

10 tips for couples considering co-pastoring (and 10 for those hiring them)

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My husband and I serve as co-pastors and heads of staff at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Portland, Oregon, each at two-thirds time. We are often asked about being married co-pastors by people considering this model. And we have more than a few reflections about it.

These lists are by no means complete, but I hope they are a good starting point for couples thinking about working together and for search committees considering a clergy couple.

Suggestions for couples

1. Do not rely solely on your denomination's matching system.
2. Be creative in your cover letter. I wrote about my husband's gifts for ministry and he about mine. Briefly lay out how you would be co-pastors.
3. Be clear about whether you would share one position or if you want more than that (each three-quarters time, each full-time, etc.).
4. Once you get your foot in the door, look at the church dossier or job description. Using what they provide, explain who would do what and what you would share.
5. Be realistic about the hours you will work. When we began serving together, we were each half time. For us that meant each of us working about 30 hours per week, because some of those are overlap hours—when we are both at a meeting or leading worship, or conducting a wedding or funeral together.
6. Be honest with each other about the state of your marriage. If you are in a rocky place, serving as co-pastors is no way to strengthen your relationship.
7. Let the committee know if you are willing to share an office or if that's a deal breaker.

8. Be clear with each other from the beginning about accountability and critique. When is this person your spouse and when is this person your colleague?
9. Leave domestic things at home. Do not fight with each other at staff meetings, committee meetings, or—for God's sake—in worship. Also, public displays of affection make some people uncomfortable. Never kiss each other at a staff meeting. Trust me on that one.
10. Engage the services of a coach, counselor, or therapist to work with you both. If this is the first time you've worked together, it will be especially helpful to have a third party—someone who is not a part of the church—to talk things over with.

Suggestions for committees

1. Be open to the possibility of a clergy couple. Otherwise you might miss some great candidates.
2. Talk with congregations that have called a clergy couple and ask how it's been working.
3. If the couple has served together before, ask about that. If they have not served together before, ask them how they envision dividing the work.
4. Look for signs of the health of their marriage without asking them direct questions about it. For instance, our search committee was impressed that we never interrupted each other.
5. Consider the plus side: when you call a clergy couple, you get a wider diversity of gifts. You get two personalities and working styles.
6. Consider the minus side: when you call a clergy couple, you take some risks. The marriage could end. Family crises affect both pastors. If the couple are heads of staff, there are now two people in authority rather than just one; it could feel overwhelming for other staff members.
7. Be clear with the couple about the time of the position. Is it one position for two half-time people? Is there room to expand—each three-quarters time or full time?

8. Be clear from the beginning about things such as the preaching schedule. If there are other pastors, do they preach less often? Do the co-pastors share equally in preaching? Who supervises whom on staff?
9. Understand that this couple will take vacations together and may go on study leave together.
10. Stay as clear as you can as you go deeper into the conversation. Put things in writing, too.

Clergy couples might not be right for every congregation. But the congregation we serve has responded positively to us and to this model. We are grateful to serve where we do and to be working with each other.