

Pastor-mothers balance pulpit and parenting

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue

Every now and then, pastor Amy Butler will find herself having to do a little simultaneous parenting and preaching from her pulpit at Calvary Baptist Church in downtown Washington.

"My daughter, in particular, knows the look," said Butler, whose teenage children sit—and occasionally chat—with their friends in the balcony. "And if I'm up front leading worship, I can see everything. So if I need to shoot a look, I do. And they know exactly what that means."

Female pastors with one flock at home and another in the pews say being a minister and a mom is a perpetual juggling act, with high expectations, never enough time and challenges that their male colleagues will almost never face.

At the same time, they say, it can also be a profound blessing.

"Baptist women ministers more than ever before are young, married and starting families," said Pam Durso, executive director of the group Baptist Women in Ministry.

Pregnancy, in particular, creates unusual dynamics for clergy and congregations. Rachel Cornwell doesn't usually talk about herself in her sermons, but one Sunday during Advent, two days before her son was born, she couldn't help but draw parallels to the baby Jesus.

Now the pastor of Woodside United Methodist Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, is preparing for the birth of her third child in August.

"It's the kind of job where you don't clock out. . . .

But I had to make sure that I was really taking my days off and really honoring my family as well as my congregation and my responsibilities to them," said Cornwell, the mother of a six-year-old daughter and a three-year-old son.

Across denominations, clergy moms speak of the gifts of sharing their children with their congregations and the challenges of meeting everyone's needs.

Joe Stewart-Sicking, who has studied Episcopal clergy who have young children, calls it the "church-home spillover." He assisted with a recent study of Episcopal clergy, which found that 84 percent of clergywomen said balancing the dual roles is difficult, compared to 61 percent of clergymen.

Clergywomen spoke of a number of sticky situations, especially with small children. "They talk about their three-year-old seeing them in their clericals and telling them, 'Please take that off,'" said Stewart-Sicking, an assistant professor of pastoral counseling at Loyola University Maryland. "They knew that that meant Mommy was going away."

Even when children are in the sanctuary, the distance between the pulpit and the pews can be difficult for some ministers' children.

Najuma Smith-Pollard, pastor of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, recalled one Sunday when her son, Dorian, preferred the company of his mother over his babysitter. "He still got away . . . and he ran right up there to the pulpit and he held on to my leg, and I kept on doing what I had to do," she said of her son. "When it came time for me to preach, one of the ushers . . . came and got him."

Despite the growing acceptance of women in the pulpit, congregants often worry about how the church will deal with their absence when their baby is born. When Cornwell took eight weeks of maternity leave, she arranged

for others to fill in on Sunday mornings.

"You always have this issue if the young woman you hire . . . gets pregnant, then who's going to take care of their church?" said Adair Lummis, a sociologist at Hartford Seminary who has studied women clergy.

Tonya Vickery of Cullowhee Baptist Church in Cullowhee, North Carolina, said she and her copastor husband split parenting and pastoral duties between them, with each of them baptizing one of their two daughters. "Whoever's on call as the minister at that moment, the other is on call as the parent at that moment," she said.

Clergywomen with adult children say the dynamics have changed as more churches have grown comfortable with female pastors.

"Certainly in the early years, we were trying to prove that women could be ministers, could do this work," said Peg Chamberlin, president of the National Council of Churches and the mother of a 26-year-old daughter. "And on the other hand, there was built into us culturally and perhaps biologically this push to be good mothers, too." Now, she says, many denominations have groups for women in ministry that provide clergywomen with informal networks to discuss how to juggle roles.

Leaders of the Young Clergy Women Project, an online community with more than 500 members, say the most popular sections of their online publications are the ones devoted to "Moms and Ministry."

This past Mother's Day, Cornwell planned to spend her weekly day off—Friday—at a special Mother's Day party at her children's day-care programs. On Sunday after she finished preaching, her husband treated her to a special lunch. "I feel very celebrated," she said. "I feel very blessed." —RNS