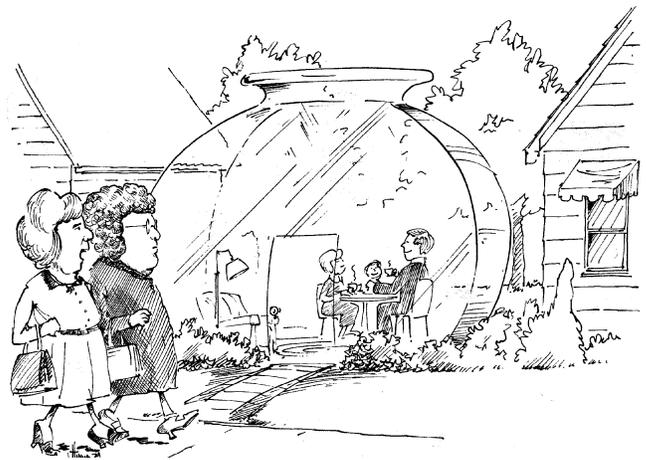


The Small-Town Pastor's Family

by Maynard Mathewson and Ron Klassen

What follows are some notes I took from a seminar led by Maynard Mathewson, former Director of RHMA. In addition to being a respected director, he was an exemplary husband and father. (Maynard passed away in 2002.) The seminar was held some time ago and I have since added thoughts of my own, making me uncertain if what follows comes from Maynard or me. (Hopefully Maynard wouldn't mind the thoughts I've added!)

—Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director



“... and this is where our pastor lives.”

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This article focuses on the *small-town* pastor's family. It is not about families in general, not even about pastors' families in general, meaning that little will be said about broader issues like child discipline, practicing at home what you preach at church, or putting too many expectations on your PK's.

Small town is unique

Some circumstances of small-town pastors' families are unique. One example: the cartoon above. Their situation is similar to King Hezekiah's. After some guests left he was asked, "What did they see in your house?" to which he replied, "They saw everything." (Is 39:4) This resembles the small-town pastor's home!

When I (Ron) was pastoring, people would often say things to me like, "I saw you mowing" ... or "washing the car" ... or "working in the garden." They meant no harm, but being from the city, comments like these were foreign to me. They gave me the feeling I was being watched 24 hours a day. (And, in fact, someone once asked why a light was on in my house at 3:00 a.m.!) If I wanted uninterrupted time for my wood-working hobby, I had to leave the garage door shut. Ironically, there is more privacy in a city of millions than a town of 500.

Contrast this to a couple of big city, big church situations. In one, the pastor was separated from his wife for more than two years and kept it a secret from his church until the divorce. In another, a long-tenured pastor's wife seldom attended church but almost no one knew she was absent. Could these happen in a small-town church? In the small town "they see everything that is in our house."

The benefits

In Lyle Schaller's book, *The Small Church Is Different*,¹ he lists a number of ways the small church is unique. Reflecting on these, one could conclude that at least some of the uniquenesses translate into benefits for the pastor's family.

"The small church is a volunteer organization" (p. 29). Smaller churches tend to have a higher percentage of volunteers and less paid staff. This benefits the small-town pastor's family in that the congregation welcomes their involvement. It means pastoring can be a family ministry rather than something Dad does by himself.

There is tremendous benefit when families minister together—both to the family and church. There are benefits when the pastor's wife visits parishioners with her

husband. In certain situations, there are benefits to bringing the kids along as well: they have a way of dispelling silence or dissolving tension as you swap cute kid or chicken pox stories, and before you know it the discussion turns to other family situations. If the pastor's wife is along she will bring much of value to the conversation. Certainly if there is counseling that involves a woman, it is good to do so as a pastoral couple. It's quite possible that, as women observe your wife's concern and wisdom, they will seek her out apart from you, which is better yet.

A side benefit of ministering together: the congregation observes you ministering as a couple, which may encourage them to do the same.

And not just your spouse, but your children can be a part of the ministry. Not all kids can be involved in Dad's work, but pastors' kids can! Town/country settings are perfect for this. As a family, maybe at breakfast time, pray for each person/family in your church and for ministry concerns. When possible, include your kids in ministry planning and decision making. And, find avenues of ministry for your kids.

A caution might be in order. (You knew it was coming, didn't you?) It is possible for the pastor's wife and family to be too involved, to the point where the wife is like an unpaid Associate or where the family is overworked because they are being called upon too often. It is also possible that the wife may not be able to get too involved in ministry, perhaps because of other demands like work or preschool children.

Having said this, if the pastor is called to ministry then so is his family. The small-town context is a natural setting for family ministry, a way for kids to grow up seeing ministry as natural a part of life as eating, going to school, and sleeping. This is something that may not be as possible to pull off in a city or large-church context.

"The small church cares more for people than for performance" (Schaller, p. 29).

The large church tends to use professional quality people—to lead singing, play instruments, sing solos, do construction projects, work on computers, etc. But the small church will use a much broader spectrum of people.

How does this benefit the pastor's family? They are all encouraged to "test their ministry wings," even at a young age. One small-town pastor's son began to lead singing in his church when he was in seventh grade. Maynard's four sons, from the time each was a teen, filled in for Dad in the pulpit. Is it any wonder that all four are in ministry today?

Another caution: We must not let the small-town church become a place where we showcase our family.

"The small church has a place for everyone" (Schaller, p. 30). Regardless of who you are—your age, limitations, abilities—the small church has a place for you. In the small church everyone is ministered to by everyone else. There's no special needs class or singles class. Everyone's a part of the fellowship and everyone is treated like everyone else.

When you think about it, who do seniors need to be around to stay healthy? Kids put a sparkle in their eyes! Who should singles be with? They crave family interaction. How about alcoholics? They need to rub shoulders with teetotalers.

As this relates to the pastor's family, there are at least a couple of benefits. One, if you have a special needs child, he or she will at minimum be treated like everyone else, and at most be singled out for extra loving by many in the church.

The second benefit: the pastor's kids learn valuable lessons about people. Everyone is a part of ministry, a part of life, a part of the

church. Everyone is valued, included, and treated like everyone else.

There are significant benefits to pastoring in a small-town context. A pastor with six children wondered if they might be missing out, wondered if his kids might have greater opportunity elsewhere. A friend convinced him that they had the most benefits right where they were!

Tips for a healthy pastor's family

What follows are a few tips for turning small-town uniquenesses into positives.

1. Make lemonade out of lemons. So your family is in a fishbowl.

There's not a lot you can do about it, except maybe get away once in awhile. (Even then your town's people will have an uncanny way of finding you!) But maybe we shouldn't look at this as being all negative. Instead, perhaps a better approach is to accept it and find its advantages.

For example, recognize that the fishbowl is a means of accountability. It means you have to always be careful how you relate to your wife and kids. It's a little harder for you to be absent from church services. You have to drive the speed limit. Are these all bad?

A pastor's son, now an adult, when asked why he "turned out" so well though he grew up in a pagan town, replied, "Part of it was a loyalty to my parents. I knew if I started doing bad stuff, their ministry wouldn't count for much. My parents explained more than once, even when I was real young, that their

effectiveness would be compromised if I were to do things I shouldn't."

Now, we need to be careful. We could work at being a good family just because we're trying to make a good impression, not because of a sincere desire to be Godly.

The fishbowl also provides an opportunity to have influence beyond your preaching by modeling what a family ought to be. Does modeling mean we must have the ideal family? Part of modeling is being open and honest ("yes, we have struggles too") and showing how to deal with family pressures, imperfections, and sin—by such things as disciplining, apologizing, and seeking help from others.

"Quotable . . ."

"What made for a small town, made for a big extended family. And that's the role Mission [Texas] played in my life and the lives of my peers. Anyone you'd meet on the street knew who you were, where you lived, and often where you were heading. And while that meant privacy was at a premium and kids had a hard time getting into serious mischief, it proved to be good preparation for the kind of public life I've lived for more than forty years. I learned a sense of accountability early in life, accepting the fact that people were always watching—even when I wished they weren't."

—Tom Landry (*long-time coach of the Dallas Cowboys*), in his autobiography (*New York: HarperCollins, 1990*), pp. 40-41.

2. Make it a family project to be students of your town/country culture. This can be incredible fun! Look up local web sites together. Read books with a local flavor. Get off the beaten path and explore the nooks and crannies around you. Ask questions of the locals when your children are within hearing range.

While doing so, be sure to make a conscious effort to respect the

culture and maintain a positive attitude about it. Be careful not to make negative comparisons between your town's culture and the culture from which you came.

3. Don't divorce ministry from family. For one, it is impossible. Some people try to divide their lives into neat categories: ministry, family, personal. In reality these can't be separated, especially in small towns. Sometimes personal recreation time is also family time. Sometimes ministry and family time are intertwined.

Take your kids with you when you are doing ministry—then it's family time too. Examples: to cattle brandings, ball games where church kids are playing, auctions, and visits in homes.

4. Emphasize the positives of being a small-town pastor's family. Sure there are negatives, but don't dwell on them. Instead, point out the pluses.

Like having a flexible schedule. Pastors get to attend their kids' ball games and daytime school events. Pastors can have lunch with their children at school. Not all dads can do these kinds of things.

Like being treated in special ways because you're the pastor's kid. PK's are often showered with gifts, taken on outings, and generally spoiled by others in town.

Like being exposed to significant people: missionaries, Bible college students on choir tour, special speakers who eat a meal in your home.

5. Make it a habit to talk positively about your congregation in front of your children. In an environment where your kids know everyone in the church, and where what you say to them is likely to get back to everyone in the church, it is doubly important to be careful about letting your frustrations enter your conversations with your children. Instead say, "Have you noticed the incredible changes in Bob? ... Wasn't that a wonderful song Cara sang today?" Save your frustrations for private conversations with your spouse.

As our kids get older we perhaps don't need to shield them as much. We do want our kids to have a realistic view of the ministry, and they can learn from negative examples

too. But even then we need to be careful not to talk condescendingly, disrespectfully, or judgmentally, and try not to be too critical. It is important to focus on the joys in our church and the good qualities of people, and guard against talking too much about all the problems.

One pastor wisely said, "It's not the problems or the nature of the ministry that makes kids bitter. Other professions also demand large amounts of time and draw their families into public scrutiny. Bitterness comes to pastors' kids when they see bitterness in their parents. At home they hear petty sniping at congregational

members, denigration of board members, and complaints about the job—then in public they see a false graciousness. Hypocrisy is murder to our kids. Bitterness is a communicable disease."

A young PK got into an argument with neighbor kids. They were all calling each other the worst names they could

think of. The PK didn't know any bad names, except one. He pointed to the really bad kid and said, "You ... you ... you deacon!" He had probably heard a few too many bad things about deacons around his supper table!

6. Compensate for the deprivation that comes from isolation. Boredom in rural areas can be a real issue. It calls for innovation, creativity, and taking initiative.

One pastoral couple was careful to initiate intentional supper conversations, a great way to liven up a normally mundane time. They asked questions like, "What was the prettiest thing you saw this week? ... something new you learned? ... something helpful you noticed someone do? ... the hardest part of your week?"

"Quotable . . ."

"I think you have to put [ministry] first because God's called you. God gives you a family. God gives you a mate and children. You have a responsibility and you should not neglect that. But we have to put Christ first in our life—period. That's over our mother and father, our wife, our children. I think that's contrary to what a lot of people tell us, but that's Scripture."

—Franklin Graham, quoted in "Growing Up Graham," by Simon Dahlman (Pastor's Family, February/March 1997).

Another pastoral couple who lived 50 miles from the nearest town made certain that one evening every week they went to town, though it was a long trip, just to let the kids rub shoulders with others.

Other possibilities: go camping, fishing, to auctions, used book stores, flea markets, the library.

Actually, the lack of things for kids to do in isolated contexts can be positive. It “forces” the family to come together with creative activities.

7. Read books about people in similar shoes.

Sometimes kids think they’re the only ones who are having experiences like theirs. This can be a lonely feeling. There are many gripping biographies of people who have been in similar circumstances, many of them written for children. Read these to your kids, perhaps at bedtime. Examples:

- John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” a small-town pastor for many years in a poor, neglected, one-street town.
- Jim Elliot, who was passionate about reaching a tribe of about 400 people and gave his life in the process.

- David Livingstone, who went through incredible hardship to reach remote places in Africa.
- Marilyn Laszlo, who was greatly used of God to reach an isolated tribe in Irian Jaya.

“Quotable . . .”

“I prefer the concept of ‘keeping balance’ to ‘setting priorities.’ Priorities implies one being superior to another, whereas balance implies complementing the other. Priorities speaks of competition for top spot; balance speaks of cooperation. Priorities suggest that it has to be either/or; balance says that it can be both/and. Viewing family and ministry from a ‘balance’ rather than a ‘priority’ perspective helps us see that each can strengthen and enrich the other, rather than generate resentment that one takes time and energy away from the other.”

—Dora Pauls, in “Balancing Priorities”
(Parents Teaching Overseas, a publication of Wycliffe Bible Translators, April 1994).

- Mary Slessor, a missionary who raised a pack of adopted children in a tribal environment.
- John Fawcett, who couldn’t bear to leave his rural congregation. Once he tried but ended up unpacking the wagons. He stayed a total of 54 years! This experience prompted him to write the hymn, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.”

Books like these will have great impact on your children. It will help them realize that being in a small town puts them in good company!

¹ Lyle Schaller, *The Small Church Is Different!* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).



Before his death, Maynard Mathewson invested his entire life in small towns—as a church planter, pastor, and General Director of RHMA.