

The Pastor's Mistress? SELC District Central Circuit 2009

How might a pastor feel about the increasing involvement of his wife in a new job with a person who is a friend to both? This exercise in empathic engagement discovered an increasing level of presumed anxiety in the participants and suggested that pastors' wives may have a similar increasing anxiety over their husbands' involvement in the church.

Introduction

A pastor takes a call to a new congregation. Whether he's new to the ministry or just new to that congregation makes no difference in the following story. Either way, he's probably full of excitement and anticipation. Perhaps he's already developed some plans about what his ministry in this congregation will be like. Maybe his family is also excited about living in a new city, working with new people, learning new things. On the other hand, they may be a little apprehensive, too, being unsure about what the future will bring.

At any rate, they move; they settle in; they begin to get accustomed to the church and the community. All goes well for a while, but eventually the pastor's wife begins to suspect that something is missing in their relationship. She can't quite put her finger on it, but it seems that she is seeing her husband less and less because he's doing more and more at the church. She feels like she's left to take care of their home and family by herself. The more he's involved in church and district and community, the more alone she feels. Who does she turn to for help, or even just a listening ear?

The Survey

At the spring 2009 Circuit Conference of the SELC District Central Circuit pastors we began to address this question and these issues with a survey that the eleven attending pastors were asked to take (see Appendix 1). The survey presented a scenario much like the one above, except that it was the wife who was offered the new and exciting job working for Ted, a friend to both husband and wife. The scenario developed in five different scenes, each one briefly describing another step as the wife becomes more wrapped up in her work with Ted. After the presenter described each scene the participants were asked to identify up to six feelings that they might have relative to the situation in each scene. They received "prompts" for their responses in the use of the so-called "Feelings Wheel," in which a large number of "feelings" words are grouped in three levels like spokes around a wheel (See Appendix 2). The center level consists of six major categories of feelings (joyful, mad, peaceful, powerful, sad, and scared). The other two levels listed twelve possible choices in each of these categories. Participants were asked to limit their responses to words in the outer two levels. After all the scenes were presented, the eleven participants returned their surveys to the presenter.

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The Participants

Ten of the participants were pastors in the SELC Central Circuit; one was a DCE / Deacon. A few of the participants were retired; most are active pastors. All but one have been married or are currently married.

The Discussion

The survey was immediately followed by a preliminary discussion, though tabulated results were not available immediately. Here are summaries of the discussion questions:

1. *At this point (at the end of the project), how do you feel about Ted?*
Responses included *suspicious, jealous, angry and skeptical*. One responder evaluated Ted as "scum-of-the-earth."
2. *What do you think/feel is going on with Ted and your wife? Feelings?*
Responders felt that both Ted and the wife were going beyond the bounds emotionally and thus betraying the friendship held by all. Their feelings ranged from guilt and mistrust to rage, loneliness, and, ultimately, helplessness to do anything about the situation.
3. *How has your relationship with Ted changed? Do you still want to continue to see him weekly?*
Although no one suggested anything that would indicate a confrontation with Ted, the relationship with Ted would seem to have changed from that of a friend to a competitor and even an enemy. One suggested that he wouldn't trust Ted anymore, and even be emotionally distant to him. One suggested that he would "send flowers to the cemetery."
4. *What feelings do you have about your wife? Her veracity? Her commitment to Ted (and/or to you and your marriage)?*
Angry and disappointed responses were noted here also, including feelings of jealousy, suspicion, hurt and betrayal. One participant noted that "she's either very naïve or she thinks I'm stupid." The participants suggested that they would be emotionally distant from her by now.
5. *How do you feel when you have confronted her about spending so much time with Ted, and she is defensive and rebuffs you?*
Although some said they would feel hurt and angry, most of the responses here related to the negative feelings the participants would have toward themselves – foolish, miserable, guilty and even stupid.

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6. *How do you feel about your wife's priorities (relationship, time, etc.)?*

On the one hand, some felt that this outcome would be a vindication of their previous negative / suspicious feelings, that they were right to be angry. On the other hand, some wondered if there was a vacuum in the relationship of the pastor and the wife that her relationship with Ted filled. To what degree would such a person be responsible for pushing his wife into this situation? These participants reported feelings of inadequacy, weakness and rejection.

After these questions were discussed, the leader revealed to the participants what some had suspected for some time – that the scenario was a metaphor in which each person represented someone else. In this scenario, Ted represented “the church where you have your call” (or even, “God”), the pastor represented “your wife” and the wife represented the participant / responder. The participants were also informed that some pastor's wives (not specifically the wives of the participants) have stated that they feel like “The church is my husband's mistress.” The following questions were then discussed:

1. *In light of the scenario and your prior answers, what feelings do you think your wife could have about the church?*

Most participants indicated that they supposed their wives would report similar feelings about the church that the participants themselves reported. Their wives might feel conflicted about their husbands (how does he choose between meeting her needs and meeting the church's needs?). One responded noted that if the church really is the pastor's “mistress” there is no secrecy to this affair – his wife (and everybody else) knows that they are involved.

2. *Are these feelings realistic? If you answered “no,” would she say you are in denial?*

Participants overwhelmingly believed that the negative feelings they reported and surmised that their wives would have are realistic, but that there may be a whole generation of pastors' wives who wouldn't talk about it (perhaps not even to other pastors' wives).

3. *Are these feelings “socially acceptable”?*

Participants said that these feelings are not “socially acceptable” in the context of the church. They felt that in that context the wives would feel that it is inappropriate to raise the issue.

4. *Are these feelings “spiritually acceptable”?*

Participants suggested that perhaps the wives would feel guilty about having such negative feelings toward the church – it might be a tough road for both of them to deal adequately with the situation and how each feels about the church. One of the participants admitted (with nodding agreement by others) that “we make up a lot of stuff as ‘ministry’ that isn't,” and so deceiving ourselves, our wives, and our churches.

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5. *Can you see a conflict in your wife's feelings between "the church as God's work" and "the church as the husband's mistress"?*

Yes.

6. *What do you think that does to her emotionally? Spiritually?*

It's possible that she feels inadequate and unneeded. It may be destructive to her, and cause her some spiritual turmoil and crisis, for which she may seek relief with some other "Ted."

7. *In light of your prior answers, how do you think your wife feels when she confronts you about the time you spend at church?*

Some may compensate by becoming "activists" in a variety of areas. No other speculations were offered, but the allotted time was coming to a close.

8. *How might you acknowledge those feelings that your wife may have about the church and time that you spend there?*

Suggestions included scheduling time with the wife even to the point of making calendar appointments, letting her know that she has the authority to call the pastor on these issues, and talking to the church council about these matters as well.

Because of time constraints we were unable to consider the following additional questions:

9. *How open are you to hear her?*

10. *Are you sympathetic/empathetic to her feelings?*

11. *Does this scenarios give you pause to think about:*

- *Her feelings*
- *Your reaction to them*
- *Your time spent at church (and what you are going to do about that?)*
- *Expectations*

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Results

After each scene was described the participants had the opportunity to list up to six “feeling words” from the Feelings Wheel that closely reflected how they might be feeling about the scene. As the responses were tabulated they were gathered into the broader categories at the center of the Feelings Wheel (joyful, mad, peaceful, powerful, sad, and scared). This meant that even though after a given scene a particular word might be chosen by a maximum of eleven participants, when several words in the same category were chosen by multiple participants the total was sometimes greater than eleven.

Scene 1

Scene 1 was described as follows:

You (Pastor) and wife are great friends with single young man named Ted. You get together at least weekly with Ted, and both enjoy his company. He has become a part of your “extended family.”

The totals in each feelings category for this scene were

Joyful	6
Mad	0
Peaceful	23
Powerful	14
Sad	1
Scared	4

These totals indicate that the respondents generally felt at peace with the relationship they and their wife were having with Ted, and that this relationship was perhaps in some sense affirming for them. Few of the participants noted any negative feelings in response to this scene, but there were only a few responses in the “joyful” category, too.

Scene 2

Scene 2 was described in this way:

Ted extends the opportunity to your wife to come to work for him as his Administrative Assistant, which she willingly accepts. It is a 40 hour a week job, and in a Pastor's family, that additional income is welcome.

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The totals in each feelings category for this scene were

Joyful	3
Mad	5
Peaceful	8
Powerful	19
Sad	2
Scared	11

In this scene, even though there were more responses that indicated a feeling of powerfulness and probably affirmation, we also noticed a decrease of around 66% in the feelings of peacefulness as compared to the first scene. In addition the negative feelings categories (mad, sad, and scared) also noted sizeable increases as compared to the first scene.

Scene 3

Here is the description of Scene 3:

Initially things go well, but you find that your wife is staying later at work several evenings a week. She is still home for supper, but "Ted needs her to do some extra work." As time goes on, she brings home work from the job to do after supper, too. Your time/family time is diminishing. When you do have "alone" time, it seems as if all your wife can talk about is "the office" and what a great boss Ted is. She tells you stories of office escapades, and office gossip - the office (and Ted) seem to be her prime focus.

The totals for the categories of feelings after this scene were

Joyful	0
Mad	18
Peaceful	2
Powerful	0
Sad	6
Scared	19

Here we noticed that there were no responses at all in two of the positive feelings categories, and only two responses in the "peaceful" category. The great majority of the responses fell into the negative feelings categories, particular the "mad" and "scared" groups. We also noticed that the number of these responses rose considerably as compared to responses for the previous scene, and that the number of "sad" feelings reported tripled as compared to scene 2.

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Scene 4

Scene 4 looks like this:

As your wife settles into her job, Ted asks her to spend some evenings at the job—because “she is doing such a great job, and he needs her so much—no one else can do what she is doing, and do it so well.” In the past several months there have even been some weekend overnights. She comes home tired from all of her work, but brimming with stories of her job, “the office,” and Ted. (Remember that he really is a wonderful boss!)

The totals for the categories of feelings for this scene were

Joyful	0
Mad	22
Peaceful	1
Powerful	0
Sad	8
Scared	16

Here we noticed that there was only one positive feeling reported in any category, and that all the other feelings were reported in the negative categories of mad, sad, and scared. It also appears that, as compared to the responses reported for the previous scene, feelings of anger, sadness and fear continued to rise as the scenario developed.

Scene 5

Finally, here is the description of Scene 5:

When confronted by you about how much time is being spent at office and with Ted, your wife is very defensive. She tells you that Ted is a wonderful boss, a great friend; she gladly spends the time at work because “he needs her; only she can do the job that needs to be done.”

The totals for this scene were

Joyful	0
Mad	15
Peaceful	1
Powerful	5
Sad	11
Scared	15

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These results appear to indicate that by this scene some of the anger and fear that was reported previously may have altered into a greater feeling of sadness. Could it be that some of the participants were supposing that by this point their initial anger may have subsided some and even changed to the beginnings of grief, or perhaps defeated resignation? We did not ask this question of the participants, but it seems likely.

Results Summary

As the scenario developed from scene to scene, and the pastor's wife was getting more and more involved with her job with Ted, participants reported that they might feel a noteworthy decrease in the level of their positive feelings toward the scenario, and a considerable increase in the level of their negative feelings. We surmised that these trends could indicate an increasing difficulty in the relationship between the pastor and his wife (the "sad" responses); an increasing anxiety in him regarding the relationship between his wife and her job and Ted (the "scared" responses) and an increasing animosity toward all the parties involved (the "mad" responses). Without strong positive feelings about each other and their situation it is difficult to imagine how strong this pastor's relationship with his wife will be.

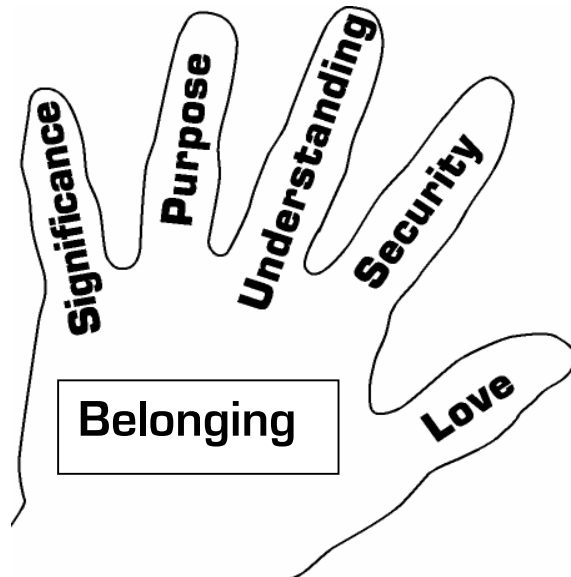
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Followup

At the next Circuit Conference in September of 2009 participants received and discussed the preliminary report of this project, using the following questions. Please note that some of the questions were "leftovers" from the previous conference; also note that some of the participants in this discussion were different than the participants in the original project.

Recall the Core Longings illustration used at previous conferences (right). This illustration lists six general areas of life in which people often find an emptiness or longing, and these areas of emptiness touch the core of their identity. In general, participants suggested that over the course of the study the wife was showing some significant shifts as she was using her work situation to try to fill her own basic needs at the expense of her marriage and family.

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In what ways were each of the wife's core longings being affected as the scenario progressed?

- *Belonging*
- *Love*
- *Security*
- *Understanding*
- *Purpose*
- *Significance*

The discussion focused on three areas – Belonging, Purpose and Significance. The participants suggested a shift from the wife's sense of Belonging in her marriage and family to a stronger sense of Belonging in the work place. They also suggested that the more work Ted gave her to do, the more useful she felt (Purpose) and that perhaps she felt that he was giving her work only she could do (Significance).

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In what ways were each of the husband's core longings being affected as the scenario progressed?

- *Belonging*
- *Love*
- *Security*
- *Understanding*
- *Purpose*
- *Significance*

Participants suggested that the husband's core longing for Love was affected as he inferred from her work involvement that perhaps she did not love him as she once had; this likely had a deleterious effect on his self-worth. As his relationship to his wife changed, perhaps he also felt himself losing his sense of Security. As he became more and more confused and uncertain about the situation his own core longing of being Understood would be challenged, especially if she responds to his anxieties with a dismissive or even denying attitude. His sense of Purpose would be shifting, and his sense of Significance (at least in her eyes) would be eroding.

In the scenario, how might you wish that your wife would acknowledge the feelings that you have about the time and energy she spends with Ted?

Participants would want her to acknowledge his feelings as legitimate, and to show some willingness to discuss some kind of shift in their individual responsibilities to improve their relationship.

The following questions were given to the participants, but were not individually discussed. Instead, the discussion became more general, and focused on particular situations of participants. Several of the pastors noted that they have had similar discussions with their wives about the amount of time and energy that the pastors were spending in ministry activities, as opposed to family activities. These pastors seemed receptive to the possibility of continuing regular discussions with their spouses in order to maintain a healthy marriage relationship. One pastor suggested that this matter might actually be an issue of time management; this pastor was also reluctant to refer to the ministry as the pastor's "mistress" because of the sexual connotations of that term. Another pastor's comments seemed to suggest that increasing involvement in ministry should be understood as part of the deal. We pointed out that our intent with the project was not so much to discuss ministry management as it was to encourage the pastors to imagine what their spouses might be feeling about their ministry involvement.

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Now let's think about "real life" for a while.

How might you acknowledge those feelings that your wife may have about the church and time that you spend there?

How open are you to hear her concerns?

<i>Not open at all</i>	<i>Kind of closed</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>A little open</i>	<i>Very open</i>
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How sympathetic are you to her feelings?

<i>Not sympathetic at all</i>	<i>A little unsympathetic</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>A little sympathetic</i>	<i>Very sympathetic</i>
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To what degree does this study give you pause to think about:

- *Your wife's feelings about your ministry involvement?*
- *Your reaction to them?*
- *Your time spent at church (and what you are going to do about that)?*
- *Expectations?*
- *The possibility that you will share this project with your wife and have a serious conversation together about it?*

When your wife asks you "how was the conference," how will you talk about this project with her?

Finally, where could we go from here?

- *Might we present this same project to our wives and see how they respond?*
- *Might we look for resources (books, or people) to speak on these issues?*
- *What else might we consider?*

Due to time constraints we did not discuss these three questions deeply with the participants. The logistics of presenting this project to the wives would be somewhat more difficult since there is not regular conference for the wives; but this difficulty could be overcome in other ways. The participants seemed to be receptive to the possibility that they be made aware of additional resources to strengthen their marriages. They offered no suggestions for the final question.

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APPENDIX 1 – The Survey

Scene 1:

On the chart below, please list up to 6 of the words from the "Feelings Wheel" that describe your feelings about this scene.

Scene 2:

On the chart below, please list up to 6 of the words from the "Feelings Wheel" that describe your feelings about this scene.

Scene 3:

On the chart below, please list up to 6 of the words from the "Feelings Wheel" that describe your feelings about this scene.

Scene 4:

On the chart below, please list up to 6 of the words from the "Feelings Wheel" that describe your feelings about this scene.

Scene 5:

On the chart below, please list up to 6 of the words from the "Feelings Wheel" that describe your feelings about this scene.

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Questions for discussion:

1. At this point, how do you feel about Ted?

2. What do you think/feel is going on with Ted and your wife? Feelings?

3. How has your relationship with Ted changed? Do you still want to continue to see him weekly?

4. What feelings do you have about your wife? Her veracity? Her commitment to Ted (and/or to you and your marriage)?

5. How do you feel when you have confronted her about spending so much time with Ted, and she is defensive and rebuffs you?

6. How do you feel about your wife's priorities (relationship, time, etc.) ?

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Some pastor's wives have stated that they feel like "The church is my husband's mistress."

1. In light of the scenario, and your prior answers, what feelings do you think your wife could have about the church?
2. Are these feelings realistic? If you answered "no," would she say you are in denial?
3. Are these feelings "socially acceptable?"
4. Are these feelings "spiritually acceptable?"
5. Can you see a conflict in your wife's feelings between "the church as God's work" and "the church as the husband's mistress"?
6. What you think that does to her emotionally? Spiritually?
7. In light of your prior answers, how do you think your wife feels when she confronts you about the time you spend at church?
8. How do you acknowledge those feelings that your wife may have about the church and time that you spend there?
9. How open are you to hear her?
10. Are you sympathetic/empathetic to her feelings?
11. Does this scenarios give you pause to think about:
 - Her feelings
 - Your reaction to them
 - Your time spent at church (and what you are going to do about that?)
 - Expectations

