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What is the Role of a Clergy Spouse?

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The first clergy spouse I knew was also my kindergarten teacher. I never gave any thought to her role as the rector's wife. In fact I didn't think about the role of the clergy spouse until years later.

Bill and I married in 1967. We were both juniors in college. Bill was majoring in agronomy with plans to work for FHA, oil companies, or country clubs with golf courses. That all changed after he attended Inquirer's Classes at *my* church, and he recognized his true calling. While he calmly and confidently moved through all of the steps required to make his dreams a reality, I lay awake wrestling with questions and fears. Would I have to behave in a proper and pious manner all of the time? What would be expected of me?

In the fall of 1969, Bill entered Virginia Seminary and I began teaching. It was exciting to be part of the seminary community. Students' wives (there were no students with husbands) met frequently, and I learned I was not alone in my struggle to discern how to be a clergy spouse.

It was a turbulent time of protest marches and questioning anything traditional. We seminary wives began to push against pre-conceived notions, and were certain we would not be altar guild ladies, teach Sunday school, sing in the choir, or do any other jobs expected of us simply because we were married to a priest.

I was pregnant when we moved to our first church after seminary. Parishioners showered me with attention and baby gifts. I was invited to sing in the choir, and I enjoyed it. I helped with the craft fairs and rummage sales, and had fun. In the next two parishes I found myself teaching Sunday school, hosting meals in our home for various parish groups, and even working on the altar guild. Another clergy wife gave me some sage advice to do no more and no less than I would do as a non-clergy spouse church member. I felt free to take on or drop parish commitments, depending upon my changing family and professional obligations.

In the fourth parish we were living in the rectory, a beautiful stone house situated in the center of the church campus. On Sunday mornings, people were walking to and from the church and the Christian Education Building from 7:30 to around 1:00. That meant no running out in my bathrobe to pick up the newspaper or to let the dog on and off her line! Living in this "fish bowl" could be annoying and even disturbing. Flowers would be delivered to our door instead of to the sacristy. Once, a woman who had arrived early for a funeral walked in the front door to use our bathroom. I had to be creative in balancing our private family life with "The Rector's Family" public role.

We were excited about our first Christmas in this home. We put candles in every window and invited parishioners for cookies and punch. A large stable was set up in the field near the road.

Two sheep and a donkey inhabited the small fenced enclosure. On Christmas Eve, the Living Crèche was blessed, and every night for one full week, parishioners would dress as Joseph, Mary, and shepherds, and stand in the stable. It was — and still is — a lovely tradition.

On New Year's Eve afternoon, I was feeling rather smug about how well I was handling my role as "Rectorine," as one parishioner called me. Snow had fallen. Bill was out of town at a funeral. I planned to sit by the fire and read. Then I heard my daughter cry, "Mom! The donkey has escaped!" There went my peaceful afternoon. I ran outside wondering how corralling farm animals had become *my* responsibility. Wasn't Bill — the ordained one who had even grown up on a sheep farm — supposed to be the shepherd around here?

The donkey had indeed knocked down a section of the fence. Both sheep and the donkey had managed to cross the busy road in front of the church property, and were running through the neighborhood. I ran inside, enlisted the help of my twelve-year-old son, grabbed our dog's leash and a bunch of celery, and — woefully unprepared — started out after the animals. Fortunately a better prepared woman and her daughter had already captured the donkey with proper leads from the daughter's horseback riding lessons.

My son and I began trying to herd the sheep back into the enclosure. After two or three hours of coming close to coaxing the sheep into fenced-in areas, my son and I gave up. Our feet were cold and wet, and all we had succeeded in doing was driving the sheep farther away from the church and into the yards of our neighbors.

Almost as soon as we got home the doorbell rang, and a girl from the neighborhood pointed to the sheep. They had apparently followed us back onto the church property. She offered to help, so out we went again, in hopes of guiding them into the gated playground. Suddenly a young man dressed in denim overalls appeared out of nowhere. He raced ahead of me, barefoot in the snow, tackled one of the sheep, and carried it to the stable. Bill had returned and was standing there in his three-piece suit, ready to wire the fence back together. The second sheep circled the fence until it found the way to join its friend. I looked around, and the mysterious young man was gone.

The animals returned to their farms the following day, no worse for their escapade. It took me a while to recover from the range of emotions I had experienced: fear that the animals would be injured or cause an accident on the busy street; frustration that I could not succeed in capturing them; anger that I was thrust into that situation; annoyance that everyone who heard the story thought it was amusing. In time I began to understand that the runaway animals, my unsuccessful attempt at shepherding, and the barefoot stranger had become part of the history of that parish's life. More importantly, my understanding of the role of the clergy spouse had undergone a small Epiphany miracle.



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