, even though only his wife is clergy, reacting with, “It’s weird, but we just moved here and are trying to allow them time to adjust.” Yet another wrote, “I’m expected to live up to the same expectations that they place upon my wife. I even have been expected to be a ‘stand in’ for those congregants who are not comfortable with a female pastor.” More painful than awkward, one woman spouse mentioned that her husband’s church expects them to have children, but they are unable to. Thus, they have to deal not only with their own disappointment, but with that of the congregation as well.

Another common expectation was to do things appropriate to one’s gender. For women, this meant not working outside the home, keeping a clean parsonage, raising well behaved children, as well as the instruction to “stay out of the pulpit and get back in the kitchen where I belonged.” Women also reported being expected to participate or lead women’s ministries, while the same was not reported by men. For men, gendered tasks included lawn care, snow removal, building maintenance and being the “Tech Guy” for worship.

Although both men and women were found in the all of the groups (excessive, significant, normal member, and none), it was only in the “none” cohort that gender was mentioned as the reason for the level of expectations. One representative respondent stated, “Being husband of a UM clergy woman is the best job in the church. The people want to love you and don’t have expectations about roles you should fill.” This sounds like a version of the phenomenon of the “glass escalator.” Unlike women who confront a glass ceiling when working in traditionally male jobs, when men enter typically female professions (nursing, teaching, social work, etc.), they tend to be greeted warmly by female co-workers and quickly promoted to higher levels of management, thought more appropriate for their gender, regardless of their education or experience in the job (Williams 1992). In this case, male spouses of female clergy are entering a female dominated role, which comes with preferential treatment.

Personality Characteristics

There were 83 references to personality-related characteristics – being, looking, or acting in certain ways. The two most common expectations were to be happy and also silent. Although the two didn’t always appear together, they did for some, such as this

respondent who wrote, “That I smile sweetly and sit on my hands” or another who said she is expected, “to smile and not say anything when your spouse is slain and criticized by members.” Being cheerful and smiling were common themes, too many to recount them all, but all fairly similar in tone. Being silent took a few different forms, including keeping one’s opinions to oneself, not to be bossy, not complaining, and this simple comment: “Shut up, shut up, shut up.” In fact, that was the entirety of that spouse’s answer to the question about expectations.

Second most common were the expectations to be friendly, especially to “always be nice even when church members are not,” and various expectations about appearance. In regard to the latter, spouses said they were expected to dress in certain ways (“well, but not too well”), specifically told not dress in other ways, actually to “look perfect at all times,” or in one case, not to be fat. In fact, a number of respondents said that they and/or their children were expected to be perfect. There were also comments about being “an upstanding Christian” or having “heightened spirituality.”

Regarding all of these personality traits, some spouses thought these were reasonable expectations (“I’m expected to be kind and spiritual, which I do not consider unrealistic expectations for any Christian.”), but most seemed to be offended by the mostly negative judgments. There isn’t one single representative comment for this group, but one respondent shared the following about the transition to being a clergy spouse:

Behavior conformity...Once the “Rev.” was put in front of my spouse’s name, the way we were treated and the expectations placed upon me as the spouse changed. I resent that because I am the same person I was before (as is my spouse), but the change from others was tangible and sometimes hurt. My personality does not gel with that and so I bristle at times.

Spouse’s Supporter and Partner

A number (112) of these clergy spouses reported that the people of the local churches expect them to at minimum, be supportive of their clergy partners, and at most, be a full partner in ministry with him/her. One said, “To be involved 100%, to act as an associate pastor.” A few wrote about supportive work done in the background or mainly at home, so as to facilitate the pastor’s work, as for this respondent who said, “Very little other than supporting my wife so she can keep the crazy hours, unpredictable schedule, weekend work, etc.” The majority though, consider their work as a more active partner. Without referring to the specific title of associate pastor, one respondent pretty much described that very job, saying, “I am expected to be at every church event. I am expected to be on all hospital and visitation calls with my spouse. I am expected to know the answers to all questions. I am expected to be a spiritual leader.”

Some spouses were happy about the role as a partnership, but most who voiced their feelings were not. One spouse described her contentment as follows: “They see me as a true partner with my husband and expect that I can do anything and are easy to request counseling as well as help in the kitchen and everything in between. They feel

very honored and I feel very privileged.” Another said, “My husband and I work together and we like it that way. We firmly believe that our church has grown because of that.” One unique contribution was described this way: “Although this is not an expectation of the church, I’m the ghost writer for my husband’s sermons. I enjoy it and he doesn’t – although he presents them well on Sunday mornings.” More often though, spouses reported resentment, some at being unpaid, but otherwise, simply feeling unappreciated. Respondents wrote about being considered “2 for the price of 1” or “just part of the package.” Another wrote, “Most church people think they have hired the entire family.”

More on the phenomenon of clergy spouse as half of a “two-person single career” (Papanek 1973) will be discussed in the next section where the clergy spouses highlighted what they most want the UMC to know about their experiences, but noting the churches’ expectations around a kind of partnership warrants mention here as well. Without any judgment about whether or not such expectations are desirable, the following comment is reasonably representative of those in this category: “Be a partner to the pastor. We are considered a team and share many responsibilities. The churches believe they got two leaders for the price of one.”

WHAT YOU MOST WANT THE UMC TO KNOW

Clergy spouses’ comments about what they most want the UMC to know fell into four basic categories: positive, mixed, negative, and other. Regarding the positive comments, the main theme was that respondents loved their situations and wouldn’t change a thing. The mixed comments were about the partnership aspect of the role, which is judged by some to be great, and others to be unrealistic or outdated. Another mixed set of comments were related to the fact that the “job” is demanding, again considered by some to be a welcome challenge, and by others, seen as an aspect that is unappreciated and therefore disappointing. The negative comments were focused on one of three larger themes: 1. loneliness, 2. bad treatment in the local church or from the hierarchy, directed at the clergy spouse respondent or their clergy partners, and 3. aspects of UM ministry, specifically moving and appointment making, parsonage living, the heavy time commitment, and low pay. Finally, a number of comments did not fit into those three categories, and will be discussed as “other.” Although there is no single overarching theme linking the comments in this last group, gender arose as one fairly common concern, along with a number of other somewhat unique concerns that merit mention, even if just briefly.

Positive Comments

The satisfaction and unabashed joy that 256 spouses expressed in this section was palpable, even in a written survey. There is little to say in explanation of their comments because their message is simple and clear: they are thrilled to be married to clergy, feel blessed, some mention their own call, and a few even put a positive spin on the more difficult aspects of the role, such as itinerancy. In their own words, the following represent some of their most positive sentiments:

I consider it an honor to serve God in this capacity, one I never dared hope to have. I am thrilled to be the spouse of a clergy person. I feel like I've landed in a pot of jam.

I am very fortunate to have shared the last 54 years with my favorite pastor. We have been supported in the local church and have always felt loved.

I have had a great experience as a clergy spouse. My husband is ordained, I am a lay person, but our calling to ministry came as a mutual experience.

I have been called to be a clergy spouse. I think it is essential that all spouses are called. I feel truly blessed to be a clergy spouse!

I love being a pastor's wife. It was my childhood dream come true and a prayer answered by God. I love working side by side with my husband... This is the best, happiest and most rewarding life a girl could ever have! This is my calling.

It has been a good life. We didn't get rich, but we lived richly.

That my life is as rich as it gets for someone whose passions are the UMC, Africa, community-based health care, and writing. I have a loving spouse also dedicated to mission service... I give God thanks everyday for the abundance that has been given to me as I serve so many who have so little materially and yet offer me so much of themselves.

I appreciate my wife's call and the life we have because of it. I appreciate the opportunity to support my wife and her work physically, emotionally, and financially.

I am privileged to share in my wife's call to ministry. Her call has been a blessing to me and has occasioned growth in my own faith and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am grateful for the opportunity. Living through the appointment system can be a little intense, but just another reminder that God is in control of our futures.

I get tired of hearing other spouses complain so much about "expectations" and my husband's job. I love being a clergy spouse and feel called to do God's work.

Mixed Comments

The uncompensated but highly demanding position in which a wife serves as a kind of professional assistant to her husband was first conceptualized as part of a "two-person

single career” by Papanek (1973). This model may have been more prevalent in the past, but it remains common in some careers today, most visibly among heads of state and other high level politicians, military officers, and Protestant clergy. In virtually all of the literature, the model has been gendered, focusing on male employees and their wives. The few times male spouses are mentioned, it is simply to note that they are different, and therefore not expected to participate in their wives careers as unpaid assistants in the same way. Taylor and Hartley (1975) wrote specifically about it’s applicability to ministry, citing pertinent characteristics of the model in regard to clergy and their spouses, such as the male-dominated nature of the job, and that the spouses’ contributions are not formally acknowledged, but are widely expected, such that one’s failure to participate as such may jeopardize the pastor’s career. Over its relatively short history, the Protestant ministry has been a “two-person single career,” and based on these clergy spouses’ comments, that is still the case. Some embrace it, as in the comments cited above, calling their ministry a “team effort,” while others reject it, but the model persists. Here are a few comments from those who hope the model is changing:

I am not for free. I have my own job and responsibilities. They did not hire me – they only get what I have time for and am willing to give. They already have my husband.

I did not receive a call – my spouse received the call. I support my spouse but I should not be expected to be a second pastor and I will not be a second pastor...Sometimes even the conference appears to think that clergy spouses received a call – they need to get out of the 1950s. Churches need to be told – you get one pastor, who just happens to have a spouse.

Why should the spouse be expected to be very involved? I am not the assistant pastor. I work full-time, and at our current church, do not find most of the women’s groups of interest...I am not willing to go to meetings just because I’m the pastor’s wife.

Nine respondents specifically noted that they attended church elsewhere, or would like to. One woman said, “I have considered attending a different church in the community but am afraid of the repercussions for my husband.” Perhaps this is the most obvious way to avoid the two-person career role, but that is not the only motivation. One said she needed to detach from her husband’s church to protect herself, trying to avoid being hurt when there are conflicts in the church. Another said it was a defense against bonding with people and then being forced to move away and disconnect. That way, if a future appointment was fairly close by, she might be able to keep her church, even if her husband had to change his. At least one was a member of another denomination, and one simply said, “Not all clergy spouses are believers.”

Clearly there are large differences of opinion about the expectation that the ministry is a two-person single career. Some seek it, others accept it, and some avoid it, while others strongly reject it. That it was overtly referred to by 100 clergy spouses as the one main thing they wanted the UMC to know means that it is still present in the churches, and in some places, even at the conference level, but there were also plenty of comments that indicated that things are changing. In particular, those who found it problematic often also referred to work outside the home or other obligations, making such a role impossible. Removing retirees from the analysis, 86% of these spouses work outside the home (both part and full

time), whereas the number of dual worker married couples in the United States is only 53% (U.S. Census 2007), which means that clergy and their spouses are more likely to be juggling two jobs than other Americans. In other words, it is a wonder that the ministry as two person single career remains as an ideal at all. Social change is slow though, and we may now be seeing just the tip of the iceberg. While some clergy spouses are likely to continue to enjoy the more demanding role of partner in ministry, that model is also likely to become increasingly uncommon, and therefore less and less expected by church members.

Some clergy spouses made comments about other ways the United Methodist Church seems outdated to them, and in need of renewal. Very often, these comments were linked to itinerancy, saying that they found it difficult to find new jobs every time their spouse gets moved. Others complained about gender issues, like the lack of inclusive language or an inability to deal with male spouses, or a mix of the two. One spouse said:

The number of male clergy spouses in the UMC increases every year but still we are ignored. Many long-time participants in clergy spouse organizations still use language like “ladies” or “wives” and hold teas. At events I have attended in the past, I have had older women ignore me or even tell me I am in the wrong place. Times are a-changing. It’s time we were made to feel welcome.

Another issue related to gender and changing times was raised by this man, married to a clergywoman:

Being the husband of clergy is probably more difficult than being the wife. In almost all cases, the husband is supporting the family with his income when compared to the clergy, but the church expects me to drop everything when my wife has to visit a sick person or attend a meeting. Gone are the days where the spouse is female, plays the organ, teaches Sunday School, and heads up the UMW. The church needs to react to the different times.

A few mentioned the lack of family time as another outdated concept, noting that one day off a week is inadequate today, and in particular, that fathers now want to be more engaged with their children, necessitating new models for being pastors that allow for more active parenting.

Finally, there were mixed comments about the fact that the role of clergy spouse is demanding, and while some enjoyed this challenge, others felt they were doing a lot, but that it went unnoticed and/or unappreciated. From the rest of their comments, many of these respondents sounded like they were dutifully fulfilling the traditional two-person single career role, but perhaps in places where this was no longer expected, so therefore it wasn’t appreciated. A less specific “type” of clergy spouse shared this more general comment that would apply to most in this group: “Though often treated as invisible, we are not. The sacrifices we and our children have made are real and have made the UMC’s appointment system possible. Appreciating, not ignoring, is in order. Thank you for offering this opportunity to share my concerns. It’s the first time anyone has ever asked.”

Negative Comments

About half of those who answered the question about what they most wanted the UMC to know focused on or mentioned something negative. As noted above, these can be divided into three categories: 1. loneliness, 2. bad treatment of themselves and/or their spouses, 3. issues related to UM ministry, specifically itinerancy, parsonage problems, heavy time demands on clergy, and financial struggles due to low clergy salaries.

Loneliness was the single most common complaint, often voiced by spouses who were otherwise happy. Others were severely lonely, and are looking forward to their spouse's retirement or are considering a divorce. The loneliness was related to a number of circumstances. First, many respondents felt they had few close friends, either because they themselves kept church members at arm's length, or the church members felt awkward as a friend of the pastor's spouse. Some referred to the challenge of forging deep friendships in small, rural communities, in which everyone has lived since birth, and they know you are just passing through. Moving, in fact, was a large reason for loneliness. Some respondents said that they are lonely after leaving friends behind, while other say they intentionally limit friendships because they assume they will be moving eventually. Others noted that they have been moved away from family members who they miss seeing on a regular basis, and a few mentioned that they are now living separately from their spouses because of appointment changes that are too far from the clergy spouse's job or avoiding the disruption of moving children while in high school or too frequently. One spouse said that although married, she actually felt like a single person, "alone and forgotten"

Another problem was that a number of spouses wished to have a pastor, as they couldn't accept their spouse in that role. Along with that, they felt limited in their ability to pursue their own spiritual growth because of the demands of the churches. One woman recounted how much she missed going to Sunday School, no longer possible in her husband's two-point charge, where she is expected to attend both services of worship. This lack of pastoral connection and spiritual growth makes for a solitary kind of religious life, even while in the midst of a congregation. Along with missing a pastor, others felt they would like to go to a counselor to have someone to talk with about their personal problems, but that if found out, the spouse and/or his/her clergy partner would be stigmatized, so counseling services are avoided.

Another commonly mentioned reason for loneliness was the ubiquitous absence of the clergy partner. Spouses wrote about frequent nights and holidays spent alone, sometimes due to incessant meetings, but other times due to parishioner emergencies that arise. One woman said, "I never ask my husband to choose between his family and the church, because I know that the church would always win." Another said, "You are expected to even give up your precious vacation time to everyone...It is all about the parishioners. I would never do this if I had the chance to do it over." Another particularly powerful respondent said, "How lonely it is being the mistress to the pastor who has the church for his wife.

While one respondent reported that she was abused by her husband and felt she had no place to turn, this was the exception. Most spouses reported excellent relationships with their clergy partners, and a desire to be supportive and make sacrifices as needed, but also knew well the loneliness that comes from feeling like a second-class citizen in one's spouse's life, while also feeling disconnected from family and friends, and unable to seek out professional help. While some spouses called for clergy spouse support groups or retreats at which they could talk to others who uniquely understand their situation, others did not want

such services. Some said they were employed full-time and therefore have little free time, while others said that when they have attended such events in the past, they felt they were narrowly focused on the traditional stay-at-home clergy wife, and provided little support for working spouses, male spouses, and the like. It is impossible to create a one-size-fits-all kind of support program for clergy spouses, but that support is widely desired is indisputable.

Respondents reported receiving **bad treatment**, primarily from parishioners, but occasionally from the church hierarchy as well. They also described the pain they feel when bad treatment is directed at their clergy partners, especially because they feel there is so little they can do in response. Not all respondents provided much detail about this kind of treatment, saying they were “treated as dirt by our conference” or “bishops were uncaring and had only their own interest at the center of their actions.” This particularly terse statement summarized more than a few others: “The UMC does not give a damn about its pastors, nor does it care about their health or spiritual needs.”

Regarding bad treatment directed at the responding spouse, many were related to the fact that they felt ignored in discussions about moves or complaints about badly maintained parsonages, and so on. These topics will be taken up later when talking about issues related to ministry. There were others though, connected to being a clergy spouse and relating to people in the churches, calling them “small minded,” “cold hearted, selfish and mean spirited,” and “nasty, negative, power-hungry sad individuals.” More specifically, one spouse said, “Some folks in the church are truly cruel...One member in a previous church would say things like, ‘Oh, the garden was so much nicer when Harriet was here!’” Another said, “My experience as a clergy spouse has turned me against the church and church members. Once we can retire, I hope to NEVER be involved with dysfunctional or any churches or annual conferences ever again. I believe if Jesus Christ came here himself, that churches would drive him and his ideas away.”

About the same number (49 reported bad treatment of self and 46 reported bad treatment of their clergy partner) of respondents raised the issue of harm to their clergy partner, which hurt them by association. One woman said, “Even though I don’t feel expectations placed upon me, I am keenly aware of all the expectations placed upon my clergy husband. Sometimes I have to ‘step in front’ of the church.” Another wrote, “I worry about my husband and his health when it comes to the day to day activities and disruptiveness of a family church. That kind of church can tear a person down and make them question their faith.” One longer comment well expresses the emotional angst that can be caused by parishioner:

I have been hurt many times by members of my church family. You begin to feel like you can’t really trust or let your guard down to anyone in the church. It is very hard to hear negative comments from church members about my spouse when I know that he is working so hard and doing the best that he can. The gossip can be brutal. Sometimes during worship I realize that instead of focusing on the message and feeling connected to God, I am consumed with worry about what others are thinking of my husband as he preaches. I find that I am bracing myself and praying that each statement he says will not offend or make someone angry. I feel like we are walking on eggshells all of the time.

Aspects of the ministry, some of them particular to the United Methodist Church and other similarly structured denominations, such as itinerancy and parsonage life, were named by many respondents. Often these concerns were linked, as distress over an unwanted move may have been exacerbated by a filthy parsonage or a drop in salary, but each was voiced in such detail that they warrant discussion as separate concerns. **Itinerancy** was the most problematic, mentioned by 143 respondents. Most felt that their concerns and especially their jobs were not considered important to the church, and therefore were ignored in appointment making decisions. One said, “Our careers aren’t even considered, although I make twice what my husband does...we are expected to shut up and pack up, interesting in this era.” Using a more positive spin, another spouse wrote, “To the extent that I was allowed to follow my own profession and have it considered when my spouse was considered for an appointment change, I received the greatest fulfillment.” Interestingly, both male and female spouses felt that their careers were not valued as much as spouses of the other sex.

Some mentioned lack of concern for their children as well. Focusing on the frequency and timing of moves, one respondent wrote, “I have not always felt that the needs of spouses and families are considered. Three out of four of my children were moved in the middle of their first grade year. Two of my children were moved twice in their high school years, which led to both of them dropping out of school.” Another parent pointed to the nature of the church to which her husband was appointed, saying there was no youth group as it was an older congregation, so it was hard for her high school aged children to get involved. More than a few recounted stories of moving to areas with poor school systems, or where the grade-level standards were much different than a previous school, making academic placement difficult.

One spouse suggested that like promotions in other occupations, pastoral moves should be offered, but clergy should be allowed to pass if they feel their family would be served better by staying where they are. Describing the unique reality for clergy families, another spouse said, “The lack of control over my own life is crippling. I don’t get to choose where I live (the town or the house) or where I worship. Church is utterly meaningless to me now and I dread going each week. I love my husband, but I wish I’d known how much I would hate the clergy lifestyle.”

Forty six respondents spoke about problems they had had living in **parsonages**, and in fact, only two people said they thought parsonages were preferable to housing allowances or salaries adequate to owning and furnishing one’s own home. A few comments focused on the placement of parsonages (on busy streets where young children couldn’t go out to play or in dangerous neighborhoods or immediately adjacent to the church, offering little privacy), and others referred to the sense of not having a place to call their own. One spouse told of church members regularly letting themselves into the parsonage and coming and going as they please, considering the house theirs. Another told of her child who, while helping to pack for a move, had to keep asking what was theirs and what stayed with the parsonage. Some respondents commented on the lack of ability to build equity in a home and prepare for retirement, or having to wait so late in life to establish residential roots, but most comments were directed at the poor condition of parsonages and if furnished, the miserable quality of the furniture, some of it donated, or redirected while “on its way to the dump.” Perhaps the worst conditions were described in this way: “We have lived in parsonages with mold. We’ve lived in parsonages with horse manure in the ‘garage.’ We’ve had sewage back up into the bathtub. We’ve lived in parsonages that I wouldn’t put my enemy in, much less my kids. Our

kids want nothing to do with the church because of their experiences.” But even if everyone’s experience was not as bad as that, there was clearly a great deal of discontent with parsonage living.

The burden on spouses related to the heavy **time demands** on clergy was noted by 59 respondents. Some focused on the seemingly incessant demands of parishioners, while others complained about the excessive amount of time spent in meetings. One spouse simply wrote, “The people are friendly but their meetings are way too long.” Regarding the need for personal and family time, the single day off each week was protested, as were constant evenings and weekends at church. One spouse’s church told them that they could take vacation, but it had to start after church on Sunday, and they had to be back for church the following week. Many spouses admitted that their clergy spouses are workaholics, but they felt the church encourages this rather than helping clergy to set healthy boundaries. One respondent said that change needs to come from the top, pointing out that “Bishops and D.S.es who are overworked are not good examples.”

Often linked to unwanted moves and excessive time demands was inadequate compensation. Sixty six respondents mentioned **financial struggles** as one of their main concerns. The high expenses of seminary and mandatory ordination retreats at the beginning of ministry were noted, as were costs in the middle and the end of a career, noting fears around sending children to college, affording long term health care, and eventually buying a home and retiring. In cases where spouses had well paying jobs, financial stress was less, but when asked to move and leave that job, spouses were more than a little concerned. Some reported that they left and suffered financially, while others remained in the previous town, struggling with commuter marriages and the challenges of what became like single parenthood. Quite a few noted that living on one salary, especially that of a pastor, was impossible and something that the denomination should acknowledge and consider when requiring moves. One of the more difficult situations, linking a number of these problematic factors, was described by this respondent:

It has been a killer... We are expected to live in substandard housing on substandard pay and like it. Having to move at the beck and call of the conference has virtually destroyed my career; after our children are grown, I expect to leave my husband to be able to find some satisfaction before I die instead of living like we’re expected to in the name of “sacrifice” and “service.”

Other Comments

In naming what spouses most wanted the UMC to know about their experiences, issues related to being a male spouse were mentioned 54 times, which some notably common themes. As mentioned earlier, most said there were few if any expectations on them, as many of the traditional expectations of a clergy spouse are gendered feminine and therefore not considered appropriate for these men. Specifically, few were expected to cook for events, lead UMW, sing in the choir, or work with the children’s program. While a few said they tried to help in things like cooking when asked, they were rarely asked, and were far more likely to do work associated with males, like building maintenance and lawn care. Some wanted programs and other kinds of support for their invisible role, while others enjoyed the freedom to construct their role uniquely and as they desire. One respondent said, “As a male

spouse of a female UMC minister with my own 26-year career outside the church, I don't really have any needs or expectations of support." This is truly a new group in the Protestant denominations that ordain women – one that is likely to change the role of clergy spouse for everyone, men and women alike. For now, they live with ambiguous or no expectations and they surprise people, whatever they do. Women spouses with full time jobs outside the church are still often expected to be full participants in their husband's churches, but these male spouses are not, and as in the case mentioned earlier, it is the clergywoman who is expected to fill both roles, of clergy and spouse, preaching and cooking, counseling and cleaning – a form of "the second shift" (Hochschild 1989), in which women work both outside the home for money and inside the home for the family. Men, more typically, work only one shift, while helping at home, but not primarily responsible for what happens there.

All of the other responses were quite varied, and often only noted by one respondent, but there were a few small patterns. There were a number of clergy spouses who are also clergy themselves, who thought the questionnaire was ineffective in assessing their experiences, and it appears that they were correct. In fact, because they themselves are clergy, we assumed they would not have the same experiences of non-clergy clergy spouses, and constructed the survey accordingly. We were wrong though, as some reported serving their own churches while also being expected to fill the role of clergy spouse at their partner's church. This phenomenon seemed common enough that it probably warrants further investigation.

There were also a few people who seemed angry to be surveyed at all, saying things like, "What will you do with the information...very little I suspect," or "Nothing. This questionnaire is a stupid waste of time," or even "The UM Church has ruined my life. Not that any of you care. I hope you are happy." These were few and far between though, and far more respondents thanked the Commission on the Status and Role of Women for asking about their experiences, such as this: "THANKS FOR ASKING! This is the first time that I have felt that I really mattered with the UMC as a spouse. Bless you!"

Finally, a few stood alone or with just a few others respondents with them, but they probably represent more than just themselves. Some of the more interesting comments were:

We are all different.

Being clergy is not easy and being in a same-sex partnership makes that even harder. The one place that should be a sanctuary (home, family, partnership) is fraught with potential loss of call, ministry, safety, home, finances.

I expect the best way to care for clergy spouses is to treat the appointed clergyperson with care and respect.

Clergy spouses must have some role in their church beyond simply sitting in the pew on Sunday.

Every spouse of every person, regardless of vocation, has pressures and concerns. I believe singling out clergy spouses as some defined group with unique needs is wrong.

I wish I had the trust needed to answer this question truthfully.

It is much better than being the spouse of an incarcerated felon.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps the first quote in the previous section best summarizes the sentiments of the spouses of United Methodist Clergy – they are all different. Some are very happy playing the traditional role of helper/assistant to the pastor, while others resist that role and work hard to create new models. Others are happy because they feel free to be themselves, and feel no confinement from expectations. Many work outside the home, and see their role as clergy spouse as truly secondary, while others try to strike a balance between what they see as two important roles – work and church, and often also family. Older spouses and church members tend to be more traditional, as do those outside of the south, but the most nontraditional spouses are often male. Churches aren't always sure what to do with a male spouse, so these men are carving their own niches, also unique to each one. As with women, some see themselves as partners with their wives, and others are busy at work, and do not see the role of pastor's spouse as central at all. There is no single clergy spouse model, as there may have once been, and there is no one kind of person fulfilling those many roles.

While many spouses are happy with their lives in the church, there were a number of common concerns, often voiced with great pain and passion. Expectations of church members can feel oppressive, as can what seems like uncaring dictates from the denominational hierarchy. The greatest concern, even among those who are otherwise happy, is around the loneliness they feel. They have trouble making and keeping friends for a variety of reasons, and their spouses are busy to the point of complete absence in some cases. There are numerous challenges around moving, parsonages, and compensation, which are likely to pose continuing problems to an increasingly challenging itinerant system. Itinerancy may have never been easy, but when the spouse is working a job that is fulfilling and economically necessary, moving can be impossible, and family separations (short and long term) are often the result.

The Commission on the Status and Role of Women took up this study of clergy spouses with two major goals in mind: to assess and understand the lives and concerns of UM clergy spouses, and also to discern how the Church might better respond to their concerns and support them. The full report explains the first, so let us now turn to the second concern – how can the United Methodist Church support the spouses of the clergy? The following suggestions, in no particular order, are taken directly from the respondents. While some ideas may be more do-able than others, surely all should be considered.

1. Make clergy relocations, not as demands, but as offers, which can be rejected, even if only once or twice. In that way, clergy and their families would feel a bit more in control of their lives. This occasional veto rule could be very empowering.
2. Be intentional about discussing spousal careers and children's needs when considering moves. Although this may happen in most situations, many spouses are not aware of it.
3. Create a system for excellent care of parsonages, and look toward the elimination of the parsonage system overall. While parsonages may be less

expensive for the church, especially in areas where home prices are high, and they make it easier for clergy to relocate quickly and often (something these spouses do not want), they also make for a sense of “homelessness” for clergy families. Helping clergy rent or buy homes would go a long way toward countering the feeling of never being “at home.”

4. Institute a denomination-wide schedule whereby clergy would be expected, or even required, to take two days off each week, and take their full vacations. In general, better attention to the maintenance of clergy’s personal time will positively impact their spouses and families.
5. Better conflict resolution skills should be taught to and readily used by clergy and cabinet leaders, such that local church conflicts are controlled quickly and effectively, before people are harmed. Clergy spouses report pain at watching church members treat their partners badly, and they feel powerless to respond. Such conflicts are all too common and many could be managed more successfully. While much of this is dependent on the competence of the clergyperson him/herself, resources from the denomination and support from cabinets could be helpful as well.
6. At introductory meetings between churches and clergy, all parties should discuss their expectations regarding the pastor’s family, with the primary purpose of letting the clergy spouse name his/her desires regarding attendance, leadership, role expectations, and so on. It should also be overtly stated that spouses and children are allowed, or even encouraged to attend other churches, or none at all. In general, the spouse and children must be empowered to set their own boundaries, as they should not be considered unpaid employees of the church. Although many enjoy serving in an employee-like capacity, many do not, so each person must be allowed to communicate his/her desires in that regard, and any precedents set by previous spouses must be discarded with each new appointment.
7. Conference or district-wide events or meetings for clergy spouses should be offered, knowing that all spouses will not be interested. Such events must be intentional in focusing broadly, beyond the traditional “stay-at-home, clergy wife/assistant to the pastor” model. They must also be offered at various times and places, taking into account the busy work and family lives of most spouses. For example, weekend retreats might appeal to some, but many more would be able to attend a dinner with a short program, focused on conversation between spouses to address the widespread issue of isolation and loneliness.
8. Compensation for clergy must be improved as much as possible, especially to reflect the level of education required and the time commitment given. This is a professional position, and should be compensated as such. No clergy family should qualify for food stamps or other poverty-related benefits. This may require the painful closing of struggling churches or the consolidation of small congregations, or other larger-scale organizational shifts, but the embarrassingly low salaries for some clergy contributes to a significant morale problem for many spouses. Spouses, even the least involved among them, want to feel that their clergy partners are appreciated by the church.
9. Spouses themselves should also work toward the elimination of universal expectations, as individuals and as a group, to the extent that they are

There is little anyone can suggest that will meet the needs of all spouses, but if the central focus of all efforts is on treating clergy spouses as unique persons with many visions of their roles, both inside and outside of the church, progress will be made. As one spouse said, “We need to bring the United Methodist Church into the 21st century by re-evaluating the clergy family.” This study is one major step in that direction.

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Appendix

Clergy Family and Spouse Survey Instrument

PERSONAL SHARING

1. Gender: Male
Female
2. Age: 19-30 years of age
31-50 years of age
51-64 years of age
65 years of age or older
3. Annual Conference: _____
4. Highest level of education is: High school
Trade/professional school or 2 year college degree
4 year college degree
Graduate school
5. Current Employment: Employed outside the home full time
Employed outside the home part time
Full time parent or homemaker
Retired
6. Household Income: \$35,000 or less
\$35,001 - \$60,000
\$60,001 - \$80,000
\$80,001 - \$100,000
\$100,001 - \$150,000
\$150,001 or more
7. My Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply): Asian American
Black/African American
Hispanic/Latino/a
Native American/American Indian
Pacific Islander
European American
8. Spouse Race/Ethnicity (same options as #7)
9. My Denomination: United Methodist
African Methodist Episcopal
African Methodist Episcopal Zion
African Methodist Christian
Presbyterian
United Church of Christ
Episcopal
Baptist
None of the above

PERSONAL CLERGY SPOUSE SHARING

1. Marriage/Partnership: In my only marriage/partnership
Divorced and remarried/repartnered
Widowed

5. What support, if any, has been most helpful to you? Why?

6. What resources have been/are available to you as a clergy spouse?

SHARING EXPERIENCES OF EXPECTATIONS

1. What expectations are placed on you as a clergy spouse in the local church?

2. In the district/Annual Conference?

3. In the local community?

SHARING YOUR "WANTS" AND DESIRES

1. Do you desire support from the local church? If yes, what kinds?

2. From the district?

3. From the Annual Conference?

4. From the general church?

WHAT THE UMC NEEDS TO KNOW...

1. What do you most want the United Methodist Church to know about your experience as a clergy spouse?

2. How did you learn about this survey?

- Postcard received
- Annual Conference Office
- Clergy Spouse Group
- Another Clergy Spouse
- News/Press Release
- Other