

# The Preacher's Wife – The Unpaid Partner

Lavonne James McClish.

Whether we like it or not, whether it is fair or not, we must face facts: Many, many people in the church consider the preacher's wife an employee (albeit unpaid) of the congregation with which her husband works. She will soon find out that she has a number of "bosses," few of whom can agree as to what her duties and responsibilities are, let alone how much time she should allot to each! Furthermore, she never knows which of those "bosses" might have the strongest will, which ones might have the longest memories when it comes to grudges, or which ones can wield the most influence upon the elders or other leaders of the church. Some save up their grievances until they see a moment of vulnerability and weakness, then they close in for the kill. They bring up all the things the preacher and/or his wife have ever done to displease them, thus adding fuel to the fire of what sometimes amounts to mob mentality or a lynching party (or maybe we could call it a "roast," though it wouldn't fit today's connotation of the "celebrity roast." These "roasts" can get pretty realistic). If you are thinking this could get to be an uncomfortable situation, go to the head of the class.

We can never please everyone. Our primary aim must be first to please God, then our husbands, and, somewhere in this mix, we must please ourselves – be true to ourselves. Eventually we must decide what **we** feel our work should be, where our talents lie, and what we can live with.

A prevalent pitfall is that of becoming so involved in so many activities (particularly when we attempt to **direct** all of them) that we are accused of "running the church." Sometimes the accusation is groundless, but some women do become overbearing and domineering, as if their "position" makes them "co-pastors." As one young woman said to me shortly after we had moved to a new location, the wife of one of the former preachers "had her finger in everything that took place in the church." Another wife, she said, was involved in absolutely nothing. Surely there has to be a balance somewhere.

Can we not work meekly and unobtrusively, not insisting that everything be done our way each and every time? Can we not **listen** instead of always **telling**? Remember, an effective leader does not attempt to be the "drill sergeant." That term reminds me of a time when my children were young, and I was admonishing them about their rowdy behavior after worship – attempting to corral them, you might say. One of the men standing around remarked, smiling, that I sounded just like his drill sergeant! Whenever I think of that occasion, although the man was a

dear friend and was teasing me, the thought also reminds me that “drill sergeant” commanding and giving orders is not becoming to a Christian woman. It is not becoming even if we are talking to other women, if we’d like to be respected and not resented. It is true that we may be resented anyway, but we should try to see that the resentment is not justified. We should lead by example and encouragement, for the most part. We want to bring out the best in **other** women and help them to see what they are capable of. When we bring them forward in this way, they can take the initiative and do things on their own, not as though they were puppets or as if they have to wait for us to “give them their marching orders” (yes, I actually heard a woman say this).

But I digress. Much of what needs to be said here will no doubt overlap with material relating to Christian women who are not preachers’ wives, because one area of responsibility or problems tends to blend into another. I feel I must relate some personal experiences (since those are the only experiences I have had). The Bible does not give us much guidance in this realm, except in general terms.

When we were much, much younger than we are now, my husband and I went to a distant city to “try out.” As the elders were showing us the preacher’s house, my husband asked them just what they expected of their preacher. One of them looked down at the floor for a few moments, pawing at some imaginary particle with his toe, and finally answered sheepishly, “Just as much as we can get out of him, and pay him as little as we can get by with.” I don’t think he was joking, and I am fairly certain I was included in the “two for the price of one” package.

At some time in the proceedings, one of the elders asked my husband what salary he would need in order to move there. He said, “I’ll just tell you what I’m being paid now,” and he told them, explaining that he was having to work part-time at a secular job to support his wife and three children. After some time had elapsed, with no word from those elders (who had promised to let us know either way), he wrote to them, inquiring. They replied somewhat like this: “We are looking for a preacher who is not so interested in money.” We have had occasion more than once to be grateful that we did not get what we thought we wanted at the time.

I suppose we should point out here the two extremes that we must avoid: Some preachers’ wives defiantly say that the church members do not own them, and no matter what anyone thinks of them, they aren’t going to be “unpaid servants.” And it is true, the church members do not own us (they haven’t even hired us); at least they have no Biblical authority for such an attitude. However, we need to be very careful about what people think of us. As the Bible teaches, our reputations do matter a great deal, and our influence can be destroyed by such an

attitude. At the other extreme are those poor souls who think that every time one of the members of the church says “Hop,” they must ask “How high?” They are doormats. Having served as a doormat more times than I care to remember through the years, I have finally learned that no one will respect you if you don’t respect yourself. If you give a bully an inch..., well, you know the rest. While we would like to please the members, our first obligation is to God, and our next is to our husbands and families. What God considers our duties to be may bear little or no resemblance to what the members think our duties are.

Another consideration is that we are a team, we and our husbands, and it is important that we give them all the help that we can, whether or not we are paid – in money (forget that) or in praise and encouragement. In some cases, helping our husbands may be one of the best ways we can serve the church. I have served as full- time and part-time church secretary (and personal secretary to my husband as well) in several different places, with no pay. I do not regret that for a moment. I do regret, though, the unjust criticism I received from so many quarters, as though I were “church property” (and as though it were “open season” on preachers’ wives).

In one church, someone was badly needed to get out the bulletin every week. It was typed on a stencil, and then printed on a mimeograph machine (the bane of my existence). The church could not afford to hire a secretary. I told the elders I would be glad to do the work, if one of the members would care for our two pre-school children while I did it. They found a lady who agreed to do it – for pay. Then, the next thing I knew, I learned that this woman was criticizing me behind my back because, she said, it was wrong for the church to be paying a baby-sitter for the preacher’s wife.

Another time, again when our children were very young, we were visiting my husband’s parents in a state a great distance from where we lived. The very first night we were there, he and his father were involved in a head-on collision and were hospitalized for more than a week. Our car was totaled. We had no choice but to fly back to our home city. Several people, among them an elder and his wife and a deacon and his wife, met us at the airport. Before we even got into their cars, one of the wives said to me, “Oh, by the way – you are scheduled to teach four and five-year olds **next week** in VBS.” At night. Fifteen or more children, wild as March hares, in a very small room. No helpers. I had no car, three children ranging in age from eighteen months to six years, and a husband who was still nursing serious injuries, who had to have help to shave, bathe, and dress himself, whose right arm was in a cast (broken in three places) from fingers to armpit.

We lived at least a couple of miles from the church building and from the nearest grocery store or doctor. It was imperative that we try to find a car immediately. I began to protest that I could not possibly prepare, that I didn't have enough time – and at that point the woman broke in and said pointedly, “Nobody else has had enough time, either.” I couldn't believe it, but I felt I had no choice. It was a nightmare, an unmitigated disaster, for the children as well as for me. Had I been more mature, I would have refused. End of discussion.

Of course, when we do stand our ground like that, we have to accept the possibility that we may have set in motion the machinery that will prove to be our undoing in that particular church. But – and here is the irony, the moral of the story – we ended up being asked to leave a few months later anyway, for a “reason” that made no sense at all, and still doesn't. You never know.

Another church with which we worked when we were very young and had very young children was in the Deep South. I soon learned that almost every woman in the church had a maid, and they began asking me who my maid was going to be. (The former preacher's wife had even hinted that she might be willing to pass her own maid on to me.) At first, I was opposed to the idea, but since I was eight months pregnant (and had experienced some difficulty) when we moved and had two other little ones, it became apparent that I would be forced to get help, whether I wanted to or not. After I had listened to the women talking over a period of time, I learned that, while they **did** want help with the housework, the main reason they wanted a maid was to care for their children so they could attend all the social events (i.e., coffees, teas, bridge games, and other parties, not to mention football games – this was a university town).

I have always been a plain and simple person, with no desire to dress up and go somewhere every other day, and certainly not to leave my children with someone I did not really know. (The women and girls who were domestic servants were, for the most part, ignorant, very superstitious, and they did not know the meaning of clean – either of personal cleanliness or household cleanliness. Please understand that I do not mean to be overly critical of them; the truth is that they had few opportunities, in the place and the time they occupied, to improve themselves. The wage they were paid was shameful.)

It didn't take me long to realize that I was a square peg in a round hole. We did make some very strong ties and lasting friendships there, because there was a definite “caste” system. We fit in very well with the “common people,” but they, unfortunately, did not have the power wielded by the “upper class” members. It did not take these people long to conclude that we were

much too conservative, negative, and judgmental to suit them, and they began to wonder why they ever invited us to come in the first place (they weren't the only ones who wondered that).

One of the deacons' wives said that my husband's sermons angered her so much, it made her want to get on her bicycle, wearing her shorts and smoking her cigarette, and ride up and down the street in front of our house. My point is that being an "unpaid partner" or servant can take many forms. Being a servant of these women, in this case, would have meant conforming to the standards and practices of a group of rather wealthy and worldly people.

What I am about to say will be controversial, I doubt not. It is, to be sure, only my opinion and my judgment, but I base it on the experience of many years and the judgment of maturity (okay, "old age"). The reader may take it for whatever it is worth, if anything. One of the jobs which seems to be automatically handed to the preacher's wife, whatever her age, is that of teaching the ladies' Bible class. I have done this at quite a few churches. When I first began to be asked to accept this responsibility, I knew I was too young, but I thought I should try. I quickly found that the knowledge of Biblical facts and principles is not necessarily enough. I knew, too, that here was a case of a younger woman teaching the older women, a reversal of the Scriptural admonition. I also learned, to my sorrow, that some women who want to get at the preacher will try to do so indirectly – by getting at his wife. There are no elders in the class, no preachers, and the teacher has no real authority, particularly if she is young and uncertain of herself. My judgment is that a young preacher's wife should postpone this job until she is older and more mature. Sometimes the ladies are divided into "the older group" and "the younger group," which would change the picture somewhat.

When we moved to begin work with a new church several years ago, I was told that the former preacher's wife had always taken care of gathering and serving food to families who had lost loved ones (and that I would be expected to continue in her footsteps). She always bought and cooked the meat herself. (Her recipes were even bequeathed to me, and I was told to use them.) She was very good at this, and people seemed to love her and appreciate her.

She knew all the members (she and her husband had been working with this church more than eight years), and she knew what the customs were. I did not. Those customs were set in stone (this was a small town) and were not to be violated. But, again, I felt that I could not refuse, so I agreed. I thought maybe I would "catch on" in time, when I got to know people better. That was not to be. First cat out of the bag, I offended one of the women. She telephoned me, and did she ever let me know she was angry (remember, I was brand-new in that church).

The death in their family was in a very distant city, and the family was traveling to that city for the funeral. They were having no guests in their home at all, so I concluded that we did not need to prepare a meal for them. Bad decision. She said I could at least have brought food to their house (I had no idea when they were coming back). I apologized, but she was not appeased. There was no excuse for my not knowing and doing these things. Shortly thereafter, I told the elders that I was not suited to this job, and that someone who knew the people and the customs could do it much better. I did undertake another project right away, that fit my personality, my knowledge, and my abilities better.

I am not sure if this is still true, but it used to be that many church-owned preachers' houses "joined hard to the synagogue," as they used to say. When you live in one of these, your house is sometimes considered an extension of the church building, and open to everyone at all times. You never knew when someone might be checking to see if your housekeeping was up to the "standard" (mine was not). One of the churches, where we lived in such a house, had several sessions of camp every summer and owned a bus to take the kids to the camp from the city. Would you care to guess whose house was headquarters for all the parents who brought their children to board the bus? Likely you haven't a clue as to whose house was to be open for the incoming children **from** camp, so that they could get a drink, use the bathroom, use the phone, and wait to be picked up.

The elders of this same church, with their wives, pointed out to us from the very outset that the house was built with a large living and dining area (almost the entire length of the house from space cut out of the bedrooms and the kitchen/den) so that the preacher and his wife would have plenty of room to entertain.

We worked with another church (my husband was the "education director" for a brief time there) whose preacher and wife did entertain quite a bit, but apparently not enough. The church members presented them with a silver coffee service, with the strong hint that they should use it often. When the preacher was fired shortly thereafter (and immediately after he and his wife had invited all the deacons and their wives over for a meal), one of the deacons said to him, "It was just too little too late."

When I was very young, our family lived in the house owned by the church with which my father worked. The members of the church had furnished one of the bedrooms, with the stipulation that the local preacher's family would keep all of the visiting preachers. This house only had two bedrooms. That meant that my mother, my father, my brother, my six-month-old

sister, and I slept in the same room—for two weeks. (That’s how long Gospel meetings lasted in those days, with two services every day.) The baby had colic or something, and she would cry for what seemed like hours at night.

One of the visiting preachers instructed my mother when he and his wife arrived that he could not sleep in the “forepart of the night,” so she would need to keep the children in our family (ages seven, nine, and six months) quiet in the mornings so he could sleep (until 10 or 11 o’clock). He wanted Cokes for breakfast (**w**e only got Cokes occasionally, because they were too expensive), which my mother had to buy. He stayed up late at night, which meant my father had to stay up late with him, making it very difficult for us children to get to sleep. This created quite a hardship on our family in many ways, not the least of which was financial. We could barely afford food for our own family.

These are just a few examples of the “unpaid servant” mentality. It is good for those of us who are married to preachers to know something of what to expect and what will be expected of us. Then we must decide how we will react, and just how much we will put up with. My mother was young and ill-equipped to deal with many of the situations with which she was faced. She was also in very bad health and had heavy responsibilities and hard work. I really thought I had learned from her experiences and that I was better prepared to be the wife of a preacher, but I discovered that some things are learned only from experience.

### **Conclusion**

I suppose, in the end, we all have to learn for ourselves. It is part of the maturing process. If we can allow ourselves a little time, when we are “asked” to take on a job, to think about it and make an intelligent decision, we will do better. Sometimes, I know, we don’t have that luxury. We can refuse politely and courteously, if we need to refuse. At the same time, we want to be out in front, leading in the way of service. We **are** selfless servants, after all. It is a fine line to walk.

[**Note:** Lavonne James McClish wrote this article and it appeared in *Showing Thyself a Pattern...* published by The Gospel Journal, 2003]

**Attribution:** From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.