

Protagonist Corner

Like a Mother Who Will Not Forsake Her Nursing Child

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The question comes worded in many ways and with various intonations. Sometimes it's heard as a flattering compliment filled with admiration. Other times it's announced with sharp edges that puncture and hurt. It's a simple question: *How do you do it?* and it refers to managing motherhood and ministry. Both are full-time callings.

My response to this question varies. To the ordinary inquirer simple explanations suffice: I have a wonderful husband who helps a lot, a marvelous child care provider who lives two blocks from the church, and a very supportive congregation. To the really caring friend on a tough day: I don't have any idea how I do it.

To the one who shrouds the question in disapproving judgment I have yet to come up with an appropriate response. They are the ones who assume ministry and mothering a two year old and four month old are incompatible. Recently in a restaurant during a rare weekday lunch date with my husband, a woman who has known me all my life, who is the wife of one of my seminary professors, who has visited the church I pastor, greeted us with, "Where on earth are your children?!" What did she think I did with them? Bundle them in a papyrus bulrush basket and float them down the river?

This year the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) celebrates forty years since the first women were ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. I am pretty far removed from the generation of pioneer women in the church, those who knocked persistently on shut doors, who suffered their way through seminary, and who fought their way through the presbytery process, only to find few churches even willing to consider them for pastoral leadership. I am deeply grateful to those doggedly determined women ever faithful to their calling for the doors they opened to me.

While it has been forty years since women were first ordained to parish ministry in our denomination, I look around and see few pastors serving churches and having babies, and realize that my contemporaries and I are still journeying without maps. Almost all of the women we have known as role models in ministry had their children and nurtured them to school age before entering seminary. Sadly, many of them today speak of the toll and sacrifice ministry has demanded of their families. Some even attribute divorces and other estrangements to their pursuit of careers in the church.

Why does reconciling church service with family life continue to present such a problem for both women and men? Does God really want pastors to work six days, several evenings, and sixty hours a week, to serve to the point of utter exhaustion and the sheer neglect of those we love and who love us most dearly? Preachers and pastors are poised to provide role models for our congregations, and we have a lousy track record of workaholicism and burnout. Those who work hard to save themselves, and everyone around them, don't do a very good job of pointing to a Savior.

Perhaps clergywomen with young children have a special contribution to make to the church. We naturally lay claim to an ancient biblical image that has long been neglected as a model for ministry. A Brief Statement of Faith affirms this picture of God from the prophet Isaiah, "Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing

child...God is faithful still.”

My nursing child has taught me a lot about dependence and faithfulness. God has so finely tuned the relationship between the suckling infant and the lactating mother that need and nourishment attain an even harmony. Because we are in such synchronization with each other, my little boy requires that I figure out a way to balance ministry with motherhood. No matter what the preaching schedule demands, no matter what the pastoral crisis calls for, no matter what the level of intensity of the church program year, no matter what administrative dilemma surfaces, I must stop once every several hours, day and night, and attend to the nourishment of my young son. As if these rest times were little daily sabbaths these are God’s great gift to my ministry. Many times each day a little lively bundle of warmth at my breast gives way to the pondering of my heart. These precious moments of mothering force this otherwise very busy leader of the congregation to stop, to rest, to pray, to practice patience, to nurture, to love. I cannot help but believe that the church I serve is also more healthfully nourished for it.

Now these warm, fuzzy musings are grounded in the foundation of practical support the congregation has offered to me: a generous maternity leave policy with full pay and benefits, a personnel policy for all church staff limiting the number of nights we work per week to two or three, and two full days off each week. Not surprisingly, these concessions to the staff have increased the level of lay leadership among the congregation.

Maintaining the balance of work and family life continues to be a daily challenge. Many sermons get preached that could have used a couple more hours of polish. Certainly some prospective members get neglected and move on to the next church. Occasionally administrative details fall through the cracks and send folks scurrying at the last minute. The church staff gives me unending grief about where the industrial sized breast pump stationed underneath my computer figures on the church tour for new members. But as long as little Joseph Winston, the preacher’s child baptized into a community of promise, cries when he’s hungry, someone is calling me to a certain faithfulness that is holy beyond measure.