

THE WIFE OF THE FULL-TIME WORKER

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On the basis of interviews with the wives of full-time workers Rosemary Jennings, who is a social worker, comments on a number of aspects of their position and offers important recommendations.

Introduction

This paper is based on six interviews with the wives of resident FTWs in Brethren churches in the south-east of England, who have been involved in full-time work for a period of time varying from under a year to fifteen years. Four of these couples had known the church they are now involved with prior to going full-time, two had not. Of the wives interviewed three were working full-time in secular jobs, two were working part-time and one had been commended to full-time work with her husband. The aim of this study is to highlight both positive areas and areas of concern which might be of help to other churches when considering having a resident FTW

Expectations

It would appear that wives were often not involved in the initial discussions when their husbands were being considered as FTWs by churches, and on occasions this has later given rise to some confusion regarding the role of the wife. It does seem that it would be helpful both to the church and to the couple for the wife to be involved in at least some discussion prior to starting the work. It was clear that good communication with church elders was greatly valued by those who had experienced it.

Supportive Role

All the wives interviewed saw their primary role as one of support to their husband rather than one of joint leadership and felt that it was very

important that they should be available to give encouragement and support to enable their husbands in their church work. I felt that this support was sometimes being given at considerable emotional cost to wives and it would seem that this is an area where churches could learn to be more sensitive and loving, particularly when areas of disagreement arise between FTWs and other church leaders.

Finances

Most of the wives I interviewed were involved in full- or part-time secular work, and in most instances this was because it was necessary in order to keep the household running, as the amount being earned by the husband was not enough to maintain an adequate standard of living. I am aware that the amount which churches can afford varies but there is a need to recognise that, frequently, the area of finance not only places considerable strain on wives but requires sacrificial support from them in order to enable their husbands to continue to be involved in full-time Christian work.

Hospitality

All the wives interviewed felt that hospitality was a very important aspect of their role and wished to be able to entertain widely in their homes and have a home where church members would feel free to call. Some also felt able to use their homes as a bridge for non-Christians, who had some church contact, to discuss Christian matters over a relaxed meal. Nevertheless entertaining, however simply, is costly and adequate financial support is needed to enable this to be possible on a regular basis. Awareness is also needed of the limitations which family demands can place on entertaining.

Pastoral Care

Most wives did feel that they could have some degree of involvement in pastoral care with their husbands, although the level of involvement varied widely. Most are or had been involved in pre-marriage and marriage counselling and saw this as an area where they could work together to help other couples both within and without the church. Some wives were also involved in regular contact with some of the older people in the church who needed practical and emotional support.

Other Areas of Church Work

The level of involvement in other church activities, such as children's

work, youth work, women's meetings, varied according to pressure of time, family demands and personal preferences. Some wives feel that they have something to contribute in one or other of these areas, but there needs to be recognition of the fact that individual gifts vary and that people should not be automatically assumed to have something to contribute because their husband is a FTW.

Family

Not all the wives interviewed had children but it was clear from those who had that at times their children can be under extra pressure as a result of their father's role—some church members have higher expectations of their behaviour, which is unrealistic. There is also the problem that church activities often take place in the evenings which means that children see less of their father, thus placing mothers under extra pressure. Churches should bear this in mind in terms of demands placed on FTWs.

Holidays/Days Off

The importance of time with one another as couples or families needs to be recognised, both in terms of a regular day off each week and also holidays together. Practice seems to vary widely as regards days off, but I felt that wives would value having more time to spend relaxing with their husbands, while recognising some of the difficulties in implementation. Holidays together were valued and enjoyed but were not always possible in view of financial constraints. Churches do need to be aware of the demands that full-time church work places on couples, and enable them to relax together.

Isolation

As with the wives of elders, wives of FTWs are often placed under some strain in terms of what can be shared of problems and difficulties within the church. I realise the need for confidentiality and prevention of gossip within churches, but do feel that churches must recognise that this can make those in positions of leadership feel very isolated. Wives are often the only people with whom church leaders can share and this can be stressful to wives. Some of the wives I interviewed were also very aware that some church members could feel threatened if close relationships were developed with some people and not with others. As a result it seems that it is often difficult to have close, sharing, supportive friendships within their own fellowship, which can lead to feelings of isolation. Some

couples have managed to make friendships with couples in similar situations in other fellowships but churches could perhaps lend a helping hand by encouraging meetings of FTWs and their wives on a regular basis, perhaps with an occasional residential conference.

Conclusion

From these interviews it is clear that the wives of FTWs feel that they have an important role to play in supporting their husbands in their work, both practically and emotionally. However, I became aware that some of the demands which are placed on wives are both physically and emotionally draining. Some of this stress is related to financial worries and some to unclear thinking on the part of the churches about their role. It was clear to me that stresses were less in situations where there was clear and honest communication between the elders and the couple and where there was adequate financial support. Churches also need to remember the phrase 'Who helps the helpers?', and recognise the need to give wives of FTWs loving and sensitive support.