

Resourcing Clergy Families in Crisis and Transition

A Clergy Family Care Summit, convened by the United Methodist General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW), met in Chicago in October, 2014, to consider the unique challenges and stresses experienced by clergy families and to explore how the church can be more supportive. Participants agreed that healthy clergy families contribute positively to effective pastoral leadership. Most of the twenty-three persons present -- clergy, clergy spouses, adult children of clergy, and general agency staff -- already understood the tensions caused by expectations of the pastor's family, by frequent moves, and by parsonage-living. A series of brief presentations surfaced additional concerns: the need for mental health care and support; the struggles of racial and ethnic families -- especially in cross-cultural appointments; the challenges faced by clergy couples; and all-too-common patterns of overwork and neglect of physical and emotional health. One presenter told of parsonages located in neighborhoods plagued by drive-by shootings. A pastor and spouse shared that when their young adult son told them he knew himself to be homosexual, lay leaders in their congregation pressured him to denounce the son from the pulpit, even though they continued to love and support him. Those lay persons interfered with and undermined his ministry for two years, until the pastor finally gave up and requested another appointment. Clergy families, like all others, struggle with relationship breakdown, parenting difficulties, eldercare and extended family issues, addictions, sudden illness and chronic disease, and the loss of loved ones. By supporting them through these and other challenges, the church can equip them to minister more effectively within their congregations and communities.

In preparation for this Summit, I surveyed Bishops throughout the connection and received some very encouraging reports of conference support systems and initiatives designed to help clergy families survive and thrive. I asked them to name what they felt to be pressing issues for clergy and then to share resources and initiatives they found helpful. I was happy to read about those areas in which counseling is encouraged and made readily available; conference policies ensure fair treatment and pastoral care for those facing crises, such as divorce; resource notebooks ("Thrival Kits") provide information needed by clergy families; leadership teams focus on developing intercultural competency; Staff Parish Relationship Committees receive training and encouragement to advocate for clergy families; marriage and family strengthening programs and resources nurture healthy relationships for all. You can read the full report [here](#). During the Summit, Bishop Sally Dyck shared that the Northern Illinois Conference offers annual transition workshops for churches and clergy with new appointments and encourages local church Staff Parish Relations Committees to anticipate and provide for the needs of the family moving in to the parsonage and community.

The following recommendations, listed in the report of the Summit at the GCSRW website, (<http://www.gcsrw.org/Portals/4/clergy-family-care-summit.pdf>), challenge church leaders to take proactive steps toward strengthening the health -- physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual -- of clergy and clergy families.

Annual Conferences, Bishops, and Cabinets

- Have bishops and cabinets or other supporting groups host or attend listening groups for clergy families to identify their experiences of expectations, blessings, stresses and support.
- Support conference mental health initiatives publically and financially, reducing stigma for clergy by normalizing the presence and need for mental health care in church settings.

- Provide periodic mental health care screenings at district and conference meetings for clergy and their entire family.
- Use events, retreats, covenant groups, and social media support groups as important tools for reducing isolation and offering places for the spouse or children of clergy to receive peer support and mentoring.

District Committees and Superintendents:

- Provide additional resources and training for SPRC members in the areas of clergy family stress and support.
- Offer transitional workshops prior to and following moves for clergy, families and congregations.
- Provide support to clergy families through the services of a district nurse, chaplain or counseling service.

Local Congregations and Staff Parish Relations Committees:

- Discuss openly expectations for clergy persons and their families. Conversations about privacy, church attendance, and respect for the individuality of the child or partner of a clergy person can greatly reduce stress in both the family and congregation.
- Ensure that SPRCs have a “health covenant” with the clergy person to include use of time off, getting an annual physical, having a mental health check, and taking time for spiritual practices.
- Train all churches who receive a cross-cultural appointment to help the congregation understand, accept, and welcome the family of their new clergy person.

The Clergy Family Care Task Force is developing more resources for supporting clergy families. In June, 2015, the GCSRW launched a new website with lists of books and webinars, articles on clergy health, a parsonage standards handbook, and tips for welcoming a new pastor <http://www.gcsr.org/Resources/ForClergyFamilies.aspx>. MaryJane Pierce Norton, Associate General Secretary of UM Discipleship, notes that the web page resources provide helps not only for clergy family members themselves, but also for those in local congregations and annual conferences who want to provide effective care and support for clergy and their families. “Staff-parish relations committees, district superintendents, boards of ordained ministries—all of these entities—seek to support clergy and have the hope and desire for healthy clergy in all dimensions of their lives,” she says. “The resources provided can guide those serving in these roles in addressing issues, providing webs of caring, giving guidance for additional help.” Watch for additions to this website as awareness increases and as we learn from each other how to support clergy and their families, especially when in crisis and transition. See also the “Ministering with Clergy Families” section and other marriage and family ministry documents under “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title or topic at <http://www.umdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>.

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