

The pastor's husband: Redefining expectations

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [July 14, 2009](#) issue

"You can be a minister. Just don't marry one," I heard myself telling a little girl in my church. And then I wondered where that came from. I suspect that I meant it as a compliment to my husband, who was standing nearby. Perhaps I had been short-tempered, as I sometimes am on Sunday mornings, fueled by the adrenaline induced by a strong sermon or the anxiety caused by a weak one. So my comment to the girl was really a comment to my husband—my way of saying that I know it is not always easy to be married to a minister.

Yet having recognized that, I must also confess that I cannot imagine being a minister without him. Lou and I met before seminary. He has watched me study for law school tests when I wanted to drop out of divinity school. He has attended church interviews with me, knowing he was being judged as closely as I was. He has read drafts of sermons, drafts of newsletters and even drafts of funeral bulletins. And it was he who discovered the denomination that we are now a part of. I am certain that I would not be a minister today if it were not for Lou, who saw gifts in me when I could not see them, and who loved the church at times when I could not.

Lou is a preacher's kid, but not a PK in the usual sense. His father was the dean and later the president of a Presbyterian seminary. The language of church and theology is his native tongue. But by the time I met Lou, when he was in his early 20s, he was sick of church, church talk and churchpeople and ready to enjoy a little time away from that world.

After a few months of serious dating, I finally got up the courage to tell him I was planning to go to divinity school. I worried about announcing this, well aware that it was not the most glamorous of plans. "All right, God, I give up," he said. "I'll come back to church."

His seemingly perfect response was later mediated by reality, as I later noted that he had said he would come back to church, but had not specified which church. In

those early days, I had been dragging him to high-church Episcopal services. There was tension on those Sunday mornings. This was not his church, and he knew it.

A healthy runner, in worship services Lou seemed to develop all sorts of physical ailments. He fell to his knees too late and with a groan, and coughed and hacked as the incense came by. He critiqued the homilies all the way home. He attended on the grounds that it was more important to me than it was to him, but his participation came with a certain malicious obedience.

Once he suspected that I too was restless with our arrangement, he began to investigate. We had long talked about the idea of finding a church home that would be new to both of us, but what I really had in mind was a church that was new to him. It never occurred to me that there was another church for me than the one I had been raised in. I figured as long as I did nothing, we could stay where we were and he would eventually come around. I have since come to learn that this is not an uncommon assumption among seminarians in love.

By then Lou was working as a labor union organizer. He wanted a church with a commitment to justice, and he found it in a local United Church of Christ congregation whose minister joined Lou's union workers on the picket lines. But I, now a divinity school student and the resident expert on religion, refused to attend that church. I had my reasons.

"Why won't you at least visit one of these churches?" he asked.

"Because I've heard they have tacky worship," I explained.

Today I lead such a church. I think our callings do not always come to us directly. They can come to us through other people, and sometimes, remarkably enough, through our spouses.

I am aware that for many clergy, the role of spouse is not simply one of support and affirmation. I know that many ministers are married to people they love but with whom they do not share a love of the church. I am aware that many who marry pastors begin by loving the church and end up hating it.

The minister's wife has long struggled with issues of role. In the old days, she was expected to play the organ, teach Sunday school and be another staff person at the church. I know of ministries that would have failed were it not for the diplomatic

skills of the minister's wife. I know of churches that would have gone under had it not been for her unpaid service. But as we honor that role and service, we must recognize that today clergy couples do not, and should not, represent a two-for-one deal.

The clergy husband, a relatively new character on the religious scene, gets a break from some of that. If there are role expectations, they are so new that they have less power. In some ways, the clergy husband is treated like a man who does something generous that is against gender type. Like the dad who shows up at school to volunteer, surrounded by volunteer mothers, he receives special attention for doing what women have done for years.

When a clergy wife misses church, people wonder where she is. The clergy husband can show up at church and hear, "How wonderful that you are so supportive." When a clergy wife chooses not to participate in a role that previous clergy wives have played, she runs the risk of disappointing the church. The clergy husband seems to get to choose his role, and given that most people do not know what to expect of a clergy husband, any interest he has in any aspect of the church is greeted with delight. "Your husband is really something," they tell me over and over again.

I have married friends who are both clergy, each of them pastoring different churches. When they were hired, both churches understood that they would see little of their pastor's spouse, for the most obvious of reasons. Both churches honor this and seem to get it. But when the female minister's husband shows up for a special event at her church, he is greeted like a rock star, with comments like, "How wonderful you could make it. We know you must be so busy!" When the male pastor's wife shows up at an event at his church, the members' attitude seems to be, "Well, it's about time," or "Finally! We were beginning to wonder if you existed."

In most clergy families, the minister's partner is what I have come to call a "civilian." This speaks to the foreignness of the clergy role in our society, a role sometimes even foreign to the spouse. I have heard from many clergy friends that they find themselves unable to convey the wonderful oddness of the pastor's role to their spouses, unable to explain the pastoral life in a compelling enough way. "So just don't answer the phone," the spouse will say during dinner, only to sit angry and confused as the pastor interrupts yet another meal to respond to the ring. "You're not that important, you know," the spouse mutters as the pastor converses with somebody else.

Over the years, the tension in the family grows, until the pastor, who was once dashing out of the house to tend to church emergencies, is now dashing out of the house to avoid the emergency at home. If we are to speak honestly about the pressures that church work can put on a family, we must admit that some pastors hide out in their work rather than dealing with the hurting people at home.

There are clergy couples whose struggles get passed on to their children, who often do not want to enter a church when they become adults. For these families, the church has become a jealous mistress—and what children would delight in spending quality time with their parent's paramour?

The future of church leadership depends on our looking honestly at this issue. Clergy can be single or married. But if they are married, we must not, in our desire to be politically sensitive and inclusive, pretend that these marriages play no role in the calling. To look at ministry without considering the role of the minister's spouse ignores a factor that could make or break a pastor's leadership. And to turn a blind eye to the struggles of the clergy spouse may ensure that the next generation resents and abandons the church.

One of the great struggles for clergy couples stems from the fact that our marriages are so public. Like it or not, the clergy spouse is always being watched. Marital interactions over who is driving the children home from church or where the potluck dish was lost take place on a stage. Families all around the parish hall could be having similar moments, but ours will be more closely observed.

Ministers are used to this scrutiny, but clergy spouses move in and out of that spotlight. In their daily lives or at work, they are treated one way, then at church they are given attention in a different way. Given that they move back and forth, they are not always aware of the dynamics that the minister knows inside and out.

My husband claims to have a permanent bruise on his foot from all the times I have kicked him under the table for saying something I deemed inappropriate. He may refer to something I consider private about me, himself or another member of the church, and my foot flies out like a heat-seeking missile.

The next morning, we parse it all out and review the conversation. Often Lou remains baffled at my reaction, thinking that I have been oversensitive or too concerned about what others think. He may comment that I have lost my edge—which infuriates me, because it's what I worry about too. But I will be just as

baffled if he does not see it my way. Could he not read the confused expressions on their faces? Does he not recall the church conflict that arose out of just this sort of misunderstanding?

Sometimes I have to remind myself that most people get to attend church events without getting kicked by the minister. They get to say what pops into their head. Being married to me changes the way my spouse experiences his community of faith, and not always for the better. So I am grateful that despite our differing analyses the morning after, when I give him that kick or that look, he usually yields to my instincts and stops telling the story. He changes the way he acts because he is the minister's spouse.

His swearing is another issue entirely. Lou works in the labor movement. I work in the church. You can see where this is going. I learned the hard way that it is impossible to swear on a part-time basis. Back in seminary, I thought I could pull it off. I swore with my divinity school friends (yes, we did, and yes, they still do), but in churches I was careful to choose my words more carefully. Until once when I was driving a car full of youth fellowship members, I accidentally ran a stop sign. As I veered to avoid a crash, I yelled out—well, you can imagine. From that point on, the kids called me Pastor Potty Mouth, and I deserved it. So I tried to stop swearing in general, so that when a brick fell on my foot at church, the wrong word would not come out. And that works pretty well for me.

But if Lou were not to use salty language in his work world, it would appear odd. So he is still struggling to be bilingual, a curser during the week and a noncurser at church and home. You can imagine how well that works. When Lou's conversation at a church party heats up, so does his language. And I have learned to live with it.

In clergy marriages, we have to pick our battles. When do we ask our spouses to yield to our standards and when do we rejoice in letting them be themselves? While we might want to say that our spouses should be themselves, most of us occupy a more complicated middle ground. I have seen clergy couples in which the weight of expectation from the minister reduced the spouse to a bland and bored partner—such spouses dread church events because they cannot be themselves and therefore can never have any fun. I have heard from clergy spouses who find that the numerous role expectations even prevent them from worshipping.

On the other hand, I have seen cases in which clergy spouses apply the highest standards to themselves, trying to be perfect but ending up isolated—perfect clergy partners with no real friends in the church.

I hold out hope that the clergy husbands of the world may be making the church a better place for the clergy wives. I pray that this new breed of spouse will be able to love the church on his own terms, and to find there a real worshiping community as opposed to an unpaid part-time job. I pray that all our spouses will be able to follow their own calls to volunteer or not to volunteer, and that they will make friendships that are deeper than a role or a job.

I am aware that in some ways, my husband is not a new breed of clergy spouse. After all, he participates on Sunday mornings. He is a great support to me in my work. But he and I have learned many things the hard way—for example, that I may not accept invitations or volunteer requests on his behalf. We have learned that he should not serve on church committees. While some clergy spouses offer helpful sermon feedback lovingly received by the pastor, we have learned that in our relationship, the question “How did you like the sermon?” is a lot like the question, “Does this dress make me look fat?” There is only one good answer, and it may or may not be truthful.

There are times when Lou and I struggle with the fact that we both have demanding and potentially draining jobs. In both of our work settings, most of our colleagues have couple relationships in which one career takes precedence over the other. In some cases, one spouse works part-time or not at all. We both have noted that our colleagues, whether ministers or union organizers, for the most part do not have spouses that work as many hours as they do. So by putting together two equally demanding careers, both of which could use the support of a spouse with more free time, we experience tensions along the way in our family life.

When I was asked to preach at my denomination’s national gathering, I simply assumed that the whole family would attend. The event was to take place at a convention center in Minneapolis during the summer. In the year that led up to the big event, the idea of speaking in front of 5,000 people grew both more exciting and more nerve-wracking. It never occurred to me that I would be there without Lou, but it turned out that he had to prepare for an impending work strike, so he and the children stayed home.

My dear father attended in his stead—quite ill, armed with a walker, a sleep machine, multiple medications and boundless enthusiasm. My father’s frailty and determination made me miss my husband’s presence all the more.

After the sermon, as I wandered the convention center, everywhere I went people asked about my husband and children and wondered if they were proud of me. I felt sad and embarrassed by their absence. It seemed pathetic to say that they had watched it Web-streamed on our computer back home. I avoided answering such questions, allowing people to think he was there when he was not. But the fact was that the big event in my professional life did not trump the demands in his. It remains a painful memory for both Lou and me to this day. We both wish it could have been different. In such cases, it seems impossible to make the right call.

One of the thorniest issues for clergy couples is the sense of call—not just in small instances but in big ones. A minister who considers a call to a new church is also considering a new church home and perhaps a new location for the family.

The minister may feel called to a new ministry setting, or in a denomination with an appointment system, the pastor may be sent there. In the latter case a two-career couple can feel particularly strained, and the church is losing gifted pastors because of it. But even in systems in which the pastor gets to choose, the spouse plays a role that is different from that in other fields. Lou has taken part in every serious job interview I have ever had. This would be preposterous for a teacher, a plumber or a surgeon, but in our tradition, when the search process between a church and a candidate gets serious, the church brings the couple in to interview and to spend a weekend driving around the community, looking at schools, houses and parks. The spouse is being interviewed as much as the pastor, no matter what anybody says.

Lou has spent many a car ride being told about the sports leagues of a given community, or the joys of a particular park, well aware that this place may become our new home. During this trip, when the cell phone rings with a call from the children, he picks it up, dealing with a medical issue hundreds of miles away so that I can make small talk with a potential employer. All the while I am wondering what he is dealing with back home but trying to give the impression of total attention to the church. This is a strange way to look for a job, and certainly not how Lou looks for one in his field.

I in turn look at how these churchpeople treat him. For God doesn't call one member of a family to happiness and fulfillment and leave the others to be miserable. Many clergy families are broken apart by a new call that only the minister feels. I have heard of marriages that have ended after such an experience. In one case, looking back, the spouse said, "At our old church we were so happy, but after we moved, it all changed." Did the church end the marriage? I would not like to assign such blame to a congregation. But accepting a call that honors only one person can do great damage. A fresh set of demands, the loss of friends, a new community with different expectations add to a spouse's resentment. In cases in which the spouse has noticed that the pastor's call to the church is somehow more important than everyone else's call, that resentment may spread to the church.

Even the most considerate of couples will have times when they perceive the call differently. When Lou had an opportunity to take a job in the South, the two of us went to check it out. I suppose it was all those church interviews that made this seem like a natural way to do things. I did not want to move at all, but I also knew that to rule out the possibility would damage our marriage. I had to be open to God's call in his life.

As that weekend unfolded, it was obvious that Lou could make a great difference in this job. But it also became clearer and clearer that there would be no work for me in this part of the country. At dinner he was hit with some kind of food poisoning that left him weak and incapacitated. As the hours of the wretched illness took their toll, he finally said, "I don't think God would be calling me to go somewhere where you could not be a minister." I look back upon that as one of the most loving things anyone has ever said to me. These were not sentimental words of affection, just the straightforward statement of someone who holds me and my calling dear.

But I also worried about what he was giving up. I even wondered if he actually did have food poisoning, or if this was a gut-splitting physical reaction to the loss of a long-held dream. In a marriage, these deep disappointments make for resentment, and so they should probably be shared equally.

Shortly after that trip, I realized that while I didn't want to move, I had to. I didn't have to move to a place where there was no work for me in my field, but I also could not insist on staying where he was unhappy. So I agreed, very reluctantly, to look elsewhere, in fits and starts, and in between many late-night "You're ruining my life" arguments.

Later that year, at a church interview in a very wealthy community, the search committee members wined and dined us. They asked Lou about his upbringing, his schooling and his work. He answered the questions with good humor, but the conversation continued only around the two subjects of his schooling and upbringing. Clearly, his work as a union organizer was not something they wanted to talk about. I tried to imagine my husband, whose work is his passion, living in a community where no one wanted to hear about it. I couldn't, and we did not end up there. To be honest, that was because they did not choose me. So even now, I am left with the lingering question: Would I have had the good sense to say no to them? I hope I would have. But I imagine the decision would have come hard and with my own bout of "food poisoning."

At the church I currently serve, the search committee took us on a similar weekend jaunt around the community. At the dinners and brunches of that exhausting weekend, I would observe Lou. His hands were waving as he spoke, a sign that he was talking about the things he cares about. Some people challenged him on the subject of unions, but he enjoys that. I heard him putting forth his strong political views in a community that I suspected did not share them. But he was being himself. There would be no kicking Lou under the table on that important discernment weekend.

The search committee seemed to understand that as well. In debating with Lou, they were also being themselves. We were not pretending to be perfect. Nor were we pretending that we were all of one mind. When that happens in the midst of a job interview, you begin to suspect that this really might be the body of Christ.

From now on when little children come up to me and ask me about the ministry, I will no longer say, "You can be a minister, just don't marry one." Instead I will pray that their callings will lead them to be themselves in all their glory.

Should they choose a partner one day who follows this odd and wondrous calling, I might warn them that it will not be easy. But I also hope they will not be scared away. We clergy need all the help we can get.

This essay will be part of a forthcoming book on pastoral ministry.