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Positive Coping among Wives of Male Christian Clergy

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Abstract Clergy spouses experience various life stressors, yet many cope and function effectively in the midst of their daily challenges. Mental health professionals were asked to identify wives of male clergy who exemplify emotional and spiritual health. Nominees were contacted and interviews conducted with 25 women. Each interviewee was asked about coping with normal life stressors, stressors associated with being married to a minister, and catastrophic life events. All interviews were transcribed and coded, using grounded theory. Participants emphasized the importance of spirituality, social support, limit-setting, and healthy lifestyle choices. Implications are discussed.

Keywords Coping · Clergy · Clergy spouses · Marriage

Today's trend toward a more positive psychology has heightened psychologists' awareness of human strength, potential, and resilience. Some of the constructs within positive psychology can be described and experienced without assuming any contrasting negative experience. For example, people can experience gratitude, optimism, wisdom, hope, creativity, and self-esteem whether or not their lives are relatively free of troubles. Other constructs in the burgeoning positive psychology literature are implicitly coupled with life's challenges and difficulties. For example, forgiveness requires that some sort of distressing offense has first occurred. Similarly, problem-solving abilities presume that there is a problem to be solved. Moreover, positive coping can only be understood when considered alongside the struggles, challenges, and stresses of life. Thus, research on the positive psychology of coping (Schwarzer and Knoll 2003) also requires some awareness of issues such as stress, loss, and conflict.

Clergy and clergy families provide an intriguing population for coping research because they face a good deal of stress on a daily basis (Gleason 1977; Henry et al. 1991; Ostrander

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et al. 1994), yet most function in a relatively healthy manner despite the demands and pressures they face (Baker and Scott 1992). Also, they are an under-researched population; psychologists have reported only a small amount of research on clergy functioning (Hall 1997), and even less has been reported on clergy spouses. Most of the research that has been reported is focused on distress, impairment, and pathology rather than coping and resilience, though there are exceptions (e.g., Meek et al. 2003).

Due to the unique nature of their work and their role in the community, clergy and their families face substantial stress. Many clergy and clergy family members report living in a fishbowl because their lives are closely scrutinized by parishioners and others in the community. In addition, many clergy families move frequently and live on low incomes. Some ministers of small congregations do not have retirement resources, opt out of Social Security benefits, and do not build equity in a home because they are housed in the church's parsonage. Clergy also deal with various challenges that impinge on their family relationships: they face unrealistic expectations from others, work long hours, and experience intrusions on family life. Beyond all this, clergy and their family members may be hesitant to confide in others because of their fishbowl existence, which makes social support a challenge for many (Blackbird and Wright 1985; Blanton 1992; Lee and Balswick 1989; McMinn et al. 2005; Morris and Blanton 1994).

The pressures facing clergy families can impact clergy marriages. Morris and Blanton (1994) reported that intrusions on family life by the extended church community resulted in decreased marital satisfaction, and Warner and Carter (1984) found poorer marital satisfaction and more loneliness among clergy couples than non-clergy couples. This, however, is not a consistent finding. Baker and Scott (1992) found that a sample of women married to clergy reported higher levels of well-being than did non-clergy wives. They explained that a sense of self-worth, a sense of control over their lives, and a sense of contributing to the family's needs (related to working outside the home) were highly important factors contributing to the well-being of clergy wives. Another factor that positively influenced well-being involved tangible assistance from their husbands with domestic chores and childcare (which was reported by wives of clergy more than by non-clergy wives). Thus, despite the various stressors facing clergy couples, it appears that at least some clergy marriages are thriving despite the unusual stressors facing clergy families.

In considering coping methods utilized by clergy and clergy spouses, McMinn et al. (2005) distinguished between intrapersonal, family, and community coping methods. Intrapersonal coping was defined as solitary, individual methods such as spiritual meditation, reading, time away from work, and individual exercise programs. This appears to be the preferred method of coping for most clergy and their spouses (Hsieh and Rugg 1983; McMinn et al. 2005). Family coping involved interpersonal support from other family members, most often a spouse. Community coping involved social support from outside the family, such as friendship, counseling, support groups, and so on. In the five studies reported by McMinn et al. (2005), clergy demonstrated a strong preference for individual and family coping, and rarely described coping relationships outside of the family. This may be related to the fishbowl existence that many clergy experience. Most of the studies reported by McMinn et al. (2005) involved clergy, but one also involved clergy spouses. As with clergy, spouses also described individual and family coping more commonly than relationships outside the family. In a survey sponsored by a magazine for wives of male clergy, the most significant need among clergy spouses was for friendship and community support (Zoba 1997).

In summary, clergy and their spouses face unique stressors but many are employing effective coping resources in response. A few studies have reported ways that clergy cope with life stress (e.g., Meek et al. 2003; McMinn et al. 2005), but very little has been

reported about how wives of male clergy cope with the demands of life. Because coping research among wives of male clergy is a relatively new area of research, we chose to use an exploratory qualitative methodology. Specifically, we interviewed wives of male clergy who were identified by mental health professionals as having exemplary emotional and spiritual health. Our goal was to learn from these women about how they cope with the routine and monumental stressors in their lives.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 25 women who were married to male Christian clergy. Each participant was nominated as an exemplar of emotional and spiritual health by a mental health professional. The average age of respondents was 51.8 years, ranging from 32 to 72 years. They had been married an average of 29.5 years, ranging from 9 to 50 years. All participants were Caucasian and Protestant. Their husbands had been in ministry for an average of 26.2 years, ranging from 5 to 50 years, and the average weekly attendance at their husband's church was 1,052, ranging from 60 to 4,650. A variety of different Protestant denominations were represented, including non-denominational churches (5), Evangelical Free (3), Presbyterian Church (USA) (3), Vineyard churches (3), Christian Reformed Church (2), Wesleyan (2), Assemblies of God (1), Church of God (1), Covenant (1), Free Methodist (1), Lutheran (1), Mennonite (1), and Missionary (1).

Procedure

We recruited a convenience sample by placing an announcement on an email listserv of Christian mental health professionals. The email introduced the purpose of the research and then solicited nominations for exemplary wives of male clergy. We defined exemplary in the following way:

We are looking for clergy spouses who exemplify spiritual and emotional health—coping effectively with life's various challenges while pursuing personal growth. These are women who balance various aspects of their personal and interpersonal lives.

A total of 34 nominees were received. Each nominee was sent a cover letter and informed consent form by US mail. Of the 34 nominees, 28 responded by returning the consent forms. Each of these respondents was contacted by telephone or email to schedule a telephone interview, and 25 interviews were scheduled and conducted.

At the completion of the interview, participants were given time to ask any questions about the interview or the research project (no formal debriefing was necessary because the full purpose of the study was disclosed in advance). Each participant was later sent a \$20 gift certificate in appreciation for her time and effort. After the data were analyzed, results of the study were sent to interested participants.

Each interview was transcribed. The transcripts were then reviewed by two members of the research team before we met to discuss categories of meaning that seemed to be emerging from the interviews (grounded theory). Based on this preliminary meeting, coding categories were established. Next, each interview was coded again by a single member of the research team using N6 qualitative analysis software. This coding system

was reviewed by another member of the research team and double-checked for accuracy and consistency.

Instrument

The instrument used was a semi-structured interview conducted by telephone. The research team met periodically over a period of three months to formulate the interview. In its final form, the interview consisted of an introductory question, “to what do you attribute your spiritual and emotional health?” followed by three main stress and coping categories. The three stress and coping categories were defined as follows:

First is what we might call *normal stress*. There are some sorts of stress that affect almost everyone regardless of who they are, who they are married to, or if they’re married. These are the very ordinary challenges of life—things like having too much to do, or financial worries, or concerns about children, or any number of other things related to the routines of life.

A second type of stress we could call *being-married-to-a-pastor stress*. There are some sorts of stress that are unique to the role you have as a pastor’s wife. It might involve the sense of living in a fish bowl, or the intrusions on your family’s time, or the expectations that you work at the church, or many other things.

A final type of stress we could call *catastrophic stress*. There are stressors that only occur a few times in life. For example, it could involve a job loss, losing a parent or child, a major marital crisis, and so on.

After each of the three types of stress was introduced, respondents were asked to identify (1) various coping strategies for this sort of stress, (2) the single most helpful coping strategy, and (3) how they grow in the midst of this sort of stress. The interviewers probed, as necessary, to explore individual/solitary methods of coping as well as interpersonal methods. Demographic questions were asked at the end of the interview.

Results and discussion

Attributions of health

When asked about their emotional and spiritual health, the exemplars emphasized two primary themes: God’s benevolence and relationships.

God’s benevolence Common wisdom and a great deal of empirical evidence in psychology suggests that an internal locus of control is more health-promoting than an external locus (Lefcourt and Davidson-Katz 1991). But it should be noted that most of the locus of control literature has disregarded theistic assumptions, making it possible that perceiving a benevolent God to be in control has different health implications than merely perceiving a powerful other to be in control. Welton et al. (1996) suggested that the three styles of locus of control normally discussed (i.e., internal, powerful others, and chance) should be supplemented by adding a fourth dimension of “God control.” The authors argue that God control is distinct from other external forms of locus of control, and they present preliminary evidence that both God control and internal locus of control are related to positive habits of health.

Consistent with the notion of God control of Welton et al. (1996), 10 of the 25 clergy spouses in this study (40%) gave credit to God's benevolence. For example, when asked to what she attributes her spiritual and emotional health, one respondent replied:

God's grace, and I'm not saying that flippantly. God's faithfulness in my life I would say is the overall thing and then probably myriad factors because of that that he uses, but I would say overall that would be my answer.

Our respondents' tendency to attribute their good emotional and spiritual health to God is consistent with attributions made by exemplary clergy when they were asked a similar question (McMinn et al. 2001).

Relationships The exemplary clergy spouses in this study also emphasized the importance of relationships in becoming and remaining healthy. A total of 13 respondents (52%) identified the importance of a relationship with their husbands ($n=7$), friends ($n=3$), family ($n=3$), or a spiritual relationship with Jesus ($n=7$).¹ Examples include:

Well, I think I have a solid husband who's emotionally and spiritually sound too and that obviously makes a big difference so I'm not coping with something that is broken or if it is broken that makes it much easier.

I have two other friends that I have 20 year friendships with and I think it has made a big difference.

... understanding who I am in Christ Jesus and what that really means. That I don't have to perform to suit anyone, I don't have to try to please anyone, I don't have to try to achieve anything of momentous proportions as maybe the world would look at it, but that I can be completely content in who I am and find that, once I really get a grasp on who I am in Christ Jesus and really what that's all about.

Most of the relationships identified as central to emotional and spiritual health were either intrapersonal (e.g., an internalized spiritual relationship with Jesus) or family-focused. Relationships outside the family were mentioned infrequently, which is consistent with the findings of McMinn et al. (2005) for clergy and clergy spouses. However, many respondents did mention relationships outside the family later in the interview, as will be discussed later.

Other Other less prominent reasons for maintaining health were also mentioned, including learning from others in mentoring or modeling relationships ($n=5$), and coming from a healthy family of origin ($n=5$).

Coping

Respondents were asked how they cope with life's stressors in three different contexts: normal life stress, stress related to being married to a minister, and catastrophic situations. The major themes for coping with these three types of stressors included interpersonal

¹ Sums do not equal 13 because some respondents identified the importance of more than one relationship.

support, spiritual practices, setting limits, reading, health promotion, and intentionality. Frequencies for each of these themes are listed in Table 1.

Interpersonal support Almost all of the respondents noted the importance of interpersonal relationships in coping with stress, but this finding needs to be viewed in the context of the interview itself. We were interested in both intrapersonal and interpersonal coping methods, and respondents were prompted if they offered only one of these. For example, if a respondent mentioned only intrapersonal coping methods, the interviewer might prompt with, “When your personal ways of coping aren’t enough, who do you call on?” Thus, it is not surprising that most (92%) of the clergy spouses we interviewed were able to identify supportive interpersonal relationships that they find helpful in coping with stress. It is more surprising to see how much clergy spouses rely on relationships outside their immediate family.

Whereas McMinn et al. (2005) found clergy to rely mostly on intrapersonal coping and family relationships, many of the clergy wives interviewed in this study described the importance of friendship and support outside of family relationships. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents (68%) mentioned friendships outside their immediate family. For example:

I have a friend who just lives about five minutes away. She is a great friend who can bail me out of some little errand I can’t take care of or a kid I can’t pick up or something like that. She is very gracious and very flexible.

I deliberately went and sought out some friends, made some friends if you will, who were not in our church circle at all. I found another pastor’s wife in the neighborhood...

This second example illustrates a potential difference between being a minister and being married to a minister. Ministers may be reticent to form close friendships with other ministers in their vicinity, perhaps because they experience a subtle competition amongst churches in the community, but spouses of clergy may be less inclined to experience competition and thus be more open to friendships with other clergy spouses. Several women in this study mentioned their preference for friendships outside of the church because friendships with other church members make it difficult to speak openly about sensitive marital or church matters. Other extra-familial sources of interpersonal support included attending support groups (28%), talking with mentors or others who had experienced similar stressors (20%), finding supportive relationships within the church congregation (24%), and discussing their situation with a therapist or counselor (28%).

Table 1 Frequencies of coping strategies mentioned by clergy spouses

	Interpersonal support	Spiritual practices	Setting limits	Reading	Health promotion	Intentionality
Normal stress	45	30	7	11	12	7
Being-married-to-a-pastor stress	23	16	26	6	0	3
Catastrophic stress	24	23	5	0	1	2

Each cell contains the number of different comments offered by the 25 respondents. The number of comments may exceed the number of respondents because some respondents mentioned a particular coping strategy more than one time. For example, a respondent might have mentioned the importance of friendship, a marital relationship, and extended family support, all of which are considered interpersonal support.

Approximately half those who mentioned talking with a counselor did so in the context of a formal counseling relationship, and the other half sought advice or conversation with counselors who were also friends or associates.

As with clergy (McMinn et al. 2005), our respondents also turned to family relationships to help them cope with stress. Two-thirds (68%) mentioned a supportive marriage and 40% identified other helpful family relationships. For example:

Talk. Especially when it comes to those normal stresses of life, talking particularly with my spouse is a very important part of that.

I'm very, very blessed to have a sister who's a very dear friend. She is far away but it's very safe.

Marital relationships appear to be extremely important for both clergy (Hall 1997; Meek et al. 2003; McMinn et al. 2005) and clergy spouses. A recent survey of women married to men in ministry revealed that "97 percent said their marriages are strong and almost all feel supported in their marriage (93%) and in their parenting (90%)" ("What Wives Want," 2005, p. 9).

Spiritual practices Various spiritual practices were identified as important in coping with life stress and were mentioned by 88% of the respondents. Most respondents mentioned spiritual practices multiple times throughout the interview. These included relying on the Bible (44% of respondents), prayer (72%), and meditation (32%).

During that time was when my husband began bringing home Bible verses for me, one every week, and I was just so in need of that. I felt so empty. Then I began memorizing them. And I wasn't sleeping well at night and I would wake up at night and I would just pray for myself and all of the people that I promised prayer for. And then as my list of Bible verses grew, I would just go through all of my Bible verses one word at a time and just think about what they meant for me and that was what helped me cope with and begin to trust God for my future.

A Christian understanding of prayer often involves releasing control of one's circumstances and giving worries over to God. One New Testament author puts it this way: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand" (Philippians 4:6-7). This strategy of releasing concerns into God's hands seemed important for many of the respondents in this study.

Chi-square analyses of the frequencies reported in Table 1 revealed that the type of coping strategy used is related to the type of stress experienced, $\chi^2(6)=48.9, p<.01$. Spiritual practices appear to be particularly important for coping with catastrophic challenges in life. Many of the women we interviewed described how life's greatest challenges deepened their spiritual practices and awareness of God's presence. One person described faith that God is working for good even in the most difficult times:

I guess reminding myself of the promises in the scriptures that my life is not an accident and what looks like a catastrophe for me, God knew it was coming. You know, God has a plan in this and he has not abandoned me and sometimes just holding onto the promises, even though if you just glanced at the day-to-day it doesn't look that way at the moment. You know, I kind of have a long range of vision.

Others emphasized the importance of prayer in the midst of catastrophic stress. One stated simply, “I prayed and prayed and prayed.” Another said, “I think it pushed me to just pray more... Prayer became a very, very important coping mechanism for me.”

Setting limits Most respondents (84%) mentioned the importance of setting clear limits with their time, personal choices, and family commitments. As is evident in Table 1, these limit-setting coping strategies were particularly relevant for the particular stresses associated with life in ministry. The clergy wives we interviewed tended to be quite involved in the churches that employ their husbands, but in selective ways. Most did not fit the stereotype of a minister’s wife who attends every meeting, raises flawless children, teaches Sunday School, and plays the piano during worship services—a patriarchal stereotype that assumes women do not have their own careers and are implicitly “hired” along with their husband. In contrast, the exemplars we interviewed—many of whom have busy professional lives of their own—are learning to be realistic about their level of involvement.

I decided that I was going to remove myself from the role as minister’s wife and think, ‘What would I do if I were simply a member of the congregation? Would I do more, would I do less?’ And I had to be very honest with people and just say, I have to take responsibility for my life and for my children, for my home. So I had to get out of some things, and my motivations for working at the church should be that of serving Christ and not doing what others thought or what they thought my duties would be as pastor’s wife.

This is not a two-for package. You are hiring him. My role is to be his spouse and to support him as any other spouse would support their spouse. And I will participate in the life of the church as any other member would based on my gifts and my abilities. Please don’t expect anything beyond that.

In addition to setting strategic limits on church involvement, respondents emphasized the importance of developing an identity outside the church. For example:

Setting...boundaries helps us to have a family life that’s outside of and support networks that are outside of the church, which, I think is really important—having people that are not part of that group, who are supports to us.

In contrast to the image of a minister’s family living in a parsonage next door to the church building, many exemplar spouses mentioned the importance of getting away from the church and church-related work during evenings, days off, and vacations. Respondents mentioned going to movies, taking retreats and vacations, leaving the house during days off, and so on. Some exemplars identified other strategies such as keeping home email addresses and phone numbers private, refusing to serve as an intermediary who brings complaints from parishioners to her husband, helping protect children from unrealistic expectations of perfection, and so on.

Reading Fourteen of the 25 respondents (56%) mentioned the importance of reading. This was not mentioned for coping with catastrophic stress, but it was mentioned often in dealing with normal stress and the stress associated with being married to a minister. Respondents said things such as:

I am always reading books.

Reading is a big part of what I do too.

For many years, I probably read every book that came out on the topic of coping, of how to manage, how to be a godly woman in whatever situation.

Interestingly, reading was not a theme identified by exemplary ministers in a similar study (McMinn et al. 2001), perhaps because reading and study is an expected part of most ministers' daily routines.

Health promotion Half (52%) of the respondents mentioned the importance of a healthy lifestyle, with almost all of these comments offered in response to normal life stressors. Examples include:

Well, I eat well. I'm always watching to make sure we eat balanced meals. I exercise about 3–5 times a week...

I take a long walk when the weather permits, sometimes it's unplugging the phone and just having some quiet time, taking a long bubble bath.

A big thing for me is just having regular physical exercise, trying to get a goodly amount of sleep whenever possible...massage—I'm working with a massage therapist.

Intentionality Half of the respondents (48%) mentioned intentional strategies they have found to help cope with life stress. These included practical guidelines, such as maintaining a balanced family life, being flexible about daily scheduling, shielding children from unrealistic expectations associated with being the child of a minister.

An important concept in Christian theology is that knowing oneself and knowing God are mutually compatible. That is, the more one knows the self the more one knows God, and vice versa. Several respondents alluded to importance of self-knowledge, noting the importance of recognizing their limits, realizing they cannot be perfect, being honest about negative emotions, and so on.

Other Various other coping strategies were mentioned, but not with the frequency to be considered a major theme in how clergy spouses cope with stress. For example, three exemplars mentioned cognitive reframing, and six mentioned preventive strategies such as time management, organization, setting priorities, and establishing routines. A few respondents (12%) mentioned the importance of being called by God to life in ministry.

Growth

In addition to coping, we were also interested in hearing what exemplars had to say about growing and thriving in the midst of life stress. When asked how stress produces growth, exemplars emphasized experiencing closeness to God and personal challenge. Several other themes were also mentioned by several respondents.

Closer to God Most respondents (84%) described how life stressors—especially catastrophic situations—have caused them to feel closer to God. For example:

My capacity for believing God and taking him at his word was enlarged... because I saw it even in the midst of... difficult things that God's word is true, and that he's faithful.

[Trials] strengthen me if I do what God wants me to do, and then I wait to see what God will do in response, and just trust him for it. Sometimes you just have to keep walking through.

Spiritual growth in times of difficulty is no coincidence because it often is related to disciplines and spiritual practices that have become well-established prior to the onset of the catastrophic stress. Several exemplars described the importance of personal spiritual disciplines and how these produced growth in stressful times.

I would say my prayer life is what helps me grow. I journal all of my prayers and so I get to look back at those and it's just amazing. I mean I journal like letter writing. I write word for word and just to go back and look at that is a reminder of what God has done and what he's doing.

As suggested earlier, these exemplars' responses indicate a locus of control that is not easily captured by the traditional attribution categories of internal, chance, and powerful other (Welton et al. 1996). Rather, they are experiencing a sense of inner peace by engaging in spiritual practices that cause them to release control of their personal circumstances into the hands of a benevolent God. This is what Pargament (1997) has labeled positive religious coping, and a recent meta-analysis has demonstrated a link between positive religious coping and adjustment to stress (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005).

Personal challenge The releasing of control to a benevolent God described by exemplars does not exclude the possibility of personal engagement and problem solving. Nearly half (44%) of the exemplars interviewed mentioned that growth occurs through personal challenge as well as releasing circumstances to God. So, for example, the woman whose husband faced grave health challenges relied heavily on prayer but also did extensive research to learn about his condition. Releasing control and accepting personal challenge were not separate activities, but were integrated into a single response of faith and action.

Other Various other means of growth were identified, but none so prevalently as to be considered major themes. For example, 24% discussed the importance of being exposed to new situations and perspectives. Also, 24% reported that church involvement produced growth during difficult times, often in relation to special workshops and seminars offered through the church. Others (28%) emphasized how personal difficulties have caused them to experience more empathy for others. Finally, 24% mentioned growing through involvement in a small group, such as a women's group or a Bible study group.

Implications

Preliminary qualitative research has limitations, and this study is no exception. Our research was based on a convenience sample of those receiving just one nomination from a group of mental health professionals. In future studies, it will be helpful to have more rigorous methods for determining exemplary clergy spouses. The present study is also limited by a relatively small sample size, ethnic homogeneity, and by our choice to interview only women. There are, of course, many male spouses of female clergy whose perspectives are not represented in this study. Despite the limitations, this study provides an initial look at those who are coping well with challenging life situations.

There are at least three important implications of the findings reported here. First, this study utilizes a helpful qualitative methodology in a time of growing interest in the psychology of religion. In previous decades, some psychologists have argued that religious beliefs detract from mental health (e.g., Ellis 1971, 1980; Walls 1980). More recently, psychologists have become increasingly open to ways that religion and mental health are compatible and synergistic (Ellis 2000; Miller 1999; Miller and Delaney 2005; Miller and Thoresen 2003; Richards and Bergin 1997, 2000, 2004; Shafranske 1996; Sperry and Shafranske 2004), but it is sometimes challenging to study religious phenomena because they do not always lend themselves to quantification. Because of these measurement challenges, psychologists of religion are wise to devote energy to developing quantitative measurement tools (Hill and Pargament 2003) while also exploring qualitative methodologies that rely less on traditional scientific measurement. Despite obvious limits to qualitative studies, there is value in hearing the stories of those who are managing life's challenges well, and then extracting principles for effective coping from the common themes they describe. This methodology may be especially useful when approaching populations that are under-represented in the scientific literature, such as clergy and clergy spouses.

Second, this study of exemplary wives of male clergy is useful because of growing interests in positive psychology and religious coping. The positive psychology movement has prompted researchers to look at what goes right with people, and not just what goes wrong. Of course, the two are related insofar as researchers and clinicians can glean principles for effective living from those who are functioning well and then apply similar principles to those who are not functioning as well. Studying healthy clergy spouses provides an opportunity to see effective coping methods among those who experience a high dose of daily stress, which may ultimately yield helpful principles that can be applied to others who face high levels of daily stress. It is striking to see the extent to which clergy spouses rely on religious faith to cope with their daily challenges. Similar to what was suggested by Welton et al. (1996), exemplary wives of male clergy find comfort and relief in releasing control of difficult situations to God. Though external attributions are typically associated with negative mental health outcomes, this does not appear to be the case when the source of the external attribution is a benevolent and caring God. Indeed, it seems increasingly clear that this sort of external "handing over" of one's problems to God is effective in managing stressful life situations (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005).

Finally, this study has a direct application for women married to male clergy. It is not just that exemplar wives of male clergy focus on spiritual practices—viewing God as benevolent and relying on positive religious coping (Pargament 1997)—but they are well-rounded in their approach for coping. They seek out supportive relationships, both inside and outside their immediate family. In fact, their clergy husbands might do well to follow their example in developing friendships outside of marriage and church relationships (McMinn et al. 2005). The exemplars in this study were also learning to be realistic in what they expect of themselves, and to set limits with those who have unrealistically high expectations for clergy families. Lastly, they find balance and repose through reading, exercise, and devising practical guidelines for themselves and their families. Thus, exemplary clergy spouses obtain a diverse array of coping styles. They utilize different tools for coping with different types of stressors, rather than solely relying on one style.

The limited research on clergy and clergy families tends to look at the problems and challenges they experience. As important as it is to understand the various stressors faced by ministers and their families, it is equally worthwhile to learn from those who are managing the stressors well. This study provides a glimpse into the lives of 25 women who

are coping well with the challenges of being married to a minister. We hope the lessons learned from their lives can be helpful to others in similar situations.

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