Minister and the Family

Note: This module includes two essays. One is written by a male minister, the other by a female minister. This has been intentional in order to provide for a wider range of the views of roles, expectations, and perspectives related to the issues of minister, family, and church. Furthermore, the two voices represented encourage the committee and new minister to recognize that there is no “one way” for what works in tending to the challenge of nurturing family relationships.

The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church: By Jane Hull

A healthy family and a healthy marriage require hard work. In any family structure there are always people and activities that constantly pull at you from many directions. A ministry family is no different.

I am a female minister, married for 32 years to a pastor. For all of these years we have served on the same church staffs and have raised two children who are now healthy and happy adults, no worse for the wear and not traumatized by growing up in a ministerial family. As my children grew through the teenage years, arguably some of the most difficult years for any family, I was their youth minister and their father was their pastor.

How did this happen? How were our children able to grow up in a ministerial family and not resent church? Are there some magic steps to follow? If only it were that easy! I would like to share our story.

We are not perfect – spouses or parents – but perhaps through our story you may glean some nugget that may be helpful to both the new minister and the congregation he or she is serving.

Balance

As I reflect back on our lives together, an overarching theme for our family could be called balance. While many books and articles on the life of the pastor speak of balance, the type of balance I’m referring to is a little different. Many writers urge ministers to carefully guard their day off, not allowing any church “thing” to enter into it. These same writers also encourage ministers to look at each day as divided into thirds – morning, afternoon, and evening, and to only work two of the three divisions. Both of these are excellent ways to achieve some form of balance in ministry. But, often church work is unpredictable.

What do you do if there is an emergency on your day off? Do you say, “Wait until tomorrow because I’m spending this time with my children?” Or, what if your child has an important event at school or on the ball field and there is an important meeting at church? Which do you choose? These are hard and very real situations that ministers deal with every day. How do you give priority to your marriage, your children, and your ministry at the same time? The answer comes in finding a new type of balance, and sometimes using great creativity! The Teaching Church has a responsibility to encourage the minister to find balance in life.

Creativity and Parenting

Let me share several examples of how our family worked through these questions. When our children were young – preschool and elementary age – we lived in a small, county seat town. This was an idyllic time for us. My husband was pastor, and I was ministering with the children, youth, and senior adults of the church.

The closest hospital for many people was about 30 minutes away. My husband visited there at least once a week. Because of the distance, it would often require three to four hours of his time. He could do it alone, which would have been fine and maybe more time efficient, but we came up with a way to
do it as a family. The children learned that they were equally important to the ministry taking place in the hospital.

We would load up the car and ride to the hospital with my husband. We had an hour of family time in the car. This was before in-car DVD players. We were forced to talk and laugh with each other. When we arrived at the hospital, the children and I would stay in the lobby – doing homework with the elementary child, and playing with the preschooler. When my husband finished, we would go out to dinner together - ministry and family working together. The children did not resent their dad being gone, and I loved sharing this time with my husband.

Another example took place when the children were in high school. I was the Minister to Children and Youth and my husband was the pastor at the church we were serving. It was my son’s senior year and he was captain of the football team. Football was his life! This particular weekend our Youth Fall Retreat was scheduled. Every fall this happened during football season and we always left as soon as school was out. Each year I would miss his Friday night game, and he would come to the retreat afterwards with the other football players and band members. But this year was different. It was my son’s senior year; he was captain, and this particular game was against one of their biggest rivals. I made the decision to be a parent first and a Youth Minister second that night. I asked the other youth and their parents to wait until after the ball game to leave for the retreat. While this may not seem like much on paper, it was a big deal. I struggled whether or not to even make the request. But, at the end, I knew I wanted to be there for my child. The parents respected my decision, and my son knew that I was there for him. In this instance, the congregation was beside me, supporting the importance of family.

Ritual

The one non-negotiable for our family is our annual two week vacation at the beach. Early on, we realized that ministry takes a toll on families and we made two weeks away together a priority. We have found that it takes one week to decompress before you can spend the second week having fun! This time away gives us a concentrated time to reconnect with each other. Over all the years, my children have never taken friends to the beach. This is our family time and we all love it, always going to the same place and doing the same things. It is very predictable, even ritualistic. Today, as they are beginning their own families, the yearly trek to the beach is something they still participate in. As a Teaching Church, make sure that your ministers have adequate vacation time. Encourage them to take all of it.

Creativity and Marriage

How do you keep your marriage on solid ground when you are in the ministry? This is a question all ministry couples ask. It was even more relevant for us, since we were both ministers. Between pastoring and being a youth minister, time was at a premium. Many writers on this subject suggest a non-negotiable date night each week. I know many couples who do this every week and I am in awe of them. For us, that was very difficult. But how did we keep our marriage fresh? Again, we had to use creativity.

Periodically, we like to have a “get away.” For us, this means going somewhere away from our home, often for just one night. This doesn’t have to be expensive. Often we would tie this in with a meeting out of town, hence the “creativity” title. Church meetings can be tedious, but if you use the time to reconnect with your spouse, they can be wonderful. Sometime we would have the fortune to stay for a night at a cabin that was owned by church members.
It was and is helpful for children to see that their parents treasure each other. We have always been demonstrative to each other around them. They see that between us, but they also see it from us to them. Never hesitate to hug your spouse and your children. Never hesitate to tell them you love them – even in public where their friends can see and hear.

**Conclusion**

Parenting and marriage are difficult. Parenting and marriage in a minister’s home can be more difficult. But with creative thinking and attempting to seek balance in your lives, it can be wonderful. It can produce children who love the church, instead of resenting it. Today my daughter is a minister and my son is an active layman in his church. As a Teaching Church, love your minister’s family. Support the balance between ministry and family that they are searching for. A healthy ministerial family most often produces a healthy church family.

**Living with Two Families: By Don Flowers, Jr.**

What can compare with the joy felt as you come home and are greeted by your beloved with a hug and a kiss? Is there anything better than the sound of squealing laughter of children exploring a new toy, or even the inside of a large box? Family is that place of refuge, of contentment, of safety, of life.

Is there another job where you are invited to walk in the holy places of people’s lives: where you can welcome a newborn into the world, celebrate dedications and baptisms, officiate marriages, walk with families to the grave? Ministry is a privilege and an honor that blesses our lives as well as those of others.

Two families, which we love and who love us! But how do we care for both? What do you do when these families collide? How can you be a minister and a family member—often at the same time? It is one of the most vexing personal ministerial issues, and how we navigate often determines so much of our happiness.

In the classic film, *Dirty Dancing*, Patrick Swayze gives an early lesson. He says, “Look, spaghetti arms. This is my dance space. This is your dance space. I don’t go into yours. You don’t go into mine. You gotta hold the frame.” Good advice for dancing, but even better for ministry and family. Where are the boundaries? How will you delineate time for family as well as time for work? These are important! Every minister will get that call in the middle of supper, in the middle of the night, in the middle of a vacation that demands a response. At the same time you will want and be expected to be at a basketball game, a concert, a teacher’s conference. How do you make those decisions? How do you balance a committee meeting and a dance recital?

The simple way is to ask, “Is this a command performance?” Not everything is a command performance. Not every deacon’s meeting, not every ball game. But some are. There are occasions that are just givens. Graduations and budget meetings are missed at your peril. At other times you may need to simply ask and then trust the family members (fellow staff members, deacons, daughters, husbands) to tell you the truth. The rule here is that you have to be honest. You can’t say, “This isn’t that important” and then come back later and use it as a club. Is a work day at the church a command performance for your spouse? What about Wednesday night youth group? What are the boundaries? What are the “must do’s”? This is a conversation that must be had with both families.

This is also a conversation that you must have with yourself. It is easy to fall into the myth that you are indispensable, that without your presence the world will come to a screeching halt. A wise friend shared a truth that is important to remember. It says simply, “To know how indispensible you are, stick
your finger in a bowl of water and notice the hole left when you remove it.” There are times when you must be present. But other times, you cannot be present. The wisdom comes in knowing which is which!

Once the boundaries are determined the goal becomes protection. How do you protect home family time? Do you take time off every week? Are there “sacred times” at home that you dare not violate? What language do you use? Are you going to work, or to church? Do you have to go to a meeting or do you get to go? These are subtle ways that communicate more than we know to our families. They also help reduce the jealousy.

It is also important from time to time to remind each family of the advantages that come with your position. Yes, your children do have “all these people looking at me” but they also have so many extra aunts and uncles and grandparents who will dote on them. Yes, your spouse is exposed to the dark side of church, but they also see the blessings that come from a night out, an unexpected offer of a vacation house for the weekend. The church family gets the advantage of another family who loves them and is there for them. There are advantages that we need to remember.

This doesn’t mean that there aren’t dysfunctional families—of all stripes. Some of us grew up with parents who could not communicate, who fought constantly and eventually divorced in a way that was not “kind.” There are churches that through the years have fallen prey to pettiness and evil. There are families that need to be avoided—for everyone’s sake.

But there are times when what is needed is another example. Are there families that seem to have found balance? Ask them questions -- “How did they work this out? How did they find a balance? What rules have worked for them?” Their answers may not be exactly yours, but their wisdom may help you find a model that works for you in your situation.

“Family” is changing! Few of us look like the Cleavers anymore! First Church of the Cul-de-Sac is disappearing in the post-Google world. Yet both families are still important, maybe more so than ever. Finding the boundaries and the rules are a conversation both families—at home and at church—must have and continue to have. The well-being of both depends on it.
Minister and the Family Action Guide

Summary:

Two essays, one by a male minister and the other by a female minister, combine to provide for a wider range of the views of roles, expectations, and perspectives related to the issues of minister, family, and church.

Focus:

The focus of this session is to build the partnership and shared responsibility between the minister and the laity for building a healthy lifestyle between work and family relationships.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

- Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of the Minister and the Family.
- Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister.
- Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group.
- The following assignments should be stated and given to the group members.

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister:

The next session on the Minister and the Family will include a time of discussion geared to involve both the laity and the new minister in sharing the tensions, choices, advantages and disadvantages with work. The following questions will guide our discussion:

- What are the advantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- What are the disadvantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- Describe a typical situation you encounter when your job responsibilities create a choice for you between work and family?
- How do you navigate the challenges of being present at family events, games, plays, extended family gatherings, and being faithful to your job responsibilities?
- What guidelines have you and your family set for making these choices? Are there times when you have to “suspend” these guidelines?

Three statements from the essay material will serve to guide the second half of our discussion. This discussion will focus on our views about how the church and the minister can work together in partnership to build a healthy balance between work and family responsibilities.
Engaging the Module: *(Approximately 40 Minutes)*

**Phase 1: Advantages, Disadvantages, Challenges**
The essay, “Living with Two Families” raises many useful questions. These indicate the types of choices ministers face. At one level, ministry is no different than any other job. All jobs have advantages and disadvantages, trade-offs, and difficult choices that must be made between work and home. The nature and environment of these choices in ministry are different, as both essay writers have pointed out. A valuable discussion for the group will be to involve the laity to share the tensions, choices, advantages and disadvantages with their own jobs. (The members who do not work outside the home can add valuable perspectives from their vantage point as a family member).

- What are the advantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- What are the disadvantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- Describe a typical situation you encounter when your job responsibilities create a choice for you between work and family?
- How do you navigate the challenges of being present at family events, games, plays, extended family gatherings, and being faithful to your job responsibilities?
- What guidelines have you and your family set for making these choices? Are there times when you have to “suspend” these guidelines?

Questions for those who are not employed outside of the home:

- Where have you and your family had to make difficult choices with work and family responsibilities?
- How do you and your spouse find balance with work and family responsibilities?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages you experience as a family with the work and work schedule of your spouse?

This approach will provide the laity members to share their own challenges and build the foundation for the partnerships that are needed with clergy and laity in navigating these life and work choices with family and church.

**Phase 2: Partners in Healthy Relationships**
In the essay “The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church” the following statement is made: “A healthy ministerial family most often produces a healthy church family.”

- What is your reaction to this statement?
- How have you experienced, or seen evidence of, this correlation before?

Two more statements are made in the essay “The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church” that indicate a connection between the minister’s family health and the congregation.

1. “As a Teaching Church make sure your ministers have adequate vacation time. Encourage them to take all of it”
2. “As a Teaching Church, love your minister’s family. Support the balance between ministry and family that they are searching for.”

These two statements, combined with the one above, emphasize a shared responsibility that exists with the minister and laity of the church. The suggestion is that they share responsibility for building the health of the church as well as the health of the minister’s family. Some of the responsibility is placed
with the congregation and the lay leadership. What is important is to recognize and embrace that the minister cannot do this alone, nor should the minister be expected to be the only one with the responsibility to manage and maintain the balance in life. Lead the group to engage in a discussion about this concept and partnership. Questions for discussion:

- What are your reactions and views about the shared responsibility the minister and laity have in the area of health for the minister and the congregation?
- There is suggestion for the church to “encourage” and to “support” the health of the minister and the minister’s family. Identify ways that the church can “encourage” and “support.”
- What are the benefits of sharing this responsibility?
- How can the minister and the church be active accountability partners in this support?

Additional Comments

Special Note: This module applies most directly to a minister who is married. For an unmarried minister it may be applicable to focus this discussion to include parents, siblings, grandparents, and even close friendships in the conversation. The focus of this module stresses the importance of making time for the family relationships in a minister’s life, those family relationships that are outside of the church-family relationships. Therefore, the married minister will focus first and foremost on relationships with his or her spouse and children, if there are children in the home. The single minister may give focus to the care and nurture of others in his or her immediate family, and other significant relationships.

Consider: In the essay, “Living with Two Families,” the image of a bowl of water is used to dispel the tendency ministers, and others, have at times of falling into the trap of thinking they are indispensable. Consider bringing a bowl with water, a clear glass bowl preferably, to the group meeting when discussing this module. Place it in the center of the group, on a small table or the center of the table, as a visual reminder.
Member Support Committee Assignment

1. The next session on the Minister and the Family will include a time of discussion geared to involve the laity to share the tensions, choices, advantages and disadvantages with their own jobs. All jobs have advantages and disadvantages, trade-offs, and difficult choices that must be made between work and home. The following questions will serve to guide this discussion and may be helpful to you in preparing for the session.

- What are the advantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- What are the disadvantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- Describe a typical situation you encounter when your job responsibilities create a choice for you between work and family?
- How do you navigate the challenges of being present at family events, games, plays, extended family gatherings, and being faithful to your job responsibilities?
- What guidelines have you and your family set for making these choices? Are there times when you have to “suspend” these guidelines?

Those who do not work outside the home can add valuable perspectives from their vantage point as a family member. These questions may be useful for those who are not employed outside of the home:

- Where have you and your family had to make difficult choices with work and family responsibilities?
- How do you and your spouse find balance with work and family responsibilities?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages you experience as a family with the work and work schedule of your spouse?

2. In the essay “The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church” the following statement is made: “A healthy ministerial family most often produces a healthy church family.”

- What is your reaction to this statement?
- How have you experienced, or seen evidence of, this correlation before?

Two more statements are made in the essay “The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church” that indicate a connection between the minister’s family health and the congregation.

1. “As a Teaching Church make sure your ministers have adequate vacation time. Encourage them to take all of it”
2. “As a Teaching Church, love your minister’s family. Support the balance between ministry and family that they are searching for.”

These three statements above indicate a shared responsibility that exists with the minister and the laity of the church. Review and reflect on the following questions as you prepare for the session on the Minister and the Family.

- What are your reactions and views about the shared responsibility the minister and laity have in the area of health for the minister and the congregation?
- There is suggestion for the church to “encourage” and to “support” the health of the minister and the minister’s family. Identify ways that the church can “encourage” and “support.”
- What are the benefits of sharing this responsibility?
- How can the minister and the church be active accountability partners in this support?
New Minister Assignment

1. The next session on the Minister and the Family will include a time of discussion geared to involve the laity to share the tensions, choices, advantages and disadvantages with their own jobs. As a minister you no doubt experience advantages and disadvantages, trade-offs, and difficult choices that must be made between work and home. The following questions will serve to guide this discussion and may be helpful to you in preparing for the session.

- What are the advantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- What are the disadvantages that your job provides you related to your work and family?
- Describe a typical situation you encounter when your job responsibilities create a choice for you between work and family?
- How do you navigate the challenges of being present at family events, games, plays, extended family gatherings, and being faithful to your job responsibilities?
- What guidelines have you and your family set for making these choices? Are there times when you have to “suspend” these guidelines?

2. In the essay “The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church” the following statement is made: “A healthy ministerial family most often produces a healthy church family.”

- What is your reaction to this statement?
- How have you experienced, or seen evidence of, this correlation before?

Two more statements are made in the essay “The Pastor’s Family and the Teaching Church” that indicate a connection between the minister’s family health and the congregation.

1. “As a Teaching Church make sure your ministers have adequate vacation time. Encourage them to take all of it”
2. “As a Teaching Church, love your minister’s family. Support the balance between ministry and family that they are searching for.”

These three statements above indicate a shared responsibility that exists with the minister and the laity of the church. Review and reflect on the following questions as you prepare for the session on the Minister and the Family.

- What are your reactions and views about the shared responsibility the minister and laity have in the area of health for the minister and the congregation?
- There is suggestion for the church to “encourage” and to “support” the health of the minister and the minister’s family. Identify ways that the church can “encourage” and “support.”
- What are the benefits of sharing this responsibility?
- How can the minister and the church be active accountability partners in this support?