

Life in a fishbowl: Survey reveals stresses and joys of pastors' spouses

Despite the challenges, a majority of those married to clergy report satisfaction with their lives.

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

The vast majority of U.S. Protestant pastors' spouses say ministry has had a positive effect on their families, but many report being isolated and under financial stress.

A new LifeWay research survey, released September 12, finds that most spouses are directly involved in the work of their churches, with one in five holding a paid position and two-thirds serving in unpaid capacities.

"The variety of experiences reminds us just not to tuck them into a single mold," said Scott McConnell, executive director of the Nashville-based evangelical research firm.

Some spouses help with the church's music or children's ministries, some serve as secretaries or copastors, and others work outside of the church but also give a listening ear to troubled members.

While 85 percent of respondents said their church takes "good care of us," six in ten agreed that their family's financial needs are not met by the salary received from their church.

On a panel discussing the findings, Lisa Rhea spoke as the wife of a bivocational pastor of a Nashville area Episcopal church. Her expectation is that pastors' salaries tend to be small.

"They're not NFL football players," said Rhea, whose husband, Robert Rhea, is vicar of All Saints' Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee, as well as an emergency room physician.

More than two-thirds of respondents said they are concerned about the level of retirement benefits they will receive.

Spouses also noted stressors in a life of ministry. For example, 79 percent said their congregation expects their family to be “a model family.” Almost half said their family lives in a “fishbowl.” And 69 percent said there are “very few people” in whom they can confide about “the really important matters in my life.”

Dorena Williamson, wife of the senior pastor of Strong Tower Bible Church in Nashville and daughter of parents in full-time ministry, said, “My mother has been probably my chief confidante.”

She also spoke of the challenge of being a “burden bearer” along with her husband, a duty that can follow them even into the grocery store. She said she relies on the self-denying example of Jesus when “some turn and become very critical.”

Despite the challenges, pastors’ wives such as Williamson and Rhea said they still value their experiences.

“It’s never a call to an easy life,” said Rhea, but it’s also an opportunity to “bring grace and a joy that you never thought was possible.”

The survey of 722 spouses included mainline and evangelical Protestants. Only 4 percent were male.

The research was sponsored by Houston’s First Baptist Church, the Southern Baptist Convention’s North American Mission Board, and Houston physician Richard Dockins.

Some other findings about pastors’ spouses include:

- 85 percent said their family has vacation time during a typical year
- 84 percent said they are satisfied with their life
- 72 percent said their spouse had experienced resistance to his or her leadership
- 53 percent are employed in a paid position outside of the church
- 24 percent said their children often don’t want to attend church
- 9 percent have a seminary degree

The mailed survey, conducted between June 21 and August 2, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points. —Religion News Service

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