

Marriage and Family Ministry Starts in Our Own Homes

As a clergy spouse, I struggled to balance being in ministry with honoring personal needs – both my own and our children’s. Through marriage enrichment experiences, fortunately, my husband and I developed deeper self-awareness and mutual understanding, while learning communication and conflict management skills that transformed our family life. I realized the folly of trying to shield my husband from the demands of marriage and family life. His full engagement as husband and father, in fact, enhanced his ministry. I came to see that sometimes being busy and distracted is more about feeling important than serving God – and maybe even a way to avoid the profound demands of intimate relationships. I began to wonder about the effect of praising laity who are “always at church” and decided that the church should do more to train disciples of Jesus Christ for transformation of their homes, as well as the world.

While on a mission trip in Argentina in the year 2000, I met Margaret Stockwell, widow of Rev. Eugene Stockwell, a renowned missionary and church agency executive. She showed me an article she was writing and encouraged me to share her story and her thoughts with others. “How is it possible,” she wrote, “that those who denounce systems of injustice in society so frequently practice injustice in the very heart of their own families? I refer here to **pastors, missionaries, and church lay leaders who put the needs of others first, while neglecting their own family members.** I see this not just in a few extreme cases, but throughout the church, wherever raising a healthy family is considered less important than ministering to a congregation or shaping church policy.”

Margaret and Eugene grew up in missionary families in Africa and Latin America respectively. After marrying and then serving as missionaries in Uruguay for ten years, they moved to the United States in 1962. Eugene worked for the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries in New York City for ten years, then with the National Council of Churches for eleven, followed by six years with the World Council of Churches. When they came to the United States and Eugene began to travel a lot, Margaret found integration into American culture very difficult. The adjustment was even more challenging for their four children, then ranging from one to ten years of age. Neither Eugene nor the church realized the pain the family was experiencing. When Eugene traveled, Margaret and the children awaited his return with joyful anticipation, eager to hear of his journeys and to reunite once again as a family. They soon realized, however, that Eugene now had little time for his family. There were always letters to write, speeches to prepare, and meetings to attend. Margaret said, “We felt isolated and broken, sacrificed for the urgency of ‘The Kingdom.’ Surely Eugene did not mean for this to happen, but it did, and I take responsibility for that as well. We hurt our children by living a lifestyle that had been modeled for us, because we didn’t know how to do differently.”

“When I speak of a family being broken,” Margaret explained, “I mean something much stronger than wounded. ‘Broken’ - in this sense - refers to a hole in the soul, a very deep sense of abandonment and lack of love. This terrible experience takes place when we feel as though we are the last to be cared about and for, and then only if there is time and energy left over. We feel like orphans, marginalized within the very heart of the church. Protecting, listening, disciplining, loving, and being present are all basic to the care of a healthy family. Children need to receive tender love and care from both parents and experience the unique gifts each one has to give. The sense of abandonment is even more painful when parents are present physically, at least now and then, but not emotionally.”

Margaret explained that she grew up believing that God called her to work outside the home. Many times, she confessed, even though physically with her children, she was not present emotionally and spiritually. She was thinking about “the work of God,” blinded by belief and

training to the fact that our children are part of God's community, gift, and creation. "Often I neglected them to get to my meetings or to whatever I thought God was calling me to do, ignoring their needs in order to respond to what I was convinced was God's call."

Margaret reports that she has seen many pastors, missionaries, and other church leaders running busily about trying to mend a broken world, while the very pain they are trying to heal elsewhere festers in their own homes. Overlooking or ignoring the needs of those with whom we have covenants of love and care casts doubt on whatever we say about God's love. God calls us to follow Christ and proclaim the Good News to all, including - although not limited to - those with whom we have made sacred covenants. In a sense, our first "church" is the family. Learning to really love in that hard place, even imperfectly, empowers us to love and serve more effectively in our churches, in our communities, and in our world. Margaret asserts her conviction that God calls pastors, missionaries, and other church workers who marry and have families to treat their spouses and family members with honor, respect, and loving care.

Margaret noted that early in our Methodist history, pastors were not allowed to marry. When finally given permission to wed, it was understood that wives and children were the last to be cared for, as documented in Charles Ferguson's *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* (Doubleday, 1971). Some of our missionaries took this model of family neglect all around the world. Even business and other professional groups often expect their employees to make a primary commitment to their work, with families receiving only whatever time and energy is left over. Some pastors' wives, daughters, and sons decide that they want nothing more to do with the church and look elsewhere for the love and care they crave. Some even develop addictions or mental illness as a result of their feelings of abandonment. **By encouraging clergy and lay persons to put limits on and boundaries around their work, congregations can foster healthy growth for families and individuals.**

Margaret expresses deep gratitude for Karatana, a Christian lay-ecumenical community that helped her family experience some healing before Eugene's death - and even more after. Likewise, my husband and I are indebted to persons and programs that have helped us develop deeper, healthier relationships within our family. When our adult children remind us of times when they felt we cared less about their needs than about the needs of others, we are grateful for the opportunity to express our regret and make amends. For clergy and lay families alike, love flowing more freely within our homes may overflow into our churches, communities, and world. Strengthening our own marriages and families empowers us to help others do the same, thus more effectively nurturing "disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

Resources

Visit www.marriagelovepower.net and click on "Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources" for information about relationship education, parenting, marriage preparation and enrichment, ministry with clergy families, and support for families in crisis or transition. See especially *Families in Ministry: How to Thrive—Not Just Survive* by Andreas and Angela Frész (Dresden, Germany:Golden Gate Ventures GmbH, 2009). YWAM Pub., 800-922-2143, www.ywampublishing.com. See also www.families-in-ministry.com.) You may also search for these and other relevant articles by topic or title at the Discipleship Ministries website (<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>).

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