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Married to the Church

By Heather Hill Special Contributor

Pastors' wives have their work cut out for them, too



Anne Scates: Highland Park Presbyterian

Somewhere in the expansive distance of Janet Denison's "office," a bell chimes, echoing through towered corridors of marble and stained glass.

It's Friday morning, and Denison's workweek has come to a close. By Sunday, the massive confines of the building will swell with members of the Park Cities community.

As the wife of Dr. James Denison, senior pastor at Park Cities Baptist Church, Mrs. Denison is not your typical nine-to-five. "In a very real way, we [pastors' wives] share our husbands' work," Mrs. Denison said. "But we also share the pressures. It's hard, but it's supposed to be hard. We didn't do it because we thought it would be easy."



Tammy Copeland: Lovers Lane United Methodist

The Denisons married in 1980 after meeting at Houston Baptist University. Janet, a former elementary school teacher, didn't know it at the time, but her life was about to change. "I don't 'work,' but in a sense, we both pastor the church," she said. "There is a wonderful sense of community in this profession ... But the job is never done."

When she's not teaching bible studies, Mrs. Denison does mission work in south Dallas. "I pretty much make my choices," Mrs. Denison said. "Sometimes there is something going on at the church on the same day, but I feel better being [at the mission]. [The church] is highly encouraging. They know we have a tough job, and they want us to be happy."



Dennise Garcia: North Haven United Methodist

Anne Scates, wife of senior pastor Dr. Ron Scates of Highland Park Presbyterian Church, also spends a great deal of time volunteering. It's necessary, she says, to expand the role of a pastor's wife. "Working in the community as well as the church is very important," Mrs. Scates said. "It's a privilege to be invested in people's lives and share our lives with others."



Janet Denison: Park Cities Baptist
 Photos: Sharna Lopez

As a full-time mother, Mrs. Scates' role in the church changes as her life does. "When I had tiny children, I focused on that in the church. When they grew, I focused on other things that reflected the changes in my own life," she said.

Mrs. Scates, who also teaches a weekly bible study, says she never thought she'd marry a minister. "I was studying for my masters in Christian Education at the time, and I was ready to take that step with the Lord," she said. "It was nice that I met [Ron] when I did. I feel like [being a pastor's wife] involves a mutual sense of call. It is so good to join hands in ministry."

When Tammy Copeland met Dr. Stan Copeland of Lovers Lane United Methodist Church 22 years ago, she said she was surprised to have fallen for someone studying for a life in ministry. "He didn't tell me what he wanted to do until I was already hooked!" Copeland said, joking. "I would be involved in the church no matter who I was married to, but being as involved as I am takes more of my personal life than just working for a company. It's more than just work — it's people's lives."

Copeland, who has a degree in education, volunteers with her kids' PTA boards, teaches classes at the church, and attends conferences with her husband. But she admits that the demands of her husband's work can sometimes overwhelm her.

"The most frustrating part is the number of hours that he puts in," she said. "It's hard having to sometimes be both mom and dad for the kids. And our plans together are sometimes put on hold."

Dennise Garcia, wife of pastor Eric Folkerth of Northaven United Methodist Church, knows what it's like to lead a busy life. While an undergraduate student at SMU, Ms. Garcia met and fell in love with Rev. Folkerth as a minister-in-training from Perkins School of Theology.

Ms. Garcia was working toward a degree in law, and even when she married Rev. Folkerth, she knew her dreams were too important to put on hold. Today she is a partner with the Ward, O'Brien, Staev, Fisk, Arnold and Garcia law firm. Raised as a Catholic, Ms. Garcia says her life has changed enormously since she married her husband 10 years ago.

"At a retreat with my husband, someone asked me how long I'd been in ministry," Ms. Garcia said. "I said, 'Oh, my husband is the minister.' But then my husband informed me that, really, I'm part of it too. When you marry a minister, it becomes a huge part of your life. Suddenly, you're in this fishbowl. I hadn't quite connected with it yet. But now I recognize that I'm a part of it. I'm in it with him."

Ms. Garcia, who received the Texas Superlawyer award from Texas Monthly magazine, says that despite her busy career, the church is supportive. "I've never felt pressured," Garcia said. "Northaven is very open to my being as involved as I want to be. My role is not a traditional one, but in today's world, a lot of women work. Northaven is a loving church. It felt like home right away."

When she's not working, Ms. Garcia plays violin in the church orchestra and tries to spend as much time as possible with her husband and daughter. "Eric and I schedule specific dates together at least once a week," she said. "And we always have family nights."

In different ways, all the women expressed similar feelings that they are just ordinary people who are truly blessed to be living the lives they now lead. Anne Scates, for example, said she doesn't see her role as a pastor's wife as anything extraordinary, but she confesses that it takes someone willing to invest her life. "Being a pastor's wife really takes a person who is open to change," Mrs. Scates said. "I could never attempt it without a deep, personal relationship with Christ. He calls me to be open and caring. I've been fortunate to be able to use the gift that God has given me."

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