Fall 2009

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Recommended Citation
Davis, Jama and Milacci, Fred, "Quantum of Solitude: Lonelines as Experienced by Pastors' Wives" (2009). Faculty Publications and Presentations. 52.
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Quantum of Solitude: Loneliness as Experienced by Pastors’ Wives

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September 2009
…my life is motions. I just go to one side and then to the other….wishing I was dead and questioning why am I even here.
Pastors’ Wives and Loneliness

- When surveyed, pastors’ wives identified their number one-felt need as being “friendship and community” due to an acute sense of loneliness (Zoba, 1997, p. 22).

- 76% of pastors’ wives reported being in need of a close friend, while 43% felt isolated from outside support (Golz, 2005).
The Problem

- The phenomenon of loneliness has elicited more “powerful and pain-filled remarks” from pastors’ wives than any other issue (Brunette-Hill, 1999, p. 81).

- A small amount of literature addresses issues focused solely on pastors’ wives with almost no studies dealing exclusively with loneliness as experienced by pastors’ wives.
Many people would find it difficult to believe the pastor’s wife is affected by loneliness, as it appears that she has an incredible husband, ministry and family (Mayo, 1999).

Loneliness as experienced by pastors’ wives is described as both profound and agonizing (Brunette-Hill, 1999).
This study utilized a **Qualitative Research** method known as **Phenomenology**
Role of the Researcher

• Pastor’s Wife

• Professional Counselor

• Researcher
Guiding Questions

- How do pastors’ wives describe loneliness?

- What factors do pastors’ wives identify as contributing to their descriptions of loneliness?

- How do participants’ descriptions of loneliness compare and contrast?
Participants

• Women married to evangelical (Christian), ordained male ministers

• Spouses were either currently serving in a full-time pastoral ministry role or had left a position of full-time pastoral ministry within the past year

• Range of experience as pastors’ wives from 4 to 38 years
Participants

- Married a range of 12 to 38 years
- Pastor-husbands have served churches ranging in size from 25 to several thousand
- All participants currently serve or have served churches in the Midwest United States
Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale & BDI-II

Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Life Experiences Survey)
- 7 participants indicated loneliness levels as elevated or significant

BDI-II
- 2 participants exhibited moderate depression and one severe depression
Data Analysis

- Verbatim transcripts by a professional transcriptionist
- 149 pages of single-spaced typewritten text
- Analysis of data was approached in terms of “theme analysis”
- Phenomenological themes occurring within the text of the interview transcripts are understood to be “structures of experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 78).
Findings: Descriptions of Loneliness

Three main themes emerged from the participants’ descriptions:

- An indescribable void created by loneliness
- Loneliness resulting from guardedness
- Loneliness as a “normal experience”
An Indescribable Void Created by Loneliness

Portrayed as a feeling of emptiness, isolation, and being cut-off from others.

All participants described loneliness in this way.

- I felt like we were always surrounded by people but nobody wanted to be with us.

- Times that I would like to have access to my husband but I can’t just physically if the hours are not at the right time. It’s feeling that other people need him more.
When I’m reading that [romance novel] type of a story I don’t feel so lonely. I feel involved in those people’s lives in that book in a way that I might be kind of wanting right then. The book ends up providing it instead of a real relationship for a little while. I’ve definitely been reading more lately so that tells me something.

…being lonely is just not having anybody to confide in. It’s not necessarily being alone because we’re surrounded with people all the time.
Loneliness Resulting from Guardedness

7 of 8 participants described loneliness in this way.

“Guardedness” was portrayed as being cautious in relationships ultimately creating a feeling of loneliness.

- It’s very hard. I was a very trusting person when we first got into ministry. I felt like I could trust anybody and I could talk to whoever, and it wouldn’t matter. I learned early on that is not always the case….I have been hurt and had trust broken so many times….Just about the time I felt like I could start, and it would take a long time to get to that point to start taking the wall down, it seemed like something would happen. I am not going there again and the wall is going back up.
Loneliness Resulting from Guardedness (cont.)

- You have to be guarded because you’re not in a place where people are healthy enough to process and do things correctly. The more guarded you are… the more lonely you get. But even if you’re unguarded, if you’re with people who are emotionally mature enough to deal with that, you’re still lonely because it alienates you in a different way.

- Relationships were always hard and always guarded. Always guarded…. It’s just the way to do it… if I had been unguarded or when I was unguarded it would backfire…

- … hard not to be guarded…. We are taught that way. It’s the role.
Loneliness as a “Normal Experience”

6 participants described loneliness as part of normal life.

- ...don’t even think about it as being lonely. It’s just life. We weren’t all called to this life to enjoy life every day. Sometimes it’s just a tough spot and you have to get through it....I don’t really think about it...It’s just normal life for me.

- ...part of being in the ministry and being a minister’s wife. I understand that completely....sometimes sad but I’ve gotten so used to it that it’s almost normal to me now.
Loneliness as a “Normal Experience” (cont.)

- I used to joke with my husband, but he doesn’t always like it… I said, you know I think God brought me here to teach me loneliness…. I don’t really know if that’s the truth but that has come out of being here, which in some ways is okay. It gives me great empathy… for people that live it and go through it.

- …even though at times I feel lonely, I don’t feel like we should be doing something different because I feel that way. It’s just something to work through in my opinion.
Findings: General Factors Contributing to Loneliness

- Participants were asked to identify factors which they believed to have contributed to their feelings of loneliness.

- Overall the factors were almost exclusively found to be tied—in one way or another—to the pastorate.

- Some were directly (or explicitly) resulting from ministry itself.

- Others were identified as those in which ministry may have (implicitly) been a catalyst that in turn spawned something else which contributed to the loneliness experienced.
Explicit Factors Contributing to Feelings of Loneliness

- All participants identified several *explicit* factors as contributing to their feelings of loneliness.

- All participants mentioned these factors may not have been present *if* they were not involved in ministry alongside their pastor-husband.

- Explicit factors are grouped into two categories:
  1. The ministry “context” itself
  2. Ministry related interactions and relationships
Explicit Factors: The Ministry Context Itself

- ...if he had another job [other than a pastor and was] not happy [he could] go find another one. That doesn’t necessarily mean you have to move, take your kids out of school, find a new church, find new friends, and that kind of thing. But in ministry it does affect everything....I guess this is probably where the loneliness does come in....you can’t talk to anybody in the church about their pastor [and tell them] he’s a jerk today.

- In regards to reaching out to other pastors’ wives...they also struggle in ministry...[and] sometimes you don’t reach out with your own personal struggles because you don’t want to burden somebody else who is struggling.
Explicit Factors: The Ministry Context Itself (cont.)

- When you at least see it, you know where your problem is. It’s not as bad as now feeling unsafe because I had no idea, and I still have no idea, who or what blindsided us. I still have no idea...so that’s why I feel unsafe. If I knew what it was then I would know what to do to guard against either that or what I did or what I didn’t do....I just don’t feel safe in church.
Explicit Factors: Ministry-Related Interactions with Others

...For the majority I really don’t talk to most people. This intensified when she was informed that [she] shouldn’t share personal or things going on either in the church or in the home that might be a problem with people in the church or in the area. It was felt that people in the congregation would have a hard time accepting the fact that you are human and there are problems....I became very guarded. I became very careful about things I said, things I did....I removed myself from having any real major intimate personal relationships with people.

Always put on the good face and only talk to people about the good things....I didn’t share a lot of times because I didn’t think it was the right thing to do.
Explicit Factors: Ministry-Related Interactions with Others

- I think sometimes we’re good at just putting on the face that we need to put on and where we need to put it on. As a pastor’s wife…you get used to when you’re not happy with your husband you still have to act like he’s a wonderful pastor when you’re at church. You get used to pretending, I guess.…

- …You believe he’s a good pastor and he’s a good man, but you’re just not happy with him right now. But you don’t air your dirty laundry….we’re looked at as an example. We’re not perfect but we shouldn’t do things to make people think less of us, and I shouldn’t do anything to make people think less of [spouse]. That may not be the top concern of most wives…but it is our security too. It is all tied up in there also.
Explicit Factors: Ministry-Related Interactions with Others

- I don’t want to be a detriment more than I want to have the deeper relationships at this point in my life I guess. I’m sure it’s self-imposed that I’m holding back and choosing to be lonely over choosing to go for what I want. It’s me trying to figure out what role I’m best in to helping [spouse] but still get out of life what I want….I think it’s a balancing act….a lot of things you say and do are kind of reflected on your husband in a way that a person in another profession would never have to deal with their wife in their job, knowing all the same people that they do and talking to the same people. It’s a little annoying sometimes that you spend so much time at your husband’s job.
Implicit Factors Contributing to Loneliness

Many implicit factors were catalysts generated through situations in the lives of the participants which contributed to their feelings of loneliness.

Implicit factors include:

1. Non-ministry related interactions with others
2. Family and time concerns

Two participants identified their personal physical limitations as contributing in some way to their feelings of loneliness.
Non-Ministry Related Interactions with Others

These factors center on the busyness of the individual, fear of rejection, relocation, and changes in the ministry plan of the church.

- I just got busy and did something to get my mind off of it. I think that’s the way I lived probably, just trying to keep doing things for other people so that I wouldn’t, I guess have to deal with me. I don’t know. There is no way I could ever live up to my own standards. There’s no way.

- Friendships were cut off by locality mostly. We also didn’t want to cause problems for them…like we were trying to do some sort of ugly church split kind of behavior where we were keeping our friendships to a higher level than we should have…it was definitely very lonely to be separated so abruptly…It was sad for me….
Non-Ministry Related Interactions with Others (cont.)

- [At times it is] easier to be the leader and to just know everybody kind of on a surface level and not feeling like you have to go deep….Then you don’t have to face your fears of getting to know anybody. So when you’re in leadership you could opt out easily and just be the leader and just be in the role of caring for people but nobody ever caring for you. But if you are in that place then you’re lonely for sure. You can hide in that role and not pursue friendships and you can pursue friendships and get burned.

- When I was unguarded it would backfire on me [and it] was really hard to learn.
Non-Ministry Related Interactions with Others (cont.)

- He wrote me an e-mail about a whole bunch of garbage that he didn’t agree with at our church. So that was just a horrible, horrible year for me….that was hard, to let go of all of those friendships and feel safe enough to be safe with new people. It was very lonely and my dad was dying. It was horrible.

- I have been hurt way too many times…Just about the time I felt like I could start [to trust], and it would take a long time to get to that point for me to start taking the wall down, it seemed like something would happen. I am not going there again and the wall is going back up.
**Family and Time Concerns**

- Stuck in the church…stuck in the marriage…stuck in third place or maybe fourth, being low on the list.
- Four nights in a row that he’s basically gone and inaccessible. Those would be four school nights as well.

**Physical Limitations**

- Some of the loneliness has been my own limitations because of having back problems and not being able to get out all the time and not being able to do things all the time….Maybe it’s safer this way.
Three Conclusions Regarding Factors Which Most Significantly Impact Pastors’ Wives and Loneliness

1. The role of the pastor’s wife and its impact on her loneliness.

2. The choices of the pastor’s wife and their impact on her loneliness.

3. The pastor’s wife and her relationship with God and its impact on her loneliness.
Significant Implications

- Implications for Researchers

- Implications for churches who employ pastors, colleges and seminaries which train pastors, and denominations to whom pastors report

- Implications for counseling practice
**Discussion**

Based both on your own experience as a counselor and what has been presented in this workshop, brainstorm with a few colleagues about some potential strategies for counseling pastors’ wives who are experiencing loneliness.
[It’s] hard to find somebody who really gets it, that really understands how much you give. We give and give and give. I think some people who aren’t in ministry don’t get how much you really have to give. It makes me want to get out. It makes me want to go the other way and escape.
Future Research:

- Identity of the Pastor’s Wife
- Personality Traits and the Pastor’s Wife
- Identity of the Pastor
**Epilogue**

- Humbling and rewarding
  - Eight participants and “windows to their souls”

- Challenged myself early in project
  - Infrequent visitor

- Importance of genuine relationships
  - Challenging for growth
  - Maintaining balance and perspective

- Growing passion
  - Responsible for knowledge gained
References

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