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APPENDIX:

Pastors' Wives Know Joy & Pain

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By Jo Gray

Special to the Standard

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Wanted: Adult female to serve without pay. Must be able to function without complaint as secretary, music director, nursery worker, janitor, auxiliary president and fund-raiser. On call 24 hours a day. Cooking abilities a plus. Good sense of humor helpful.

In many churches, this is the unpublished job description of the pastor's wife -- perhaps the only profession that has no real job description but is deemed vital to her husband's success.

Lawyers do not depend on their wives to defend clients. Doctors don't need their wives in the operating room. But in many churches, a pastor needs his wife in the ministry.

Pastors' wives sometimes see themselves not only without a title or job description but without an identity.

"I've got a name, and it's not 'The Pastor's Wife,'" said one pastor's wife, summing up her frustration of being identified with her husband's occupation in a way most women are not.

"As soon as I am introduced as the pastor's wife, I know I will be seen as someone to fill a vacancy and provide chicken casseroles when the need calls for it," said this woman, who asked not to be named.

Other pastors' wives find joy in what they once would have considered obligation. Lisa Newton, for example, has been a pastor's wife nearly 14 years. She currently teaches a Sunday School class of teenagers.

"When I was new to the ministry, I would have felt inadequate to teach," she explained. "Now I do it because it is in my heart to do so."

Ruth McKay, another pastor's wife, experienced a clear call from God to be a pastor's wife when she was 14. Today, she also finds personal fulfillment in teaching children at church.

Even after 50 years of being married to a pastor, she feels certain about her own call to serve. "God revealed it to me," she said.

"You have to be willing and able to answer God's call," McKay said. "I've done

more of what God has wanted me to do rather than what the church wanted."

Yet expectations often are hard to break.

Newton said she never will forget the time she was asked by a member of a small congregation if she played the piano or sang. When she told the inquirer she did neither, she was asked, "What do you do?"

"People just assume the pastor preaches and you must sing and/or play the piano," Newton said. "It is part of the role and is often expected of the pastor's wife."

Sometimes, this expectation becomes part of the job interview if churches are seeking a package deal when hiring the pastor, she said.

One of the hardest things for her as the pastor's wife, Newton said, is losing her own identity.

"As a mother, I am known as Brooklyn's mom or Brittan's mom. And I am known as the pastor's wife. I don't mind being called Lisa."

The life of a pastor's wife can be lonely at times, Newton said, explaining that she and other pastors' wives live in a situation that, by its nature, limits close personal friendships.

"You're surrounded by people, yet you are often alone," she said. "I believe this is why many pastors' wives become depressed and somewhat withdrawn. We all need someone we can be honest with and share our feelings with -- someone to understand."

Yet the pastor's wife cannot confide in the women of the church about family issues, because these are the women who confide in her husband when they themselves are faced with the same kind of issues.

"You have to minister to the minister, but there is no one to minister to me," said one young pastor's wife who asked not to be identified. She fears that to share her real feelings is too big a risk to take.

Another young pastor's wife agrees but said there are times when sharing is important.

"I have learned, so far, that being in the ministry automatically puts you in that fishbowl status," said Melissa Adams, who has been a pastor's wife less than two years. "People are always looking for fault, which they will find at some point or another because we are human."

She echoed Newton's feelings of loneliness.

"That sense of loneliness can soon allow self-doubt to creep into our lives," she said. "We no longer feel we are doing a good job in any of our roles. The job we have doesn't always produce tangible results. That in itself can make us doubt our self-worth."

McKay, on the other hand, said she and her husband have always been a part of the community in which they serve, which has given them no lack of friends or the time to feel lonely.

"I recall the words of an old church member who said, 'Being lonely is a sin,'" McKay said. "I'm inclined to agree. I read. I talk to the flowers. I even talk to my toes if need be."

Jeanie Mayfield fell in love with and married a sailor who had no interest in serving God at the time. She has watched God work in the life of her husband, who currently is a pastor. And now as a pastor's wife, she has had to adjust to expectations that are beyond her expertise.

"I am totally inadequate at taking charge and planning dinners and a lot of functions," she explained. "This was intimidating at first, but I have learned that God always blesses me with ladies who are very good at this sort of thing."

Now widowed, Sharon Escobar served as a pastor's wife for more than 40 years. She was 16 years old when she married a minister.

"I was so young and inexperienced that my biggest problem was me," she said. "I would lay awake at night and worry that I would ruin my husband's life because I was so ignorant."

Escobar now realizes that a pastor's wife is first of all a human being with the same wants and needs as any other woman. Yet she knows members of the congregation do not always acknowledge this fact.

"I believe our expectations of ministry and the belief that certain things are expected of us as pastor's wives can cause a lot of frustration," Escobar said, recalling how she felt when she had to be involved in every aspect of church work in her younger days.

"This resulted in a very tired wife and mother," she said. "Gradually, I learned there has to be a balance in anyone's life if there is to be anything that is worthwhile."

Success as a minister's wife also requires turning the proverbial "other cheek," McKay added.

"I have swallowed a lot of hurt," she said. "But it is better to take the criticism than to break up the church. I've been criticized for hugging, but if I can give a hug, it's one thing I can do that may make a difference."

Sandy Brooks, too, has learned to deal with the hurtful things people say to her as a pastor's wife. She has served alongside her pastor husband 28 years.

She tries to consider the source and not let words get her down. "Negative remarks usually come from immature Christians," she explained.

A key to surviving such incidents is to be secure, Brooks added. "We have to be secure in our relationship with our husband. We have to be secure in our relationship with the church, with God and with ourselves."

And that gets back to calling.

"I believe being a pastor's wife is as much a calling as being called to preach," Brooks said. "It is a calling, not a chosen profession."

There is joy to be found in the journey, she insisted.

"Seeing lives change for the positive, that's what keeps us going," Brooks said. "In the ministry, people come to us seeking help and reassurance. If everything around me is going bad but I can help one person, it is uplifting."

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