

Myths About Being a Pastor's Wife

Mrs. Julie Stiegemeyer

The memories. . . I treasure more than any are all those many times we gathered together around God's Word and Sacrament—the sad but comforting prayer service after 9/11, the funerals when the message of God's grace and love for us supported us in our grief, the darkened church on Good Friday with the Easter lilies scenting the back stairway . . . I want to thank you with heartfelt gratitude for welcoming my family into your homes, for your patience and kindness, for making our family feel so loved and cherished."

These are some of the thoughts I shared in a goodbye letter to our congregation when my husband, their pastor, took a call from his first parish in 2006. He had served Concordia Lutheran Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for seven years, and when it was time to say goodbye, I shed lots of tears.

If your husband is considering becoming a pastor, you probably have a lot of questions, not only about the practical matters of moving to the seminary and making a living through his years of education, but also about what being a pastor's wife in a congregation is all about. Will the congregation expect you to be in charge of VBS, Sunday School, and the choir? What will the congregation mean to you and your family? Will you shed lots of tears when you leave your first parish? In other words, will your experience in the congregation be a wonderful, uplifting one, or one filled with frustrations?

In order to explore some of these questions, let's visit some of the myths that you may or may not have heard (or even may assume about the pastors' wives you know), and see if we can come up with some strategies and tips that will help you as you consider the possibility of being a pastor's wife.

Myth #1 – A Good Pastor's Wife Plays the Organ, Serves on the Ladies' Aid, Works as the Sunday School Superintendent, Helps with the Altar Guild, and Sings in the Choir.

Behind this myth is the idea that the pastor's wife has to be involved in all areas of congregational life, even if she has no natural inclination to work on all of those

various tasks. I know a pastor's wife who likes being the church secretary, another who enjoys playing the organ, a third who gladly serves on the altar guild, and still another who loves teaching Sunday School. Each one is naturally drawn to these different tasks because it is what she likes to do. Everyone enjoys doing different things, including pastors' wives, which means that it is okay to say no to serving on a committee that has little appeal. It is also commendable to serve in a sacrificial way. I mean, who really loves to wash dishes after an Easter breakfast, or put away chairs after Bible class? There are tasks that need to be done, and a sacrificial and giving spirit should characterize every Christian.

But it all comes back to vocation. A pastor's wife's primary vocation is to serve her husband as wife, to care for the needs of the home, to tend to children if she is a mother. These are her primary vocations. Serving on fifteen different committees at church can definitely cut into your schedule and could limit your ability to care for those placed in your care—your family. So, choosing how to be involved at church not only is based upon your interests; it also depends on how much time you have available. This depends on many factors—a work schedule, family commitments, etc. Being overcommitted and overly busy can lead to burn-out, frustration, and general crabbiness. And who wants to be crabby? I sure don't.

In my years in the parish, helping out at church was, indirectly, a way that I could assist my husband. If no one stepped forward to coordinate VBS, I would be able to help. This can truly be a service to the church. But I've also heard of situations where it can also backfire. The pastor's wife can be stretched too thin, and the congregation becomes overly dependent on very few individuals to keep things at church running.

The policy I have developed is to give myself at least six months in a new location before becoming involved in any ongoing volunteer work, which includes joining a choir, serving on the PTA, or being involved in committees at church. That gives me time to adjust to a new situation and figure out where my time can be spent in the most beneficial ways as well as keeping me focused on my primary vocations of wife and mother.

Myth #2 – A Good Pastor's Wife Doesn't Work Outside the Home.

This is, obviously, an individual choice that each pastor's wife makes with her husband. Often, a pastor's salary is modest, so the extra income the wife can bring in can be a great benefit to the family. But if the pastor and his wife have children, daycare then can become an issue. Although I've never seen any research done on this issue, my guess is that a majority of pastors' wives are employed. The truth is that pastors' wives, generally speaking, have lots of options. One of those options might be to work from home. I've enjoyed the opportunity of writing and working from home, which allows my schedule to be flexible. One thing to keep in mind is to avoid a job that might prevent you from coming to church for worship services, which would be a problem, not only for the pastor's wife, but also for any Christian.

Myth #3 – A Good Pastor's Wife is an Excellent Homemaker.

This myth is rooted in the idea from years past that the pastor lives in a parsonage, which his lovely wife keeps in glowing condition so that members of the congregation can stop by at any time, day or night, and expect to be served a delicious cup of coffee and blueberry muffins piping hot from the oven. This is, obviously, a fantasy. While I've had the occasional unexpected visit and I've been able to welcome a church member into the home and give them fresh scones and a cup of tea, I've also had situations when people have stopped over unexpectedly and gotten licked by the dog, hissed at by the cat, and treated to kids screaming through the kitchen.

The truth is that—whether you live in a parsonage or not—pastors and their families are very normal. Sometimes the house is a mess. Other times it's clean. Sometimes I am feeling hospitable. Other times I may need a nap and not want visitors. Even if you live in a parsonage, a congregation should respect your family's need for privacy and give you the space you need—and most congregations do just that.

That is not to say that you cannot help a friend in genuine need nor turn away the runaway who is standing on your doorstep at 11:00 at night (which happened to us years ago). But everything is tempered with moderation. Welcome the congregation into your home for an annual Christmas open house, have the elders over for a barbeque or host a youth picnic. But if you are still in your pajamas at 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning, don't be afraid to ask an unannounced visitor to come back later.

Myth #4 – A Good Pastor's Wife Doesn't Mind Being Referred to Only as "the Pastor's Wife" and Never by Her First Name.

The truth is that pastors' wives have unique, individual skills and talents, and they each hope to be known not only for their connections to their family, but also for their unique contributions. We want to be known as Julie who writes, Marsha who knits, Ginger who homeschools, or Sharla who sings. Of course, we also want to be known as the pastor's wife. We are proud of our husbands and try our best to support them. But we also are individuals. Most congregations embrace their pastor and his family, and enjoy and even brag about their pastor and his wife's abilities. Our congregation in Pittsburgh was very supportive of my children's books and helped me with book signings and promoted my books to friends and neighbors. This is, probably, quite typical. Most congregations love and support their pastor—and by doing so also love and support his family.

Myth #5 – A Good Pastor's Wife Never Loses Her Temper, Never Yells at Her Children, Never Disagrees with Her Husband, Never Peels Out of Her Driveway in a Huff, and is Never Late for Church.

This is a big one! Behind this myth is the idea that pastors' wives are perfect—which of course, we know is not true, but the myth is still perpetuated, consciously or not. Think of the Church Lady from Saturday Night Live. From what I remember, this character was not a pastor's wife, but there is this persistent notion that pastors'

wives are prim and proper and look down their noses at sin. They never have problems, never get frustrated. In short, the myth basically is that pastors' wives are sinless.

And, admit it: we all buy into this myth not only about our pastors but also about their families. We raise our eyebrows when we hear a pastor's wife shout at her kids or gossip about a neighbor. We become irritated with the pastor who is ten minutes late to a meeting.

The truth is that pastors and their wives do try. Because we are loved by Christ and rejoice in the salvation He has earned for us, we in turn love our neighbors and do our best to live godly lives. But the bottom line is that we're all sinners. We're all desperately in need of the grace and mercy of Christ. Pastors and their wives do not have a special pipeline to God. My prayers are not more effective than anyone else's. And though I do spend a lot of time in church, I still lose my temper, don't feel like cooking dinner, get lazy, make nasty comments, gossip, and get angry much too easily. And for these things I repent. The truth is that a pastor's wife—just like everyone else—is loved by Christ, doing her best to fulfill her vocation of wife to the man God placed into her arms.

If your husband is considering going into the Office of the Holy Ministry, you are both in the middle of a challenging and emotional decision. But you can rest assured about one thing: God who has cared for you all your years will continue to guide and love you. No matter what changes happen in your family, our faithful God will see you through it all.

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