

The Impact of Forced Exits on the Pastor's Spouse

Whether you have been blindsided by a leadership decision or experienced a slow "death spiral" in a ministry role, the spiritual and emotional toll of a forced exit is great. Trauma is not too drastic a word to describe what ministers and their families encounter when they are fired, forced to resign, or find themselves at the mercy of a leadership coup.

The pastor's spouse – either wife or husband – will likely experience many of the following challenges as this unwanted and unexpected transition unfolds.

Identity

- May strongly derive their purpose and worth from their position or their spouse's position
- Losing a ministry job is an attack on the core of their dignity
- Losing a ministry job may significantly impact their perception of right – "being" and right "doing" before God - has huge spiritual implications
- May feel they are being punished by God or have not been found worthy enough to finish their ministry tasks

Family

- They will either "fight" - looks like a "momma bear" due to harm against the spouse and children
- OR they will "flee" - become severely withdrawn and isolated
- Both responses will impact familial relationships and it is expected that they will become strained
- Protecting their family may be singularly on their mind but they will feel completely inadequate at this task which leads to deep issues of security and competence

Former Church as Support System

- "Betrayed" is the most common feeling
- Confusion, deep hurt, deep loss, and deep anger may follow - their sense of justice and righteousness has been/is being challenged as they feel rejected (along with feeling their spouse's rejection)
- Common responses from churches – Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) - forced silence and inability to speak about the events leading up to the exit; silence from former "friends" - people they may have led to Christ, watched their kids grow, taught in their Sunday school classes, shared meals with, been on sports teams/clubs, etc., and shared deep intimate spiritual moments with which had created a type of bond they thought trust-worthy
- Without this support system, if they do not have family physically close and especially if they don't have any close emotionally, *they will feel utterly alone*

Former Community as Support System

- If they have been a part of the larger community, they will have to face this community perhaps feeling others see a huge "scarlet letter" against their spouse/family
- They will question who is "for" them and "against" them - common tasks, such as going to the grocery store, will be very difficult to take part in and may cause them to be overwhelmed, easily/commonly leading to panic attacks
- If they are employed in the community, a positive work environment will most likely help to restore their sense of identity and justice; but any stressors already present in a work environment may lead to further distrust and heightened paranoia or being "on alert" for further danger

PTSD -

- Post-traumatic stress is to be expected in this situation. Post-traumatic stress occurs in any highly stressful event. This is a state expected to be experienced for a short time - 4-8 weeks. Common symptoms are:
 - Inability to organize time/information
 - Being in a “fog” - unable to connect to reality around oneself
 - Outbursts of anger and crying - quickly going between the two states
 - Losing the filter to their speech (this is the brain’s inability to use the pre-frontal cortex– the “thinking” brain)
 - Physical reactions to triggers (places, people, & music are high trigger-points for Spouses, texts, anything related to a church building/calendar, etc.)
 - Nightmares
 - Inability to sleep or sleeping too much- inability to stay awake, experiencing strong urges to fall asleep at abnormal moments
- PTSD – These symptoms clinically become a “disorder” when they are experienced more than 12 weeks after the crisis event. Usually, outside help will enter the picture later in the timeline, however, it is important to watch for and ask about these symptoms.
- Of the women I have worked with, about 75% of them have PTSD and typically struggle with severe anxiety (sometimes leading to panic attacks), inability to sleep, frequent nightmares, and/or repeatedly reliving portions of the events leading up to the church exit, and experience negative physical/emotional reactions when trying to return to any church building/body. Many of these are experiencing these same symptoms 8+ months after the event.
- The key to PTSD is a sense of helplessness and aloneness - until these can be addressed, the symptoms will continue.
- With proper support, post-traumatic growth is also to be expected. With love, nurture, and safe connectedness, they can grow in resilience and will learn to “comfort those with the comfort they have received” down the line. **This may take several years but traumatic events are not to be seen as a death sentence or defining of their future.*

The Pastor’s Spouse May Be Rooted, Secure, and “Whole-Person Healthy.” Consider This:

How a person will approach this season of life will depend upon the security and strength of their identity and connection with God, their personal support system, and their connections with personal family members. If these are all healthy and strong, they will most likely navigate a transition in and out of ministry with minimal difficulty. Any difficulty they have will be surrounded with the supports they need to walk through a normal grief/loss process. While still painful, they have the resources in place to be resilient and “bounce back” fairly quickly. In these cases, the focus of support may only need to be on how to help them navigate practical decision-making (new job, resume supports, housing, etc.), newly rising marriage questions, and supporting them in helping their children navigate their grief, as well assisting in reconnecting them with a healthy body of Christ.

PIR Ministries is committed to promoting the wellbeing of the families of those who serve the Church in vocational roles. For more information, contact us

*on our website at pirministries.org,
by email, at info@priministries.org,
or by phone, at (844) 585-1234.*