

Called to Both Ministry & Motherhood

Jennifer Irvine Goto

I'm new at this. My son, Dakota, is just a year old and my Certificate for Probationary Membership was recently hung on my office wall. My son is still of the age that I'm convinced that he doesn't do anything wrong—on purpose. And my congregation still believes that anything I do differently than they prefer is also not on purpose, but because of my inexperience. There's a measure of grace in this newness.

Part of the grace is being able to learn from and have the way made smooth by those who went before me. It has now been generations of women who have been teaching The United Methodist Church what it means for clergy to be parents as well. I hope that the redefining of roles and expectation that has taken place has also allowed male clergy to redefine being pastor and parent.

The world has not completely changed from the expectations that motherhood is the sole calling for women. My husband and I are both in the ordination process and were serving at different local churches when I was pregnant. We



faced the assumption that I would soon be leaving my appointment to stay home with my child and be a pastor's wife. Instead, he has left his appointment to care for our son during the days and to be a great pastor's husband. Other clergy moms and dads have made other choices and are just as content with theirs as we are with ours. The important thing is for each family to be able to have the encouragement to discern God's direction for their situation, rather than have one solution placed on them by the assumptions of the surrounding culture.

My son's babysitter is also the child of a United Methodist clergywoman. As a teenager, this babysitter is well seasoned in the system of itineracy and congregational expectations. She is able to model to my son the necessity of a good sense of humor, how to find your own voice in the congregation where your mother preaches, and how to remind your parents that there is more to life than church. Because of the connectional bonds that United Methodists share, I pray that she and my son

continue to nurture their relationship even when we are not in the same local congregation.

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parent as call. As I meet with other mothers, I find that most do not have that language or understanding of their role as a parent. Seeing parenting as a calling from God might bring me through some bad moments, but it doesn't make me a perfect mother. Yes, my son has fallen off the bed. (And I spent the rest of the night waking every few minutes to check his breathing.) Yes, I have left the house without the supplies required for that day, leaving my son with a bare head and feet. Yes, I have even been afraid that my son's first word might not be something appropriate to shout out in worship on Sunday morning. But I have a center to come back to—that the way I parent is meant to glorify God above all

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else, just as the way I do ministry is. I am able to say that God has given me gifts to be a parent and that my parenting skills are not measured by my son's future job or education, but by how my parenting glorifies God. It helps me to remember that just as God will provide what is needed for me to live out my call to ordained ministry, God provides for me as a parent as well. I can turn to God for patience, for healing of my own soul as parental guilt creeps in, and for courage to ask for help. As God told Moses and Jeremiah as they faced the fears of their calls, "I will be with you," these words are also whispered into my ear by God as I face the fears of being both pastor and parent.

I must remind myself daily that I am following God's call into the dual vocation of mother and pastor, not just because being a pastor is a fun thing to do. When I leave home for the church each day, my son remains in the loving arms of his father, but his cries would lead you to believe that he is in the clutches of some horrible monster. It's all a big show that ends when the door closes behind me, but my heart still breaks each morning.

As we all despise the person in the grocery store check-out who questions whether our child's clothing is appropriate for the weather, the congregational advice and criticism of our parenting skills or our children can be devastating. However, there is nothing better than having a congregation full of people telling you that you have the most beautiful baby in the world.

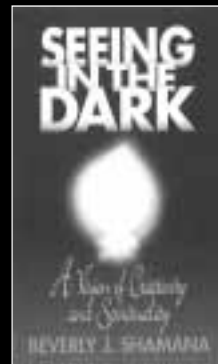
If I were not a pastor, my son would not know a mother who was using her gifts to follow the call of God completely. If I were not a mother, my congregation would have a pastor who felt like she had cut off a part of who God called her to be. Either way, the resentment would be palpable, and I would not fill either role well. It is in bringing my whole self to the altar of God as a living sacrifice that I have found my gifts used—both pastor and mother.

Dakota has just recently learned the gift of sharing. He grins as he hands me objects—papers, toys, socks . . . and my

response is to grasp the object firmly and say, "Thank you." God also seems to enjoy this sharing of gifts, and as I hold my son in one hand and the hand of a dying parishioner in the other, my heart cries out "Thank you, thank you, thank you." □

Jennifer Irvine Goto is mom to Dakota Nobuyuki Goto and pastor to the people of Walnut Creek United Methodist Church, Walnut Creek, California. She also finds time to be "Jen" while indoor rock climbing, practicing yoga, and enjoying date nights with her husband, Shinya.

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