

# Colleagues at Church and Home

A clergy couple shares the story of their ministry together. | JOHN and KRIS STEWART

## **Kris's story**

John and I were married during the spring of my second year at North Park Theological Seminary, and we moved to Connecticut four months later for my internship. We had a plan: I would finish seminary and seek a call to serve in a church while John would continue to work on his master's degree in history with the goal of one day teaching. Everything was neatly laid out.

Everything changed, though, when John declared that he felt God was calling him to ministry—so much for sticking to a plan! I have to confess that I was extremely frustrated; this was not what we had decided as the plan for our lives. Seventeen years later, however, we are now serving our second church as a clergy couple, and what seemed like a somewhat unusual calling is now becoming a more and more common ministry model.

## **John's story**

Before we go any further, I'd like to share a bit of my side of the story. Kris is right: we did have a plan, but as so often happens, God, that third partner in every Christian marriage, had another plan.

What Kris didn't know was that as

I got to know her better, and as I got to know ministry better through her, I felt a growing conviction that God was placing a call on my life as well. Nevertheless, my sudden declaration of my intention to go to seminary took Kris quite by surprise. So from the very beginning, flexibility has been a constant in our marriage, and in our lives as pastors.

## **Our story**

Any call to Christian ministry, or to Christian witness for that matter, is full of surprises and challenges, as well as blessings. Clergy couples serve in a variety of settings; some serve in one setting together, some serve in a split parish model, and some serve in two distinctly different settings. Our experience has been to serve together at one church.

The journey to our first church took a bit of time because of our change of plans. In fact, it took eight years for the two of us to get through seminary. During that time Kris worked at North Park University for a year, and then for three years at Bethany Covenant Home in Minneapolis while John completed his internship and seminary classes. Finally in 1997 we received a call to our first church

in rural Minnesota. Then we began to put into practice what we had only talked about in theory—and theory is certainly different from day-to-day reality.

Our first church was tremendously gracious as we began to figure out what the reality of being a clergy couple looked like. We began to discover which aspects of ministry came easily to us as we worked together, as well as what areas would need a little more effort in order for us to work well together. Sorting out these details led to how we naturally divided up the tasks of our call. Kris, with her background in music and seminary emphasis on Christian education, created the worship services each week and worked with the education and discipleship of the church. John took on the majority of the preaching and visitation.

Even though John had responsibility for most of the visits, when we first arrived in town, we made an effort to visit as many parishioners together as possible. It was a visit to the home of two elderly sisters in our congregation that highlighted the novelty of our call.

While we enjoyed coffee and strawberry shortcake in their dining



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room, they questioned us about where our then two-and-a-half-year-old son was. When we responded that he was at day care, they innocently asked, “Oh, Kris, where do you work?” Though they had been at the church meeting to vote to call us, the concept of “clergy couple” was so foreign to them that it didn’t cross their minds that both of us had been called to serve as their pastors.

That brings us to the question of how we view ourselves in light of serving the congregation. A lot has been written attacking or defending such concepts as “egalitarian” or “complementarian” relationships in regard to gender roles. We try not to place

ourselves in either camp. Our work is like two wings on an airplane; the left and right wings have the same function of serving to lift the aircraft in the air, yet each must be designed differently to perform effectively. Simply put, we seek to complement each other’s strengths as we share the load of our call equally.

The concept of shared roles is most strongly evident in the area of counseling, which in twelve years of shared ministry has most often centered on marital relationships. We feel, and have had it confirmed to us by those

whom we counsel, that it has been beneficial to have both male and female insights regarding a particular situation. It has also been helpful that the counselors are married to each other. It works well for

us to counsel the couple together as well as offer to meet with each spouse one-on-one. While we are up-front in stating that we will talk about the counseling situation with each other, we also offer the option of complete confidentiality. We have been pleas-

**John and Kris Stewart** are pastors of First Covenant Church in Worthington, Minnesota.

antly surprised to find that in every case so far, those being counseled have been open to having both of us know their cares and concerns.

Now in our second church together, we have discussed the uniqueness of being a clergy couple with our current congregation, and they respond favorably to hearing from both of us. This is especially true when it comes to the task of preaching. John preaches about three weeks out of the month, and the fourth week either Kris preaches or we team-preach.

The team-preaching experience is both one of our greatest frustrations and our greatest joys. The frustration occurs in the preparation because we approach the process from two opposing directions; Kris is more linear while John takes more of a big picture approach. We've often told our parishioners, "You don't want to be in the office when we're working on a sermon together!"

The preaching itself is often a great joy because there is a whole different dynamic that occurs when two of us present the word. We have discovered that when we preach together, the dynamic of two distinct voices, united by a common text or theme, invites the hearers to experience the word in a more participatory manner.

### **Working out the details**

As with any call, there are challenges. Who attends denominational events like Midwinter or the Annual Meeting? How are issues of salary and pension handled? What are the effects on family and how do we establish boundaries?

There is a temptation to discuss family issues at work, and work issues at home. The latter can be detrimental to any marriage when there is a difficult situation at work. In our case we don't have the benefit of one spouse being at least one step removed from the issue.

Early on we were faced with a

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situation that was consuming us both at work and at home to the point that we were discussing it all of the time. Finally we came to the conclusion that we had to set physical boundaries to properly protect our time, space, and family. We declared that once we walked down the hallway of our home toward the bedrooms, this topic of discussion was off-limits. We have had times when we are more effective at this than others, but if we find ourselves getting too wrapped up in a situation one of us will remind the other of the "hallway solution."

Key to navigating our call has been flexibility, both for us and for the congregations we have served. In this we have been truly blessed. We have had to understand that our going into a church that previously had one pastor meant we would be sharing a salary. But both congregations we have served have been flexible in allowing us time for our family. Kris tends to stay home with the kids during breaks within the school year, and pulls back on her hours during the summer. Our churches have given us the flexibility to continue to develop our gifts as individuals who are called together and have allowed us to grow naturally as a clergy couple.

This past winter we received a Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant to attend Midwest Ministry for a career assessment. Since we had been working as a clergy couple for twelve years, and since there is little written on clergy couple ministry, we wanted to get a checkup on our shared call to pastoral ministry. Our current congregation not only approved our time away, they encouraged us in this venture.

In the assessment we discovered that there is tremendous strength in acknowledging our differences. Then

we can look for ways in which we complement and strengthen each other, as well as the overall ministry. On a practical level we learned that some of the frustration we experience

as we work and serve together is to be expected; in fact, it is an acceptable part of the process, and maybe always will be.

Each church who calls a clergy couple, and each couple who takes a call together will live out the ministry differently. One thing is constant: it is a married couple, a husband and wife, often a father and mother, who minister together, not two separate, unrelated individuals. This may seem obvious, but we have heard of a congregation (not a Covenant one) that did not allow their clergy couple to take vacation time together because that would leave the pulpit empty on a Sunday. This is an extreme example, but it raises one issue that needs to be considered.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, while a clergy couple is yoked together in ministry and marriage, they are also not two for the price of one; that attitude cheapens the value of the unique gifts each spouse brings to ministry.

As we worked on this article together, we constantly asked the question, "But wait, are we saying that clergy couple is the best model of ministry?" Of course the answer is no. Clergy couple pastors, individual pastors, and other co-pastor models prepare and proclaim the word, visit and care for their parishioners, and seek to share the love of Christ with their communities and the world with compassion and diligence. In the end, it's not about what model is most effective, it's about honoring the call that God has put upon us. For us, we seek to honor the call that God has put upon us together, and in serving together, we pray that we are serving him, his kingdom, and the congregations we're called to. ■