

My spouse is also my pastor

During the pandemic, I've realized how much I rely on her as a proxy for my faith.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue



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For the last two years I've lived with a pandemic pastor. I overheard my spouse's daily huddles with her staff to learn new technology and plan or reimagine what worship and gathering mean. They experimented with regional zones and prerecorded videos and musical compilations, with Zoom conversations and baptisms in parks and drive-through impositions of ashes. While our home has always been focused on ministry, the pandemic turned it into a church office and sanctuary with seemingly few boundaries.

As I helped with cords and microphones or watched the service in one room while she preached in another, I noticed the tethers of my faith life, the ways church and community shaped me and held me in place, beginning to fray. I could feel each little thread pull from week to week. It was as if a river kept rising until the waters covered my feet. Like a flood eroding a riverbank, these waters began to expose the underlying structures and dependencies of my faith, those unseen pillars that sometimes keep us rooted to a place and a way of being.

In 20 years living with a pastor, I hadn't realized just how much her presence mediated God to me in a sacramental way. I was coming to realize how my spouse's ministry has been a way I've seen God using me and me participating with God. In the absence of a physical church community, it became clear that her ministry was more than an inspiration or a way for me to learn. I was leaning on her gifts and work as my own.

Yes, at church I held babies and served communion and said hello to new faces and connected with friends. But in the absence of weekly gathering I came to see that those little acts were not the tethers of faith and life with God that I thought they were. Having seen the ways people are drawn to my spouse and see God in her, I may have felt close to God simply because I was close to her. The rising waters were pressing me to ask if my sense of who God is and who I am with God were tethered to my proximity to her and what she symbolizes.

So many of us do this. We want to believe ourselves to be a justice-oriented Christian, or a progressive, or committed to diversity, or biblical, or orthodox, or family oriented. To confirm this identity and self-perception we may point to a church program or church members, but often it's the pastor who becomes the icon of what we hope for in ourselves. The pastor becomes the proxy for what we cannot or will not be as fully as we hope or say we want to be, the lens through which we imagine our own goodness and faithfulness. Because we follow them or listen to their sermons or attend their church they become a kind of confirmation of the way we've chosen to live, or at least to talk about living.

That is, until the pastor destroys the icon by misspeaking, by not knowing, by growing into a new conviction, or by just being human.

My spouse's ministry, the way her congregation felt empowered by her—my life with God and sense of call have too often leaned on my proximity to her work, Sunday to

Sunday. Rather than let her life inspire me to find ways to grow, I let her serve as a stand-in for my own growth.

I began to realize this after almost a year of worshiping online, sometimes attentively chatting and liking and humming along, sometimes watching on my phone while Arsenal FC flickered on the big screen, sometimes listening while riding my bike. I wasn't worshipping; I was going through the motions. I began to realize that my pastor was no longer a mediator but more of a proxy. As long as she was doing the work, I didn't have to.

I wonder if this is one of the scars or fears or possibilities COVID has laid bare. Stripped of the presence of people, we are left to ask questions of what we believe and do and are beyond the simple act of showing up at a building on Sunday. I also wonder how the weight of this proxy faith presses on the shoulders of our clergy. Is this what they thought they were being called to? To be everything we ourselves are not willing or able to be enough of?

During the pandemic, I've seen my spouse struggle as virtual church concentrated the job's most difficult elements and hid away too many of its joys. I've watched as members she baptized and visited in hospitals and visited in grief and loss simply decided that church wasn't as important as a free Sunday or a small clutch of friends.

But as the doors have opened again and I've (reluctantly) come back, I've also come to realize how unfair that burden is on the pastors in my midst. I've come to realize how much my own faith shrivels when I do not acknowledge a powerful truth of God's body: that I am needed. And when I open my eyes to the ways that I am needed I can also acknowledge the ways that I need others, the expansive, multiple, complicated ways God speaks in our lives when we are with one another. I hope we can release our pastors from being icons. Even more, I hope we can embrace the ways our pastors need us.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Faith by proxy."