

## **Are We Being Transformed? Healthy Family Dynamics for Ministry Families**

By Bob Young

The Bible makes clear the possibility and expectation of transformation. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul urges transformation based on internal metamorphosis rather than mere external pressures. To the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 3:17-18), Paul says that transformation allows Christians to reflect God's glory.

When I contemplate the transformation that the Bible describes as part of the Christian life, I know that I as a minister, above all Christians, must reflect the reality of a transformed life. I must be changed; my changed life must be obvious to those who watch me. One area in which this transformation (or lack of it) becomes apparent is in the area of family life, especially in the minister's relationship with his wife. We who minister must ask ourselves, "How would Jesus change me from what I am to what I should be?"

If I am genuinely interested in being changed by God, he will change me to be more sensitive to the needs and situations of others. I will be able to understand others. In this article, I address five areas in which ministers' families are especially vulnerable. We who preach need to become more sensitive in these areas in our relationships with our wives or children.

### **Unrealistic expectations**

It is bad enough that many churches tend to have unrealistic expectations for the minister's wife and family. When those unrealistic expectations are also present in the attitude and actions of the minister, double trouble is on the horizon.

Ministers must carefully distinguish between realistic expectations and those expectations that are in fact grounded in worrying about what someone else will think of the minister or his family. What expectations are realistic? (By the way, perfection is not possible!)

### **Low self-esteem**

Many minister's wives and children suffer from low self-esteem. (Incidentally, studies show that many ministers also suffer from low self-esteem.) Ministry with its multiple roles, dynamics, and expectations can be brutal—for ministers, ministers' wives, and ministers' families. My counseling with ministry couples indicates that many tend to raise their own self-esteem by lowering that of the other partner. The vicious cycle spirals downward, and effective ministry is not possible, because the confidence of being God's child involved in God's work has eroded.

I wish I could say that my family and I completely escaped this problem, but honesty admits that ministry has not always been easy, even though our overall experience in local church ministry has been a wonderful blessing. Churches loved us and cared for us, encouraged and appreciated us. I am grateful to God that our family came through those experiences as well as we did, even though I am still concerned at times concerning the impact of my ministry on the faith level of our sons.

## **Fatigue**

Everyone gets tired, but there is a unique kind of fatigue that a minister and more especially, a minister's wife, feels. Fatigue comes from knowing that everyone is always watching and the events in the "glass house" are in view.

Fatigue multiplies because the ministry family is generally on call 24/7. As difficult as it may be for the ministry team to make the decision (and to convince the church), ministry couples must have time away. As in the ministry of Jesus, especially as described in Luke's gospel, there must be mountaintop periods of refreshment and renewal so that powerful marketplace ministry is possible. No one ministers at maximum effectiveness with the resource level on empty!

## **Loneliness**

Few understand the loneliness of the ministry couple. Especially for the minister's wife, there is often a deep-seated loneliness felt. Ministers who are in the limelight and actively involved in the lives of church members may not understand the loneliness of their wives. Loneliness comes because of fear of vulnerability. To whom can the minister and his wife turn? Who will counsel? Who can handle the fact that all is not well in the paradise of the ministry home? These are real challenges which must be considered by church leaders, churches, and ministry couples.

Over the years, my wife and I have dealt with the fact that our friendship patterns are different than most by coming to appreciate the fact that we have friends around the world as a result of our involvement in ministry and missions. Nonetheless, sometimes we feel a bit of jealousy when we see those who have lived in the same place for decades and have deep, meaningful, continuing friendship with those they see regularly. Our friends and friendships are much more scattered, as is emphasized when someone with the kind of constant continuing friends I just described says to us, "I am a bit jealous—you have friends everywhere!"

## **Love**

Unrealistic expectations, self-esteem issues, fatigue and loneliness can drain the romance from a marriage. In fact, a large enough dose of these factors can suck the love right out of a relationship. God transforms a minister so that he might understand what romance means to his wife. Love must be expressed, and the first source of love for the ministry couple must be the mutual love shared in the home. The children of ministers often need an extraordinary dose of love.

A loving ministry family may well survive the rigors of ministry, but along the way, a loving church, loving church leaders, and loving brothers and sisters go a long way toward meeting an important need.

As we focus on our ministries and our personal relationship with God through Christ, let us not forget that the transformed life extends to our relationships within the family—meeting the needs of our wives and children. May God bless you in your ministry!