

Her Fight: How Many Pastors' Spouses Deal with Depression

We were driving through the piney woods of East Texas, a few hours into our annual marathon drive back to North Carolina.

I was serving as pastor of a rural church about an hour south of Raleigh at the time, and we were headed back after spending Christmas in Texas with our families.

I loved being a pastor. The church I was serving could not have been a more kind or generous group of people. They loved us hard, and we tried to do the same in return.

But each year as we made our pilgrimage home to Texas for Christmas, I noticed it was growing harder and harder to leave.

Texas was home. And we missed it. We missed the people, the food, our family. All of it.

So, as we drove back to North Carolina, my wife brought up the idea of beginning to look for jobs in Texas. We'd had this conversation before, but that day as we drove, her voice held a different urgency.

Something had changed, but what?

Later that spring, I came across Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver's book, "This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers." In it, the two discuss the beauty and struggle of being a pastor.

In one poignant chapter, Daniel opens up about the difficulty of this life for couples.

As a pastor, you feel you are called to the church in which you serve, but what happens when your spouse isn't finding the same sense of fulfillment and purpose where you are?

Would God call one person in a marriage to happiness and fulfillment while

leaving the other to be miserable?

As I read and reread this chapter, it began to dawn on me that I was living this mistake. I was living out my calling, content in my work and fulfilled in my vocation.

But my wife? She was miserable.

The reason she was miserable wouldn't become clear for almost another full year. By then, I'd resigned as pastor of our church, we'd moved back to Texas, and I had begun a different career in higher education.

We said this was the life we'd prayed for, the life we wanted, and yet things only got worse for my wife.

Depression works this way. It doesn't know when you have what you want or are living the life of your dreams. It is a silent disease that appears and reappears at its leisure.

Even in the years since she was diagnosed, we struggled to grasp fully this new way of living life together.

There are good days and there are bad days. And there is no way of knowing which days will be which. Such is the nature of depression.

I won't go so far as to blame the church for my wife's depression. She may very well have experienced this even if I had been in another vocation.

But I do believe there is a lot about being married to a pastor that created an environment that accelerated this process for her.

Choosing to be married to a pastor is hard. It is like signing a contract in which no part of who you are or what you do as a family will be private.

You constantly live wondering what those who sit next to you at church think about you as a parent and spouse, as well as about how you and your children look and act.

Everything feels like a referendum on you and your family, whether this is reality or not.

Many ministers' spouses feel the weight of this daily and, for some like my wife, it eventually grows into depression.

I am constantly amazed at how far our society has come in its knowledge and understanding of mental health issues. But we have so much farther to go, especially in the church.

Most people who attend church have little understanding of the pressures they knowingly or unknowingly put on their ministerial staff and, by proxy, those staff members' families.

My wife fell victim to this and struggled for years to find her voice and the strength to fight for herself and her mental health.

We as the church need to come to a fuller understanding of the often unrealistic expectations and pressures we place on ministers and their families.

We need churches who are willing to rethink their model of ministry and how much they ask of so few.

And we need churches who will be willing to lead out in the conversation on mental health, helping those who are weak to find their voice.

Then maybe instead of this being her fight or his fight, it might become our fight.

Editor's note: This article is part of a series this week for Mental Health Awareness Month. The previous articles in the series are:

[*How Coronavirus Affects Your Mental Health and What You Can Do*](#) | Cate Schilling

[*Despite ACA, Not All Insurance Provides Mental Health Care*](#) | Monty Self

[*7 Issues Your Family Must Navigate During COVID-19 Crisis*](#) | Kristyn Arnold

[*Young Adults Face Mental Health Issues in 'Emerging Adulthood'*](#) | Rebekah Gordon

[*Maintaining Clergy Mental Health Proves to be Complex Puzzle*](#) | Elizabeth Denham Thompson

