

PASTORING PASTORS' WIVES:
A STUDY OF THE SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT OF THE WIVES OF WELS PASTORS

BY
JOSIAH LOERSCH

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. DAVID SCHARF, ADVISOR
WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 20, 2026

CONTENTS

CONTENTS	II
ABSTRACT	III
INTRODUCTION	1
Target Audience	3
Goals of this Paper	3
Research Methodology	5
Improvements for Future Surveys	6
The Interview Process	7
THE SPIRITUAL FEEDING OF A PASTOR’S WIFE	8
The Roles of a Pastor-Husband	9
A Pastor’s Wife Receives Spiritual Nourishment in Weekly Worship	10
Difficulties of Weekly Worship	10
Blessings of Weekly Worship	12
A Pastor’s Wife Receives Spiritual Nourishment in the Home	15
Addressing Guilt Over Unfaithfulness to God’s Word	16
A Pastor’s Wife is Spiritually Nourished in Devotional Life	18
Spiritual Leadership in the Home	18
Bible Study as a Couple	21
Conversations Seasoned with Salt	25
Family Devotions	26
A PASTOR’S WIFE IS SPIRITUALLY NOURISHED THROUGH PRAYER	30
Is Prayer Together Necessary?	30

Time Management and Habit Formation	34
SUPPORT FOR WELS PASTORS' WIVES FROM OUTSIDE THE HOME	37
Spiritual Guidance from Other Pastors	37
Spiritual Support from Circuit Pastors	40
Spiritual Support through Extra-synodical Organizations	41
Spiritual Support from Crosstrain	42
Spiritual Support from Fellow Pastors' Wives.....	43
Spiritual Support from Synodical Leaders	44
CONCLUSION	47
APPENDIX A – SURVEYS	48
Survey for Wives.....	49
Survey for Pastors	50
APPENDIX B – CHARTS	51
APPENDIX C – RECOMMENDED RESOURCES	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

ABSTRACT

Is a WELS pastor's wife an overlooked sheep in her husband's flock? Are the ways WELS pastors' wives receive spiritual nourishment different than the rest of their congregations? This thesis uses a combination of surveys and interviews to examine the ways pastors minister to their own wives and how they can grow in caring for their spiritual needs. It will show that in many ways, a pastor's wife is not only blessed through her husband's public ministry, but she also enjoys the great benefits of having a pastor close at hand. However, WELS pastors and their wives do not always maximize those benefits; they have room for spiritual growth in personal devotions and prayer life, and they themselves desire that growth. The author believes that the spiritual patterns of a WELS pastor's wife may differ from lay wives not because she lacks, but because of the additional spiritual blessings she has through her marriage to a pastor.

INTRODUCTION

“Hey! We’ve got to go or we’re going to be late!” comes her shout from the garage. His voice flies back: “I know, I can’t find my wallet!” A frantic search is in progress. Dresser drawers are thrown open. Clothes are pulled out, frisked, and strewn about. Even the sheets are thrown back. Every room in the house is checked and rechecked over the next quarter of an hour. No chance of an on-time arrival remains. On the brink of giving up, he stops to think, his arms fall to his sides, and his hand brushes his hip. He yelps out of delight and embarrassment. His wallet was there the whole time, as close as could be, yet unseen and unnoticed.

A pastor is charged with shepherding the portion of God’s flock over which he has been made an overseer (Acts 20:28 NIV). This shepherding is no inconsequential task. It consumes his hours, his weeks, his life—there is no such thing as leaving his work at the office. To call his shepherding important is an understatement—souls are at stake. Mistakes do not result in lower profits or late shipments but spiritual uncertainties.

In the frantic bustle of shepherding his congregational flock does a pastor ever forget to care for the one with whom he is joined at the hip? Does a called spiritual leader ever neglect to lead the spiritual life of the one with whom he is one flesh? Or does the pastor’s wife enjoy a place of honor next to her shepherd? Are gospel-motivated comfort, answers, and encouragement always an arm’s length away?

Much has been written on life as a pastor’s wife over the last century. One focus of these books is how a pastor’s wife fits into a congregation. Common problems include what

relationships she is able to form within the congregation, the congregation's (unrealistic) expectations for how she will serve the church, and the manner in which she raises her children. Another focus is on how she deals with the nature of her husband's job, especially his busyness and the emotional burden of his work.

This paper, however, will focus on the spiritual care of and support for a pastor's wife. This area has received little attention, and when mentioned, it has been brief.¹ Nor has anything recent been written within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.² How are our pastors' wives doing in their spiritual lives? Are they flourishing? Are they flailing? It is time for a checkup.

My research focused exclusively on pastors' wives within the WELS. All male survey respondents were called pastors of WELS congregations, and all female survey respondents were wives of WELS pastors.³ Because of the lack of WELS literature on this subject, extra-synodical resources were consulted. Many findings are applicable to clergy marriages of any denomination, but some applications are specific to WELS, such as how the WELS' synodical structure serves the wives of its own ministerium.

1. E.g., In *I'm More than the Pastor's Wife*, Lorna Dobson spends only three pages out of 129 talking about the spiritual life of a pastor's wife. In *Who is the Minister's Wife?* Charlotte Ross includes a scant two and a half pages on spiritual care. Ironically, that book, too, is 129 pages.

2. The best writing I could find on this topic within the WELS was a portion of "The Problems Facing the Pastor's Wife Today," by Ronald V. Ash, published in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol 81, No.1 over forty years ago. That article relies heavily on one extra synodical book resource (*What is Happening to Clergy Marriages* by David and Vera Mace) and a survey conducted by Ash that received only 14 responses.

3. Unless otherwise specified, "pastors" and "husbands" refer to the same people; each use will be according to the point being emphasized. Any use of "wives" refers to the wives of WELS pastors unless otherwise specified.

Target Audience

This paper is for WELS pastors. Most applications I (or really, their wives) suggest must be implemented either as a marital team, individually by the husband, or by synodical leadership. It turns out that very few improvements in pastoring a pastor's wife can be done without the involvement of said pastor.

A second audience is WELS pastors' wives. In order to be on the same page, husband and wife should both know what they are doing and why. Wives may discover they are not alone in their struggles. This paper may help a wife self-diagnose areas for growth and consequently encourage her to communicate with her husband. It should be noted that while wives are the secondary *audience* of this paper, they are the equal, if not the primary, *beneficiaries* of this paper.

A third audience is anyone with a clergy couple in their life, including single pastors, synodical leadership, and friends and family members of clergy couples. Spiritual struggles may be more obvious to those outside the marriage than within, so it is good for third parties to be aware of potential issues and possible solutions. There is no reason a third party can't give gospel-motivated words of encouragement.

Goals of this Paper

Two questions guided my research. The first: "What do WELS pastors do well in shepherding their own wives?" Survey questions specifically asked for input on aspects of husbands' and wives' spiritual lives that were going well and are enjoyed. Interviewees gave valuable insight into practices they utilize and contended not only that they work, but that all couples would benefit from those practices. In short, much is being done well.

My second guiding question was, “What can we do better?” While the overall spiritual pulse was healthy, most respondents expressed a desire for improvement in some aspect of their routines or practices. Many correctly recognized continued growth as a need, and many suggestions were given as to how couples could improve.

Regarding this second question, I must emphasize—and cannot emphasize enough—that it is impossible to achieve a perfect spiritual life. A former president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary wrote, “You cannot master the true faith as a person might master a lesson in arithmetic. The purpose of studying the truths of the Bible is to bring us, by the living Word of the living God, into a living relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ.”⁴ It is impossible to form unbreakable habits. It is impossible to perfect devotional and prayer life, with or without your spouse. It is impossible to merit eternal security from how often or how well we worship and pray. Immaculate piety should not and cannot be the final goal. The final goal is to turn our eyes to Christ and keep our eyes on Christ (Heb 12:1-2). The goal is to lean not on our own merits but on Christ’s merit. He is the one who cleanses us from all sin, even our failures to prioritize his word (Heb 10:22). Every Christian ought to pray that the Holy Spirit strengthen and preserve us in faith until we join all the saints in worshiping the lamb before the throne (Rev 5:13).

Will I say anything new in this paper? Broadly speaking, nothing is innovative. So why write this paper? It is in our nature to forget certain truths. We all stumble and need to be picked up again. Even pastors who preach and teach the gospel seven days a week need to hear it themselves. So no, there may not be anything factory-fresh new, but that is not the goal. The goal

4. Paul O. Wendland, “How God Grows Christians,” essay presented at the Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference of the Michigan District, 1989, 6. WLS Essay File.

of this paper is to encourage and support. Even if nobody ever reads this paper, it was beneficial for the survey respondents to consider their spiritual practices and count their blessings.

Research Methodology

My research utilized surveys and interviews.⁵ Survey respondents were chosen at random by taking every eighth name in the 2025 WELS pastoral directory.⁶ Pastors received an email with links to both surveys and requested that the pastor forward the email to his wife whether or not he himself participated in the survey.⁷ After two rounds of emails, the survey link was posted on a WELS pastors' wives Facebook page, and this increased my responses to 125 wives and 80 husbands.^{8 9}

Potential inherent biases exist in these surveys, but because of the variety of responses I received, I do not think they are significant. One inherent bias would be that those who answered my survey are those pastors or wives who are going through a difficult time and crave an outlet.

5. To see the full list of survey questions, see Appendix A.

6. When I landed on the name of an unmarried pastor, I took the next name on the list and continued with every eighth name from the original name. I did not start with the first name in the directory.

7. I am not sure how much the exact wording of an email matters in convincing people to engage with a survey. Striving for clarity the email read: "Dear Pastor, my name is Josiah Loersch. I'm a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary writing my thesis on 'Pastoring Pastors' Wives.' I would love for you and especially your wife to participate in a short survey (<15 minutes) on your experiences. I have no means to reach your wife directly, so please forward this email to her even if you yourself do not wish to participate. All information is gathered anonymously—more info is provided at the beginning of the survey. Thank you so much for your time!"

8. I think it was beneficial that I had two different means of survey collection, both wives who were asked directly by an email in their personal inbox and wives who saw a post and answered solely because they were interested in contributing to this study.

9. I would like to say thank you to the 125 wives and 80 pastors who took the time to complete the surveys, as well as the dozen people whom I interviewed. Their experiences and responses were invaluable to this project. Their responses have already benefitted me, and hopefully they will benefit many others through this paper.

These situations could be anything from a struggling marriage to—speaking bluntly—people who just like to complain. On the other end, those who answered could have been only those proud of their thriving marriage. The wide range of responses leads me to think that these potential biases did not contribute to my results in a significant way.

There could have been an age bias because of the complete randomness of recipients, but that did not happen. Wives and husbands were both distributed fairly evenly by age and experience (see Appendix C).

Improvements for Future Surveys

Improvements could be made in future research. One goal in the wording of survey questions was not to lead respondents to negative or positive answers, e.g., I did not want to bait wives into venting about their husbands so that I could write a controversial paper. Most questions were left open-ended, and that successfully preserved the quality of responses. However, open-ended responses are very difficult to categorize, especially when respondents gave multiple answers to a question asking for a single item.¹⁰ The opposite also occurred; sometimes an answer was given that did not address the question being asked, though this was less common.

Another effort to preserve honest responses was to allow answers of any length. The intent of this encouragement was to make the survey appealing to those without much time. Many responded with lengthy answers that were very insightful. A few answered every question

10. The best example of this was with the question, “What is the spiritual highlight of your week?” I could have listed, “the worship service,” or “Sunday Bible Study” as options within a longer list. Actual responses included “worship,” “Bible study,” “worship and bible study,” “Sunday morning,” and “being with fellow believers in worship.”

with fewer than five words, which was not particularly useful. An encouragement to express themselves in complete thoughts may have been beneficial, especially for the pastors.

Future surveyors will need to gauge the balance between anonymity, honest responses, efficient data analysis, and ease of survey completion (especially time commitment). Much of this will depend on the size of the survey and specific goals. Even with the difficulty of categorizing responses, I am glad that I did what I could to preserve honest and open responses.

The Interview Process

Five of the nine interviewees were chosen from the pool of surveys.¹¹ I chose interviewees who showed they had given time and attention to spiritual maintenance (research question one) and who expressed strong desire for improvement in pastoral care (research question two).

The other four interviews were conducted with those who care for clergy couples. One was a pastor's wife who is a professional Christian counselor. Another was a professional Christian counselor who works exclusively with WELS pastors through Crosstrain ministries. One interview couple works as a team specializing in marriage coaching for clergy couples through Crosstrain ministries. The fourth is a pastor's wife who helps organize small (10-15 people) renewal events for pastors' wives annually.

Of the nine interviews, four were with individuals, five were with couples. Interviews were conducted virtually due to distance. Seven were on Google Meet, two on Zoom, and all were recorded on those servers. Transcription was done using otter.ai.

11. All surveys were anonymous, but if people were willing to be interviewed, that necessarily sacrificed anonymity to the author. Unfortunately, this meant that there were a handful of people who gave great responses but did not wish to be interviewed because they wanted to remain anonymous.

THE SPIRITUAL FEEDING OF A PASTOR'S WIFE

Where is a pastor's wife spiritually fed? How is she spiritually fed? Those answers are the same. That answer is also the same for every other person in any other vocation. A pastor's wife is fed through the means of grace. She is fed by the gospel of Jesus Christ in both word and sacrament. The apostle John testifies to the power of God's Word when he says, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Already in baptism each pastor's wife received the good news of forgiveness, as Peter preached, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). A pastor's wife receives the gospel also in the Lord's Supper, as Christ himself said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). It is through these means and only through these means that Christians can expect the Holy Spirit to work, as the apostle Paul said: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). Will a wife's relationship with the Word of God be affected by her marriage to a minister of the Word? How could it not be? She shares a bed, a home, and a life with the shepherd of the congregation. Yet fundamentally, she receives spiritual nourishment the same way as every other Christian: through the Word of God.

The Roles of a Pastor-Husband

The roles of husband, pastor, and possibly father are all vocations of a married pastor. Which is most important? God says, “A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh,” (Gen 2:24). A husband’s primary role is to be a husband to his wife with whom he is one flesh. Loving her “as Christ loved the church” (Eph 5:25) means loving her in every way, including taking care of her spiritual life. A husband’s second role is to be a father to his children, including bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). In his list of qualifications for overseers in the church, St. Paul says, “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (1 Tim 3:5). If he cannot shepherd his own family’s spiritual life, how can he be expected to shepherd his congregation? A pastor’s third role, finally, is his congregation.

Pastors often confuse the order of their roles and prioritize their congregation over their family. Stated negatively, they neglect their wives and families. One pastor explained how pastors might apply the above scriptural principles. “If a pastor admits, ‘I don’t have enough time for my wife,’ maybe he should tell his council that. Or one of the elders could check in on him and say, ‘Hey, you know what, pastor? Come and start the meeting with prayer but then go home. Go be with your family.’ I think that would be entirely appropriate.”¹² A pastor serves God when he properly attends to his wife and children and cares for them as his primary and secondary duties.

Those who notice his neglect the most are those he neglects. When asked to give one way that her husband could better minister to her, one wife said, “[He could] care about my emotional well-being as much as he does his parishioners’ well-being” (Wife 84). Another said her husband

12. Anonymous Pastor D, interview by author, Google Meet, October 27, 2025.

could better minister by “remembering his vocation as a husband and father” (Wife 2). Pastors serve their wives primarily as their husbands, not as their pastors. Wives desire that husbands keep their priorities straight. God commands it. Husbands should do it. But inevitably, they will fail. For all those failures, Christ grants forgiveness. He served perfectly in our place and then gave himself for us to win forgiveness. Consequently, Christ himself is a husband’s primary motivation to love, serve, and shepherd his wife as his first flock.

A Pastor’s Wife Receives Spiritual Nourishment in Weekly Worship

A pastor’s wife is no different than other Christians in that she receives spiritual nourishment in the public worship service. One might expect that pastors find spiritual fulfillment on a Sunday morning, and that is correct. In response to the question, “What is the spiritual highlight of your week?” 53 out of 80 pastors surveyed (66.3%) said that the worship service or a specific part of the worship service (e.g., preaching the sermon, distributing communion) was their highlight. When asked the same question, a majority of wives felt the same, with 68 out of 125 wives (54.4%) naming either the worship service or a portion of the worship service as the spiritual highlight of their week.¹³

Difficulties of Weekly Worship

While Sunday mornings are a highlight for the majority, wives also shared a number of challenges that affect spiritual nourishment on Sunday mornings, almost all related to children.

13. This does not mean only 54% of wives are nourished in corporate worship, but rather that 54% find it to be their highlight.

Fidgety children affect worship directly, as one wife said: “I am not often able to hear the entire sermon due to helping our four young kids in the pew by myself on the weekends when he preaches” (Wife 48). There is no easy solution to this problem short of other members helping care for the children. One wife noted a side effect resulting from the husband’s inability to be present during the service: “I wish there was a way that he could take Sundays off at least once every couple of months to sit with our family. (He is the only pastor at our church). His role as pastor is very important, but also as head of the home to show our boys (we have three) how to be a spiritual leader in the pew, not just the pulpit” (Wife 103). Another reflected on how the comprehensive experience of being a pastor’s wife can hinder her ability to worship:

Taking maximum advantage of the spiritual benefits of church can be difficult for many reasons. I have been nervous at times for my husband to conduct the service well, especially in the presence of many visitors or in times of strife (within the church or amongst members)... We have four little kids, and I get them ready and to church alone in the mornings. There is sometimes pressure (actual or self-induced) to present yourselves as put together because you're the pastor's family. Many wives teach Sunday School or perform in other volunteer capacities. I get roped into many, many conversations on Sundays, though I identify as an introvert. We have a few kids that are too young for Sunday School with no childcare during Bible Class, so I rarely attend or process very little if I do go. All this to say, Sundays can be overwhelmingly exhausting for wives, too, instead of spiritually refreshing (Wife 11).

These hindrances are no small thing. Some might say that struggling with children is a season of life that needs to be endured and will one day come to an end (discussed more under “Devotional Life” below). To some extent, that is true, but when these conditions persist for years, concerted effort should be taken by the pastor and his wife to make sure that these years are not years of spiritual famine. During those years, spiritual nourishment may have to come primarily from devotional and prayer life in the home (see below).

Blessings of Weekly Worship

In spite of the difficulties, many wives cherish the blessings of weekly worship. One blessing is that they get to be a part of the congregation and do not have to feel like they are anyone special: “My general philosophy has always been that I am member of the congregation and am ministered to like all the other members” (Wife 16). For believers in the Old Testament, God designed Sabbath worship to be refreshing, and that benefit of worship continues for wives today. Wives cherish this: “My highlight is sitting in the congregation and worshipping with my brothers and sisters in Christ. I feel like it is a reset each week and sets me up for success for the upcoming week” (Wife 24). Corporate worship is one way the Holy Spirit strengthens and preserves pastors’ wives.

Within the service, two aspects of worship hold special significance. Ten wives (8.0%) specifically stated hymn-singing as the highlight of their spiritual life. Seven wives (5.6%) stated that receiving communion is their favorite. Seven wives is a relatively small percentage compared to other categories, but one wife provided more insight. “[My highlight is] taking communion with my husband. I wait till the end and go up to the front with him. It may not seem like that big of a deal, but being able to do that with him means a lot” (Wife 53). A pastor also raved about how much it means to him to commune with his wife:

The practice has always been since I became a pastor that I requested of our elders and the ones who helped out with communion, “I’ll take the last table, and my wife will wait until that time to come up with me.” This sounds corny, but throughout the week, we deal with school boards, with people, with kids, sometimes even with each other. Being able to sit next to her, kneel next to her, side by side, bump into each other a little bit, lean in and kind of rub shoulders against each other as we’re taking the Lord’s Supper—it’s a nonverbal, “Hey, we’re receiving the Lord together, and we are here for each other.” And it’s just a special moment.... I think it’s an absolutely powerful, wonderful moment. Taste and see that the Lord is good. It’s a pretty real moment. I would encourage, if a pastor

doesn't already do this and is married, that he should consider asking the council members or elders if he can commune with his wife at the end.¹⁴

Because only two people mentioned this in the surveys and interviews, this does not seem to be a common practice. The vigor with which this pastor spoke leads me to believe it is worth trying.

The sermon is another place within corporate worship where pastors' wives can be spiritually fed like other members. While only three wives specifically listed the sermon as their weekly spiritual highlight, it seems that, if pressed, many of the fifty wives who broadly stated "the worship service" as their highlight would choose the sermon as their favorite part. My guess is based on their mention of it in answers to other questions.¹⁵ Even though her relationship with the preacher is different than everyone else's, it is not hard to understand why wives are fed by the sermon. If a sermon is prepared for an entire congregation, it includes law and gospel in a way that is applicable to every hearer in one way or another. His wife is no exception. This can be a source of comfort for the preacher as well.

Don't forget that your wife is one of your members as well. Even if no one else is showing up to hear you preach, she's most likely always going to be there and will benefit from what you have to say! (This is something we've discussed being in a mission setting and not always having the best attendance at church) [sic]. I think this applies even beyond a mission setting. Any wife is a member of any church (Wife 5).

When preparing a sermon, a pastor asks himself, "How is this relevant to my flock this very week?" Different members and prospects come to mind as he prepares. If he is not already doing it, he should not hesitate to consider his spouse alongside the other sheep he so thoughtfully shepherds.

14. Pastor D, interview by author.

15. E.g., Wife Respondent 10 responded to "What's one thing your husband does well in ministering to you?" with, "My husband is an excellent preacher and teacher, and I enjoy his sermons and Bible studies at church."

Before collecting surveys, I wondered how many wives would talk about their husbands' personal lives being a roadblock to the wives' own reception of law and gospel when proclaimed from the pulpit. Two potential roadblocks were 1) not being himself in the pulpit, and 2) his wife perceiving him as a hypocrite because of her intimate knowledge of his sins. Likely, these things happen, but they were never mentioned in the survey or interviews. I think that should be considered a blessing from God and a sign of healthy marriages and ministries.

One special way wives benefit spiritually from the sermon is in their conversations before and after it is preached. Wife 97 appreciated her husband's thoughts throughout the week and included it as a way he ministers to her. Another wife insisted, "Read your sermon to her the night before!" (Wife 70).¹⁶ And it is not just the pastor's wife who benefits from this. "If you (his wife) need clarity about the sermon, then the congregation will need it too" (Wife 104). One wife explained how seeing her husband's sermon beforehand helps her overcome the difficulty of caring for her four children during the service.

Ever since our oldest turned two, he has printed off his sermon (at my request) so that I can read it the night before or Sunday afternoon sometime. This is a tremendous aid for me. I could go back and watch the livestream, but not only do I appreciate having a written copy to re-read certain parts that hit home, but also that his willingness to print it off each week speaks volumes about meeting each sheep's needs in this journey to listen to the Shepherd (Wife 48).

A pastor's own wife is not separate from the congregation. She is a member as much as anyone else. In serving his people, a pastor serves her, and in serving her, he serves a child of God. If he shepherds her with extra time and attention, that is not a bad thing.

16. The final question on the survey was, "If you could pass along one piece of wisdom/advice to seminary students about tending to the spiritual needs of their spouses when they're in the full-time ministry, what would it be?" Many wives took the liberty of giving many pieces of advice. This quote was one such wisdom nugget in a string of four and it had no further explanation.

A final place for spiritual nourishment in congregational life is in Bible classes. Between Sunday morning and midweek Bible studies, 26 of 125 wives (20.8%) listed Bible study as the spiritual highlight of their week. Only one negative comment was given about congregational Bible studies (Wife 47). All other comments were positive. One exceedingly pleased wife gushed,

[Bible class] is his specialty, so I love seeing him love doing that. And I learn so much every time even though I've gone through multiple courses of the same Bible study over the years. I sit back and watch and learn. I don't ever read anything. And every once in a while, I'll raise my hand and answer something if everybody else is quiet. He is exceptional at teaching Bible study. We talk about Bible stuff a lot at home, you know; I'll ask a question, he'll tell me, and I love that too, but I just love watching him do it and then learning at his feet with everybody else.¹⁷

While this comment shows one wife's appreciation for her husband, I also hope it makes pastors ask themselves some potentially painful questions: "Would my wife rave about my Bible studies in an interview? Would anybody? Is my Bible study preparation getting the attention it deserves?" If it has been a while since a pastor has done some honest self-evaluation in this area or if he is unsure how his teaching is received, his wife might not be a bad place to seek honest feedback.

A Pastor's Wife Receives Spiritual Nourishment in the Home

While many view church as the primary place for spiritual nourishment, the home may have an equal role in one's spiritual life and growth. As challenges present themselves in the church, the importance of spiritual nourishment in the home rises.

17. Wife H, interview by author, Google Meet, November 10, 2025.

Addressing Guilt Over Unfaithfulness to God's Word

Why talk about guilt under the subject of spiritual nourishment in the home? Pastors and their wives do not have guilt over skipping church because they do not skip church. Nor are they conscience-stricken over Bible study attendance, hymn-singing, or how often they take Lord's Supper, because according to the survey and every other indication, they do those things. Those weekly events are rituals ingrained in many since infancy. Besides, pastors cannot skip lest they not be pastors much longer, and if wives skip, people will talk. Because pastors and their wives consistently do what they are expected to do (and because those are good things to do—the Holy Spirit works through the proclamation of the word in all those activities), there is little guilt there.¹⁸

But because spiritual life in the home is different than life in the church, there lies guilt. Corporate worship is scheduled for you and rarely changes; church is at 9:00, Bible study is at 10:15, and communion is on the first and third Sundays of the month. In the home, you set your own spiritual schedule: devotion could be morning, midday, or evening—you get to choose! You can read the Bible on your own, with your spouse, with your children, or all three! You can pray around your own schedule, your spouse's, and your children's. Freedom to be flexible in worship life is freedom won by Christ (Gal 5:1). It is a tremendous blessing capable of being wielded to great advantage for the Christian.

But guilt is here. Christians realize that they have not wielded this freedom to their greatest spiritual advantage, and pastors and their wives are no exception. In response to the

18. This is obviously not meant to say that pastors and wives have never felt guilty about going through the motions of worship. One way or another, every Christian has failed to be perfect in his thoughts, words, and actions during every hymn, creed, or sermon. However, these feelings of guilt were absent from survey responses. While no guilt is insignificant spiritually, this guilt is insignificant statistically.

question, “How do you and your spouse study the Scriptures together?” Wife 90 said, “We don’t. And that breaks my heart to say that. We used to be very faithful in doing devotions together every night. Once that faded away, it never returned.” Wife 12 said, “He is faithful with his personal study—I am not... I don’t try to not do it... I am an occasional personal Bible study sort of gal... I listen to a lot of Christian radio/and read a few blogs here and there or read some Bible chapters but honestly, I am a poor example of the Christian woman’s journey in devotional life.” Wife 31 was blunt: “We are bad at this.” When pastors were asked to give one way they could improve in caring for the spouse’s spiritual needs, many recognized shortcomings in devotional habits,¹⁹ prayer life,²⁰ and leadership.²¹

The primary reason for guilt is that pastors and their wives are sinner-saints. Yes, they have been made alive in Christ (Eph 2:5), but while on this earth they still struggle against their sinful flesh (Rom 7:14–25). They fail to give the Lord the honor he deserves and fail to use the spiritual tools he provides (Deut 6:6–9; 1 Thess 5:17). They are not sinless, and their spiritual lives are not perfect.

The secondary reason for guilt (and perhaps some misplaced guilt) is that God has not regulated worship practices for New Testament believers. There is no mandate to pray at five appointed times throughout the day or to recite a certain Bible passage twice daily. With no finish line to cross or bar to leap over, Christians may wonder: “Have I done enough?”

The solution to guilt, both real and perceived, is Christ. Sins of unfaithfulness have been forgiven by Christ just as every other sin. They were put to death on the cross when the Son of

19. Husband Respondents 15, 29, 44, et al.

20. Husband Respondents 2, 10, 37, 54, et al.

21. Husband Respondents 56, 77.

God was put to death for them. In freeing sinners from sin, Christ also frees them from the pressure to perform—Christians do not have to wonder whether they are doing enough because Christ has already done it. When Christians chart out their worship life in the home or feel guilty for their failures, they can say with the Apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

A Pastor’s Wife is Spiritually Nourished in Devotional Life

Spiritual Leadership in the Home

A pastor’s role in the home is no different from any husband’s role. What a pastor does for his congregation, a man of God does for his household, and a pastor ministers to his wife primarily as husband rather than as pastor. He is to be the spiritual leader of his household whether it is a household of two or fourteen. God commands this: “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Eph 5:23–24).

“Everything” includes spiritual leadership. Paul continues, ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (Eph 5:25). Loving “as Christ loved the church” in the context of marriage includes pointing one’s wife to Christ and making sure she is spiritually fed.

God commands that men have a duty to oversee the spiritual lives not just of their wives but of the whole household. “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in

the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4).²² The prophet Joshua modeled this whole-family spiritual leadership when he declared, “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15). Pastor or not, spiritual leadership in the home is not optional. It is a husband’s duty.

According to the survey, wives are thankful when their husbands take strong command of the spiritual life of the home. In response to “What’s one thing your husband does well in ministering to you?” Wife 8 said, “He is a disciplined leader of our devotional life.” Another said, “He’s a faithful leader of our household in making sure family devotion time is a priority” (Wife 77). Still another, “He is a good spiritual leader. We do devotions together daily and he gently pushes me to grow spiritually” (Wife 3). The wives of WELS pastors appreciate when their husbands take responsibility and lead spiritual life in the home.

Since the garden of Eden, men have been tempted to shirk their God-given leadership role, including the role of spiritual leader of the household. Pastors are susceptible to that temptation like every other man. Some recognize this: “I allow myself to be pulled in so many directions in ministry that I often overlook spiritually leading my wife” (Husband 31). Others may not, with Husband 60 admitting that it had not occurred to him in a long time that he should take steps in better ministering to his wife’s spiritual needs. Every husband should take special care to ask his wife how he could better lead her and their family.

A cafeteria worker serving hundreds of people may not notice if one person gets overlooked and goes hungry, but that one person will notice if his plate is bare. The same is true for spiritual nourishment: a pastor feeds many people with spiritual food, but when he forgets to

22. “Without a doubt, both fathers and mothers catechize. The admonition for fathers does not exclude mothers but impresses upon fathers the seriousness and vitality of their role.” Grobien, Gifford A. “Fatherly Spiritual Leadership,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 86.2 (2022): 173.

feed his own wife, she certainly notices. Many wives in the survey noticed just that. One noted that her husband could be better about “initiating and leading our prayer life as a family and couple” (Wife 41). This problem is by no means limited to pastors. In a broader conversation about lay men being away from home due to work, Gifford Grobien says, “Husbands and fathers must be explicitly aware of the ways they are drawn away from household life, and they must make conscious choices to restore their presence and leadership in the home.”²³ While the vocation of pastor is unique in many respects, being out of the house for many hours each day is not one of them. Pastors are unique in that tasks within their professional vocation (shepherding a congregation) are virtually identical to tasks within their vocation as husband and father (shepherding wife and children). This similarity makes it easy for a husband to forget that his calling to be a spiritual leader is not over when he leaves the office. Wife 110 noted this work-home similarity and wishes that her husband would be “more proactive in daily devotions and Bible study for just the two of us. I’m the one that usually pushes to have them. Perhaps it’s an occupational hazard.” One wife’s experience spoke powerfully to all the different vocations, responsibilities, and attitudes that are involved in this experience.

I know my husband feels he’s in the Word all the time, though he doesn’t do devotions himself for his own benefit (to the best of my knowledge). He’s in the Word to prepare for class/sermons/devotions. I feel so much closer to him on the occasions when we do devotions together. Not having him lead in the home with devotions is something I struggle with; it’s not my God-given role. And I feel if he would step up in that area, that would build me and our family up ten-fold. Ministry is a team commitment. Why wouldn’t you want all the members of the team to be as spiritually fit as possible? (Wife 90).

Spiritual leadership in the home is not only commanded by God and appreciated by wives; spiritual leadership is also strongly *desired* by wives. I do not include this point to encourage

23. Grobien, “Fatherly Spiritual Leadership,” 175.

wives to look for failures in their husbands and harbor resentment, but to encourage wives to express their desires for strong leadership to their husbands. I encourage husbands to honestly and thoughtfully assess their own spiritual leadership and to ask their wives how they could improve. Grobien provides a closing thought on why it is important to address lack of spiritual leadership in the home:

The point of all this is not to pit men against women, husbands against wives, fathers against mothers. The contemporary world has already done this. Rather, we should see that in making a helper mate for Adam, the Lord expected husbands and wives to partner in their tasks, following the loving, sacrificial leadership of the husband. Such a partnership may be revitalized with fathers taking up again their place in domestic life, especially in the catechesis of the family.²⁴

Bible Study as a Couple²⁵

Do WELS pastors and their wives do Bible study as a couple?²⁶ In the strict sense, 43 of 125 wives (34.4%) study together. Another seven couples (5.6%) use the same materials separately and discuss the content later in the day, while another fourteen couples (11.2%) have devotion

24. Grobien, “Fatherly Spiritual Leadership,” 175.

25. For the sake of this survey, I am defining “Bible study” as any time spent in God’s word, whether that be the Scriptures themselves, a devotional book, a Scripture-based podcast, or similar tools. I am defining “as a couple” in the strict sense as “husband and wife in the same place at the same time with the same materials.” In the broad sense, “Bible study as a couple” includes those who utilize the same study materials independently and then talk about them later during the day (i.e., regular and intentional discussion about the material later that day). Simply using the same materials and not talking with each other is not included. Also included in this broad sense are those whose only Bible study time together is as part of a family devotion. Not included are those who both do unrelated Bible studies, whether they talk about them later or not.

26. The survey question was, “How do you and your spouse study the Scriptures together? How has that changed over the course of your marriage/ministry?” As asked for, many answers included how their devotional habits had changed, e.g., what and how often they studied before having children, while four kids were in the house, and after the kids moved out. Because the ages of survey respondents were fairly evenly dispersed, for the sake of analysis, I categorized each couple according to how they were studying right now. E.g., those who had studied together in the strict sense during the first year of marriage but now have kids and only do family devotions were counted under “Family Devotions only.” E.g., those who didn’t study together for the first twenty years of marriage but now study together daily in their twenty-second year are counted as those who do devotion as a couple.

only as part of a family devotion. In the broad sense (combining those three statistics), 64 of 125 couples (51.2%) study the Scriptures together on a consistent basis.²⁷ This does not mean that only half of WELS clergy couples are doing personal devotions. Most of those who do not study together specified that they do their own Bible study independently.²⁸

Is it a problem that almost exactly half of WELS clergy couples do not do a Bible study together as a couple in any way?²⁹ On one hand, the support for studying the Scriptures independently from one's spouse is strong. Predictably, some have difficulties finding time: "We don't necessarily study the Scriptures together. Our schedules as a pastor and teacher don't leave much time together during the day" (Husband 20). Others found individual study more beneficial: "We don't study together, as we've tried many times and it's not for us. Instead, we study on our own separately and discuss what we're studying. We thrive with spiritual discussions when it's not tied to having to read the exact same text at the exact same time" (Wife 102). Wife 125 said,

We don't really study together at this time in our marriage (4 years in) unless there's a topic or passage he is studying for a sermon or Bible study which he wants to bounce off of me. We have gone through phases. We used to try doing "devotions" together, but we have vastly different definitions of what a "devotion" is or should be. That combined with complexities of scheduling has led us to realize that it is more enlivening to us individually and to our marriage to just do our devotions separately than to try to do something together and cause more stress.

Many couples can thrive off of independent time in the Scriptures. If this is what couples find works for them, they should continue in this with no pressure to study together.

27. I only used the numbers from the wives' survey because the data set was over 50% larger. Numbers from the pastors' survey were similar, with 37 of 80 (46.2%) studying together in the broad sense.

28. Since the question only asked how they study together, some answered, "We don't," and left it at that without specifying what they do instead, hence the ambiguous "most."

29. This question is different than the question as to whether couples should *pray* together. For discussion on praying together, see below.

Because time is so often at a premium, Interviewee D noted that he can make time for his wife to have devotion on her own by freeing her from tasks that threaten to consume her devotion time. “Husbands, love your wives. It sounds silly, but by stepping in and taking care of more of the physical cares around the home and family, you may very well free your wife up to (a) tend to her own spiritual care privately, and (b) have the energy to have devotions with you at the end of the day or whenever it is best.”³⁰ Chores might not feel like the Lord’s work, but taking out the trash and doing the dishes might be the best way for a husband to serve his wife’s spiritual needs.

Those desperately looking for time should not think in terms of what they might be giving up in order to study God’s Word but in terms of what they gain. Tim Keller writes,

What would the effect be if we were to dive even more deeply into Jesus’ teaching and life and work? What if we were to be so immersed in his promises and summonses, his counsels and encouragements, that they dominated our inner life, capturing our imagination, and simply bubbled out spontaneously when we faced some challenge? How would we live if we instinctively, almost unconsciously, knew Jesus’ mind and heart regarding things that confronted us?³¹

There is so much to gain from being in God’s Word! Couples do well to remember that devotional time is time well spent and not another burden to bear.

Other couples desire unified study but struggle with the husband being in the right headspace. For instance, “We tried it early in our marriage, but I felt like I was always being ‘pastored.’ We haven’t tried it since” (Wife 81). Another wife has a similar issue: “We don’t study Scripture together. It’s too bad. It seems we don’t mesh well together in that way. Just looking at facts and how, ‘this word means that in Greek’ and how ‘that passage is related to this

30. Pastor D, interview by author.

31. Keller, Timothy, and Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. East Rutherford: Penguin Books, 2011. 75.

doctrine,' is not meaningful to me" (Wife 52). A pastor's wife (who now does marriage coaching alongside her husband for WELS pastor couples) shared her own experience and what she and her husband advise:

I probably felt this early on in marriage where I didn't know as much about the Bible as he did because he went to school for eight years for that. And so [when we're coaching other pastor couples] it comes from a good place where it's a pastor [my husband] telling another pastor, "Hey, you know, if you take your pastor hat off and you just come as husband, you know how much more your wife will feel at ease and be willing to share? She won't be nervous or be thinking, 'I'm not going to know enough,' or, 'I don't know the right things.'"³²

Her pastor-husband doubled down and spoke directly to pastors: "Remember that during this time, you are husband and you don't need to tell your wife all the ways that her comment was not exactly theologically correct. Just come alongside your wife instead of being 'pastor' in that moment."³³ The imagery evoked by "alongside" is helpful. While the husband should be the spiritual leader of the household, the goal of joint Bible study is not for the pastor to teach. The goal is to sit together and be nourished by the Bread of Life (John 6), to grow alongside each other, and to walk side-by-side through earthly life until the Lord calls them to eternal life. If the husband is unable to come alongside his wife, joint Bible study will become a spiritual burden. If that is the case, it should not be forced.

On the other hand, support for studying God's word together as a couple is also strong: "We read a devotion or portions of Scripture each night after putting out young kids down to bed. It is a wonderful time to feel close to each other even during the long days" (Wife 40). Wife 45 rejoiced that she and her husband are finally studying together: "After going to part time ministry (and the kids are gone), we have finally made this a wonderful habit! I've craved it for

32. Wife C, interview by author, Google Meet, October 23, 2025.

33. Pastor C, interview by author, Google Meet, October 23, 2025

years!” Those who have made couples Bible study part of their routine find it highly edifying. For them, giving up the habit is not an option.

There is no Biblical prescription for the devotional life of husband and wife. Each couple should be in the Word however it works best for them. Some wives can be spiritually fed by individual study as much as by doing devotion with their husbands. Couples who are flourishing with their current routine should stick with it. Couples that have not established a routine should experiment with different times and tools. A pastor’s wife has a great advantage over lay wives in accessing her husband’s resources, and she should utilize them and him. Fundamentally, the devotional life of a pastor’s wife is no different than anyone else’s—she is spiritually fed by the Word of God. Be in the Word.

Conversations Seasoned with Salt

Christ is our life (Col 3:4), and we should live accordingly: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him,” (Col 3:17). The apostle Paul gives special encouragement regarding the substance of conversations: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt” (Col 4:6).

There is particular appreciation for spiritually motivated attitudes and conversations by pastor’s wives, particularly among those who do their Bible studies independently. A pastor described he and his wife’s immersion in the Word: “We talk. A lot. And those conversations are sprinkled with salt.”³⁴ By definition, every Christian marriage should have Christ as its foundation. A conversation salted with Christ might only be twenty seconds while cooking

34. Pastor D, interview by author.

supper. If that sounds like nothing, I ask you: is the Holy Spirit unable to work in twenty seconds? Many wives appreciate very informal conversations with their husbands, but one wife appreciates her loosely structured conversations and considers them a great blessing:

We'll check-in once or twice a week for about 10-20 minutes, sometimes just to talk about the day, things coming up, updates for one another, and hit up the following 4 questions/items each week: 1) what were our highs and lows this week, 2) how can I love/respect you better this week, 3) is there any unconfessed sin to discuss together and grant forgiveness for? Then 4) one of us (we usually take turns) shares aloud a one- or two-minute prayer about that conversation's content and asks for God's help in our future together to model Him to each other, our kids, and others (Wife 48).

Whatever form they take, conversations seasoned with salt are a great blessing. A pastor using spiritual salt is fulfilling his duty to care for his wife's spiritual needs.

Family Devotions

Fourteen wives (11.2%) said family devotion is currently their primary or only daily devotion, and many other wives have family devotion in addition to their own individual devotion. The vast majority of respondents said that they had family devotions when children were in the home (at least to some degree), so while 11% is not sizeable for any given time, everyone who has kids will go through a stage of having family devotions. Are pastors' wives spiritually fed through a child-oriented family devotion, especially if it is their sole time in the word each day?

Three main blessings of family devotions stood out in interviews and research, all of which are not specific to pastor couples. Perhaps the most obvious blessing is that children grow in the faith and knowledge of their Savior. One wife with a young daughter said that her spiritual highlight is "hearing my daughter understand, apply, and live out simple truths from our nighttime Bible stories" (Wife 41).

A second blessing is that parents are refreshed with the same simple Biblical truths which they are teaching their children. Complexity does not equate to efficacy. How often aren't those simplest truths the ones of which adults need to be reminded? "Jesus Loves Me" is simple enough for a three-year-old. What adult has not had days when he or she has felt unloved by all those around her? A mother reads a storybook Bible to her children that says, "God created the whole world, and he did it in just six days!" Does she not have days when her burdens are too big for her, and she wonders if they are too big even for the Lord? God never changes. His word never changes. Even the simplest family devotion feeds a pastor's wife.

A third blessing is that devotions become routine. Children and routines go hand-in-hand, so once devotion becomes part of the routine, devotion is a can't-miss event. Daily spiritual nourishment for the children means daily spiritual nourishment for the mother. Pastors' wives can be spiritually fed through child-oriented family devotions.

That wives are nourished by family devotions and may play a significant role in making them happen is not meant to imply the pastor-husband should be absent on a regular basis. The husband must be leading his family's spiritual life. Interviewees strongly emphasized that a pastor should make every possible effort to be a part of the spiritual nourishment of his children.

There are requirements, qualifications for an overseer: "If he cannot manage his own household, how can he manage the house of God?" You know, a pastor can easily get so busy tending to the emotional, the mental, the spiritual needs of so many people that he loses his family when—and this is going to sound weird or selfish—that should be his first priority to tend to his family, so that they, together with him, can all serve as examples of a Christian home. And that might be time better spent than working so that the broken families in the congregation can see, "You know what? What does a healthy husband and wife team look like?"³⁵

35. Pastor Interviewee D.

Every father should be present, but especially the pastor-husband and pastor-father should be present. He serves his congregation by serving his family.

The two most common objections to regular family devotions are time and schedules, which are really two sides of the same coin. Time constraints are not solely a pastoral occupation problem, but pastors—WELS and otherwise—commonly struggle with ministry obsession and making time for family.³⁶ So how does one find time? That question is neither rhetorical nor impossible. The answer is simple: “We never *find* time; we have to *make* time (emphases author’s). Time has to be managed. Time has to be scheduled.”³⁷ For those who find themselves constantly busy, Pastor Mike Novotny offers some wisdom:

There are times and seasons of life when, by God’s calling and design, we can’t do everything we want to do. But maybe the most important word in the phrase is *seasons*. There are busy seasons of life, but if you’re finding that busyness isn’t a season like winter is a season, if you’re finding that busyness is all your seasons, then God would want to push you a little bit about how hard you’re pushing, how much you’re doing, how many hours you’re investing, and the standards that you have for your daily life.³⁸

The number of minutes in a day is likely not the primary hindrance to one’s devotional life. How one fills that time likely is.

While time has to be made, and while time-making may require significant effort, that time can be used efficiently and conveniently. Pastor E’s familial devotional life demonstrates that an incredibly rich devotional life need not take much time at all. He is the father of three kids ages five years, three years, and three months. To those grasping for time, he recommends,

36. Daryl J. Potts, *Suffering in Silence: Examining the Silent Suffering of the Wives of Christian Clergy, Advocating for Their Voice and Value.*, (The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling, 2021), 75

37. Charlie Shedd and Martha Shedd, *Praying Together: Making Marriage Last*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1987), 39.

38. Mike Novotny, *Beyond Burnout: How to Find Rest in a Restless World*, (Milwaukee: Straight Talk Books, 2024), 45.

“Instead of saying that we’re going to set aside fifteen minutes every day as, ‘This fifteen-minute chunk is devotion time,’ we incorporate devotional life throughout the day.”³⁹ What does this look like? He teaches his congregation the same routine his family follows.

What we do is pretty simple. In the morning, we read a psalm with breakfast. We pray Luther’s Morning Prayer. We confess the creed and then we say part of the catechism. Lately with the kids we’ve been doing the commandments, but as they get older, we’ll start saying more parts. And how long does it take to read one psalm? We’re not reading Psalm 119! It takes two minutes at most, and then since we’re already sitting down, we pray. And then if you’re already praying, you just kind of keep going. I think the kids think that the creed is just a continuation of the prayer. And then they like doing the commandments. So that’s our morning—you have these rich resources for starting your day. Then in the evening when we eat our eat supper, we have daily readings that we follow. We read a Bible story at suppertime. We pray the Lord’s Prayer. That covers it for meals. Then before bed we read one Bible story from a storybook. Then we sing a hymn—we try to memorize a hymn each week, and we’ve got a series of hymns that we go through throughout the year. If you do those three things, you’ve got this rich devotional life because you’re in Scripture multiple times a day. And this takes probably a total of 15 minutes combined. That’s realistic for your average family. If you eat meals together, then you can do it. If you don’t eat meals together because your kids are old enough that they’re doing their own things, then by that time you’ve trained them to do this on their own.⁴⁰

A family devotion can be done in a way that is efficient and edifying for all involved. A pastor’s wife certainly can be spiritually fed through a model like this, even if it is the only devotional time she gets throughout the day. This model also provides flexibility for different ages and preferred resources.⁴¹ Yes, maybe a pastor has to miss a meal or two during the week, but he does well to remember that his roles as husband and father come before his role as pastor. Husbands—are the souls of your wife and children worth fifteen minutes a day?

39. Pastor E, interview by author, Google Meet, November 4, 2025.

40. Pastor E, interview by author.

41. *5-Minute Bible Studies for Families* by Jay W. Bickelhaupt (2020) is an excellent devotional. There are three devotions per week for 52 weeks, allowing you to use other variety in your devotional life. Each devotion is one page and includes two questions after the reading that are scalable for children of varying ages. At the end is not a prayer, but rather a specific item for which to pray, which allows you to pray from the heart without the burden of coming up with something from scratch.

A PASTOR’S WIFE IS SPIRITUALLY NOURISHED THROUGH PRAYER

Jesus taught his disciples to pray and modeled prayer life for them (Matt 6:5–13; Matt 14:23). God commands that Christians pray continually (1 Thess 5:17) and in every situation (Phil 4:6). God not only hears the prayers of all believers but answers them for their benefit (1 John 5:14–15). Because the Lord commands Christians to pray and desires to hear their prayers, prayer will necessarily be part of every Christian marriage.⁴² The wives of WELS pastors are no exception. In treating prayer as distinct from devotional life in this paper, I intend to show that how couples handle devotional life and prayer need not be identical.

Is Prayer Together Necessary?

Prayer is necessary. Is praying *together* necessary? This question arose because many wives noted on the survey how much they enjoy praying with their husbands. Others expressed wishes that their husbands prayed with them more often. Wife Respondent 125 said about praying

42. Prayer and devotional life are closely related—does a devotion ever end without a prayer? The survey did not ask about prayer specifically, but it was mentioned by 36 wives and thirty pastors. It clearly plays a significant role in how husbands minister to their wives.

together, “I’ve been meaning to ask for us to do that again.” However, a small minority has no desire to pray together. One wife said, “It felt silly and we couldn’t get through it without laughing.”⁴³ One pastor made a strong argument that prayer between couples is not necessary.

Be careful not to have a preconceived notion of what is best in your marriage. When I was a seminary student, I was convinced that husbands/wives should say *ex corde* prayers together. As a newly married couple, we tried; my wife just wasn’t knit together to do it. In fact, sometimes our nighttime prayers became a source of great irritation for her. “Come on, hon,” I’d say, “just say whatever is on your mind.” It often ended up with her saying nothing and crying in frustration because that just wasn’t her. So, while that idea of husband/wife praying together sounds great, in our marriage it was exactly the WRONG advice [emphasis his] because of how the two of us are knit together. If each of you are connected to the Word regularly, individually as well as corporately, it will be fine! My wife and I are, and we’re both good (Husband 46).

It seems difficult to argue against this pastor and his wife. They gave joint prayer a *bona fide* effort, found it did more harm than good, and they both spend regular time in the Word.

A member of the Crosstrain Ministries staff⁴⁴ has worked with pastors for over a decade and recognized that many pastors struggle to pray with their wives. “When I first asked the very first group of pastors to do a marriage prayer, I thought I might need an ambulance to stand by. They all went, ‘No—what? My wife won’t let me do that!’”⁴⁵ This staff member admitted that he himself had not regularly prayed with his wife for the first decade of marriage. But he is not a pastor, and these men were—is there an assumption that pastors do all the “right” things automatically [sic]?

43. Interviewee B, interview by author, Google Meet, October 27, 2025.

44. Crosstrain Ministries is a subsidiary of Crosswalk Lutheran Ministries in Laveen, AZ, though it serves the entire ministerium of the WELS. Its website states, “Crosstrain coaching helps WELS pastors develop healthy spiritual, emotional, and physical habits, along with transparent relationships, that foster resilience.” The organization has a branch for ministry resilience and another on marriage resilience. “Marriage Coaching – Crosstrain Ministries,” n.d.

45. Interviewee A, interview by author, Google Meet, September 24, 2025.

Of all people, why do pastors find themselves unable to pray with their wives?

Interviewee A has discovered over the course of his ministry that reluctance and resistance to praying are symptoms of bitterness and unhealthiness in the marriage. In an unhealthy marriage, a wife may be thinking, “You are the last person I want to pray with. You’re one guy on Sunday morning you’re another guy on Monday. And I see the guy on Monday a lot clearer than I see the guy on Sunday morning.” That feeling may be very real in some marriages and only perceived by the husband in others. But whether his wife feels that way or not, pastors often feel that burden.

And the guys felt the same way [as the wives]. One of the things we discovered in Crosstrain is that one of the most effective tools Satan uses on pastors is guilt. And our theology teaches the opposite, that it’s all about grace, but there’s a lot of mixed and difficult and deep feelings about, “I didn’t do well enough at church. I’m not doing a great job at home. I’m overextended in all areas. I’m embarrassed for the things I’ve done. I don’t even know if I should be leading my wife in prayer (Interviewee A).

Those feelings are real. The pastor may have sinned in all those areas. But while he may preach from the pulpit that those sins against his wife are forgiven, that forgiveness is not making its way into the marriage. Interviewee A takes the hardline stance that marriage prayer is a “non-negotiable” and will put pressure on a couple to pray together. If a pastor participating in Crosstrain tries praying with his wife and it is not going well after the first couple of months, his Crosstrain coach will continue to talk with them to try to figure out the issue because the coaches consider it that important.

At some point I’m gonna meet with you and your wife and I’m going to ask her to help me better understand. “Even with this emotion you’re feeling, why wouldn’t you want to pray with your husband and ask God to bless your marriage?” And when we’ve done that, we’re usually able to get past it quite easily. But sometimes they need a third party to come in and say, “Come on now. Is this stubborn pride? Or—?” We have a little saying we use at Crosstrain a lot: “Hurt people hurt people.” So we ask the wife, “What’s hurt? What are you hurting over that we need to discuss so you can take your husband’s hand and pray with him? Where do we need to apply forgiveness in your marriage so that you don’t have this chasm between you?” And then we work through it slowly and we’re

very, very patient. Some couples take years and then they both say, “I can’t believe we didn’t do that from the beginning!” (Interviewee A).

Is Interviewee A correct in designating marriage prayer as non-negotiable? Another marriage coach was asked about a pastor’s inability to pray with his wife, he said,

While I try very hard not to be legalistic—maybe it’s just my personality, but I push hard on this one. I don’t let people give up very easily because praying with your wife is a baseline to spiritual intimacy, and you need to work through it. What is preventing you from that working? It’s probably not something good: it’s forgiveness, it’s guilt, it’s something else that needs to be worked through. And so not praying with your wife is a red flag where we need to work through that. What are the root causes?⁴⁶

His fellow marriage coach (and wife) clarified that when this strong encouragement is given, he is not berating the couple; the encouragement is given to the husband to be the spiritual leader of the marriage and in that role to strive for spiritual intimacy.⁴⁷

In their book on prayer, the Shedd’s offer a tactic for those struggling with praying together because of awkwardness or embarrassment: praying together silently.

We thought, why not start our prayer time with the list of things we’d like to pray about? Then when we had shared enough to understand each other, we would go to the Lord together in silence. We would sit on our rocking love seat. We would take turns telling each other things we’d like to pray about. Then holding hands we would pray, each in our own way, silently. That was the beginning of prayer together that lasted.⁴⁸

Is prayer together necessary? No. Is prayer together easy? For many, no. Is prayer together beneficial? For the overwhelming majority of marriages, experienced professional marriage coaches say “Yes.” Is there help available for those who are struggling? Yes. The husband should lead his marriage towards spiritual intimacy by whatever means possible, even if

46. Pastor Interviewee C.

47. Wife Interviewee C.

48. Charlie Shedd, *Praying Together*, 35.

that requires humbly asking for help from a marriage coach. How many more couples can join in saying, “I can’t believe we didn’t do that from the beginning?”

Time Management and Habit Formation

Of 205 total survey respondents, 114 (55.6%) mentioned that time, schedule conflicts, or busyness affect spiritual life in some way even though no question explicitly asked about any of those three things. While some couples have figured out how to have an intimate spiritual life with each other in spite of different schedules, others feel an emotional and spiritual hole and want to fill it. Words could not express Wife 20’s feelings: “Right now we don’t :-([emoji hers]. We have good intentions but little consistent follow-through.”

Another reminder about roles and priorities is apropos. Your heavenly Father has saved you from sin, death, and the devil by sending his Son to pay for your sins, and by his grace the Holy Spirit has worked faith in your heart so that those blessings are yours. What great joy to grow in knowledge and confidence in the Lord Jesus! With what better thoughts can hearts and minds be filled? What better use of time than to be in the Word and share it with others. May each Christian say with King David, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” (Ps 122). For the Christian, nothing is more deserving of time and attention.

Where can time be found? I will re-quote the Shedd: “We never find time; we have to make time. Time has to be managed. Time has to be scheduled.”⁴⁹ The three couples in interviews C, D, and E all recommended tying devotion and prayer to mealtimes because they

49. Charlie Shedd, *Praying Together*, 39.

happen every day. Waking up and going to bed also happen every day. Wendland states the different benefits that come with praying at different time of day:

We get up in the morning and pray, “Father, you tell me that today I can rise up new in Jesus. I truly am your child for his sake, and his pardoning love has covered all my yesterdays, so that I may approach today as his new creation. Because it is your word, it is true. Amen.” At the end of the day, we feel weary with looking at how often we missed the mark, and how pitiful our attempts at holy living were. So we find our rest in the wounds of Christ. We take comfort in the thought that he pronounces our works good for his love’s sake and graciously forgives the evil in them. During the day as we become conscious of sin and as guilt lays heavy on our thoughts, we have to drive out the Accuser with the message of One who pleads in our defense: Jesus Christ the Righteous.⁵⁰

What time you pray matters not. God rejoices to hear your prayers at any and every time of day and night.

How do you make habits stick? In his work coaching pastors, Interviewee A noted that when pastors acknowledge the benefits of joint prayer and say they will henceforth try to do it more, “In this world, it has about a 5% success rate. It's like a New Year's resolution.” He suggested putting your intentions in writing. “If you put it into a written action plan with accountability, encouragement, a timeline, and practical steps, it goes up to over 90%. That’s what we have our pastors do in their spiritual action plan” (Interviewee A). Any number of self-help books can aid in getting rid of bad habits, replacing them with good habits, and making the new habits stick.⁵¹

While couples should try setting spiritual habits, they should neither expect habits to change overnight nor to reach a point of perfection in spiritual practices. Prayer and devotions must not become works done for the sake of doing works but rather be fruits of faith produced

50. Wendland, “How God Grows Christians,” 8.

51. Pastor Mike Novotny’s *Beyond Burnout* offers spiritual and practical wisdom for those seeking to organize and tame their busy lives. Strictly on the practical side of self-help, countless options are available. The simplest and best I have found is the New York Times bestseller *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. It gives four simple steps towards breaking old habits and forming new ones.

out of thankfulness. For the times spiritual habits have grown rote and heartless, Christians should not lose heart—forgiveness has already been won.

SUPPORT FOR WELS PASTORS' WIVES FROM OUTSIDE THE HOME

The vast majority of spiritual care happens at church or in the home. By preference or by necessity, some spiritual care happens outside the home. This care may come from an associate pastor, circuit pastor, professional counselors, or synod officials.

Spiritual Guidance from Other Pastors

Where does a WELS pastor's wife turn when she needs a pastor? Does a pastor's wife ever go running to another pastor because she just cannot stand to hear the answer from her husband's mouth? Or is that scenario a myth? To answer these questions, wives were asked, "Do you always feel comfortable going to your husband with a spiritual question or do you seek out the advice of another pastor? Why?"

Many wives could never dream of going to someone besides their husband for spiritual wisdom: "He's the man!" (Wife 109). "I always feel comfortable going to my husband with a spiritual question. He knows my weaknesses, strengths, challenges, and concerns. I already trust and confide in him and know he is well trained and equipped to answer questions and address concerns" (Wife 28). Another wife spoke of the opportunities her spiritual questions provide for furthering spiritual intimacy: "It gives us the opportunity to go into the Scriptures together to seek out any question I may have. This is also an opportunity for husband and wife to grow

closer together in the Word. And who would not want that! When you experience and have this, it is truly a blessing!” (Wife 119). Thanks be to God that he provides for these women so well through their husbands. However, it must be stated that these husbands are not better than those whose wives seek answers elsewhere; different people have different preferences. It does speak well of WELS pastors and the training they have received that they are able to answer questions with wisdom and tact and in doing so and serve their wives.

Exactly 20% of wives (25 of 125) said that they have asked another pastor for advice on at least one occasion.⁵² Wife 57 appreciated talking to another pastor a single time when dealing with a health crisis. Others go to another pastor when the question involves their husband: “I go to my husband, he knows how to talk to me when I have a question or a concern. If I need advice about something that he is connected to, then I’ll go to my other pastor, with the blessing and encouragement from my husband.”⁵³ Others said their husbands would direct them to other pastors when they knew someone else could better answer their questions.

Five wives mentioned that their husbands do not always answer them as they would answer a member. Sometimes a pastor is “more abrupt or less considerate” with his wife than he would be with a member (Wife 37). Wife 64 elaborated:

Honestly, other pastors take more time. It’s not intentional, but I think there is an attitude of “I can talk to you later/anytime” that permits pastors to bump their wives to the bottom of the priority list. I’m comfortable asking anything, but I don’t want to derail him because I know he’s busy. If I text or email or call another pastor, I know they will respond when they can and won’t feel the same obligation or annoyance.

52. This actual percentage is probably higher; the question could have been understood as, “Do you make a regular practice of asking another pastor your spiritual questions?” in which case a one-time occurrence in the past would not have been mentioned.

53. Wife Respondent 24. Similarly, 40, 46, 89, etc.

The opposite issue also exists, where instead of being less considerate, the pastor is overly considerate and is too timid to give an objective answer. “I don’t always feel like he answers me like he would if I weren’t his wife; he is often reluctant to minister to me as he would an average congregation member. I wish he could sometimes separate our relationship and be more objective if I have a need” (Wife 115). The encouragement for husbands and wives in both of these opposite situations is the advice the apostle Paul gives to all Christian relationships: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph 4:2).⁵⁴

WELS pastors’ wives are well-pastored when it comes to finding answers to their spiritual questions. For those times when a wife needs or desires an answer from another pastor, she should and can feel comfortable doing so. A pastor need not be offended or feel resentment when his wife seeks help from someone else, and he should even encourage his wife to pursue spiritual growth that way. Times of questioning may also be opportunities for assessment and growth in the marriage. The pastor does well who recognizes in what role he should be when he answers his wife’s questions. Is she looking for dogmatic objectivity or the most tender pastoral care he can muster? If he cannot answer that question himself, he should ask his wife what she is looking for. His wife will appreciate his desire to serve her better and his willingness to be honest and transparent.

54. Three wives had unique responses in that they were the only one who mentioned their particular issue. These obviously cannot constitute a pattern for WELS wives as a whole, but they are worth noting so that other pastors and wives are aware that they exist. One wife said she was comfortable going to her husband “other than confessing one pet sin that I think might not be healthy for our marriage. I’ve been dealing with that one by myself.” Another said, “To be honest, if I have a Bible question, I will usually ask my dad. Occasionally my husband.” One noted, “I do now, but in the first 3 to 4 years of marriage, I haven’t always felt that he was the most receiving of hard-to-share feedback regarding my perspective on spiritual matters regarding our marriage’s health.” A pastor should not be surprised if another pastor’s wife asks him for spiritual guidance and he should treat it as an opportunity to serve.

Spiritual Support from Circuit Pastors

Do WELS pastors' wives receive spiritual care from the circuit pastor? In times of need, circuit pastors have the opportunity to be of great service. Ten pastors said that their circuit pastor was a source in times of marriage counseling. Six wives said the same. The circuit pastor is intended to be a pastor for the pastors under his care, and providing marital counseling is certainly part of that role. One wife (125) said that she could not go to the circuit pastor for counseling because she had been hurt by him in the past. No circuit pastor is perfect, nor would he claim to be. When handled by sinners, the human element of spiritual care will not be perfect. But God chooses to use jars of clay to carry his Word to other sinners (2 Cor 4:7). Pastors' wives are served well by the care of their circuit pastors.

A circuit pastor has an opportunity to serve especially in times of crisis. One interviewee appreciated her circuit pastor's willingness to drive to see her.

A couple years into our marriage, we had miscarriages and he [the circuit pastor] was a resource that I found really helpful. It was not necessarily marriage counseling per se, but our circuit pastor came and visited us a couple times, and I thought that was really helpful as we went through the grieving process. And we were in an area that was extremely isolated, so it was encouraging that he drove the three-and-a-half hours to come see us there. The support we got from our circuit and circuit pastor during those times was just a big source of comfort for us.⁵⁵

Circuit pastors should do their best to make themselves available whenever there is a need and to communicate that to the pastors they serve.

⁵⁵. Wife E, interviewed by author.

Spiritual Support through Extra-synodical Organizations

Pastors provide marriage counseling to others, but what happens if the pastor's marriage is the one needing counseling? To answer that question, my survey asked, "If you've had a need for marital counseling, where did you as a couple go to seek help and why?" Many referenced their circuit pastors for pastoral counseling. Others sought professional help elsewhere.

Christian Family Solutions (CFS) is an organization that is affiliated with the WELS but not funded or run by the WELS. It provides a broad range of Christian counseling services, including marriage counseling.⁵⁶ In my survey, sixteen wives and nine pastors spoke positively about CFS. One wife said, "I am very, very grateful for the district funding for called workers and their families to be able to access some CFS services!" (Wife 125). CFS is a quality first choice, and those interested in its services should see whether assistance is available through their district.

Fourteen respondents utilized non-WELS Christian counseling through local providers instead of CFS, an associate, or a circuit pastor. The primary reason was a desire to retain privacy. Pastor 69 commented,

Personally, we...both want to see a faith-based counselor outside of our synod. The counseling our synod offers is fantastic, but the WELS is too small to be truly anonymous for called workers in my opinion. I don't think my wife or I would be comfortable or completely open with a counselor who was my high school buddy's little brother or a member of my parents' congregation. Those are fictional examples but hopefully make my point.

Personal preference will play a role in determining what counseling services work best for each marriage, but pastors' wives can certainly be served by extra-synodical counseling services.

56. "Christian Family Counseling Care & Services | CFS." Christian Family Solutions, n.d.

Spiritual Support from Crosstrain

Distinct from marriage counseling is marriage coaching. The marriage coaching wing of Crosstrain Ministries is very intentional in stating that they provide coaching, not counseling. “Marriage coaching is not the same as counseling. Counseling often looks at the past to help you better understand the present. Coaching focuses on helping couples better understand one another and assists in creating plans to grow. Coaching takes you from where you are to where you want to be and provides encouragement and accountability along the way.”⁵⁷ Twelve respondents had utilized Crosstrain’s services and spoke highly of it. One wife said, “Crosstrain pushed him [her husband] to that next level of being the best husband.” Wife 97 called their work “outstanding,” Wife 26 said it was, “excellent,” and Wife 74 said her and her husband’s devotional life “improved drastically” after utilizing Crosstrain. Pastor 24’s single piece of advice for seminarians was, “Go through Crosstrain marriage coaching. My wife said, ‘I wish we had done this at year 5 of marriage!’” You do not need to be struggling in your marriage to utilize coaching, and the benefits last a lifetime.

Two of my interviews were with Crosstrain staff. Anecdotally, I can say that these workers are incredible people. They care deeply about helping couples grow in every facet of marriage, including spiritual life. The coaches shared challenges they have faced in their own marriages, and now they use those experiences, their knowledge, and their training to help WELS pastors and their wives flourish.

57. “Marriage Coaching – Crosstrain Ministries,” n.d.

Spiritual Support from Fellow Pastors' Wives

Some wives expressed a desire to gather with other wives, or if they already were, to do so more frequently. On the contrary, Wife H said that she did not care for wives' gatherings at all. A number of opportunities exist for wives to gather for rejuvenation both spiritually, physically, and emotionally. They are useful tools for those who desire them.

The most natural option is to gather with the other wives in one's circuit. In interview F, the pastor and his wife expressed appreciation for circuit gatherings. At their former parish, the wife would gather informally with the other wives for lunch on a Saturday on a monthly or bimonthly basis. In their current location, they are remote, so frequent gatherings are not feasible, but she appreciates the opportunity to connect at semiannual circuit picnics.⁵⁸

Some districts have annual retreats for wives. The South Central District's gathering is called The Priscilla Project, and its mission statement is simple: "The Priscilla Project exists to help pastors' wives grow in their spiritual maturity and to provide encouragement and support."⁵⁹ Wife 42 attended the retreat and said, "Priscilla project was a cool way to spend time with other pastors wives especially in a district that is as big as it is." However, she also mentioned that the gathering has become so popular that it was hard to know everyone there. She recommended that it may be wise to split up the gathering by grouping a few circuits together. Regardless, a district-organized retreat serves as great option for pastors' wives to be spiritually fed.

A third option is for wives to start their own version of The Priscilla Project. Interviewee G helped organize one such annual gathering in Wisconsin and described what her event looks like. "It's very chill. We just get together, do a couple mixers, and have some food. That's Friday

58. Anonymous Pastor and Wife F, interview by author, Google Meet, November 2, 2025.

59. South Central District. "Priscilla Project." N.d.

night, and we share our story of the last year a little bit about each other if there are any new people. And then Saturday we have breakfast and then an all-morning Bible study that's set up by one of the wives.”⁶⁰ Like the wife from the South Central District above, Wife G expressed the benefits of relatively small gatherings. “We’ve had a mix of 10 to 20 women show up, which has been a good size group, because if you get any bigger than that, you don’t get that intimacy. On one side it’s, ‘We want to include everybody.’ But it’s nice to have a small group as well.” Wives seeking this type of support should not hesitate to start similar gatherings.

Spiritual Support from Synodical Leaders

Who takes care of a pastor’s wife in times of spiritual catastrophe? What can synodical leaders do for a wife in a spiritual and marital crisis? As a synod, we walk together, and WELS leaders are willing to walk with wives through any situation to ensure they receive the spiritual care they need. Wife J’s powerful story belongs in this paper as an example of the synod pastoring a wife whose pastor-husband and his associate (her other pastor) failed her. Wife J shared her story because she appreciates what God did for her through synodical leadership. She is willing to have her story shared for the benefit of any wives who could find themselves in a similar situation. Her story deserves to be shared as an example of excellent pastoral care from a synodical level. Names have been bracketed out for anonymity.

I don't know where you can use this, because I don't much share this. But I have shared it, and I don't mind sharing it. My husband, a pastor, was on leave to fix his (our) marriage. Eventually after some months, my husband’s associate pastor announced, “We pastors,” (indicating my husband, who wasn’t actively pastoring) “now place you on church discipline.” [The circuit pastor], who had been counseling us for months, tried to ask

60. Wife G, interview by author, Google Meet, November 11, 2025.

clarifying questions of that pastor, but it was non-negotiable.... I was put on church discipline for being an unsubmitive wife.

In a nutshell, it went on for about 13 weeks. During that time, there are official things you have to go through if you want to fight that you've been put on church discipline. You can't take communion while under discipline, so I went to church every Sunday, and during that time my confirmed children could go up for communion, but I couldn't. And men of the congregation came and sat by me while my children were up there, and then they went and sat back in their own pew. Talk about other Christians who are not called workers silently doing things to stand up for you! But the other thing with called workers having your back—this is a pretty serious thing. The circuit pastor said, 'I haven't experienced anything like this. I'm not sure what to do.'

He talked to the seminary. It was determined that a sort of jury had to happen whereby the home church's church council had to meet with me and the pastor who put me on church discipline (not my husband). Each of us (me and home pastor, not husband pastor) had to come with two witnesses proving our point. My point: I am a repentant sinner. His point: I'm unrepentant. Then, my home church council had to unanimously vote if I was unrepentant or repentant. And [a professor] at the seminary, [the circuit pastor], and [another neighboring pastor serving the district] had to come to these meetings, too.

It was like Martin Luther; [the professor, circuit pastor, and neighboring pastor] opened the Bible and pointed to things, and I was just shaking. I'm a big talker, but I was not allowed to talk during these meetings. Those pastors spoke to the council and said, "This is what God's Word says. Who can argue with this?" And I would just wait. I knew all these men on the church council at [name of church], and I was just sweating, just sitting there, not knowing if I should look up or down or what I should do. The [majority of the] council voted to take me off, but it wasn't unanimous, and it had to be unanimous—there was one man who held back.... We had to come back another three weeks later and re-bring up evidence.... It was another three-hour church council meeting to see if they could get me off church discipline, which didn't happen again. I didn't know what was going to happen. In the end, they went through some seminary papers and some different things, and those pastors and some other synodical leaders met, and they transferred me out of that church in bad standing—which is really not something pastors do—to [a nearby church whose pastor had been in all the meetings]. I met with [the new pastor], and he said, "Are you sorry you've broken all 10 Commandments?" I said, "Yes, you know that." And he goes, "Welcome to the Lord's Supper." And that was on Maundy Thursday. And he and [another synodical leader involved in the process] were doing that service together. And that night of all nights—I'm just bawling, sitting there in church because I can finally, after three months—three hard months—go take the Lord's Supper. And the pastor gives me a thumbs up, and I'm crying. Now I take communion every time I can.

I share that story with you, because, again, our Synod is not perfect. Our pastors are not perfect. I had a pastor who wronged me, but it all worked out, and people are still—they were just—wow. "This is what an unsubmitive wife looks like. This is what it does not."

They laid out their evidence, boom, boom, boom, Bible verses. And I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, this is like the Reformation!" It was amazing.

I feel strongly that I can talk to people going through hard times and tell them that they need to stay with the WELS. They have your back. No, they're not perfect. And you're going to run into bumps on the logs. That guy who held out on the vote thought he was doing the right thing. I believe he did. But it wasn't the right thing, and it was handled with dignity for that pastor who put me on church discipline.... For a while I had felt like, "Oh, the WELS never deals with problems." Yeah, they do, but with a lot of dignity and a lot of grace. I tell that to everyone I can, that you have to trust the process, because God works through it.... These men are busy and sinful and imperfect and bending over like crazy for called workers and their wives. So that's my story of the system and the synod and the spiritual richness we have.⁶¹

Wife J ended up getting a divorce. She remarried nearly a decade later. Her former husband has not been a pastor since the events she related. Her new husband, who is also a WELS pastor, takes wonderful spiritual care of her. I include her story so that WELS pastors' wives know that our synod cares about them. Even should an issue escalate into a spiritual catastrophe, synodical leaders want to serve as best they can.

61. Wife J, interview by author, Google Meet, October 26, 2025.

CONCLUSION

The Lord has showered WELS pastors' wives with opportunities for spiritual nourishment. WELS pastors do well in many ways when ministering to their wives. These ways including their sermons, congregational Bible study, and prayer and devotional life in the home. A WELS pastor's wife has these sources of spiritual enrichment and the added bonus of easy access to spiritual answers any time she has a question. She is well served by a husband who serves her as a husband, and she has the added benefit of a husband with the knowledge and expertise of a pastor. A wife also has access to resources from the WELS, including circuit pastors, fellow wives, and synodical leadership.

Each WELS pastor-husband can grow in how he provides spiritual nourishment. He best serves his wife when he serves her primarily in his role as a husband rather than as a pastor. He can grow in how he leads the devotional and prayer life of his home. He can answer his wife's questions with patience and understanding. Neither husband nor wife will ever be perfect, but by the grace of God they can continue to grow in wisdom and knowledge and faith in the Lord Jesus their whole lives through.

God has blessed WELS pastors and their wives in abundance. May they always rejoice in those blessings. May Christ be at the center of everything they do. May the Holy Spirit strengthen and sustain them all their days.

APPENDIX A – SURVEYS

The following instructions were given at the top of each survey:

Thank you for your willingness to participate! Your input is incredibly helpful. A few things to note:

1) This research is intended to benefit you, the wife of a pastor, in your spiritual life. Your spiritual life is inseparable from the rest of your life, so I pray that this research is a blessing to many marriages and families as well.

2) You may answer each question with as little or as much detail as you wish. You may also skip questions.

3a) (for wives) I realize these questions may bring to mind some difficult memories and experiences. In sharing those stories, I humbly ask that you not view this as an opportunity to vent about past or current shortcomings, but as an opportunity to enlighten and encourage current and future pastors, husbands, and wives.

3b) (for pastors) I realize these questions may bring to mind some difficult memories and experiences. In sharing those stories, view this as an opportunity to enlighten and encourage current and future pastors and husbands.

4) This survey is completely anonymous. By submitting this survey, you are consenting to being quoted anonymously in my thesis paper.

5) For my research, I am also conducting a small handful of interviews virtually. I would like to have both wife and husband participate together, if possible. The last question on the survey will ask if you are willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. This would require you to give up some degree of anonymity; I, Josiah, would learn who you are, but all information from that interview that gets used in my paper would still be presented anonymously. If you are willing to be considered, simply leave a phone number or email address.

6) Thank you!

Survey for Wives

1. How many years have you been married? (select box of 5-year range)
2. My husband and I have been at a parish where our nearest close relatives were...(check all that apply from three options)
3. My husband and I have been at a parish where the next closest WELS church was (select all that apply from four options)
4. What is the spiritual highlight of your week?
5. What's one thing your husband does well in ministering to you?
6. If your husband could minister to you better in one way, what would it be?
7. Do you always feel comfortable going to your husband with a spiritual question or do you seek out the advice of another pastor? Why?
8. How do you and your husband study the Scriptures together? What has changed in your marital devotional life over the course of your marriage/his ministry?
9. If you've had a need for marital counseling, where did you as a couple go to seek help and why?
10. If you could pass along one piece of wisdom/advice to seminary students about tending to the spiritual needs of their spouses when they're in the full-time ministry, what would it be?
11. Would you be willing to be considered for a follow-up interview? If so, leave an email or phone number.

Survey for Pastors

1. How many years have you been in the ministry?
2. I've served in a place where the next closest WELS church was (select all that apply from four options)
3. What is the spiritual highlight of your week?
4. What's one way you intentionally care for your wife's spiritual needs?
5. What's one way you would like to improve in how you care for her spiritual needs?
6. How do you and your wife study the Scriptures together? How has that changed over the course of your marriage/ministry?
7. If you've had a need for marital counseling, where did you as a couple go to seek help and why?
8. If you could pass along one piece of wisdom/advice to seminary students about tending to the spiritual needs of their spouses when they're in the full-time ministry, what would it be?
9. Would you be willing to be considered for a follow-up interview? If so, leave an email or phone number.

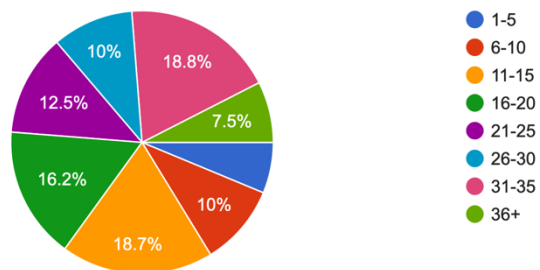
APPENDIX B – CHARTS

Husbands were asked for ministry experience and wives for years married so that I would be unable to correlate anonymous responses or couples where one spouse wished to remain anonymous and the other gave me a name.

Dispersion of Husbands:

How many years have you been in the ministry?

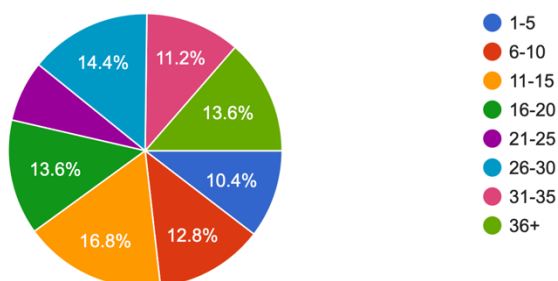
80 responses



Dispersion of Wives:

How many years have you been married?

125 responses



APPENDIX C – RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Many pastors and wives recommended devotional resources in interviews and responses. Some resources are for family or couple devotions, while others are general devotionals or Christian literature. The author of this thesis has not reviewed or utilized all of these resources and recommends them on behalf of interviewees and survey respondents. Resources are listed alphabetically by author.

Bible Gateway. "Reading Plans." Bible Gateway App. Developed by HarperCollins Christian Publishing.

Bourman, Jonathan, and Timothy Bourman. The Notable Podcast. <https://thenotablepodcast.com>.

Chapman, Gary D. *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. Chicago: Northfield, 2024.

Chapman, Gary D. *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*. Chicago: Northfield, 2010.

Concordia Catechetical Academy. "Lutheran Catechesis." Lutheran Catechesis.
<https://www.lutherancatechesis.org>.

Concordia Publishing House. *Concordia's Bible History*. 2nd ed. St. Louis: Concordia, 2021.

Cunningham, Ted. *Greater Joy TWogether: A 52-Week Marriage Devotional*. Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2023.

Deutschlander, Daniel M. *On Giving Advice to God, Part 1: Devotions on the Wisdom of God and the Foolishness of Man*. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2018.

- Eggerichs, Emerson. *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs*. Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004.
- Fryar, Jane L. *Today's Light Devotional Bible*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2014.
- Jahsmann, Allan Hart, and Martin P. Simon. *Little Visits with God: Devotions for Families with Small Children*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2006.
- Keller, Timothy, with Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. New York: Dutton, 2011.
- Kinnaman, Scot A., ed. *Treasury of Daily Prayer*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2008.
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Translated by Charles P. Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- Lewis, Robert M. *Raising a Modern-Day Knight: A Father's Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood*. Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family, 1997.
- Luther, Martin. *A Simple Way to Pray*. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Catechism*. By Stephen Geiger and Joel Otto. Edited by John Braun and Ray Schumacher. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2024.
- Madson, Norman Arthur. *Evening Bells at Bethany*. Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Co., 1948.
- Panning, Armin J. *Romans*. The People's Bible. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999.
- Rainey, Dennis, and Barbara Rainey. *Passport2Purity*. Little Rock, AR: FamilyLife, 1999.

Tripp, Paul David. *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2014.

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. *Christian Worship: Hymnal*. Waukesha, WI: Northwestern, 2021.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ash, Ronald V. "The Problems Facing a Pastor's Wife Today" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol 81, No. 1 (1984). WLS Essay File.
- "Christian Family Counseling Care & Services | CFS." Christian Family Solutions, n.d.
<https://christianfamilysolutions.org/counseling/>.
- Clear, James. *Atomic Habits*. New York: Penguin Random House. 2018.
- Dobson, Lorna. *I'm More Than the Pastor's Wife: Authentic Living in a Fishbowl World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.
- Grobien, Gifford Andrew. "Fatherly Spiritual Leadership." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 86.2 (2022). 173–76.
- Habeck, Irwin J. "Fostering Spiritual Growth for the Pastor and His Family." Presented at the Nebraska District Pastoral Conference, Waco, Nebraska. April 14, 1982.
- Keller, Timothy, and Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. East Rutherford: Penguin Books, 2011.
- "Marriage Coaching – Crosstrain Ministries," n.d. <https://crosstrainministries.com/marriage-coaching/>.
- Novotny, Mike. *Beyond Burnout: How to Find Rest in a Restless World*. Milwaukee: Straight Talk Books, 2024.
- Potts, Daryl J. "Suffering in Silence: Examining the Silent Suffering of the Wives of Christian Clergy, Advocating for Their Voice and Value." *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 75.1 (2021). 51–59.
- Ross, Charlotte. *Who Is the Minister's Wife?: A Search for Personal Fulfillment*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1980.

Shedd, Charlie and Shedd, Martha. *Praying Together: Making Marriage Last*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987.

“The Priscilla Project.” South Central District, 2024. <https://sc.wels.net/priscilla-project>.

Wendland, Paul O. “How God Grows Christians.” Essay presented at the Pastor Teacher Delegate Conference of the Michigan District, 1989. Revised and amplified for the Spiritual Growth Taskforce of the WELS, 2000. WLS Essay File.

“Pastoring Pastors' Wives: A Study of the Spiritual Nourishment of the Wives of WELS Pastors,” by Josiah Loersch is marked CC0 1.0. To view a copy of this mark, visit <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>