

THE MARRIED PASTOR'S FAMILY LIFE

Pastor Nolan Harmon once said this as early as 1928:¹

... foremost among the duties of a minister are those he owes to his home and family. This is universally conceded, but too often the minister's home is immolated upon the altar of his work. The pastor has a hard task, but the pastor's family often has a harder one.

1. Pressures on the Pastor

1.1 From the culture to succeed

- Life has become exceedingly complex. The work ethic seems to have been replaced by a corporate success syndrome that measures a person's worth in terms of prestige, promotion, wealth, and appearance. Most men identify the core of their lives with their job instead of with their family life and measure their worth, not by the kind of husband and father they are, but by how well they do at work.

Many men act as if they consider home life a mere interlude between working hours. As a result, for many men who are trying desperately to succeed, the hours at work become longer and longer and the hours at home become consistently shorter.

The pastor is not immune from this cultural syndrome. When the graduate leaves seminary, his professors let him know in subtle ways that, because he was such a successful student, they expect him to be a successful pastor. The alumni director and seminary administrators are also much in favour of his succeeding. If he does so and his church grows large, they hope he will remember his theological roots and use his influence to see that his alma mater is included in the budget of his church.

Denominational officials as well hope the new pastor will succeed. If he does, their programmes will be supported in better fashion.

Last, the members of his own congregation hope that he will succeed. But therein is his most nagging problem. For in any given congregation there are probably many different ideas as to what constitutes pastoral success and how to achieve it. He may try harder and harder to succeed,

¹ Nolan Harmon, *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1928), 46.

exerting more and more effort, and utilizing an ever-increasing number of work hours to do his best to be “all things to all men”.

1.2 From the family for relationship

- When, on top of all the other demands, the pastor experiences pressure from home because his family members have expressed that they too have needs.

Their requests may be the last straw. By then the demands of his job may have consumed nearly all of his energies, and he may have lost sight of the fact that he has a family role to fulfil.

2. Reconciling Relationships

2.1 A season for work, a season for family

- His is not a case where one role should supersede all others at all times. For example, though some writers insist that the pastor’s responsibility to his family should always take precedence over other responsibilities, a more realistic picture of the pastor’s competing roles is to say that, depending on the particular circumstances involved at a certain time, the demands of any specific role may take precedence over the demands of the others.
- Harmon writes:²

There are times when an emergency at home demands every thought of the father or husband; there are times when an emergency in the church becomes so imperative that it takes precedence over all home duties. This will be admitted. What is not so easily remembered, however, is that a minister’s relationship to his family is as high and as sacred as that to his church.

2.2 Responsibilities interlock

- The means that the better the father, the better the pastor; the better the guide for the children of others, the better the guide for one’s own children. That is the balance towards which every pastor should strive.

Many exemplify such a model. Unfortunately, many others do not. They fall prey to extremes. An example is how a wife said this to her pastor husband, “Everyone in our church has an excellent pastor except the kids and me. We don’t feel as if we have any pastor at all.”

² Ibid., 46-47.

Others dote on their families so much that they are constantly involved in family matters and have little time to give energy and direction to the church.

- However, rather than the lazy or self-indulgent type, it is the highly motivated, success-oriented pastor for whom there may be the greatest concern. He probably has the best chance of making the greatest impact for God. Yet if he does not do his “homework” carefully; he may eventually lose his wife, his children may become wayward. And one or both of these problems may make him a casualty to the ministry.

3. Obligations to His Family

3.1 Spend quality time with them.

- The pastor’s wife and children have not only physical needs but emotional needs as well. Those can be met only as the pastor sets aside blocks of quality time to spend with his wife and children.

In the pastor’s household, the real danger is that the pastor often becomes so busy helping other people who have problems that he does not take the time to thoroughly understand the problems of his own household. It is possible that compared to the problems other people in his church are facing, he views that the problems of his wife and children seem insignificant. However, they are not insignificant to the persons experiencing them. The pastor needs to remind himself constantly that his own family should have an understanding listener and counsellor as much as others in his congregation who may have troubles.

- Although the pastor needs to spend quality time with his wife and children, that time should not be quality time as he defines it. For instance, little closeness between husband and wife is enjoyed when the husband spends the majority of his night home glued to the television screen while his wife sits beside him fuming.

A child may not regard as quality time outings that are planned insensitively. Quality time with children is best defined by the children themselves. For one child quality time may consist of enjoying his father’s full attention at the dinner table. What a luxury for the child to be able to babble on uninterrupted about his day’s activities and other subjects that have captured his interest. How nice it is when an adult actually considers a child to be a person with valid opinions!

3.2 Be there for dinner.

- It is important that the father of a household make the dinner hour a priority item on his agenda and that he spends the hour devoted entirely

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to his family. When infrequent dinner meetings make it impossible for him to be with his family for dinner, he should do his best to make up for the lost time.

- The dinner hour should be a sacred and pleasant time. It should not be made a time to complain about food and other frustrations.
- It is good for the pastor to take his wife out for dinner from time to time. The primary relationship that the pastor has in his family is that between his wife and him.

3.3 Share intimate moments with the child.

- Bedtime is an extremely important time for little children. It should be made a happy time. Whenever possible, Daddy should be there to share the experience—reading of a story and saying a prayer. This may offer important and intimate moments where the father can share Christ's love with the little child.
- When children enter their teens and begin spending evenings away from home in their own activities, it is often helpful to them if a parent is up when they arrive home. It is important that the parent not adopt the role of an inquisitor, thereby conveying to the child that he is not trusted. Some of the best hours spent with teenage children may be those late-night talks between parent and child.

3.4 View children's actions realistically.

- One way a pastor can minister to his children is to view their actions realistically. After all, they are children, and they should be allowed to act as children. Though they need to be disciplined children so that the pastor's family can serve as a proper example to other families in the congregation, they should be allowed to make mistakes. Moreover, they should not be badgered or placed under undue stress to be better than the other children in everything.

3.5 Maintain a private and public life for family.

- Harmon writes:³

The family of the minister should not be made to serve as slaves of the church, nor should their home be used as a public convenience for the entire membership ... The minister's family; like any other in the congregation, ought to take an active part in the work of the church and its several departments. However, to force the wife into the position of assistant pastor and the children

³ Ibid., 48-49.

into becoming prodigies of childish ecclesiastical leadership is wrong. It is not fair to the family and it spoils the Church.

No matter what role the congregation expects her (the pastor's wife) to play; the minister very properly sees his wife as HIS wife, to love and to cherish, to protect and support. He must not forget that she married him, not a whole congregation—at least that is what she thought she was doing.

4. The Marriage Transcends Children

4.1 Wife is the pastor's best friend and his children his next best friends.

- As friends, their feelings and opinions are important. Both the wife and the children should be respected and their attitudes taken into consideration when major decisions are made that will have dramatic effects on them. Children view life from a limited perspective. Nevertheless, their perceptions are real to them and should be viewed as important by their parents. Good friends are worthy of respect and should be given that respect.

4.2 Marriage is for life, and children are only loaned to parents for an indefinite period.

- When the parents cease carrying on the everyday functions of parenthood, they will still be husband and wife and must continue to relate to each other. It is important, therefore, that as husband and wife the parents keep in touch with one another and not let the overwhelming responsibilities of parenthood make them forget the need they have for one another.
- When the children enter adolescence, they attempt to pit father against mother, attempt to break up the sense of solidarity so necessary to a communicating married couple, or attempt to play one parent against the other for their own selfish ends. The pastor and his wife should recognize the tactic for what it is.

5. The High Importance of the Family

If his family is destroyed or it fails, a pastor's ministry in the church may be brought to a sad end.

- Therefore, there are times when the needs of his family should take clear precedence over those of the church members or the demands of his job. There may come a time when he will need to remove himself from the ministry for a short period so that he can more properly meet the needs of his family. Then when he returns to the pastorate, he will do so with a firm family base upon which to build the new ministry.

- Next to his relationship with God, there are no more important relationships than those of a husband and wife, and a father and his children. Those relationships must be preserved and protected with earnest effort.

6. Separation of Church and Mate

- Make it clear, even as early as at the interview, that your spouse will do only what she is comfortable doing using her gifts. She will not do some things just because she is the pastor's wife. But she will do what the Lord leads her to do, and help where she can.
- The wife of a pastor is already in full partnership with him by being there for him at home. Having a home that is secure and stable is very important to the pastor who returns to find refuge.

7. What a Pastor's Wife Wishes Her Husband Knew about Her⁴

- Love me. The apostle Paul wrote, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25). I need to know I am more important to him than board meetings. I appreciate him making time to spend with me, doing things we can enjoy together.
- Love our family. There are many pastors, but our kids have only one dad, and they need him to make time too. They want a chance to talk, laugh and to enjoy some undivided attention from Dad.
- Know my limits. Contrary to popular belief, pastor's wives are not auditioning for the role of Superwoman. But they want to pray with their husbands before committing to anything to make sure God is leading them more than their own desires. I and my husband want to learn that we can say no to a certain task and God could supply the right person.
- Protect me physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Deacons' wives would sometimes ask me about some information their husbands had told them after a meeting. The other wives were shocked to realize I had no clue as to what they were talking about. It wasn't that my husband was leaving me out; he was protecting me.
- Laugh with me, not at me. There are some things I do not wish the congregation to know about. I don't want to be the subject of a sermon illustration or joke if it will hurt my feelings or humiliate me. And I never

⁴ This is from an article by Barbara Milioni posted on <https://www.parsonage.org/articles/married/A000000253.cfm>.

want my husband to use a story from our lives without first asking my permission.

- Pray for me. I struggle not only with my own battles, but also with the awareness of my husband's burden for the flock. I know how much it hurts when someone strays, the energy he expends with a family in crisis, the hours he spends preparing to feed the sheep.

So I want him to pray that I will be sensitive to his needs, that I will be wise in my counsel, that I will be gentle with my tongue and that our home will always be one where he is happy to return. And while he's at it, I also want him to pray just for me, personally.