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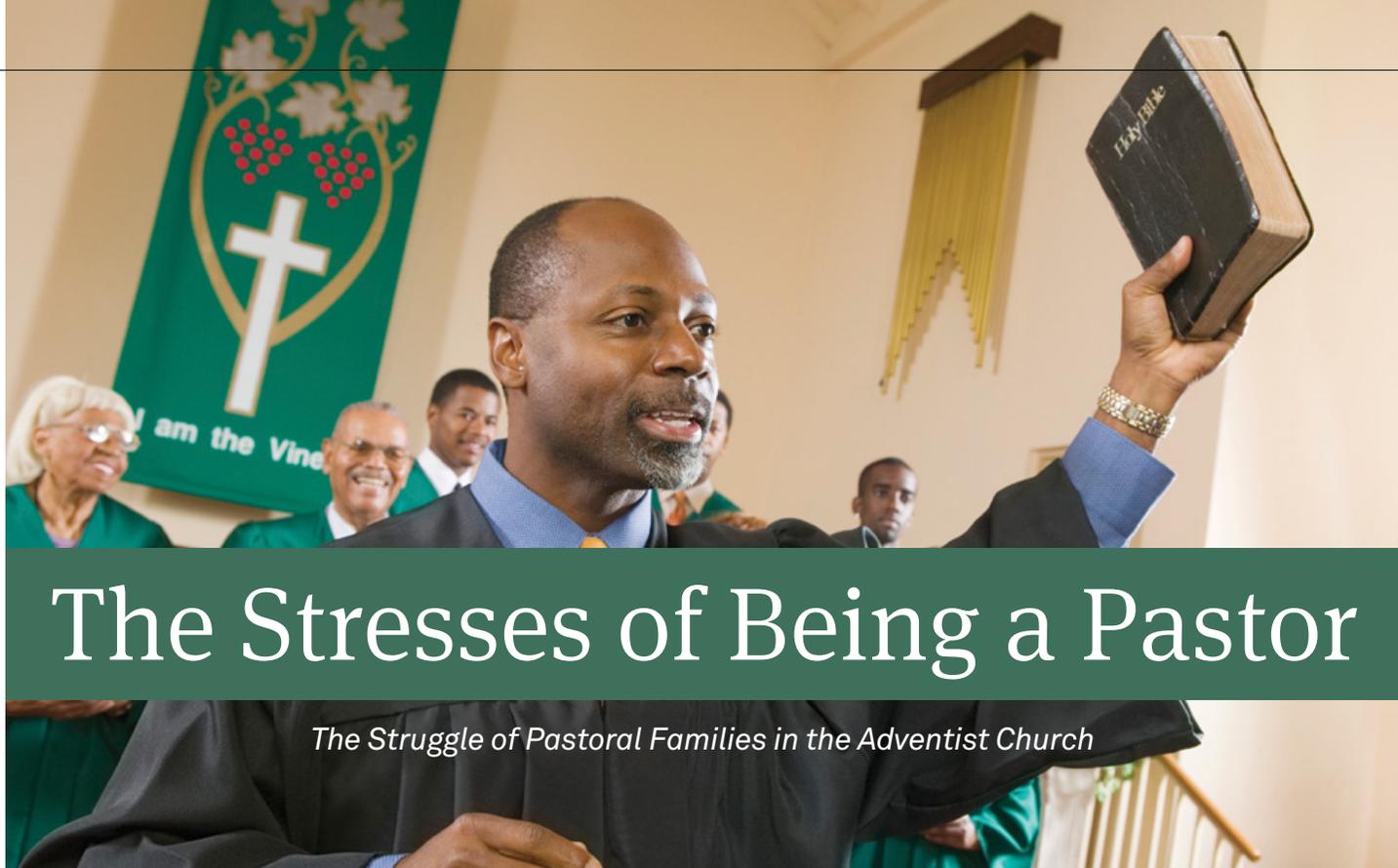
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The Stresses of Being a Pastor

The Struggle of Pastoral Families in the Adventist Church

The North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (NAD) has recently recognized the importance of academic research on the effectiveness of ministry. In particular, the NAD has become concerned about the wellbeing of its pastoral families. It is not uncommon for pastors to become burned-out after several years of pastoring and some leave the ministry altogether. The NAD-sponsored research on the causes of stress on pastors and their families is an effort to combat these trends.

In 2012, an interdisciplinary team working from Andrews University became interested in the topic of pastoral family stress. This team, based out of Andrews University, includes Social Work professors Alina Baltazar and Wendy Thompson, Behavioral Sciences professors Romulus Chelbegean, Gary Hopkins and Duane McBride, as well as David Sedlacek, professor of discipleship and family life. René Drumm, dean of the School of Social Work at Southern Adventist University, and Elaine Oliver, associate director of the Department of Family Ministries for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, also joined the team. The two-year-long project was jointly funded by the NAD and Andrews University's Office of Research & Creative Scholarship.

The study included all regions of the United States and was divided into a quantitative and a qualitative study. The quantitative study used a questionnaire based on other studies that had been completed in other Christian denominations as well as the Adventist Church. "We decided that we would use some of the survey instruments that had been used previously and that had already been validated," explains David Sedlacek, "but we didn't find one that really captured what we needed from what we would call a 'challenge perspective.' In other words, what were the challenges to pastors, their spouses, and their children? We designed that survey instrument ourselves."

Once the surveys were developed, they were sent electronically to the NAD. The NAD then sent the surveys to the Unions who sent it on to the Conferences. The conferences contacted the pastors directly. Spouses were contacted through Donna Jackson, the ministerial spouses leader for the NAD. Pastors' adult children were surveyed at Andrews University and Southern Adventist University. The surveys were designed to protect the confidentiality of the pastors and their families, who might have been afraid to report honestly, and did not include identifying parameters, such as the union to which they belonged. A total of 389 pastors out of 4,500 who were presumably

contacted by the conferences completed the survey, along with an additional 313 spouses and 171 adult children of pastor's families, for a total of 873 respondents.

Almost half of the pastors who responded were 50 or older, which led the team to believe that they might be the ones most concerned about pastoral stress and its effects on their lives and their families. The responses indicated that the pastors were being transparent and honest about their challenges. "There is something called 'face validity.' In other words, we saw things in the survey responses that the literature suggested we would see," explains Duane McBride. Financial concerns, such as retirement benefits and the cost of college education, were highest on the list of stresses. Spiritual struggles, such as finding time for prayer and Bible study, were ranked as the second most challenging aspect of being a pastor. Political challenges were also high on the list and pastors reported stress caused by the congregation or by the conference and union.

The reported side effects of stress included depression, anxiety and addictive practices (pornography, media addiction and overeating). "One of the most fascinating things was that in almost every situation, it was the pastors' adult children who rated the specific problem more severely," says Sedlacek.

Seventy-one percent of the pastors' kids and 45 percent of the pastors reported a concern about media addictions. Seventy-two percent of the kids reported struggling with unhealthy foods, compared to 61 percent of the spouses and 54 percent of the pastors.

The pastors' adult children also reported some abuse. While the percentage was quite low, with verbal abuse being the highest percentage at 25 percent, this indicates yet another aspect of stress in the life of a pastor's child. Typically, children do not feel that their parent's job depends on their behavior. However, pastors' children know that what they do may impact their parent's career.

Children that experienced abuse indicated that it affected their spirituality, particularly the aspect of personal prayer. "One explanation is that the father, in some ways, represents God. If the father abuses the child, the child doesn't want to have anything to do with a God who they consider to be like their abusive father," says Sedlacek. The abuse that

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children experience is also related to the lack of privacy in a pastoral family. "Everything they do is in the fish bowl," says McBride.

The qualitative studies, performed in focus groups, revealed other interesting aspects of pastoral family stress. There were three categories of focus groups with five or six groups in each category: pastoral focus groups, pastoral spouse focus groups, and pastors' young adult kids (over 18 years). In addition, five different pastoral families (including children younger than 18) were interviewed as a group.

According to Sedlacek, pastors in the focus groups reported a "struggle to trust their local conference. There are expectations that the conference has of them, but they don't feel that the conference has their back. Some pastors

believe that conference administrators expect a lot, but do not give a lot." However, the pastors' children reported that it was the congregation they struggled with the most. "The congregations are demanding and demonstrate a lack of understanding," says Alina Baltazar, "The parents tried to be understanding, but it was the congregation or the friends of the pastors' kids who told them they shouldn't act a certain way because they were pastors' kids. The congregation has these high expectations for their behavior." Pastors' children also reported that the congregation disrupted family vacations or the pastor's day off.

During the family interviews, participants raised the issues caused by frequent moves. Because pastors are often moved from district to district with only a few years in each place, they have difficulty maintaining friendships. The pastor's spouse is particularly impacted because his/her job is typically not as mobile, and the children reported that it was hard for them to make new friends. In fact, Baltazar says, some of the children "held back from making new friends because they knew they would be moving in a couple of years."

Both the quantitative and the qualitative studies attested to the loneliness of belonging to a pastoral family. Seventy-one percent of the spouses and 62 percent of the pastors said that it was difficult to maintain friendships in the congregation because of the pastor-member dynamic. "There is the sense that there is no one they can confide in," says McBride. Some of the pastors in the focus groups noted that they are afraid to confide in their colleagues for political reasons. The only one they can confide in is their spouse. However, 71 percent of the spouses who took the survey reported that there is no one they can talk to.

Many pastors in the focus groups indicated that they did not even feel comfortable seeking counseling. "They feel like there is no culturally acceptable place for them to reach out and get help," says Baltazar. Interestingly enough, the pastors' children felt the same way and were comfortable talking only with other "pastor's kids."

Once the qualitative data is analyzed, the research group plans on synthesizing both the quantitative and qualitative data into a single report that includes specific recommendations to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The group hopes that their report will influence the church to actively educate congregations, pastors and those

in leadership positions on how a pastor and his/her family can be supported.

For example, congregations can be educated to respect the pastor's privacy and family time. The pastors can take family or financial seminars to learn how to better handle some of the challenges they face in their work. Some of these seminars have already been instituted in the Seminary curriculum. According to Sedlacek, "the North American Division also is looking into mandating continuing education for pastors." Instead of pastors leaving college or seminary to head out on their own, the NAD is developing a program that lasts from the beginning of a pastor's career as a college student all the way to retirement. Church leadership, at the level of the conference, union or division, can work towards understanding that issues such as the ordination of women, homosexuality or contemporary worship music can divide churches and deeply impact the lives of pastors and their families. "I think sometimes we forget that these seemingly academic policy decisions really play out in the pew every Sabbath," he says.

Although this study only examined pastoral families within the North American Division, it is reasonable to assume that pastors around the world experience similar stresses. The researchers hope to expand this study in the future to include other divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.



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