

Keeping up Appearances

Linda S. Hileman

Mary and Matthew Winkler were, according to members of their congregation, the perfect pastoral couple. At least they seemed to be until Mary, by her own admission, shot Matthew to death in the bedroom of their Tennessee parsonage in March of 2006, and then ran away, with their three little girls in the back seat of their family car. She was, they report, a loving mother, the model preacher's wife—kind, giving, and sweet. They were a happy couple. He was the perfect pastor, she was the perfect pastor's wife. We heard over and over that "They had no problems, as far as we knew." Most of us have formed opinions

How many of us, as pastors and pastors' spouses, are hiding private pain? Living in fear of our own congregations because we know that we are only one juicy bit of gossip away from being forced to move—or worse?

or guesses as to what, exactly, happened to cause such a tragedy, but two things are clear: there was a problem, and no one outside the family knew about it.

As a pastor's wife, one of the most chilling things I noticed when reading about this story is that even in jail, even after being

accused of and apparently admitting to murdering her husband, Mary was still being the model preacher's wife. A woman from the congregation who visited Mary in jail said, "Her focus seemed to be on everybody other than herself. She was thinking about her children, thinking about Matthew, about how this affected our church."¹ The second thing that stood out for me is that no one spoke up about Mary besides members of her congregation and her attorney. Not one of her own family members, not another pastor's wife with whom she was friends, no one to whom she turned for spiritual direction or help, not a friend or confidant. We who deal with other people's pain on a daily basis, are very good at keeping up appearances and denying, even to ourselves, that anything is wrong.

There is a line in the contemporary Christian song, *People Need the Lord* that this tragedy brings to mind. "On they go through private pain, living fear to fear; laughter hides their silent cries, only Jesus hears."² How many of us, as pastors and pastors' spouses, are hiding private pain? Living in fear of our own congregations because we know that we are only one juicy bit of gossip away from being forced to move—or worse? How many of us hide our private cries by putting on a smile, focusing on everyone else's problems and neglecting our own?

So often, we feel there is no one to whom we can turn. We have no pastor because the pastor cannot truly minister to her or his own family, any more than a physician can treat her or his family. Talking to congregants, no matter how close to them we are, is out of the question; the district superintendent, no matter how understanding, is still in charge of our next move, and we are loathe to talk to our peers because they are as good at keeping up appearances as we, and we fear being judged inadequate or incompetent. It is no surprise



© iStockphoto.com/Claudia Dewald

that loneliness and isolation are the number one problem among pastors and their spouses.³

So, we keep up appearances, we hide our pain, and it festers, becomes bigger than life, and finally takes over our lives and our souls like a cancer. Blue Cross Blue Shield reports that from 2003 to 2005, claims for mood disorders (depression, anxiety, and bipolar) were 40 percent higher among clergy families in the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church than in the general population.⁴ We suffer, our families suffer, our spouses suffer, and ultimately the ministry and the church suffer. What is the answer to the problem?

Our God is a God of Connections. Jesus understood this. He stated it succinctly in Matthew 22:36, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it; love your neighbor." That is, unfortunately, where we tend to stop. We forget the last part of that sentence: "as yourself." We in ministry (by that I mean the pastor and her or his family) are great at the loving (giving, nurturing, caring, and helping) our neighbors part, but we are not so great at the "as yourself" part (receiving love from others). The psalmist also understood this. In Psalm 30, for instance, David says that he calls out . . . he cries out . . . and he wails. His pain is not hidden; it is out there in the open. He is not denying it; he is not attempting to wall it off; he is asking for help in dealing with it.

When we ignore the second half of the second greatest commandment and do not make connections in order to receive help and support, we place walls around our pain and grief. The Winklers are an extreme example, but we all have experienced the results; loneliness, isolation, lack of intimacy, depression. The longer we practice walling ourselves off, the more entrenched the wall becomes, and the harder it is to accept help.

So, what can we do? We can make connections with each other. We can seek counseling for ourselves and our families (most insurance policies will pay for counseling). We can share our pain, cry out, call for help, and experience the kind of burden-sharing we offer to others. I can hear the objections to this now. "I can't do that. What if someone finds out we are seeing a counselor? What if my district superintendent (D.S.) thinks I'm having problems? What if the person to whom I go for help turns out to be my next D.S.?" The real question is: what if you do not share your burdens? Over 50 percent of pastors leave the ministry after only five years.⁵ In a recent study, 55 percent of current pastors said they would leave if they could. In one denomination, 85 percent of PKs do not attend church after they leave home.⁶ The vast majority of pastors state that the ministry is detrimental to their families. One counselor, who sees a large number of clergy and clergy spouses in his practice, says that United Methodist clergy-wives are the angriest people he

The vast majority of pastors state that the ministry is detrimental to their families. One counselor, who sees a large number of clergy and clergy spouses in his practice, says that United Methodist clergy-wives are the angriest people he sees.

sees. It is ironic that, in a connectional system, such as the United Methodist Church, we and our families have so few connections.

We must begin actively seeking ways to become spiritually, emotionally, and mentally healthy. Every counselor knows that when you are dealing with other people's pain on a daily basis, you should be in a therapeutic relationship with another counselor. In ministry, unlike the counseling profession, our entire families are involved in dealing with other people's pain. Our families, who often are the ones nurturing the pastor, deserve to be nurtured and cared for at least as much as our congregations, and the pastor/parent or pastor/spouse cannot adequately

provide that care.

I challenge each and every pastor to consider this: find ways not only to share your own burdens but to help your family share theirs. Make connections, whether it is with other clergy-families, couples, or a counselor. I wonder what might have happened if Mary and Matthew Winkler had asked for help with their private pain instead of trying to keep up appearances and bear it alone. □

1. Associated Press (March 26, 2006). Friend: accused wife of slain pastor apologizes in jail. FoxNews.com. Retrieved April 5, 2006, from www.foxnews.com/story
2. Steve Green (1983). "People need the Lord" [sheet music],. United States: River Oaks Music Company.
3. B. Oden, (April 1988). Stress and purpose: clergy spouses today. Retrieved November 2005, from Religion online web site: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle>
4. Blue Cross Blue Shield Of North Carolina (2005). Utilization summary report based on claims from 2003-2005. Charlotte, N.C: Blue Cross, Blue Shield of N.C.
5. Barna Research Group (2001). Pastors. Retrieved February 10, 2006, from <http://www.barna.org/flexPage>.
6. B. Hardy, (2001). Pastoral care with clergy children. *Review and Expositor*, 1998 (Fall), 545-57.

Linda Hileman holds Master of Science and Education Specialist degrees in Marriage and Family Counseling from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is a nationally certified

counselor, member of the American Counseling Association, the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors, and Chi Sigma Iota. She is a marriage and family counselor at Chrysalis Counseling Center (formerly Methodist Counseling Center) in High Point, North Carolina and at Moses Cone Behavioral Health in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has more than forty years experience living in the parsonage as pastor's spouse and pastor's daughter.

