



THE  
PASTOR'S  
ADVOCATE  
SERIES



*Ministering to the  
Needs of Your Minister*

A photograph of a white, two-story house with a porch, partially obscured by a large tree with vibrant red autumn leaves. The ground is covered in fallen red leaves.

Living in the  
Pastor's Home

# Living in the Pastor's Home

by Marshall Shelley and Bob Moeller

Series edited by Dan Davidson





## Preface

A pastor's wife refuses to attend their church.  
Another's son gets suspended from school.  
Another's teenage daughter is sexually active.

Are these circumstances cause for the pastor to set aside ministry, or are they some of the normal struggles of life? Some people view the pastor's family as the test that validates his ministry. "If he can't raise his own kids right, he's not qualified to be a pastor." Who should make the judgment call between a family that's managing a crisis and one that's out of control? And how can the pastor's family best respond to criticism they receive?

To discuss this serious pastoral issue, the editors of *Leadership* journal assembled four people in 1992 with pastoral family experience. We talked about our childhoods in the "fishbowl" of public scrutiny and the experiences each of us has encountered with our own children. Though we entered the session knowing little about one another, we left with the awareness and comfort that we had much in common.

It appears that many pastors face the same struggles. *Leadership* also conducted a survey in 1992 that found a majority of pastors and their families grapple with time pressures, intimacy issues and general satisfaction. For example:

94 percent of pastors felt pressure to have "an ideal family."

77 percent of pastors' spouses felt pressure to be an ideal role model of the Christian family.

Only 55 percent of pastors were "very satisfied" with their marriages.

Only 31 percent of pastors and 25 percent of their spouses were "very satisfied" with their family lives.

The good news is that this problem is a solvable one. Pastoral families can take their lives back and put them in order if they choose to do so. And congregations can help. The more you understand what it is really like to live in a pastor's home, the more supportive you will be of everyone in your pastor's family. See it from their perspective. We invite you to join us for the conversation that follows.

H.B. London Jr.  
Vice President  
Ministry Outreach/Pastoral Ministries  
Focus on the Family

This material is excerpted from "The Home Litmus Test," an article appearing in the fall 1992 issue of *Leadership* journal, and is used by permission.

## Introduction

Marshall Shelley and Bob Moeller, editors of *Leadership*, gathered four individuals in 1992 who've seen the inside of the pastor's home to discuss how neat the place has to be.

— H.B. London Jr. pastored Nazarene churches for 30 years. He is now vice president of Ministry Outreach/Pastoral Ministries with Focus on the Family. H.B.'s assignment is to oversee several departments, including its ministry to pastors and their families.

— John Townsend, clinical co-director of the Minirth-Meier New Life Clinic West, spends much of his professional time counseling pastors and their families.

— Eunice Vanderlaan has been a pastor's wife for two decades. She and her husband, Jim, are parents of seven children, four of them adopted. Through the Christian Reformed Denomination in Grand Rapids, Mich., they participate in a ministry to people with disabilities and their families.

— Randy Pope, pastor of Perimeter Church in Atlanta, Ga., is the father of four and is committed to balancing ministry and home life.







## **The Pastor's Family: Does It Pass Inspection?**

**Leadership journal:** A recent survey indicates that 94 percent of pastors feel pressure to have an ideal family. Yet, you never hear a search committee come right out and say, "By the way, in addition to calling you, we're also hiring your wife and children to serve as role models to the church." So where does this pressure come from?

**H.B. London:** I think nearly every lay leader has read Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 3 on the qualifications for an overseer. Often they interpret "well-managed" family as immaculate. So they expect the pastor's children to be well-behaved and involved in the church. People may not stop to realize that a pastor's family is just as vulnerable and human as theirs.

**Eunice Vanderlaan:** I think that passage is misunderstood. Paul is dealing with basic character traits, not the way every episode of life has to turn out. If you have a pastor who is honestly trying to be a good father and hasn't shirked his responsibilities, even if his children don't turn out, he will be remembered as a Samuel. But if he hasn't made the effort and has let his work take first place and his children are going wild, he will be judged as an Eli.

**Leadership:** So, "well-managed" refers not to the result, but to the process? Does that imply well-managed kids can turn out either good or bad?

**John Townsend:** Right. I believe the passage speaks to the importance of entering the process and shouldering the responsibility of parenthood.

**Randy Pope:** On the other hand, Titus 1, dealing with the qualifications for elders or overseers, does not seem to be describing the process as much as the product. It seems to be pushing us further, saying our children must be believers. Obviously, it's not referring to small children. It does imply that, before we bring someone into church leadership, a test of their ability to manage is the spiritual condition of their children. If their kids are unbelievers or in rebellion, that needs to be taken into serious consideration.

**Leadership:** The verse in Titus that follows the discussion of "wild and disobedient" children states that those entrusted with God's work must be "blameless." What does that mean for fallen human beings?



**Vanderlaan:** If you understand that in an absolute sense, you're dead in the ministry. It's remarkable to me that both Eli and Samuel had disappointing results with their children. Yet, Jehovah punished one for his ineffective parenting and blessed the other. We need to teach our people that it is the faithful process of parenting, not the end results, that God evaluates.

**Townsend:** Part of understanding "management" is the realization that there will be ups and downs, recessions and difficult times. In a home, there's going to be good and bad times, but the pastor needs to keep in mind, "I'm still the manager." That calls for patience and avoiding hasty explanations. The important part is the commitment to manage *through* problems and crises, not to avoid them altogether.

**Leadership:** So what legitimate expectations can a congregation have for pastors and their families as role models?

**Townsend:** Certainly the pastor's "model family" is not a family without problems. To set up that expectation is to set up the church for a certain fall. Everyone will end up feeling defeated. We need to understand what "role model" means. What are we modeling? We aren't pretending to be Jesus incarnate. We are just His representatives.

I think a better model for families is the one found in Luke 18. The parable of the publican and the Pharisee presents a confessional model rather than an idealistic one. The publican admitted his needs and faults rather than hiding them. The Pharisee hid them. That parable ought to give all families the freedom to say, "We have struggles, fights, losses and unanswered questions. We don't love each other all the time like we ought to, but here's how we survive." It's a more realistic and redemptive model of Christian living.

The best favor a pastor can do for his church is to say, "We're going to disappoint your idealism every day if you see us other than as strugglers and people on the journey just as you are."

**Leadership:** We've wrestled with the meaning of a "well-managed" household. What signs would indicate a "badly managed" household?

**Townsend:** First, when the parents don't have a clear understanding of what the problems are. If you can't diagnose your family's problems, you'll have difficulty solving them. And not all problems are apparent on the surface. A good manager can assess the family's weaknesses, strengths and hurts.



➤ Second, when a parent doesn't take responsibility to address the problems. The issue is not whether they have in fact solved all the problems, but rather if they are taking responsible, biblical steps to address their difficulties. Will they admit that they need to spend more time with their children or pull back in some areas or perhaps even seek counseling?

**London:** Mismanagement can be either the exercise of absolute authority or the absence of authority. If parents are too rigid and demanding, or if they are too careless and passive, they do great damage to the kids.

**Leadership:** When do family factors indicate a pastor should leave the ministry?

**London:** My family is much more important to me than my role as a pastor. I could see leaving the ministry on a temporary basis, if need be, to get things squared away at home.

**Vanderlaan:** That's right. You may resign your pastorate, but you may not resign your family.

**Leadership:** Besides the expectation of a "well-managed" family, what other unspoken expectations does a pastor face?







**London:** I think there's an expectation that pastors don't face the same problems or have the same needs everyone else does. That leads people to treat you differently than they do others. To them, you're neither male nor female; you're something else.

This is particularly true in financial matters. Congregations don't always stop to ask whether your children are able to afford the same clothes their children are wearing. Or whether you need new tires, but can't afford them. They don't notice you've been wearing the same suit for three years, and your wife has worn the same dress to church every Sunday for the last six months.

I received a letter just the other day from a pastor who was told by his church, "You're in the ministry, so God will take care of you." The implication was, *Since you are God's responsibility, not ours, we don't need to take care of you.* That's an unrealistic expectation we need to reshape.

**Pope:** In our church, I use the membership class to help shape expectations toward my schedule, my role and my family. Of course, shaping expectations is much easier when you are the first pastor of a church. The person that follows me will have a much harder time because the pattern I establish may not conform to his style and preferences.







**Townsend:** Often church members have the notion that you as a pastor have no emotional needs outside your family, and that you don't need the comfort of the body of Christ. You can handle everything on your own without their support.

The other mistaken idea they have is that you have no boundaries. In other words, you are available to anyone, at any time, at the drop of a hat. You can't blame them for these misperceptions. Often, they are new and immature believers who have come from difficult families of origin.

They expect you to say 'no' to your family's needs and always say 'yes' to the needs of the flock. That's boundary confusion. It's like giving the five foolish virgins in Matthew 25 all the oil in your lamp and then discovering your own empty. Pastors without boundaries end up in that emotional condition.

**Pope:** Another way to reinforce our expectations is through preaching. Unless we are conscious of what we are doing, we can end up preaching Christ's reality to the exclusion of man's humanity. If I use illustrations that consistently portray myself favorably, people will assume that I'm obedient to Christ in every aspect of my life. I need to be certain to avoid sending a false picture of my own life.

To guard against that, when I'm finished preparing the sermon content, I'll stop and ask myself, "Now, where am I going to show my humanity in here?" I try to give the people a balanced picture of who I am: Someone trying to follow Christ, complete with my own struggles and shortcomings.

**Leadership:** Is it easier in a larger or smaller congregation to protect your children from the unrealistic expectations of churches?

**London:** The larger church provides a degree of anonymity for your family, which I think is positive. In all the years I was raising children in a large church, many people didn't even know who they were. They couldn't have taken a shot at them even if they wanted to. In a church of 200 parishioners, your family is always on center stage.

**Vanderlaan:** I think the intimacy of the smaller church provides a healthier environment to deal with unfair expectations. It gave me a chance to say to my children, "Yes, Mrs. So-and-So, whom you know very well, expects certain things of you. But the Lord doesn't, and neither do I." We found that intimacy beneficial for kids, with parental shielding, of course. There were all these people of all ages whom the kids knew well and whose lives could teach them much.

**Leadership:** How do you deal with the tug of war between ministry needs and the needs at home?

**Vanderlaan:** Early in our marriage and ministry, we had noticed that there seemed to be two types of pastors who entered retirement. There were those who bore their battle scars, but who nonetheless had embraced the ministry and taken their children with them through the heavy weather. They had sunk deep roots in their congregations and had drawn from the nourishment that was there.

Then, there were those who emotionally had held back, so their families held back as a way of protecting themselves from ever being hurt. We noticed that, when they reached retirement age, they had this numb look and manner about them. Recognizing the potential for pain, but unwilling to miss the nourishing joy, we decided to put our roots down deep among the people.

**London:** I get so many letters from pastors' wives who refer to the church as their husband's mistress. It's the husband's excuse for not being all that he should be to his wife and children. I'm sure there were times my wife and children felt cheated in a similar way. But there are ways to help your children take real pride in what you do. You can accentuate the advantages of ministry.

For example, though I worked a different and longer schedule than many other dads, I was always able to make it to see my kids play basketball. I could leave work in the afternoon when other dads could not. So, I reminded them of that from time to time. The strategy I used was to play up the good times and the positive things about the ministry.

**Pope:** Sometimes it helps to jolt our kids with just how important they are to us. A while back, I asked my son what he wanted for his fifteenth birthday. He said he wanted to go and see the Chicago Bulls play in Atlanta. It turned out that the last time the Bulls were playing in Atlanta was Good Friday. In our church, that evening's communion service is a pretty big deal. When I told my son we had tickets and were going to the game instead, he said, "But Dad, what about the Good Friday service?"

I replied, "It's not nearly as important to me as going to this game with you."

"What if people from church see us on television?" I told him it didn't matter who saw us there.

**Leadership:** What types of churches help produce healthy families?



**Townsend:** Churches that normalize failure. In an unhealthy church, everyone looks good on the outside, but actually they're all messed up. In a healthy church, everybody may look horrible at first glance, but actually they're doing well. They are a confessional church, willing to talk about their financial problems, career failures, intimacy problems.

The pastors that often end up in our in-patient clinic with chronic depression are those who did not, or could not, receive redemption from the people. They never had anyone to talk with, and no one to say to them, "It's okay that you're struggling with sexual temptations or anger toward your wife or disappointment with your job. I go through the same things."

**Pope:** That's good as long as we normalize failure without compromising standards. Sometimes, we can confuse normalizing failure with making sin acceptable.

**Townsend:** Absolutely. I would put it this way: Truth without grace is a church that's self-condemned. Grace without truth is a church in license. We need both grace and truth.

**Leadership:** Should people in the congregation be allowed to approach your spouse or your children with concerns they have either about your ministry or the church in general?





**London:** It depends on how visible your family is to the congregation. In any church, pastors will be subjected to some criticism regarding the service or the sermon or the music. My children wouldn't react much at the time, but later would come and say, "Mom, Dad, why are they so critical?"

The more your wife is involved in the life of the church, the more she'll receive criticism. If she circulates in the choir, the Sunday school and all the women's groups, she becomes more vulnerable.

**Pope:** I think the wife, as an adult, should handle these situations on her own. She should confront the person giving her a problem. I don't think it's a good idea to serve notice from the pulpit that people cannot approach your family with criticisms. That's dangerous.

I know of one situation where a pastor's wife was taking some strong criticism and her husband announced from the pulpit, "These are the new ground rules. Stop treating my wife this way." If that type of thing needs to be done, do it privately or during your new-member orientation class, not in a Sunday morning service.

If part of a ministry team, there are occasions where she ought to accept hearing some criticisms and deal with them constructively.



➤ **Vanderlaan:** It's liberating for both of you when your husband trusts you to deal directly with people. The key is to exercise a firm gentleness. With strength, you gently set limits with other people.

**London:** This situation is a prototype of many of the letters we get at Focus on the Family. They'll write and say, "My husband spends so much time at the church that he has little time for us. Yet, people are so cruel and brutal toward him. I feel like telling Mrs. So-and-So, 'You don't have any right to treat him like that!'" The wife, in those cases, becomes the protector because she senses the husband won't protect himself. She feels like she needs to rescue him.

**Townsend:** There is a principle that people become more demanding the fewer limits they encounter. As long as a pastor keeps trying harder and harder to please people, they'll become more omnipotent in their demands. They've figured out this is a free ride. This candy machine keeps putting out more candy bars. In that case, he needs to set limits to decrease the selfishness of others. People are abused when they refuse to set limits because the out-of-control person keeps becoming more out of control. The wife is saying, "Right now, I'm the only boundary; my husband doesn't have any."

**Leadership:** But what do you do in situations where the church refuses to respect those boundaries?

**London:** I know of a pastor whose daughter was killed in a car accident in California. He was serving a church in the Midwest. He had to go out west, make the arrangements, bring his family there, go through with the funeral and cope with the loss of his only daughter. The church never sent so much as a letter or flowers. When he returned home, the board informed him they were subtracting the time he spent in California from his annual vacation. It broke him.

I often counsel pastors and wives in extremely painful situations to get away from their church for a few days and ask, "Is the price we're paying to stay here actually what God wants us to do?" My impression often is that it's probably not. I'll tell them point-blank, "These people don't deserve a pastor. It may be time for you to leave."

**Townsend:** Churches that abuse pastors are usually in denial. They need to suffer the consequences of pastors leaving in order to wake up, repent of their behavior and seek biblical guidelines for caring for a pastor and his family.

**Leadership:** How much should parents share with their children the struggles they're facing at church? How much should you protect them?

**Vanderlaan:** I was never very good at hiding my grief. That was particularly true when we were asked to leave a church on one occasion. That summer was a blur of grief to me. I remember my little ones drew a picture of Mommy with a chain of tears all the way to the floor.

But I've found that denial is destruction, even worse than the problem you're facing. So I counsel, don't hide your anguish. If children ask, "Is something wrong?" be honest with them, but don't burden them with things that aren't age-appropriate.

**Leadership:** Is there a difference between openly grieving and displaying bitterness toward the congregation?

**Vanderlaan:** Yes. The latter will inevitably develop a bitter root within your children. I think you answer your child in the same way you do when they ask you about sexual matters. You answer the question they're asking, but you don't burden them with more than they can understand. That's not fair to them.

**London:** I think the cruelest thing my children ever experienced were those Sundays, a regular part of our denomination's governance system, when the congregation was given a piece of paper and asked to vote whether or not I should remain as their pastor. I thank God that, in many cases, that circumstance no longer exists.

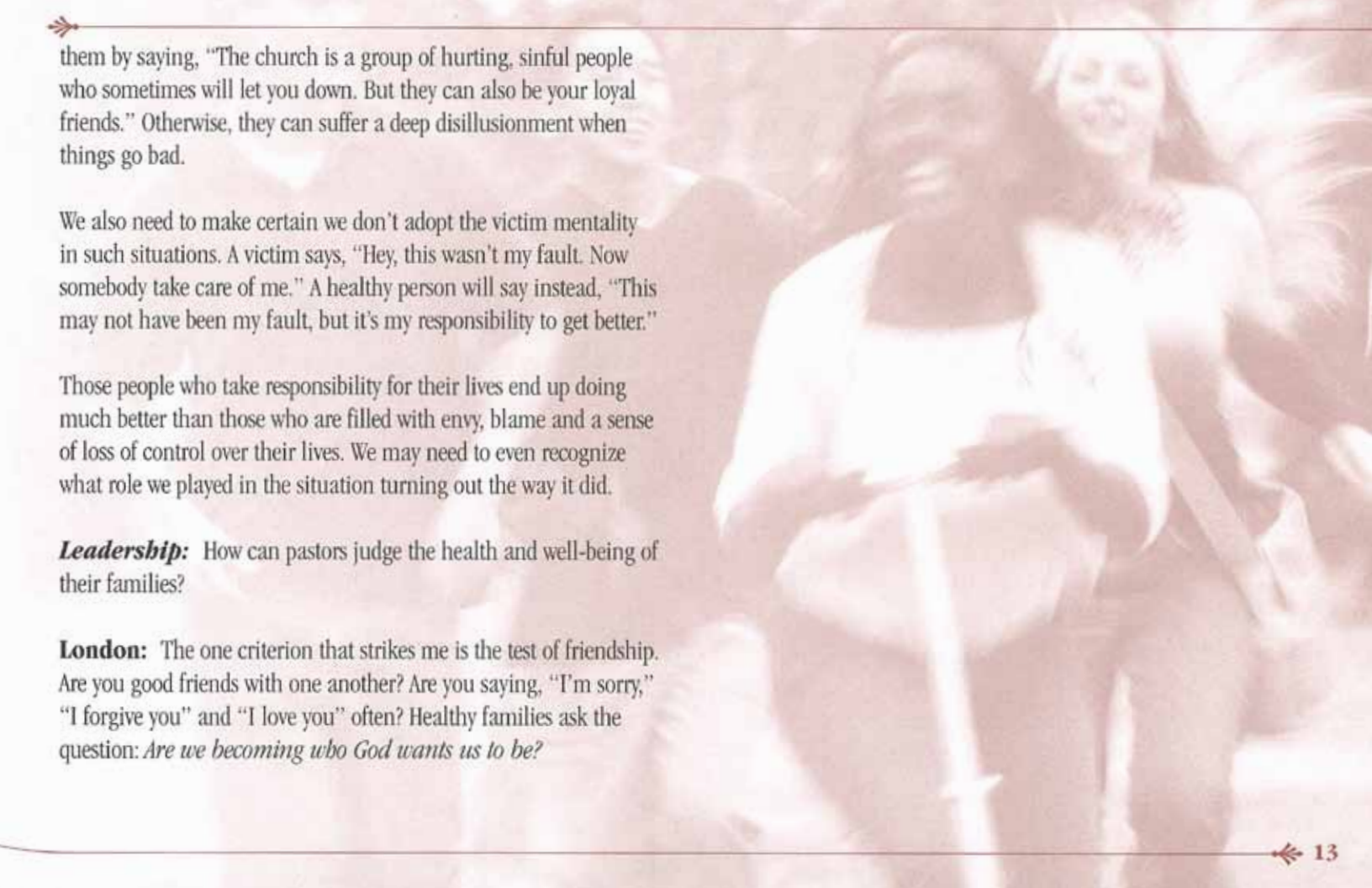
**Leadership:** How did you cushion your children from the impact of those Sundays?

**London:** As much as possible, I tried to send the message to my kids, "This is not a big deal." My wife was wonderful. I still don't know if I agree with her on this, but she would say, "If they don't want you to be their pastor, why in the world would you want to stay there anyway?"

**Townsend:** A central issue revolves around what is age-appropriate for the child to hear. In the preteen years, I believe we should hold our discussions about the chronic complainer at church behind bedroom doors. We share with our children our conclusions, not the process.

In the teenage years (12 to 18), we do just the opposite. We prepare our kids for problem solving by bringing the child into the process of resolving a struggle. We need to teach our children how to solve dilemmas and issues or they'll enter life unprepared. The older a child is, the more they need to know how to handle truth.

How kids react will depend a great deal on the training they've received from age 0 to 12. We shouldn't give our children an idealized view of the church. We need to be honest and prepare



them by saying, "The church is a group of hurting, sinful people who sometimes will let you down. But they can also be your loyal friends." Otherwise, they can suffer a deep disillusionment when things go bad.

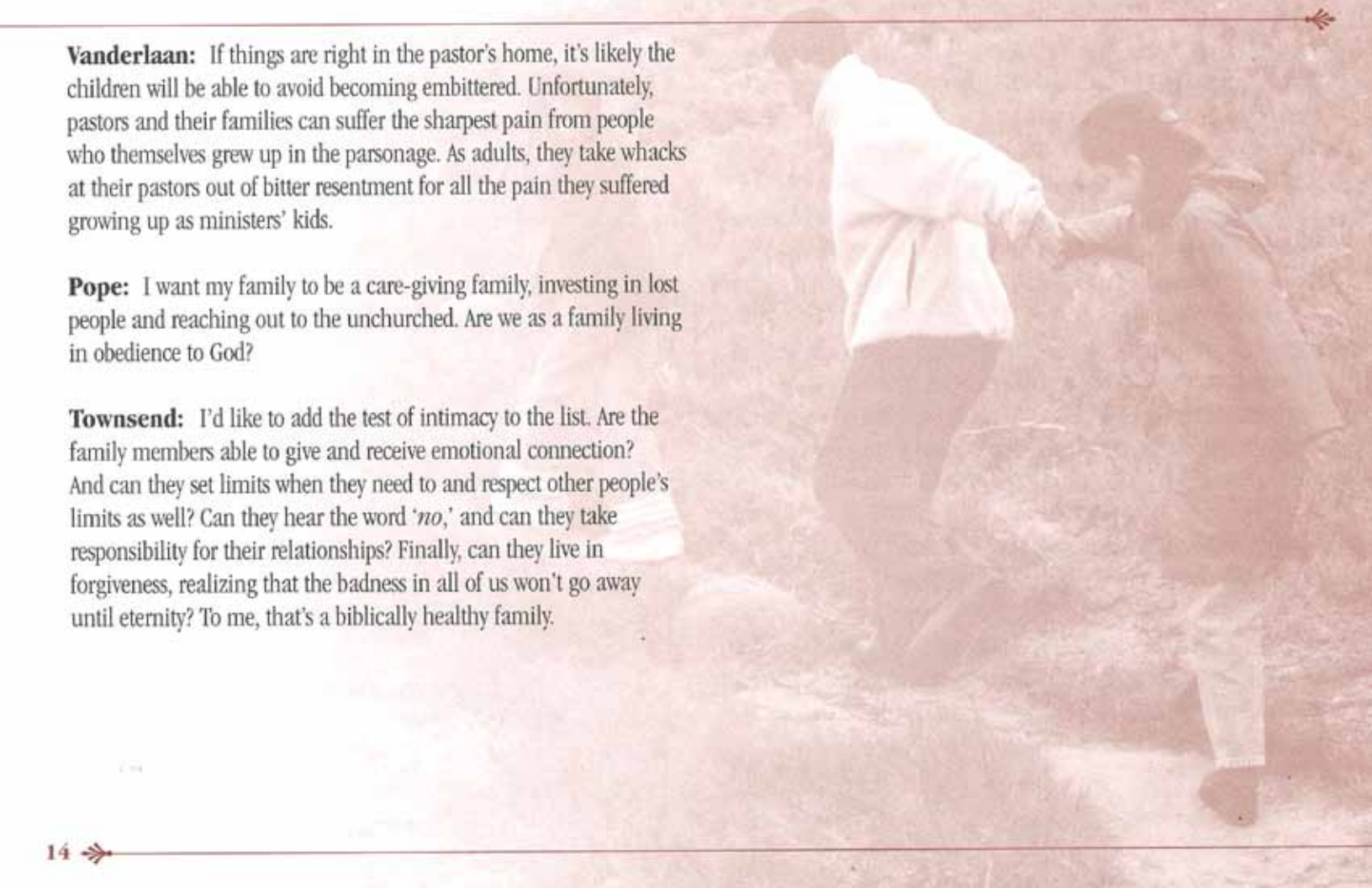
We also need to make certain we don't adopt the victim mentality in such situations. A victim says, "Hey, this wasn't my fault. Now somebody take care of me." A healthy person will say instead, "This may not have been my fault, but it's my responsibility to get better."

Those people who take responsibility for their lives end up doing much better than those who are filled with envy, blame and a sense of loss of control over their lives. We may need to even recognize what role we played in the situation turning out the way it did.

**Leadership:** How can pastors judge the health and well-being of their families?

**London:** The one criterion that strikes me is the test of friendship. Are you good friends with one another? Are you saying, "I'm sorry," "I forgive you" and "I love you" often? Healthy families ask the question: *Are we becoming who God wants us to be?*





**Vanderlaan:** If things are right in the pastor's home, it's likely the children will be able to avoid becoming embittered. Unfortunately, pastors and their families can suffer the sharpest pain from people who themselves grew up in the parsonage. As adults, they take whacks at their pastors out of bitter resentment for all the pain they suffered growing up as ministers' kids.

**Pope:** I want my family to be a care-giving family, investing in lost people and reaching out to the unchurched. Are we as a family living in obedience to God?

**Townsend:** I'd like to add the test of intimacy to the list. Are the family members able to give and receive emotional connection? And can they set limits when they need to and respect other people's limits as well? Can they hear the word 'no,' and can they take responsibility for their relationships? Finally, can they live in forgiveness, realizing that the badness in all of us won't go away until eternity? To me, that's a biblically healthy family.





*The Pastor's Advocate Series is intended to assist congregations in better understanding the needs of their pastors and pastoral families, in better caring for the personal welfare and professional well-being of these leaders and in better teaming with them to maximize their united ministries for Christ.*



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