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Sources and alleviators of stress experienced by ministers' wives

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Sources and alleviators of stress experienced by ministers' wives

Abstract

Ministers' wives experience unique and excessive stress as evidenced by their rising divorce rate, a growing rebellion against "what they consider outdated notions of sacrificial servanthood, 11 and by reports from professionals who counsel them (Lavender, 1976; Molgaard, 1981; Presnell, 1977, p. 274). In studying stress and burnout for clergy, Bouma (1980), Lavender (1976), and Mace and Mace (1980) noted that although ministers encounter stress factors far beyond those for other occupations, their wives experience even greater strain. Furthermore, Lavender (1976) reported that when ministers' wives seek counseling, psychologists find that stress factors have caused them severe psychological and emotional damage due to the lack of training or support for dealing with the demands placed upon them by their husbands' careers.

SOURCES AND ALLEVIATORS OF STRESS
EXPERIENCED BY MINISTERS' WIVES

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Ministers' wives experience unique and excessive stress as evidenced by their rising divorce rate, a growing rebellion against "what they consider outdated notions of sacrificial servanthood," and by reports from professionals who counsel them (Lavender, 1976; Molgaard, 1981; Presnell, 1977, p. 274). In studying stress and burnout for clergy, Bouma (1980), Lavender (1976), and Mace and Mace (1980) noted that although ministers encounter stress factors far beyond those for other occupations, their wives experience even greater strain. Furthermore, Lavender (1976) reported that when ministers' wives seek counseling, psychologists find that stress factors have caused them severe psychological and emotional damage due to the lack of training or support for dealing with the demands placed upon them by their husbands' careers.

The purposes of this paper are (1) to focus on the stress areas experienced by ministers' wives and (2) to make recommendations for dealing with such stress. Although the results of several studies by Mace and Mace (1980), Molgaard (1981), and Valeriano (1981) showed that the overall response of ministers' wives toward their lives as ministers' wives is generally positive, those results also indicated stress factors unique to ministers' wives which must be understood in their context in order to attempt to relieve some of the stress.

Stress Areas

The literature cites a number of stress areas common to ministers' wives. Molgaard (1981) surveyed 300 Lutheran and Methodist ministers' wives in Iowa and found five main concerns: salary, time, housing (parsonage or

own home), frequency of moving, and labelling of children as P.K.'s (preachers' kids). Another survey by Ross (1980) divided the stress areas into four main categories: time, friends, money, and housing. Ross indicated that although those stress categories occur in other marriages, they are "peculiar to and aggravated by" the career of ministry (p. 48). An additional stress area from the literature is expectations from congregations, husbands, and self, as well as societal labelling which produces a sense of isolation and loneliness (Molgaard, 1981; Sinclair, 1981). In the following section, a description of the stress areas will be given with emphasis on effects which are unique to the minister's wife.

Labelling and Expectations

An important question that arises in a discussion of stress affecting ministers' wives is "What is so different about being married to a minister compared to being married to any other professional?" Baker (1984) noted that she never introduced another woman by citing the profession of that woman's husband, but she is rarely introduced in any other way than as a pastor's wife. Being a minister's wife is an integral part of her societal identity and she is treated accordingly (Ross, 1980).

As shown by Lavender (1976) and Valeriano (1981), traditional images are immediately visualized and influence the relationship when anyone introduces "my pastor's wife." The results of Molgaard's (1981) study showed that ministers' wives are often uncomfortable endeavoring to live up to the image of the perfect wife, mother and Christian woman. Furthermore, their attempts

to live up to that image produce unrealistic guilt, self-pity, rebellion, or passive conformity. Mace and Mace (1980) found that ministers' wives are almost obsessed with at least their perception that they are expected to be superhuman.

As reported by Lavender (1976), MacDonald (1981), and Turner (1982), there are many expectations for a minister's wife including the following: being plain but not too homely, stylish but not too pretty or well-dressed, capable but not overbearing, and being intelligent but not too well-educated or worldly. Furthermore, she must be an excellent cook and hostess, a gifted Bible teacher, an accomplished pianist, a perfect mother, a dedicated secretary, an exceptional financial planner, and a counselor to her husband and the laity.

Also expected is that the minister's wife will work along side her husband without pay for her services (Croskery, 1977). Taylor and Hartley (1975) identified the Protestant ministry as a clear and extreme example of the two-person career which requires active participation of one spouse in his/her partner's work. Usually this happens in careers which are male dominated, and it is expected that the wife will find vicarious achievement in her husband's career. However, Taylor (1977) cited the high percentage of ministers' wives working, their high level of education, and other factors to show that they increasingly find satisfaction in their own work rather than being willing to derail their careers for the sake of their husbands' ministries.

Time constraints

Time constraints is a stress area for clergy families with lack of time off being the most troubling (Mace & Mace, 1980; Molgaard, 1981). Only six percent of the ministers married to the women in a study by Molgaard (1981) were reported to take 1½ to 2 days off per week and a full thirty percent only rarely take a day off. As found by Mace and Mace (1980), Turner (1982), and Valeriano (1981), one side effect of this lack of time off is that ministers' wives are not able to spend as much time as they would like with their husbands, resulting in many ministers' wives feeling rejected, lonely, and depressed. In addition, Bailey and Bailey (1979) and Molgaard (1981) showed that ministers' wives reported stress from having too many household and child-rearing responsibilities when their husbands are not available to share those tasks.

Frequency of Moving

Several factors enter into the stress experienced with frequent moves. For example, according to Molgaard's study (1981), many ministers' wives find themselves having to adjust to new communities, peer groups, housing, congregations, and job opportunities every few years. They often must move far away from their families of origin, making it impossible to enjoy the benefits of knowing and relating to extended family. Furthermore, as children grow older and leave the home, frequent moves for the minister and wife may make it impossible for them to have regular contact with their own children and grandchildren (Bailey & Bailey, 1979; Valeriano, 1981). Another problem Molgaard (1981) noted was that

ministers' wives face disruption from frequent moves continuing into the later years of ministry, whereas others in our mobile society have become established in their careers and communities by that time. A portion of the stress of moving is associated with the location of the move which is often to small towns. Molgaard (1981) found that in Iowa 62 percent of ministers' wives live in towns of less than 15,000 population where cultural and career opportunities are lacking for the generally well-educated minister's wife. Bouma (1980) reported an additional stress of moving being that most of the details of the move become the responsibility of the wife.

Salary

Inadequate financial support is the main salary problem experienced by ministers' wives as reported by Bouma (1980) and Molgaard (1981). Being among the poorest paid professionals contributes to one of the greatest sources of anxiety in ministers' homes according to Bailey and Bailey (1979) and Molgaard (1981). In 1974, Sommers showed that ministers ranked number 316 out of 432 occupations in rate of pay, placing them among the lowest paying occupations such as farm laborers, waitresses, and cooks. Since then, a 1983 National Council of Churches study (cited in Clergy Pay, 1984) found that the average increase in clergy salaries between 1973 and 1983 was below keeping up with inflation by 17 percent or almost \$1,800. Documenting the low income of clergy families is fairly easy, but the stress caused by low income is harder to document because many clergy and their wives are ambivalent about speaking up

for more adequate support (Presnell, 1977; Molgaard, 1981). Others, such as the 600 American Baptist ministers' wives who responded to a survey by Swilling (1984), indicated that 60 percent of them work outside of the home and 80 percent of those do so out of economic necessity. In addition, 46.6 percent said that their income was inadequate but not seriously so, while 8.39 percent reported receiving very inadequate financial support.

Housing

Housing is provided for clergy families in two different ways. Either a parsonage, usually next door to the church, is provided or a housing allowance is part of the salary package and is used to purchase or rent a home. Both types of housing have some advantages, but they also have disadvantages that add to the stress experienced by ministers' wives.

One of the main disadvantages of living in a house next door to the church is the lack of privacy. Bouma (1980) noted that ministers' wives complained that people drop in without calling first and even walk in without knocking. They reported this happening more often when the house and furniture belong to the church, as though people see the parsonage as their property rather than as a private home for the minister's family. The parsonage is also often used for extra meeting space or as a source for a telephone or a key to the church (Bouma, 1980). In contrast, when a minister's wife lives in a neighborhood which is separated from the church she may miss the contacts with people which she would have by

living close to the church. Additionally, Molgaard (1981) found that being excluded from the social circle of the neighborhood, because they are thought to be different, adds to the sense of isolation and loneliness experienced by ministers' wives.

Bouma (1980) and Molgaard (1981) noted that the recent trend for clergy to buy their own homes in order to gain privacy and financial equity may not continue as a consequence of housing costs being higher than in the past and frequent moves making it difficult to resell a house at a profit. Therefore, some ministers and their wives reported being unhappy with not being given a choice about where to live (Bouma, 1980; Molgaard, 1981). For example, if the church sold the parsonage, the clergy family may have been forced to buy a home when they would rather not have done so.

Labelling of Children as Preachers' Kids

The question of how the minister's wife is affected by the labelling of her children as P.K.'s is not very well documented in the literature. Even Molgaard (1981), who studied labelling of P.K.'s as one of the five main stress areas for ministers' wives did not show how that labelling affects the minister's wife. The questions in Molgaard's study concerned how the children react to the labelling, and she found that 51 percent of the ministers' wives responding indicated that their children dislike having to live up to the expectations of being ministers' kids. In addition, one woman in Molgaard's study (1981) wrote that it is very stressful if a minister puts pressure on his wife and children to

behave a certain way when he is worried about what the congregation thinks. There is also some indication that the laity exerts pressure on ministers' wives as to how those wives should raise P.K.'s (Turner, 1982).

Friends

For most Christian women some of their closest friends will be women in their churches, but fifty-six percent of the ministers' wives in a study by Valeriano (1981) reported not having this freedom. Bouma (1980) noted that the minister's wife is expected to take into consideration the feelings of those women who would feel slighted by not being chosen as her friends. As shown in Valeriano's (1981) study, some ministers' wives fear confiding in church members in case the confidences are repeated to others in the congregation, especially during times of church conflict. Not only does this betrayal of confidence become a personal hurt, but it also adds to the stress experienced by the minister's wife who is very conscious of how her actions affect her husband's career (Oswald, Gutierrez, & Dean, 1980). Sinclair (1981) found that some women's friendships are avoided because they take advantage of the influence or skills of the minister's wife. These women may wish to have access to the minister or to obtain help through crisis times that may not be a fair burden for the minister's wife to carry. Molgaard's (1981) research found that ministers' wives have many acquaintances but few opportunities to develop more meaningful relationships, and when they are separated from extended family, the isolation from close

relationships is more stressful. Another related factor is that the minister's wife really has no pastor to whom she can turn when she has a need for pastoral care or counseling (Croskery, 1977; Stewart, 1974).

Recommendations

Given the stresses impacting ministers' wives it is important to make recommendations for alleviating some of the stress or at least for providing support. Whereas each minister's wife is an individual who shares some concerns with other ministers' wives but also is affected differently by the stresses, the recommendations fall into the following general categories: (a) support groups among peers both during and after seminary, (b) continuing education and skills training for each minister's wife who desires it, (c) addressing congregational expectations with the laity, and (d) marriage enrichment or counseling for the couple. Following is a brief discussion of recommendations in each of these areas.

Support Groups

Classes and support groups led by veteran ministers' wives would be helpful in preparing seminarians' wives for what they can expect later in parish ministry (Bouma, 1980; MacDonald, 1981). Oswald et al. (1980) recommended ongoing support with competent leadership once the woman is in the church as a minister's wife. These support groups could either be with others in the denomination (perhaps at the annual conferences, or in retreat settings), or the groups could be for the wives of local ministers of all denominations.

Continuing Education

Education based on the individual interests or needs of ministers' wives is also important. Molgaard (1981) found that although the average minister's wife is more highly educated than the general public, many put aside their educations or careers in order to support their husbands in seminary or in the early years of ministry. Stewart (1974) noted that many of those marriages break up when the husband has completed his training, partly as a consequence of the wife's feelings of inferiority in the very area in which she has helped her husband gain competence. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents to Valeriano's (1981) survey indicated they needed additional training either to update their own professional competence or to increase their skills for working with the members of their congregations.

Congregational Expectations

Croskery (1977), Lavender (1976), and Oswald et al. (1980) recommended that denominational officials make intentional efforts to educate the laity concerning the pressures they exert on ministers' wives. As recommended by these researchers, the laity can be helped to see the individuality and humanness of ministers' wives through education and awareness raising. Such education can take place through newsletters, which many denominations publish for each member, or through having officials from the denomination work with churches, especially during interim times, to help them become aware of expectations from the laity and other stresses which ministers' wives encounter.

Marriage Enrichment/Counseling

Marriage enrichment retreats for clergy couples are of high value. Mace and Mace (1980), leaders in the field of marriage enrichment, found that in the retreat setting the couples can focus their attentions on what really matters- the quality of their marriage relationships. Marriage counseling, provided by people other than those who make decisions about the minister's career, was strongly recommended by Mace and Mace (1980) and Oswald et al. (1980).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is evidence that ministers' wives experience a considerable amount of stress (Oswald et al., 1980). Many of the stresses are situational and time-limited, although others are part of the daily life of all ministers' wives. The stresses fall into several categories which cluster around those discussed in this paper: time, salary, frequency of moving, housing, friends, labelling of children as preachers' kids, and labelling and expectations for ministers' wives.

Change and alleviation of stress are possible if intentional steps are taken to reeducate the persons involved and to provide support systems for ministers' wives. Such change must involve changing the attitudes and relationships existing between ministers' wives, the attitudes and relationships of ministers' wives and their husbands, and the relationships and attitudes between ministers' wives and local congregations as well as the denominational hierarchy.

The most important consideration is to recognize the individuality of each woman whose husband is a

minister. Although there are similarities, the particular circumstances and responses are different for each minister's wife. Through recognizing the unique circumstances of ministers' wives and the resultant stress from those circumstances and through supporting the individuality of each minister's wife, it is possible to break down the limiting stereotypes and thus begin to alleviate the stress.

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