

Rising Divorce Rate Among Clergy

by Stephen McCutchan

Along with the increasingly disturbing statistics about the decline of clergy physical health, comes the unpleasant reality that the clergy divorce rate is now above the average in society as a whole. In contrast to earlier years, getting a divorce doesn't destroy a pastor's acceptance in the church. In one way, that is good. Plenty of people in our society have gotten a divorce but have many other excellent qualities and gifts that contribute to society. Yet the very increased acceptance of divorce in the church, for both conservative and liberal churches, removes the pressure to maintain a marriage among the clergy.

The fact that the rise in divorce rates among clergy is happening all across the theological spectrum raises a special challenge for us. We do need to struggle with what it is within the ministry that works against successful marriages and whether we are failing to access the resources of our faith that should strengthen the bonds of marriage.

Our inability to maintain our marriage bonds cannot but weaken the witness of the faith that we are seeking to proclaim.

EXPECTATIONS

A major pressure on clergy families are the expectations, real and perceived. Expectations of others can be difficult to respond to when they affect how we want to live our own personal life. All of us, whether we are in clergy families or not, live our lives in light of the expectations of others. Sometimes we live in conformity with, and sometimes in rebellion against, such expectations. Regardless, we are affected by those expectations. A complicating factor is that sometimes we assume that people expect something from us but it is more in our mind than in reality. So clarifying those assumptions can be a major step in dealing with the pressures of expectations.

WHAT DO I THINK YOU EXPECT?

As a **first step**, let you and your spouse take a piece of paper and write out five expectations that you assume the other person has of you. In this conversation, write out your assumptions as it relates to being a part of a clergy family, although this is also a useful exercise in other contexts as well. Try to be as honest as possible and willing to test out even vague assumptions that you have always wondered about.

When each of you are finished, share your lists. To keep it a mutual and interesting conversation, let one person share their first assumption, talk about whether the assumption is real in the other person's mind, and then reverse the process and hear the first assumption of the other person. At this point, don't try to resolve the problem of the pressure from an expectation but simply clarify whether it is just a projection or is really real. Continue in this mode until all five assumptions of each spouse has been identified and clarified

A **second step** is to try to come up with a mutually agreed upon list of what each has a right to expect of each other in the context of being the family of a pastor. You may not always like what you expect, but you can agree that it is acceptable. For example, both may expect that as part of being in a clergy family, there will be

pastoral emergencies that can disrupt family plans. It's not pleasant, but it is real. On Sunday mornings, a sick child is going to have to be cared for by the non-clergy spouse. You should try to make a list of at least twenty expectations as part of your conversation.

What are the expectations with respect to the spouse's participation in the church, the role of spiritual discipline in the family, sharing with each other about what is happening in church meetings, counseling sessions, church conflict, etc.? What is the assumption of the respective roles in the context of church conflicts? How are decisions processed between the couple in the consideration of a move to another church?

These and numerous other expectations exist, sometimes unspoken, within the context of a pastor's family. The clearer a couple can be of what is expected and what is not, the less tension there will be in light of those situations.

There is a **third step**, which really introduces the proverbial *Elephant* in the room. This can be both fun and enlightening. Make sure you have sufficient time and energy for this exercise—and maybe even a cool drink and some soft music. OK, is that enough build-up?

Good Presbyterian theology posits that all of us, not just those who are ordained, have a call from God. Even if only one of the members of your marital team has a visible *call from God*, accept for this exercise that God has intentions (or a call) for both of you.

Each of you take some paper (or if you are high tech, boot up your computer or iPad), and for twenty uninterrupted minutes try to come up with ten statements about what you sense God's call is for the pastor and what it is for the pastor's spouse. (If you are both ordained, make your statements about the call of the pastor's spouse relate to the role as spouse of the other person who is pastor.)

Stop after twenty minutes, take a cool sip of your drink, and exchange lists. Read and reflect on them and ask any clarifying questions to make sure you understand, before you start sharing your response to your mutual reflections.

It is quite likely, if you have a good healthy conversation, that each of you will want to make some revisions on your mutual lists. You may also discover some theological issues that you will want to discuss further at another time.

If you have chosen the music well, after the discussion might be a good time to get up and dance. It is special, humbling, and maybe even a little frightening to consider the call of the God of the universe for your personal lives. Remember, it caused Abram and Sarai to start a whole new journey in life. If Scripture records that accurately, Abram was 75 at the time of that first call. Who knows what God has in store for you?