

What Have They Seen in Your House?

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The ‘call’ to the gospel ministry is a great and solemn responsibility that God lays on the heart of an individual. Yet, pastors who are blessed with families also have another priority - the great privilege of leading them to the kingdom. Neither responsibility should be discharged to the detriment to the other. Isaiah 38 & 39 tells the story of Hezekiah’s failure to testify of God’s goodness to the Babylonian emissaries who had visited him to learn about his miracle-working God. The prophet Isaiah confronts him with the question, “What have they seen in your house?” (Isaiah 39:4). In light of the fact that the most natural first recipients of our gospel-sharing endeavours should be those in our families, this is a question we would do well to consider as church leaders within the context of our own families.

The prayer of affirmation known as *The Shema* is considered to be the most important prayer in Judaism. It states,

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength . . .
⁷These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

The *Shema* stresses the importance of parents passing on a spiritual heritage to their children. Ellen White reiterated this thought when she wrote, “Our work for Christ is to begin with the family, in the home . . . There is no missionary field more important than this” (*Adventist Home*, 35). We cannot possibly meet the challenges of our calling in our own strength because pastoral families are specially targeted by the Enemy. It is no accident that Ephesians 6, which speaks of spiritual warfare, follows Ephesians 5 which emphasises the importance of family relationships.

The pastoral family is subjected to internal as well as external pressures. By definition, married pastors make two key vows, one to be faithful to their spouse and the ordination vow to be faithful to God through ministry. These vows often cause conflict in the minister’s experience. This tension is emphasised by the following passages. Jesus stated, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). Yet we are also counselled, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). Ministerial families will always wrestle with where to strike the balance between devotion to the ministry and responsibility to family. Unfortunately, the pastor’s spouse often gets the raw deal of the conflict. Ministry hours are not family friendly and many ministry spouses may be reluctant to express their legitimate needs for fear of being seen as an obstacle to ministry.

With all the legitimate calls on the minister's time it is possible that 'the good can become the enemy of the best'. In order for ministers to fulfil their responsibility to their ministry and their families, time must be budgeted just as we budget our limited finances. This may mean that many important activities may have to be left so that we may do that which is essential.

The very public nature of pastoral ministry often leads to ministry spouses experiencing the pressures of 'living in a fishbowl'. Pastors need to protect their spouses from unrealistic expectations based on out-dated stereotypes of what a ministry spouse should be and the role they should play. Pastors' spouses do not have a job description. Their role is simply to be the wife/husband of the pastor. Their ministry involvement should be based primarily on their individual spiritual giftedness, not on the position the pastor occupies.

God created three divine communities in order to safeguard our need for intimate relationships - marriage, the family and the church. We often make the mistake of prioritising the church over our families. The reality is that, 'As goes the family so goes the church.' The spiritual and emotional health of a pastor's family and the well-being of the church are interrelated.

Pastoral couples can strengthen their families and their ministries, by cultivating their spiritual foundation and emotional connectedness. Christian families, including ministry homes, often neglect intimate couple prayer and meaningful family worship. The marriage covenant is dependent on the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Solomon illustrates this principle when he states, "Two are better than one . . . ¹²And a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (*Ecclesiastes 4:9,12*). Marriage can only fulfil God's purpose when two genuinely spiritual people live by genuinely spiritual principles. The health of a ministry couple's marriage empowers them to authentically gather their children at the family altar.

Our worship must be more than something we do just because it is expected. How we relate to each other in our families will have a significant impact on how our children develop spiritually and emotionally and will be a strong predictor of their future relationships. We are counselled that, "If the parents would enter more fully into the feelings of their children and draw out what is on their hearts, it would have a beneficial influence upon them" (*The Adventist Home*, 19). Family worship can actually become a hindrance to spiritual growth unless parents are able to emotionally engage with their children and be "ministers of grace" (*Child Guidance*, 478) rather than ministers of religion.

When pastors do not achieve an equitable balance between home and ministry, children can often become resentful of the church. They may ask themselves, 'What kind of God would force parents to serve Him so obsessively that they don't have time and energy for their children?' According to George Barna's research, the optimum ages at which children make decisions for Christ are between 5-13 (www.barna.org). This is a confirmation of what Mrs White said many years ago that, "It is in these early years that the affections are the most ardent, the heart most susceptible of improvement" (*Review and Herald*, December 17, 1889). Barna also found that parents continue to be the major influence on the children's

spiritual choices, being two to three times more effective in leading children to faith than any church programme.

The sadness of Hezekiah's story was that he failed to share his testimony and missed a gilt-edged opportunity to be a living witness of God's goodness. It is a sobering thought that our personal witness can change the course of history for our spouses and our children. The 'call' to be a pastor embraces the wonderful privilege to minister to their families as much, if not more, than to the communities in which we serve. While ministers may have a tendency to judge their standing with God based on the success of their ministry, we are counselled that, "Men and women, children and youth, are measured in the scales of heaven in accordance with that which is revealed in their home life. A Christian in the home is a Christian everywhere" (*SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol.5, 1085).