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GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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opinion exist, there are many cases where the church holds these together in tension without division for the sake of the Gospel.

The church as the body of Christ has the role of maintaining an image of Christian community, or even as modelling the Kingdom of God to the world. With respect to women, its failure to do this is conspicuous. But Christ's body was also broken, and if, as the church, we accept our brokenness, we are identifying with the brokenness of the world instead of putting ourselves on a pedestal. Women, who have been marginalised, and often exploited, whether in the church or outside, have special insights into the experience of those whom society has rejected, those with whom Jesus himself identified. Men who support issues of justice for women in the church sometimes find themselves experiencing the same kind of hostility.

The path ahead may be difficult, but it need not lack the Christian virtues of love, forgiveness, self-denial, humility and service. It is only as we ourselves seek to be more Christ-like that we will be instruments of healing and change for all of God's people. It is only in the imitation of Christ that the church will be seen to transcend the old barriers of race, class and gender.

Rosamund Dalziell is research officer at the Zadok Institute. She studied theology at St. Mark's College of Ministry. **p. 361**

Married Couples in Clergy Partnerships: Opportunities and Problems

Sue Saunders

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This transparently open and honest account of the joys and difficulties of harmonising professional relationships (where husband and wife are both ordained and serving in the same parish) with marital relationships is to be highly commended. As more women graduate from theological schools, the number of ordained husband and wife teams can be expected to increase rapidly. The author discusses the crises of identity roles, the need for 'space' and the challenges and opportunities in the changing social context of church life. Did Paul anticipate some of these issues when he wrote to the Church in Corinth and to Timothy in Ephesus? In this case, study of the issue of roles is further complicated by the fact that, up to the present, only men can be 'priested' in the Church of England while women must remain as ordained deacons.

INTRODUCTION

The seeds of this article originally came from a group of clergy couples working in the Birmingham Diocese. There are ten couples who are both ordained—that's twenty 'Clergy people', a sizeable minority. We meet regularly to share joys and pains—often more pains, which is why this piece of writing seems to pose more questions than it answers. But I

write from where I am and share my reflections as an offering of a piece of knitting or patchwork, rather than a well worked theological treatise. I thank the couples who offered their reflections similarly to me last year, and whom I quote in this piece of writing.

In Birmingham, there is no blueprint for the clergy couple—not one of us works in the same way as another—we are all different, but sharing our discomfort with current structures and models within the Church of England, our conviction that we are called to work in this way, and our sense that God is doing a new thing in our Church. p. 362 Fortunately our Diocese has been willing to allow us to try our ‘new thing’ and has been open to our various ways of working. We range from a couple who describe themselves as ‘co-vicars’, to another where he is the Vicar, she the non-stipendiary deacon. Two women are engaged in full time stipendiary posts whilst their husbands lecture/ study elsewhere. Even when the total job is one-and-a-half, one couple splits it into three-quarter-time each, and another divides it on the lines of the man doing ‘one’ and the woman doing the ‘half’! Family commitments obviously play a part in the way jobs are divided up. None of us had two fully stipendiary posts and none of us work in different parishes at the moment. Much depends on the context; the couples who are part of a wider team find it easier to share ‘straight down the line’, possibly because the precedent for sharing already exists; areas of responsibility are already being worked; couples who are the sole staff find this harder to do. One couple remarked, ‘It’s easier if husband and wife are part of a larger team—it’s harder then to cast the wife as “assistant” or “second class”.’

Couples share ministry in different ways; some do everything together, others have a mixture of joint and individual ministry. One couple in Birmingham have only one joint responsibility, doing everything else separately; ‘We are two individuals who just happen to work in the same church, just happen to be married to each other’. One couple said: ‘People tend to perceive, if we lead things together, that he’s in charge and I’m helping!’ Another couple said: ‘We have found it necessary explicitly to state that such-and-such is a delegated area of responsibility for that person—so any questions, advice or help are directed to that one person.’

EXPRESSING THE IMAGE OF GOD

Most clergy couples feel that the marriage of male and female in the ordained ministry is an important expression of the image of God. It is in community, male and female, that we fully express that image. Leadership should then be ‘fully human’, and male and female clergy together express this whether married to each other or not. Some couples are deliberately careful to avoid stereotyping of the male and female roles, for example by expressing ‘the tenderness of the male and the rationality of the female’. One woman said: ‘Being a woman in ministry, I no doubt express the femaleness of God, though the fact that I’m not a priest and have a minor role in worship at the main eucharist of the day might continue to suggest that the maleness of God is more important.’ Much here is true of a mixed teamleadership—the P.363 group of us in Birmingham are not sure that a married clergy partnership contributes any magic ‘ingredient x’ to the team—save the muddle we offer in our relating which speaks of the complexity of human relationship. In terms of what we are expressing about ministry we encounter a paradox: on the one hand our partnerships express the fact that ministry is something that is shared and in which all participate, and something which requires cooperation. On the other hand, a husband and wife in the same parish can be too powerful or apparently self-sufficient, and can therefore *discourage* lay people from sharing in ministry. We have to be particularly careful that the former is emphasised, and to beware that we are not seen to be saying that ministry is exclusively about ordination, thereby denying a role to lay people whether

clergy husbands or wives or not. We hope that we are saying something about people having different roles but equal value, particularly when one half of the partnership is priested and the other cannot be. We would not wish to be seen as interchangeable—as if we were identical—but wish to be seen as complementary both in terms of gender and function, and this we feel to be an enriching experience and a gift to the church.

Some congregations find it curious or unimaginable that a married couple could sit down and have a staff meeting alone together as two members of the clergy, which raises the question of whether we have to be more ‘professional’ in our approach to work, simply to avoid clashes of roles. Some couples cannot separate ministry from marriage at all; nor would they wish to, seeing that the joint ministry of ordained husband and wife affirmed the idea that ministry and life are inseparable. This, I think, highlights one of the major difficulties facing the clergy couple—that of how far the professional relationship harmonizes with the marital relationship. Communication, organisation, responsibility, sharing and submission to one another form part of both relationships—what works in the marriage may not be translatable to the professional situation. This means that a change of gear is necessary and can produce strain. Many people ask ‘Is it possible to work closely with your spouse?’ and add ‘I know I couldn’t work with mine!’ Perhaps what they are trying to say is that there is something essentially different between relating as a colleague and relating as spouse—certainly this is the area that clergy find hardest—it is all too easy to let the games we play as a married couple creep into the vestry and staff room. Alternatively, it is possible to find that relating as colleagues becomes the only way you *can* relate and the marriage relationship wanes and eventually disintegrates. People say [p. 364](#) that it is a ‘problem’ for two clergy to be married to each other: sometimes by that they mean that they cannot understand how it could work, or sometimes they mean that they are confused about our roles. Sometimes they mean they don’t know how to deploy us. However, all this can tempt the couple to fall into the disastrous trap of playing down the marriage in order to minimise people’s confusion. So we begin to behave as if we are not married, which at best oversimplifies our relationships, and at worst leads to estrangement. It is an open question whether it is possible to be authentic in relating in both ministry and marriage, once the compartmentalising that many find necessary takes place.

MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY ‘ON SHOW’

Given that we are letting our marriage enhance and enrich our ministry, another source of stress is the exposed nature of our marriages. There is a danger of the clergy being a focus of ‘that which is perfect’ and marriages are no exception. This is true whether or not both husband and wife are ordained. There are difficulties and tensions experienced by clergy partnerships, and conflict is part of most of our experiences. If we can learn to be honest about this, and help each other to grow through the difficulties, we have something special to share with our congregations. First by enabling them to see conflict in a non-threatening way as a positive opportunity in marriage. Secondly by witnessing to the way relationships, and particularly the Body of Christ, can grow through tension, and also by expressing something about the accepting nature of love. However, this is an ideal that is difficult to attain; people do find it embarrassing if a husband and wife openly disagree. That tells us more about them than about ourselves, and we need to be able to let them hear their own truth about difficulty with conflict. Few of us are able to tackle this, I suspect—loyalty on the staff team often prevents us from being open about our clashes and problems; however I believe our ‘aggro’ can be healing to others if we can learn to admit failure and to help others to see it is not the end. But none of us wants to make the

clergy team look precarious, so we walk a tightrope. God forbid that in our attempts to make our conflicts a role model for others we should forget to be ourselves! All this means a great deal of honesty about the marriage and the ministerial relationship and it does create an enormous amount of pressure.

Of course a major source of the pain is the fact that one half of the partnership is priested whilst the other is not, and in most cases would [p. 365](#) like to be. To stand to one side and watch your contemporaries moving to a place you cannot go to, yet feel called to go to, is bad enough. When one of them is your husband, it is agony. One couple spoke of the way in which it had felt like a parting. When we met with the then Bishop of Birmingham before joining the Diocese, he asked me, 'Do you want to be a priest?' When I said 'Yes', he turned to my husband and said 'And you will bear that pain'. That has been true. Husbands can feel that they would rather not go through it than be the focus of pain, and the day of the priesting becomes less celebratory than it might be. The opportunities for growth that this presents must not be denied—with openness and frank expression on both sides, with neither protecting the other, new levels of identification can be reached. However, it does not do to be told that because you are one flesh his priesting will affect you both, as one woman was told!

Some couples run into problems with the way in which the congregation view them (and aren't congregations forward in expressing those views!). One couple in our Diocese has found that the congregation has felt disappointed in the ordained wife; 'Why can't she be a real Vicar's wife,' they say, then, *sotto voce*, 'like the last one!?' Disapproval is expressed that the wife is 'gallivanting around the parish' being diaconal rather than preparing the Vicar's supper. Some parishes view the Clergy couple as a two-headed four-legged beastie—the 'JanenJohn'. At a vote of thanks at one church the clergy couple in the team were thanked as a pair—but the items for which they were both praised were things that only *she* did, not him.

That brings me to the issue of differences, competition and threat. It takes a very strong marriage to endure (nay, rejoice in) a partner shining in the same area as you—particularly if your self esteem is low! 'When is your wife coming to take our service?' is not a question guaranteed to put a spring in your step. People do make comparisons—and tell you about them. Not always easy to listen to; not always easy to forget.

It is very easy to lose one's identity when sharing in joint ministry in the same Church. This can lead to a desperate search for oneself, and asking of the question, 'Who am I?' There is the constant danger that one becomes unable to be apart, to function alone. Perhaps more so for the woman the question can become 'Could I do this alone without my husband to lean on, or without asking him to take on the jobs I can't cope with? Would this parish want me on their staff if I didn't come as part of the package?'

There can be problems when the curacy or partnership suits one half of the couple but not the other—either due to the churchmanship [p. 366](#) (can't we find another word for this?), or style of ministry, or social factors. One partner will eventually feel demoralised and unfulfilled whilst the other blossoms.

The fact that the working structure is so fixed can cause problems. The vicar-curate hierarchy can be a straitjacket: what do you do if it's the female that has the administrative and managerial skill, suited to the role of incumbent, whilst the male feels happier concentrating on pastoralia? The fact that legally the man is senior in a two-staff (by virtue of his priesthood) is felt to be a tension, especially when the couple sees their partnership as absolute equals. Some feel that one has to 'work it' according to the legal and structural position, otherwise one is living in a 'fantasy land'. Others feel it is better to ignore utterly the laid down legality and work in whatever way suits them, their marriage, and their

gifts. Existing structures do not reflect reality for many couples—the question of what we do about it is not simply a question for the couples involved—but for the whole Church.

On a more mundane level there are some things that provide challenges to us which can be enriching: in clergy partnerships we are blessed with a colleague who is intimately and professionally involved in our ministries and at the same time ruthlessly honest! This is a personal challenge to each one of us to be able to take criticism, and also to be able to 'let be' the partner who is doing 'our job' in a different way to the way in which we would do it. This is particularly the case in areas of delegated responsibility. We have to respect the needs of the other in unburdening or not, depending on the personality. We have to live with not having to know everything the other is party to, because of confidentiality. The importance of 'space' is felt in every clergy partnership. If work is shared, then it becomes necessary to find other spaces. One couple said: 'We have found it necessary to have interests and activities apart from each other where we are known primarily through the activity. It demonstrates that you are of value for your own sake and not just because of your ministry.' As with any couple sharing the workplace the marriage can become dominated by the Church so that it becomes less obvious that other common interests and bonds must be worked on to keep our marriages healthy. Making time for one another with no Church agenda is a priority. Boundaries between work and home and family are even more fuzzy than for 'normal' clergy families: 'Life can be so absorbed by the world of the Church that it needs a determined effort to go beyond the boundaries and know what's happening "out there," ' remarked one couple. [p. 367](#)

NEW WINE, OLD WINESKINS?

Clergy partnerships do not sit happily on existing job structures. New wine needs new wineskins. Our partnerships are in the main characterised by a view of sexual equality which finds the Church's insistence on male dominated job partnerships incongruous. What is required is a flexible approach whereby diocesan pastoral strategies are prepared to go for joint appointments and job sharing, even with the financial complications that these bring (part-time males run into problems with pensions and housing for some strange reason).

It would be marvellous if we could cease to be regarded as problems ('Where can we place them?', 'Who will pay?'), and could be greeted as an opportunity and challenge for ministry, with the belief that any administrative difficulties are worth overcoming. Perhaps we will all have to take risks in making a couple 'Joint Vicar-in-Charge' or putting a woman in charge of a parish with her husband as the curate, providing the sacerdotal role but not the 'senior' role we assume goes with it. There is a danger that we will deal with each couple on a 'oneoff' basis, providing something *ad hoc* and tailor-made. That would be a pity, for a challenge is worthless unless it results in permanent change, permanent erasure of anomalies. We are not pioneers unless others follow—let's not offer tomorrow's partnerships today's models.

Clergy partnerships do present a challenge and an opportunity. But some dioceses see them purely as a problem and now refuse to place a married couple in the same parish. Some couples do indeed come to the conclusion that it is better to work in separate parishes where one can be known in one's own right and feel free to be oneself. This arrangement presents issues of its own which I cannot examine here.

It may seem as if the clergy couple's life is fraught with difficulty, strain and tension. Whilst it would be foolish to deny this, it must also be recorded that these partnerships are often highly creative, and force the Church to address significant and uncomfortable issues—regarding structures, flexibility and working patterns, yes, but *also* regarding

marital conflict and growth, models of relating, the clergy as ‘beyond reproach’. Clergy partnerships are an increasing phenomenon—men and women do fall in love and marry at college, and, indeed, before and after the training situation.

Given all this, the Church has to decide how best we are to use *both* people: not denying the vocation of either of them, not asking one of them (usually the woman, dare I say) to soft-pedal, not forcing them into moulds that are inappropriate. p. 368

I hope other dioceses are as caring as Birmingham, and that there are places couples can go to be totally honest about their relationships in a safe environment—without this, the task is all the harder. Clergy couples—problem? or opportunity? What is the Spirit saying to the Church?

The Revd Sue Saunders is an Anglican minister at St. Martin’s-in-the-Bull-Ring, Birmingham, England. p. 369

A Woman Iconographer of Maadi, Cairo

Leonie B. Liveris

Reprinted with permission from MaryMartha, International Orthodox Women’s Journal, January 1991

In March 1989 I had the privilege of attending a meeting of Orthodox women in Cairo, Egypt to plan the second Orthodox Women’s Consultation subsequently held in Crete in January this year. Many images remain in my memory of the women I met, the churches and monasteries visited and indeed the whole atmosphere of a teeming city reflecting both great poverty and wealth, and the sound of the call to prayer from the minarets and the bells calling the faithful to Divine Liturgy. And I especially have a lasting and detailed memory of a visit to a tiny studio tucked away in the dome of an old Coptic Orthodox Church. It was in this church that we met an iconographer, Jacqueline Ann Ascott.

The Coptic Orthodox Monastery and Church of the Virgin Mary—Adawia, built on a spot marking one of the places where Joseph and Mary and the child Jesus rested after fleeing into Egypt from Palestine, is being faithfully restored by clergy and congregation. The church is on the banks of the Nile and surrounded by an ancient wall built by the Romans.

Jacqueline Ann Ascott was a student of art history at Oxford University in England and a member of the Anglican Church. She was drawn to the Coptic art form and continued her studies for her PhD on early Coptic iconography and its subsequent changes through to the present day. During her research she studied Arabic and Copt languages, in which she is now highly competent in spoken and written form. Her research brought her to Egypt and in direct contact with the Coptic Orthodox Church. She was chrismated into the church, and her spiritual father and advisor is His Holiness, Pope Shanouda III. Dr Ascott is an outstanding scholar and she is recognized by her church as an iconographer committed to restoring the true Coptic art form in church icons. In February 1989, she presented her PhD thesis before an assembled audience of over 2,000 at the Church of St