

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

What challenges does the role of the Male Clergy Spouse pose to traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity in the Church?

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CASE STUDY

Our case study is taken from *The Construction of Masculinities and Femininities in the Church of England: The Case of the Male Clergy Spouse*, which gives several examples of the Male Clergy Spouse role and the way that couples have navigated this new dynamic in ministry.

Elaine is an ordained Clergywoman in the Church of England. In her interview she speaks of different aspects of the way that her husband Patrick has approached the role of the Clergy husband, identifying some of the key challenges and differences of this role for men and the way that they inhabit it.

One of the first things that Elaine identifies is that the Clergy spouse role is traditionally feminine, commenting, “it used to both amuse and annoy [Patrick] that he would get invited to events such as *Catering for Large Numbers*”¹. Elaine also explains that for male clergy spouses “people are less inclined to just assume they’ll be doing the tea and so they do make less assumptions”².

This falls in line with her description that “Patrick’s determinedly not stepped into the role of clergy spouse”³, she reports that he is involved with areas of Church where he has a genuine interest in the work being done and the role fits his abilities. She states, “He would never do anything because he is my husband. Because that’s

¹ Sarah-Jane Page, “The Construction of Masculinities and Femininities in the Church of England: The Case of the Male Clergy Spouse”, *Feminist Theology*, 17 (2008): 40, accessed 1st May 2016, doi: 10.1177/0966735008095640

² Page, “The Construction of Masculinities”, 39

³ Page, “The Construction of Masculinities” 40

not who he is. He is himself. And he holds that very strongly”⁴. Elaine and Patrick’s story is only one out of many, but does illuminate some of the difficulties of the male clergy spouse role whilst acknowledging that men have the opportunity to approach the role differently.

THE TRADITIONAL CLERGY SPOUSE ROLE

To put this ‘clergy husband’ role in context, we must understand the traditional role of the clergy spouse in Church of England parishes. The Church of England passed the legislation for the ordination of female priests in 1992, and the first woman was ordained in 1994 at Bristol Cathedral.⁵ Hand in hand with this new role of female priests came the role of the male clergy spouse. However, considering that this was only 22 years ago, it is still a relatively new role that in the past has been exclusively female.

The role that has been constructed over time reflects traditional understandings of gender norms. An example of this comes from a Bishop’s wife in North America, who describes that “I could cook more creampuff swans for the women’s lunches, bake more cakes to give away and glue more cotton balls on the Christmas crèche sheep that anyone thought possible. I was a good parish priest’s wife”⁶. Similarly, in the same article that our case study is featured in, female priest Anne explains that as she has been the spouse, rather than the ordained clergy, “it would have been very easy to slip into the Mother’s Union, children’s work, catering, jumble sales” because “the roles that might have been available were women’s roles. Not men’s roles”⁷.

⁴ Page, “The Construction of Masculinities” 40

⁵ “The women priests debate”, accessed 3rd May 2016, <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/women-bishops/the-women-priests-debate.aspx>

⁶ Phoebe Griswold, “Living the Theology of a Bishop’s Spouse: Experience, Experiment and Adventure”, *Anglican Theological Review*, 81 (1999): 85

⁷ Page, “The Construction of Masculinities”, 39

It seems that there is still a perception of specifically gendered roles in the Church. This may be seen as falling in line with Doyle and Paludi's views on the social roles of gender. In a 1991 study, they put forward the idea that gender roles are about the ways in which men and women convincingly or successfully inhabit their prescribed gender identity. They distinguish between a person's ascribed status (status within a group which the person has little or no control over, such as sex at birth, or behavioural expectations based on age) and achieved status (status earned or chosen through personal effort). Both of these statuses come with expectations, but the role of the clergy spouse fits outside of these categories. It has been a role with expectations based on traditional gender norms, yet not actively chosen by the inhabitants of that role.

Since the role of Clergy spouse has been constructed in such a gender-specific way, there seems to be less expectation that male clergy spouses will fulfil the same role as female clergy spouses. As Page notes, "Walrond-Skinner argued that the non-ordained clergy husband is less likely to be enmeshed into the work of his wife because first, he has no role model to follow and can therefore enact the role in a variety of ways, unconstrained by tradition"⁸.

MASCULINITY AND THE MALE CLERGY SPOUSE

Since the expectations of the male clergy spouse are much less clearly defined, there is more freedom to self define the role in a way that the man is comfortable with and feels equipped for. In the light of this, it can be down to the individual and the approach of the Church community that decide how much the clergy husband role challenges masculinity. For example, in our case study Patrick has chosen activities that are of interest to him, but has actively resisted being "compartmentalised into a pre-defined identity"⁹. Self-reliance and dominance are attributes often accorded to

⁸ Page, "The Construction of Masculinities", 37

⁹ Page, "The Construction of Masculinities", 40

hegemonic masculinity, and the non-prescriptive nature of the male clergy spouse role allows for this to remain an unchallenged attribute.

Within the role of the Clergy-Spouse relationship, the non-ordained member of the relationship is clearly the less actively engaged in the running of the Church. Within this important social, spiritual and community context the man is somewhat in the background. In general, it seems that male clergy spouses are supportive of their wives, taking on extra childcare and social engagements involved in Church.

However, Page suggests that they are much less open to being defined by their role as a clergy spouse¹⁰ or seeing the clergy spouse role as a co-calling alongside their spouse's calling.¹¹ This certainly suggests a desire to not be held by the previous expectations of the clergy spouse, which may be related to a desire to retain a distinct masculinity within a traditionally female and supportive role. In Cody-Rydzewski's interviews with Clergy wives, she notes that the transition from being the provider to being a supporter of their wives has often proved challenging and the "women believed that much of the awkwardness...stemmed from husbands who were uncomfortable with their role as ministers' spouses".¹²

MODERN MARRIAGE AND THE CLERGY SPOUSE

The 1900s were a major time of change for gender relations, with women's suffrage, decline of traditional marriage and family structures and the ordination of women. One aspect of this change is that dual employed couples have become more common, an issue which affects both male and female clergy spouses. In Susan Cody-Rydzewski's study of Female Clergy marriages, for example, all of the married

¹⁰ Page, "The Construction of Masculinities", 40

¹¹ Lenore M. Knight Johnson, "Models of Clergy Spouse involvement in Protestant Christian Congregations", *Review of Religious Research* 54 (2012): 37

¹² Susan Cody-Rydzewski, "Married Clergy Women: How They Maintain Traditional Marriage even as they Claim New Authority", *Review of Religious Research* 48 (2007): 283

women talked of their husbands having full-time jobs.¹³ This of course works the other way around, as women are now more likely to have employment outside of the home. Cody-Rydzewski's interviewees seem to eschew the idea that ministry is always a "two-person career"¹⁴. M. Knight Johnson has also done studies of Clergy spouse involvement, profiling different couples as taking part in Partnership Models, Layperson Models and Independent Models, showing the variety of differing ways to be a Clergy member and their spouse in the modern day. The study also identified that the size and tradition of the Church had a large effect on what was expected of the clergy spouse, with smaller and more evangelical Churches being those with the strongest expectations on the spouse.¹⁵ Due to these differences in expectation, the conflict caused by a dual-employed couple would really depend on the individual Church that they were a part of.

Some clergy spouses take up the role of the carer, whether in a full time capacity or simply taking up extra domestic responsibilities. Our case study of Elaine and Patrick is an example. Elaine is very complementary of her husband, praising him for "doing all sorts of things that Fathers aren't expected to do like take my daughter to a ballet exam, put her hair in a bun...all these kinds of very non-male things because he's equally shared in parenting"¹⁶. Of course this description of the roles as 'non-male' implies that Elaine has a fairly traditional view of gender roles, but this further shows some of the challenges to hegemonic masculinity that the 'carer' role brings to clergy husbands. In an article on Vicar's husbands in the Telegraph, clergy husband Steve Pattle explains "I'm happy for the time to be in her shadow but I would like to go back to work, as I sometimes feel that my skills are being wasted"¹⁷. This reflects some of the previously mentioned 'discomfort' of clergy husbands which may relate

¹³ Cody-Rydzewski, "Married Clergy Women", 278

¹⁴ Cody-Rydzewski, "Married Clergy Women", 281

¹⁵ M Knight Johnson, "Models of Clergy Spouse", 33-35

¹⁶ Page, "The Construction of Masculinities", 40

¹⁷ "Vicars' husbands discover an answer to their prayers", last modified 28th June 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1465641/Vicars-husbands-discover-an-answer-to-their-prayers.html>

to the challenge that playing a supportive role poses to their hegemonic conceptions of masculinity.

TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS GENDER ROLES AND THE CLERGY SPOUSE

Within the religious context, one of the largest issues that arises is that of traditional Christian conceptions of marriage and 'male headship'. This idea stems from verses such as Ephesians 5:23 and 1 Corinthians 11:3, which speak of the husband being the head of the wife. This has been commonly interpreted as advocating male leadership and authority within marriage.

Mark Muesse argues that religious men are made to feel anxious because characteristics such as submission, sexual restraint and religious devotion are all expected of them within religion, and yet are seen as feminine characteristics within larger society.¹⁸ Muesse says that the response is to construct a 'hypermasculinity' based upon the strict family and religious structures that place men in authoritative positions. In the light of this, the role of clergy husband has the potential of being a threat to the traditional view of masculinity within marriage. The women in Cody-Rydzewski's study tell stories that seem to confirm this idea, speaking of how they often had to make concessions on giving leadership to their husbands in specific areas of marriage, such as finances or saying grace at meals, in order to maintain a sense of their husbands having authority in their marriages.¹⁹

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

There is comparatively little research done on the role of the male clergy spouse. The studies seem to bring up issues that relate to both the male and female clergy

¹⁸Stephen Blake Boyd, W. Merie Longwood, Mark W. Muesse, *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*, (Kentucky: Westminster Know Press, 1996), 78

¹⁹ Cody-Rydzewski, "Married Clergy Women", 285

spouses, based around expectations and identity. Many of the male spouses seem to be wary of being defined as the 'vicar/minister's husband', something which may be reflected in 'vicar's/minister's wives' as women increasingly have roles outside of the family. This issue is linked to the expectations of the individual Church upon their minister's spouse. If this expectation is strongly linked to traditional gender roles, even the existence of a male clergy spouse could be a challenge. However, many churches have little to no expectation of the spouse. This new role certainly appears to be somewhat flexible, to which specific expectations have not yet been attached. Despite this flexibility, the demands of ministry upon a couple or family still remain in both a practical and psychological sense.

GLOSSARY

Ordination- The act of appointing and confirming an individual as a member of Clergy in the Christian Church.

Clergy- Person ordained for religious duties in the Christian Church, such as a Vicar, Pastor or Minister.

Ministry- The work of a religious person or religious group.

Parish- a small district that has its own church and Church leader.

Gender norms- attributes or behaviours typically linked to a specific gender.

Hegemonic- social, cultural, ideological influence of a dominant group.

Calling - the belief or urge of an individual or group towards a specific way of life or career, often with belief in a divine origin of this feeling.

Co-calling- Belief that an individual shares the calling of their marriage partner

Suffrage- right to vote in political elections

Traditional marriage- the view of marriage as between a man and a woman, with the male as the leader of this partnership.

Partnership model- Model of Clergy-Spouse relationship where the spouse is actively involved in the Church alongside their partner.

Layperson model- Model of Clergy- Spouse relationship where the spouse is involved in Church in an equal way to other members of the congregation.

Independent model- Model of Clergy-Spouse relationship where the spouse attends a different Church or not at all.

Evangelical- predominantly Anglican movement marked by a literal interpretation of the bible, conversion-preaching, focus on world mission and personal salvation of individuals.

Headship- The Christian conception that the Husband is the leader of the wife, taken from Ephesians 5:23

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boyd, Stephen Blake, Longwood, W. Merie, Muesse, Mark W., *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*. Kentucky: Westminster Know Press, 1996.

- Mark Muesse is a well-known scholar who has written some very valuable things on the role of masculinity in religion. This book, compiled with others, provides a huge source of material on the topic, however it does not directly reference the male clergy spouse, so is a more useful source for the general topic of masculinity in Religion. Each chapter is written by a different scholar on varying topics. The introduction to Part III was used for this Guide, but for further reading on Masculinity in Christianity the next Chapter "Is it Manly to be Christian?" may be of interest.

Church of England, "The women priests debate", accessed 3rd May 2016.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/our-views/women-bishops/the-women-priests-debate.aspx>

- The Church of England website is fairly comprehensive in their acknowledgement of different issues. However, this page on Women's ordination only gives a factual description of the legislative changes that have been made. Considering that there is substantial theological debate around this issue it is difficult to find anywhere on the website a discussion of the theological changes that would have had to correspond to the legislative changes.

Cody-Rydzewski, Susan, "Married Clergy Women: How They Maintain Traditional Marriage even as they Claim New Authority", *Review of Religious Research* 48 (2007): 273-289

- This study provides a strong overview of some of the challenges of the challenges that women's ordination has posed to marriages. The study is focused on the women and their stories, so despite providing stories of male clergy spouses, they are second hand accounts from the women, which may make them less reliable.

Griswold, Phoebe, "Living the Theology of a Bishop's Spouse: Experience, Experiment and Adventure", *Anglican Theological Review* 81 (1999): 83-93

- Griswold writes in a very personal manner, making it very readable, and gives a very honest account of her struggles as she became a priest's wife, had to relocate, and then became a Bishop's wife. The text clearly has the purpose of being a resource to other women in her position and gives a valuable insight into the traditional clergy spouse role and how it can affect people. However, it is of very limited use to someone trying to find out about the experience of men in the same position, as it only makes one reference to the existence of clergy-husbands.

Johnson, Lenore M. Knight "Models of Clergy Spouse involvement in Protestant Christian Congregations", *Review of Religious Research* 54 (2012): 19-44

- Knight's studies are exclusively in America, so may have less direct application to British clergy couples, but still provide an in depth study into the way that different couples approach ministry. The research has depth to it, and Knight acknowledges some of the limitations of the study, such as the small geographical area and the inclusion of a limited amount of Church traditions. The study still has some valuable insights into the functioning of clergy members and their spouses.

Page, Sarah-Jane, "The Construction of Masculinities and Femininities in the Church of England: The Case of the Male Clergy Spouse." *Feminist Theology*, 17 (2008): 31-42. Accessed 1st May 2016. doi: 10.1177/0966735008095640.

- Page provides only her provisional findings on this topic, using the few interviews that she had taken so far. The background information, including her literature review, gives a strong sense of the research done on the topic so far. However, the sense that the role of clergy husband is a much more flexible and less demanding role may come across slightly too strongly considering the small pool of research. Nevertheless it is a useful source for a topic on which there has been little written.

Wynne-Jones, Jonathan, "Vicars' husbands discover an answer to their prayers", last modified 28th June 2004,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1465641/Vicars-husbands-discover-an-answer-to-their-prayers.html>

- Wynne-Jones' article paints a somewhat humorous picture of the clergy husband in England. The article is somewhat out of date now and the website that it makes references to is no longer in operation. However, it does provide context to the fact that the issue of the Clergy spouse is one that is many peoples real experience and gives insight into the fact that some of these men attempted to band together to share their experiences. It also provides some valuable first hand opinions from clergy husbands, although only from one man who may have been chosen to aid the tone of the article.