

## Pastors' Kids: Perceptions and Experiences of Family, Friends, the Church, and God

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how the experience of being a pastor's kid impacts a person's relationship with God, their family, their friends, and the Church, and how they perceive and have experienced these institutions and relationships throughout their lives. Ten pastor's kids participated in one hour long interviews, with questions ranging from general information about themselves to more pointed questions about how being a pastor's kid has impacted different areas of their life. Findings show that the majority of pastor's kids would not change their experiences, as difficult as they may have been. As well, all participants expressed a desire to be treated the same as any other child their age, while most expressed a desire to be able to explore their faith and truly make it their own. These findings, and others, both affirm previous literature on the subject and contribute to potential new areas of study.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much research exists surrounding pastors and the unique challenges that they face in their profession, including role expectations, intrusions on their personal life, and feelings of isolation and loneliness (Chandler 2010; Fredrickson and Lee 2012; George 2009; Helopoulos 2015; Lehr 2006; Self 2011). For instance, the Barna Institute recently conducted a study called *The State of Pastors* (2017), in which they interviewed over 10,000 pastors on a wide range of subjects, from job satisfaction to their mental and emotional health. Amidst this research on pastoral experiences, we know that the impacts of a pastor's job is not limited to their lives alone, but the lives of their spouses and children as well. Yet far less research exists on the unique situation that pastor's spouses and their children find themselves in. While pastors may be very satisfied and happy with the work that they are doing, despite the stressors that come with the job, what about the satisfaction levels and experiences of those who are born into the family of a pastor?

Since 1990 research has accelerated on pastor's kids, showing that they experience higher levels of pressure and expectations as a result of their parent's role in the church (Anderson 1998; Kinnaman 2013; Tighe 2011). Pastor's kids also had a front row seat to the many conflicts that happen in the church, ranging from conflicts over doctrinal issues to disagreements over the color of the sanctuary carpet (Kinnaman 2013; Lee 1989, 1992:166, and 2013; Tighe 2011). These compounding variables can understandably paint a relatively grim picture of the pastor's kids experience and can lead many to speculate about who pastor's kids are and how they will turn out long term. The notion that more pastor's kids are leaving the church than their peers is a prevalent narrative too, and one that is often blown out of proportion. In reality there is about a 3% increase in whether or not a pastor's kid will leave their faith and church compared to their

peers (Kinnaman 2013). While ample amounts of research exists surrounding pastors, it still begs the question as to what impact living in the home of a pastor, being a pastor's kid, can have on an individual?

In this study, I turn to one-on-one interviews with pastor's kids to explore how being a pastor's kid impacts a person's relationship with friends, their family, the church, and God, and how they perceive and have experienced these institutions and relationships throughout their lives. In these interviews questions ranged from general questions about their family and church, to detailed questions about their relationships with the church and how being a pastor's kid may have played a role in their family and their faith development. Throughout this process, three overarching themes emerged: the desire to be "normal," to be able to choose their own faith and truly make it their own, and that pastor's kids are "doing alright."

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the numerous stressors put on a pastor, from a church, their family, and their God can paint a grim picture of pastoral life. At the same time, pastors report being fairly satisfied in their jobs. For example, in one study 87% of clergy reported being very satisfied with their job (Smith 2007), while another study found that 62.4% of 2000 pastors surveyed reported that they were "mostly satisfied" and 24.7% ranked themselves as "very fulfilled" in their jobs (Fredrickson and Lee 2012:7). According to Cameron Lee then, "ministry is simultaneously both satisfying and demanding" (Lee 2010:631).

In this section I focus on three key limitations of pastoral ministry, from Lee and Fredrickson's (2012) book *That Their Work Will Be A Joy: Understanding and Coping with the Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*: (1) Role expectations, (2) Intrusions on the pastor's private life, and (3) Isolation and loneliness. I then summarize central findings on pastor's kid's experiences,

which help to set the context for my study at hand.

### Role Expectations

Role expectations are most accurately explained by a fake job advertisement for a pastor. It reads:

Wanted: Person to fill position that involves important but undervalued work; exact job description unclear. Long hours; must work weekends and holidays. Low pay. Master's degree required; doctorate preferred. Must be accomplished at multitasking, including running an organization without clear authority to do so. The successful candidate will be skilled as a public speaker, manager, politician, and therapist, and will devote significant time each week to pastoral visits. The position reports to multiple bosses (Lee and Fredrickson 2012:67).

While satirical in nature, the advertisement is not far from what many pastors understand their job to be. In her study *The Impact of Pastor's Spiritual Practices on Burnout*, Diane Chandler (2010) surveyed 270 pastors on their spiritual practices and how they cope with ministry demands. Chandler was the first to advance a distinct link between spiritual practices and burnout. One pastor outlined nine different "hats" he is expected to wear in his role as lead pastor. This pastor needs to be a business-man, a counselor, a first responder, a personnel manager, a coach, a teacher, a strategic planner, a principle trainer, and a visionary (Chandler 2010:5). Jason Helopoulos (2015) makes a similar remark in his book *The New Pastor's Handbook: Help and Encouragement for the First Years of Ministry*. He writes that "a Senior (lead) pastor manages staff, oversees a church, operates a complicated budget, preaches weekly, casts the church's vision and must garner respect from vocational peers" (p.39-40). The sheer number of responsibilities that pastors deal with on a nearly daily basis was central in Denise George's study of hundreds of pastors across forty denominations, compiled in her book *What Pastors Wish Church Members Knew* (2009). These responsibilities can easily lead to pastors feeling as though they must "be all things to all people," which can lead to greater difficulties

within ministry and within the pastor's home life as well (George 2009:22). In his work on clergy burnout, Fred Lehr (2006) describes being caught in the "holy crossfire," where the pastor and their family try to juggle expectations, from those that they place on themselves, to the expectations of their family, their congregation, and God (p.5). Lehr (2006) continues, reporting that 50% of pastors feel as though they are not able to meet the demands of their ministry, with another 90% of pastors feeling as though they were unprepared and not trained enough to cope with the demands of ministry (p.4).

These demands come from every area of a pastor's life, which leads to a number of complicated issues a pastor must confront. For some, they feel pressured to set an example because they are the spiritual leader, responsible for a congregation that looks to them as the example (George 2009:22). Other pastors fear that because they are so busy they will neglect their own spiritual walk, resulting in guiding their congregants astray spiritually (George 2009). In an interview with a clinical psychologist who worked frequently with pastors, the story of a female pastor acting out in frustration and anger against her congregants was shared. Her counselor noted the combination of trying to "be the hero" all the time with little recognition from her congregations as contributors to feeling very burned out (Frykholm 2015). William Self, a pastor of fifty-three years, expressed his frustration in his book *Surviving the Stained-Glass Jungle* (2011). He said that congregants at his church who show up on Sunday "will never know the price my family, the church staff, and I have paid to ensure that they will have a good day at church" (Self 2011:36). On top of this, pastors struggled to feel that they were meeting the needs of every congregant, as outrageous as those needs may be. Feeling restrained by time, one pastor expressed struggling with "trying to balance study, pastoral care, administration, and all of the other ministries in which a pastor is involved" (George 2009:36). When a pastor is thriving

and their church is successfully growing, their relationship with congregants inevitably changes, and unfortunately the congregants may not understand that (Chandler 2010:5). One pastor explained how impossible it is to have a “personal relationship with every new member” and the inner struggle he felt when he wanted to in relationship with more members of his congregation (Chandler 2010:5).

Lee and Fredrickson (2012) interviewed Mark Buchanan, a former pastor, author and associate professor of pastoral theology at Ambrose University, on his pastoral experience. Buchanan expressed that there is ultimately no way to please every person in the congregation; there is always going to be someone who feels the pastor is “not warm and cuddly like pastor so-and-so” or that they focus on one topic when they should focus on another (p.10). Still, that lingering feeling of needing to succeed in each of these areas impacts pastors. On the topic of boundaries, Lee and Fredrikson wrote that often when a pastor begins to even think about boundaries they think along the lines of “am I being selfish? Is it inappropriate for me to think about boundaries? Doesn’t following the way of Jesus mean a life of pure self-sacrifice? Isn’t the church about community, deep friendship in God, life together?” (Lee & Fredrickson 2012:130). Attempting to meet all of these expectations and live up to the standards placed on them by practically every person in their life can lead pastors to overwork, with one study showing that the average pastor works between 50-60 hours per week (Chandler 2010:1).

In sum, demanding and sometimes competing role expectations are front and center of the pastoral experience. One implication of this reality is the tension experienced between a pastor’s personal and public life, a theme that I turn to next.

### Intrusions on A Pastor’s Private Life

The examples provided in the literature of time intrusions are numerous. With pastors

working so many hours, and many feeling the need to work even when they are not technically “on the clock,” it takes a large toll on the pastor and their family. The need for pastors to have boundaries and for the congregation to respect those boundaries is clearly demonstrated in the literature. Fred Lehr (2004) writes about boundary ambiguity, and how a lack of clear and maintained boundaries by the pastor and their family can lead to privacy concerns, and potential intrusions in the family's life. In Denise George's study, pastors spoke to the fact that even when they are away from the church, even when they are "off," that the responsibility they face in their roles does not truly go away (George 2009:48). They additionally expressed that normal congregants can take weekends off, but pastors can rarely do that. And even if they are lucky enough to get away with their family for some much needed family time, if there is an emergency, such as a death, the pastor will often leave their family and go back to deal with the crisis at hand (George 2009).

Despite the best intentions of setting boundaries, sometimes boundaries need to be crossed, as one pastor recounts in George's work. This pastor had set aside some “emotional recovery time” one afternoon, and later received a call that a member of their congregation had committed suicide. This pastor was obviously needed, turning the afternoon from one that was supposed to be refreshing, to one that was emotionally draining. Ulstein surveyed pastors “off the record” where he discovered one pastor's inner struggle to congregants who do not respect a pastor's “emotional Sabbath” (Ulstein 1993:19). He sometimes gets irritated or mad, but he cares for his congregation. The problem therein arises because “they all say, ‘I know you're busy’ or ‘I know I should call at the office but...’ Everybody is making an exception to the way they usually act. If they knew how many exceptions there were, they wouldn't do it” (Ulstein 1993:19). The struggle to keep yourself sane and healthy by setting boundaries and at the same time “not

seeming compassionate only during business hours” is one that plagues pastors and is seen throughout the literature (Ulstein 1993:18).

Within these lived tensions there is this underlying narrative that the pastor needs to be all things for all people, and it can be easy to unintentionally forget about their family in the process. Fred Lehr (2006) found that 90% of pastors believed that their choice to serve in ministry was harmful to their family, and 33% would define the lack of privacy as a hazard to their family (p.4). Lehr continues, saying that the lack of quality family time is detrimental to the family’s identity and their cohesion (p.5). Because the pastor is often on call, even while at home, it is difficult, not only to plan family time, but to make the most of those moments, when provided.

Another example of this type of stressor is the constant scrutiny and input that pastors and their families receive from those in their congregation. George (2009) found that 44% of pastors felt that their children were under scrutiny for their life choices, 32% felt that they were being scrutinized on how they discipline their children, and an additional 26% felt that they were being judged for where they sent their children to school (George 2009:57). In William Self’s (2011) research one pastor recounts realizing that “ministry is the world’s most advised profession” (p.12). He said that he received input in all areas of his life, from lifestyle, to marriage, to what denomination to work with. One pastor’s wife explained how challenging raising kids in the spotlight of a ministry family can be, saying that it didn’t matter what her “children do or don’t do, somebody in the church has something negative to say about it” (Williams 2005:21).

As pastors juggle competing role expectations and the intruding aspects of their professional responsibilities in their personal domain, a third reality that pastors describe is isolation and loneliness.

## Isolation and Loneliness

Jason Helopoulos writes that “the pastorate is one of the most people-intensive yet isolating occupations one can have” (2015:90). While a pastor’s job is filled with interactions with people, 70% of pastors do not have a person in their life that they would describe as a “close friend” (George 2009; Lehr 2006). Ulstein recalled the first time he noted this professional distance between pastors and those that they interacted with. He found this distance to stand in contrast with the “humanizing, freeing unity that I had found in Christ” (Ulstein 1993:12).

One reason for this distance is the confidentiality needed between pastors and their congregants. As one pastor pointed out, “not everyone who tries to befriend you can be trusted, and at some point, may actually betray you ... Remember to keep your lips locked. Those people are trying to get power by being your confidant. If you expose your problems or talk about some else you become extremely vulnerable” (Self 2011:119). One pastor further expressed these sentiments, saying:

Pastors often have no one they can go to for counsel. I have to admit that I am lonely. I can’t talk to people in the congregation as though they were just my friends. I have to keep things to myself. Sometimes I feel like a garbage receptacle. People come to me and tell me the most awful things. If I carry it all on my shoulders, I can’t even get to sleep (Ulstein 1993:132).

Congregants may be unaware of how alone their pastor can feel. One pastor attempted to explain this by saying that often they have found that congregations sometimes forget that pastors are in fact simply people (Ulstein 1993:102). When asked what one thing pastors wish their congregants knew about them, one pastor answered “I wish my members knew how friendless I am. Actually, I don’t want the church members to know this, so I never let on - they don’t know” (George 2009:23). Another spoke to the need for even pastors to have someone in their life that can pastor them, as everyone else has a pastor in their life (Self 2011:38). In Diane Chandler’s

(2010) research, every pastor expressed a deep need for “relational support, encouragement and accountability” (p.6). When asked to reflect on their time as a pastor, one pastor who had experienced severe burnout said that if he had a “genuine support system” that forced him to take a break, slow down, and ask tough questions, that his experience may have been different (Ulstein 1993:102). This pastor had to step away from the church for three years, and described returning into a church sanctuary as “traumatic” (Ulstein 1993:102). Where do church leaders go then, for this ever important support that they so desperately need? Some turn to friends outside of the church, spouses, and to God (Ulstein 1993).

Experiences of isolation and loneliness have huge ramifications for pastors’ own well-being, as well as the well-being of their family. Lorna Dobson (2003) discusses a similar loneliness in the lives of pastor’s wives. One pastor’s wife recounts moving to a new church and being told that she should not have best friends in the church, because the last pastor’s wife had a close clique and it caused a lot of problems. For the next seventeen years of ministry, this pastor’s wife was haunted by those words, and she refused to make close friends because of them (Dobson 2003). One pastor lamented the loneliness his wife experienced, saying that he wished that there were “some people willing to reach out to my wife; to be genuine friends with her, and not just to see her as the pastor’s wife” (George 2009:53). A study conducted by Warner and Carter (1984) sought to compare marital satisfaction of pastors and their wives compared to married couples who do not work in church contexts. Five variables emerged - loneliness, marital adjustment, emotional exhaustion, involvement and scores from the MMPI “K” Scale<sup>1</sup> - with loneliness, burnout and diminished marital adjustment as the most significant (Warner and

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<sup>1</sup> “Used to measure a social desirability response set, and a demographic survey” (Warner and Carter 1984:127).

Carter 1984). This study also found that because of the greater prevalence of these variables the couple “may begin to psychologically withdraw from each other and from friendships due to burnout; he being overly involved and she being emotionally exhausted. As a result, they experience loneliness and less marital satisfaction” (Warner and Carter 1983:130). This withdrawal is also shown in Dobson’s research, where pastor’s wives say that they do not want to talk to their husbands about difficulties going on in their own life or their marriage because they feel guilty complaining about what being married to a pastor means especially since he is doing the work the Lord has called them to do (Dobson 2003).

Ironically enough, being a pastor, a job in which one is almost constantly interacting with people, can leave one feeling isolated and lonely. Due to the sensitive nature of a pastor’s occupation and discussions, often they feel they cannot turn to their family, particularly a spouse, as that would breach confidentiality. This is just one of the many ways that a pastor’s role can impact not only their lives, but also the lives of their spouses and their children.

### Pastor’s Kids

How do those who are born into the family of a pastor perceive and experience pastoral life? In his book *Life in a Glass House*, Cameron Lee (1989), writes that “the very credibility of a pastor’s ministry may seem to hinge on what church members see through the walls of the glass house. There is the added pressure to be a perfect family: to be perfect spouses and perfect parents and to rear perfect kids” (p.164). From Carole Anderson’s (1998) surveys with 487 pastor’s kids over the age of twenty-five, we learn that participants felt immense expectations put on them and their family from the congregation, themselves and their secular peers. Steven Tighe’s (2011) article, “Raising Church Celebrities: A Study on Clergy Parenting Practices,” showcases the tension that pastor’s kids feel between being a “naive goody-goody, or a rebel”

(p.13), with one pastor's kid saying, "if people found out I was a pastor's kid, they'd be like 'I have to be better around you than I would around someone else. Really weird'" (p.13-14).

Hijme Stoffels (2004) adds that many of his participants felt like "public property," an unpaid part of their parents' ministry rather than a child. Those feelings of their family being like "public property" also resulted in pastor's kids feeling like they were competing with the church for the attention of their parents (Newman 2008). As stated earlier, pastor's families already struggle to find time to spend together as a family, and this apparent competition between the church and the pastor's family also contributes to some of the resentment that pastor's kids have for the church. This perceived constant evaluation and judgment plays a large role in the upbringing and shaping of pastor's kids, so much so that "unrealistic expectations" was cited as the number one struggle in their faith development (Kinnaman 2013).

Throughout the literature there are countless stories of pastor's kids feeling that congregants view them as celebrities rather than peers. In *Life in a Glass House*, one pastor's wife expresses her daughter's frustrations with this status, saying that their church youth group would never start until she arrived. This pastor's kid was frustrated because "when others were late it didn't seem to matter, but when she wasn't quite on time it was a big deal" (Lee 1989:168). Additional studies referenced pastor's kids being used as sermon illustrations as a contribution to these feelings of celebrity. Further, even knowing more than their peers about issues in the church contributed to this celebrity status (Tighe 2011).

The pastor's kid experience allows them to be uniquely aware of underlying conflict and issues in the church, which was cited in multiple studies as contributing to their difficulties with faith and the church in general (Kinnaman 2013; Lee 1989, 1992, and 2013; Tighe 2011). Having access and viewing privileges to this conflict plays a significant role in how the pastor's

kids views the church and those in it. Many of the conflicts that pastor's kids witness are tied directly to their parent, which can turn the situation into an "us vs. them" dynamic. While parents may attempt to do their best at hiding this information, children may not only overhear issues, but they are also able to pick up on underlying issues that are not being discussed. In Jon Mark Dalhager's paper, "Pastor's Kids in Latin America: An Investigation into the Advantages and Disadvantages of the PK Experience" (2012), Dalhager uses "triangulation" as a means to explain the unintentional "us vs. them" dynamic. Triangulation occurs when a third member, in this case the pastor's kid, is drawn into a conflict between two original parties. For example, if a congregant appears to pick on a pastor's kid, it may not have anything to do with the pastor's kid, rather it is because of a conflict with the pastor (Dalhager 2012:156). Incidentally, in the resolution of the conflict, the pastor's kid is often left out of the resolution. Steven Tighe's (2011) research addresses this too, where he found that pastor's kids may not experience the same resolution of the issue as their parents, which he speculates could lead to higher levels of resentment towards the church.

Tighe's (2011) study also sought to answer the question of how growing up in a pastor's family can help or hinder one's faith, and what did adult pastor's kids think was the most beneficial actions that their parents did growing up to help contribute to their adult faith (Tighe 2011:8). Tighe suggested that the three most important elements of a pastor's kid's relationship with their parents was their involvement in the child's world, intentionally doing fun things as a family, and having good two-way communication within their home (Tighe 2011).

Several studies also offered a more positive approach of what being a pastor's kid can look like. Tighe (2011) found that some pastor's kids recall fond warm memories of being uniquely blessed by the congregation. While this study did not directly outline what these special

blessings were, Ulstein (1993) interviewed a pastor who shared his family's experiences with these unique blessings, saying, "Back at our first church, when the kids were little they were the darlings of the congregation... Ladies would knit and sew little outfits for them. Some of the gifts were pretty garish. They were awful things, but they came from the heart" (p.21). These gifts, while sometimes awful in nature, speak to some of the positives of being a pastor's kid, as well as the uniqueness of the role.

Despite the uniqueness of the pastor's kid's situation, there does not seem to be any evidence for pastor's kids leaving the faith any more than their peers. The Barna Institute found that 40% of pastor's kids experienced a difficult season of doubting their faith, in comparison to 38% of millennials who had been raised in the church (Kinnaman 2013). When asked about whether their child went through a difficult season of doubt in their upbringing, 40% of pastors said that it was "very accurate" for their child (Kinnaman 2013).

## METHOD

In light of these findings in the literature on the lived experiences among pastors and their families, work remains to better explore how pastor's kids view and experience growing up as pastor's kids. For instance, how does being a pastor's kid impact one's relationship with their friends, family, the church, and God, and how have they perceived and experienced these institutions throughout their lives? These are the questions that anchored my research study.

Participants in this study are children of Protestant lead pastors or youth pastors. I chose to study children of these two types of pastors because the majority of the literature focuses on these two pastoral types and experiences. As well, in thinking about the different types of pastors, it seems that the experiences of children of lead and youth pastors are very different than the experiences of children whose parents are community, associate, children's, administrative or

worship pastors. This is mainly because of the prominent public profile that lead or youth pastors generally play in the life of a congregation, in contrast to other kinds of pastors in churches.

### Recruitment

Potential participants identified themselves after receiving recruitment materials (poster, email, and advertisement on the Ambrose University student portal), upon which I verified that they met the criteria outlined above. In addition, I approached those I knew who were pastor's kids, and explored whether they would have any interest in an interview for this study. I also relied upon a snowball sample where those who knew of the study referred others they knew who may have also wished to participate.

### Sample Demographics

The sample included six female and four male participants. Participant ages ranged from eighteen to forty-one, with seven between the ages of 18-24 and three between the ages of 26-41. Eight participants come from Western Canada, one from Central Canada and another from Eastern Canada. All ten participants had at least one other sibling in their family. Eight participants are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree, one is in a graduate program, and one has already completed graduate-level studies.

### Church Demographics

Nine of the participants reported that their father was the pastor in the family, and one had both their mother and father pastoring in the church. Denominationally, all ten participants came from conservative Protestant backgrounds, with one moving from a mainline Protestant denomination to a conservative Protestant denomination. The size of the congregations ranged from fifty to 500 congregants, with most averaging 50-100 on a typical Sunday. Of those interviewed, eight had fathers who were lead pastors and two were youth pastors.

## Interviews

I conducted face-to-face interviews in various meeting rooms at Ambrose University. Each interview took approximately one hour, with the shortest taking 57 minutes and the longest interview being 74 minutes. Questions ranged from general demographic information about the participant and their church, to more specific questions about their experiences and perceptions of their friends and family, the church, and God (see interview schedule in Appendix A). I chose to do face-to-face interviews for a number of reasons. Given the personal nature of the questions, it was important for the participant to know who was receiving their information and to build a trusting relationship with me, the researcher. I was also able to take note of what participants said, their body language, pauses, and other nonverbal cues that I would have missed with other methods.

## Analysis

Following data collection, I transcribed verbatim each digitally recorded interview. Once transcribing was completed, I coded the interviews line by line, to find themes that were repeated multiple times across the ten interviews. As I analyzed the data I sought to identify themes that connected to previous literature, as well as pay attention to new themes and ideas to emerge from my data.

## DATA

As a reminder, my central task is to address this question: How does being a pastor's kid impact one's relationship with their family, friends, the church and God and how have they perceived and experienced these institutions and relationships throughout their lives? In what follows I organize my findings along the four key areas of family, friends, church, and God. Some themes fall under two or more of these four domains, however I report findings under the

area most prevalent across the interviews.

### Family

Five themes emerged on the topic of family: their parent<sup>2</sup> as a resource and example, a desire to protect their parent via their pastoral role, their parent's level of openness regarding conflict, spending time with their parents, and finances. Overall, six of the ten participants, without prompting, expressed that while being a pastor's kid had a variety of challenges, to be explored shortly, they would not change their upbringing as it also positively contributed to who they are today.

#### *Parents as a Resource and Example*

Throughout the interviews, six participants referenced how much they enjoyed the wealth of knowledge that came with their parent being a pastor, as well as the example that was set for them by their parents. In regards to knowledge, participants referenced this in both a theological and pragmatic way. When participants struggled with their own questions, or questions that others brought to them and they were unable to answer, many were able to turn to their parent for answers. In a practical sense, five participants referenced a desire to go into full-time ministry, and some mentioned how they were able to glean advice from their parent on this subject as well.

When speaking about how he resolved some of his doubts surrounding the faith, Edward, an eighteen-year-old, remarked "I think I was able to find pretty reasonable answers for most of kind of the things I was doubting and part of that was probably just because my dad had that knowledge and was a pastor." Similarly, Joy, a twenty-year-old, talked about "just being able to ask him questions when I got older and stuff, being able to ask him questions about God and all that kind of stuff and just feeling comfortable doing that was huge." Jacob, a seminary student

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<sup>2</sup> When I say parent in this context I am referring to the parent who serves in a pastoral capacity, unless otherwise stated.

aspiring to become a pastor once he graduates, spoke to the example his dad set regarding time management. Further, Jacob, as a self-described introvert in a people-dominated profession, said, “Now, looking at it, my dad’s an introvert as well, so it’s truly going to be really useful to kind of get advice from him on how he deals with his time, and manages his time.”

### *Desire to Protect Their Parent*

In eight of the interviews, participants made some reference to feeling as though they had to protect their parents. This sense of protection took shape in a number of different ways. For some, like Jane, a twenty-one-year-old, this protective feeling meant that her and her siblings always had to behave because they loved their dad and they “want him to be seen in a good light and we don’t want to be the cause of trouble for him.” Jane also referenced a higher expected standard of behaviour for the pastor’s kids and how that played a role in protecting her dad, saying “it was specific to the PK and then it shed negative lights on my dad too if one of us ... if we did something even trivial it would put that light on my dad and the expectation of my dad.” For example, some participants referenced skipping church, but proceeded to feel guilty about after having done it. Jacob, in reflecting on his almost three years away from the church, said “that’s why I felt really bad too whenever I wasn’t going to church because I was like, oh no, am I going to give my dad a bad reputation in church? And is this going to affect his job?” Allie felt similarly to Jacob, saying:

I was a teenager too and so I already understood that kind of the biblical principles behind okay if a, if a family, if a pastor doesn’t have control over his own house, how is he supposed to have it over the church? And so there was that pressure of being like I need to have these certain [standards]... and my parents were always pretty chill, they weren’t enforcing the ‘no you have to be perfect,’ but also there was just this thing that I was like ‘okay my actions could make my dad lose his job’ and then we’re screwed.

In addition to one’s actions, a person’s words could also have a negative impact on their parent and job. Allie, a twenty-one-year-old, spoke of the need that pastor’s kids have for a safe

space, a safe relationship to talk to someone and how pastor's kids "might need more help finding that safe person, where they know 'okay, what I say isn't going to affect my dad's job.'" Beyoncé, a nineteen-year-old, echoed this, saying that she felt she could not be fully open when talking to people within the church because she "wouldn't want that to get back to my dad."

Others spoke to how difficult it was to watch their parents go through the hardships that come with being a pastor. Most impacted by this was Joy, who expressed how difficult it was to watch both her dad and mom feel pressure to act a certain way in addition to watching them navigate the various conflicts their church encountered. Joy said that the hardest part about being a pastor's kid was "knowing that my dad has a good heart and knowing that he wants to see people flourish and wants to see them step out and take risks and like build the Kingdom of God, and him not being able to do that [due to politics] breaks my heart." She also spoke about her mom, saying:

(E)ven with my mom having to feel perfect, she used to smoke and stuff... And so, for her to feel like she was always being judged and always under a magnifying glass to be the perfect wife, and the perfect outgoing person that she just is not... so seeing that pressure on my mom was really hard as well.

#### *Parents' Level of Openness Regarding Conflict*

Five participants spoke to how open their parents were concerning matters in the church. Three of the participants spoke about how their parents had kept church and home very separate, while the other two spoke about how their parents were very open about conflicts occurring in the church, and how it helped them as they interacted with the church.

Beyoncé recalls growing up and thinking that "things in the church ran so smoothly and all the people on staff were friends and my parents kept it hidden from us, so until probably grade 12 is when they started talking and I would overhear and be like what?" Andrea, a nineteen-year-old student, remembers there being conflict in the church, but "it was very much like dad kept

that separate, we were never really allowed to know about it.”

On the other hand, Carl, a thirty-eight-year-old, found that his father’s willingness to be open about church conflict actually helped him in a lot of ways as he navigated his sometimes tumultuous relationship with the church. In talking about his father, Carl described him as “a very honest person so, even church politics and stuff, he would share it and I know a lot of pastors they wouldn’t, there was a separation thing, but my dad was very honest.” Carl continued on to acknowledge that while this honesty could potentially be a negative for some, it worked very well for him, saying:

I do believe that my dad being honest about the things that goes on in church, I know it can be a detriment but it can also be a real positive thing because it has I think for me, through a lot of these bad scenarios or bad situations, bad politics, that I came to understand that God will work through the church in a mysterious way, and I learned to accept that and I’ve learned to actually trust that God will work through it and so that actually causes me to put more faith in to it

Additionally, Allie spoke of her father’s openness and how he challenged her to help resolve conflict in the church or change things she did not like, saying “I would often talk with my dad when he got back from board meetings which, he was always quite aware of like my thoughts of the church as a whole, and I mean, his perspective was always ‘okay, but what are you going to do to change it?’”

### *Spending Time with Their Parent*

This topic came up in seven interviews, with discussion ranging from an appreciation for the lack of time that pastors have, to a desire to spend more time with their parents, to their parent’s intentionality in spending time together as a family, to how pastors should interact with their children once home after a workday.

Jacob expressed that he wished his dad had spent more time with him, though Jacob also

took some responsibility for not spending more time with his father during his teenage years. He recalls:

I wish that I could've spent, and maybe it's like my fault too growing up, I'm not sure, but I yeah I just wish that we could spend more time each day or each week, but it's, I mean, it's understandable, like the amount of things he had to do on a daily and weekly basis.

Jane spoke about how her and her siblings would all go to the church and hang out with their dad while he was working, and Joy spoke lovingly about calling her dad every day after school at the church to tell him about her day. Carl recalls his father coming home late after board meetings and how:

(H)e would still drag us out to go eat, the culture of eating late kind of thing or go watch a late movie, so my dad was very, you know, he would still be there for me in a sense, um so I never felt like, you know, I was not cared for. I think my dad was very sensitive about that part of our lives

David, a forty-one-year-old, remembers feeling like his dad was never able to take off his pastoral hat, even when he was home with his family. He expressed a desire to see his dad strictly as dad rather than pastor, but found his dad really struggled to separate his ministry persona from his parental persona. Edward advised pastors to not let their pastoral priorities be a guide when dealing with family matters, rather “you need to like let your priorities as a parent guide it.” Joy added on to this, encouraging pastors to be honest about their own faith journey and their struggles as a way to encourage their kids and create a dialogue around faith. She said:

You need to be constantly in communication with your kids. Tell them the stuff that you struggled with as a teen, when they're struggling with it, because with that vulnerability and that 'yeah but God worked through this... and even though I'm going through the same, some similar hard things and hard ships even now, I'm still being used.'

### *Finances*

Three participants referenced the tight financial situations that their family lived in growing up. While one participant spoke about this in a negative way, two spoke about how their lack of

financial resources created a reliance on God that they and their family would not have had otherwise. Jacob briefly mentioned how he would always see his friends go on vacations every summer and would lament to his family that they just stayed at home during the summer. In contrast, both Joy and Carl recalled times where their families were uniquely and unexpectedly provided for financially. Joy recalled a specific Christmas where her dad went and checked the mail to find that there was an envelope with \$500 in it for her family. She continued to speak about how often their family would receive vouchers at Christmas for activities for their family of six to do together, which was significant because with such a large family they would have otherwise been unable to do these activities. Carl spoke to how the lack of financial stability he and his family experienced as he was growing up became a testimony to God's faithfulness in his life, saying "when you're serving God or when your family is in full-time ministry, part of your income is from the church but in many ways, everything else has to come from God." Carl's father would also show him the family finances to tangibly demonstrate how God had provided for their family during that given month. Carl explained, "it looked like we probably should not have made it through this month financially, but look, God provided by... somebody left a grocery bag on the door or something like that and so that was like a real-life example for me to kind of learn from."

### Friends

On the topic of friendships, three themes emerged across the interviews: difficulties associated with moving, school and the desire to "fit in", and feeling the need to be guarded in friendships and other relationships.

### *Moving*

Six participants and their families moved at least once over the course of their childhood

due to their dad's job. Edward and his family have moved twice for his dad's job, and the most recent move, in the middle of his junior high years were very difficult for Edward. He was angry for a number of years, "at my parents, I was angry at God, I was angry at myself but I didn't want to admit it." Edward attributed his anger to having to leave behind his solid group of Christian friends in the city, during the middle of junior high, to move to a small town where he knew nobody and had to restart all over again. Carl, while not particularly angry about having to move, admitted that it complicated making solid friendships and this was a reoccurring theme that has continued on into his adult life as well. He said:

There's that loneliness, there's that often constantly meeting new people and I think it took me a long time, I think up until university, it really it took me through university to really, not even fully work out but at least 30-40% worked out in accepting the fact that, you know, that's kind of how life is and I learned to make friends anywhere that I go.

#### *School and the Desire to "Fit In"*

The pressures that pastor's kids feel do not start or end with the church, rather they extend into other areas of their life, including school. Six participants admitted to not being very vocal about their faith because of the potential social ramifications that would come with the title of not only pastor's kid, but also Christian in general. Andrea grew up in a very small town, and went to school with the same twenty people from kindergarten to grade twelve, which left her struggling to maintain her Christian identity and fit in with those in school. She expressed this conflict, saying, "Would I want to fit in more with my classmates or these older people kind of [at church]?" She later said "I think in high school, trying to figure out who I was and everything, and choosing between church and friends, and it's like, God was always that thing like in the way kind of." Edward spoke about his attempts to distill his Christian identity, saying "it was kind of that, to fit in it was like 'yeah I'm a Christian, but I'm not a 'super Christian.'" Beyoncé also spoke to this, saying "I never gave people the vibe that I was super, I don't know

what word to say, super intense about my faith. So I don't think people like felt uncomfortable around me knowing."<sup>3</sup>

### *Guarded in Relationships*

Seven participants referenced feeling like they were unable to be fully honest with others in their lives for a number of different reasons. For some this was due to personality, while others pointed to their position as a pastor's kid. Jane was one of the two youth pastor's kids interviewed, and she talked about how being a pastor's kid meant that she was privy to more information about those in the youth group and how it:

(P)ut a little bit of a divide between youth pastor kids and other kids, because you can't be totally open with everyone, because you can't talk about the things that you hear at home and sometimes you're not sure that you can talk about and what you can't talk about and so you just don't talk about any of it.

Carl also talked about how the inability to be open about his life, specifically about the negative things he encountered in life, complicated his ability to make good friendships, saying:

If I need to make good friends I need to share my life, right? Even difficult things [struggles, doubts, loss] we go through, but then there's always a certain point where I would not go too far, because I don't know what other people would do with the information.

Andrea attributed feeling guarded in her friendships to not only being a pastor's kid, but also to growing up in a town of about 1000 people, saying:

I think it's partially small town, because it's like, a couple times like I would tell a friend a secret or something and then 5 minutes later everyone would know, and I'd be like 'well thanks.' So, being from a small town, you learn to kind of guard yourself, and not tell people things.

### Church

It was at this point in the interview that participants often let out a sigh of emotion as they

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note here that because I did not conduct a comparative study between both pastor's kids and Christian teenagers in general, it is difficult to tease out if the aforementioned experiences are distinct to pastor's kids or whether they pertain to Christian teens in general.

braced to speak about their relationship with the church, despite nine out of ten reporting that they currently have a positive relationship with the church. Some participants notably tensed up as we covered areas surrounding conflict in the church, sharing how they as individuals and as a family navigated the unique relationship between their church and being a pastor's family. The topic of the church is one that yielded the strongest opinions and themes compared to the other three. Having said that, it is important to note that eight participants are currently involved in a church, with the remaining two still searching for a church, having just recently moved to the city. Even though participants all saw some conflict in the church that sullied their relationship with the church, all came around to see the church as a broken body of God's people, deeply loved by God. This allowed them to navigate the numerous challenges and difficulties outlined in the following section with more grace than they would have previously.

### *Pressure and Expectations*

Across the board, all ten participants spoke to the different pressures and expectations they felt were put on them as a result of their parent's occupation, with varying degrees of severity.

For the majority of participants, these expectations and pressures caused much grief. The reoccurring theme here was that participants just wanted to be treated like the other children in their congregation, or their peers in general. Beyoncé spoke about how her youth pastor was always on her to be an example to the other youth, pressuring her to set an example because her dad was the lead pastor. In response she simply expressed a desire to be normal, because she "just didn't want that pressure." These pressures caused participants to feel like they had to behave a certain way, mostly within the church setting. Ruth spoke to the immense pressure her family was under, saying, "If there is [imperfection in the pastor's family] they might question their faith even though it's not fair to the pastor's family because they're human and it's not

really fair to expect them to be perfect because no one is perfect, except for God.” The “glass house” discussion advanced by Cameron Lee (1989) was met with resistance by some, but overall participants agreed with Lee’s central premises, specifically that being a pastor’s kid and living in the “glass house” often causes the pastor and their family to feel as though they are being watched, and in turn that they must act a certain way.

There were two participants who acknowledged that the pressures were there, but that they had less of a personal impact on their lives. Edward said, “At a young age I realized that I kind of knew the pressure was there, but I just kind of realized that it [meeting those expectations] just wasn’t going to happen.” Edward attributes this in large part to his laid-back personality. Additionally, Joy spoke to how being a good kid and rising to those expectations, specifically of being a well-behaved kid in church and being both academically and biblically knowledgeable, gave her a sense of accomplishment. However, these expectations did not bother her to the degree that they bothered other participants. As stated earlier, it was more difficult for Joy to watch these expectations suffocate other members of her family.

### *Broader Understanding of the Church*

All ten participants mentioned how their unique view of the church was a challenge at times, but it also helped them develop a more realistic understanding of what the church is, and for some, it even contributed to a more loving view of the church over time. Jacob spoke eloquently to this point, saying:

I kind of had a front row seat to, well not gossip, but kind of just knowing what was going on in the church, and it definitely, I don’t think it was because of dad that it impacted my view of the church negatively, but it definitely helped me realize um I guess the reality of the church right? That it’s not this kind of perfect place where Christians are nice to each other, that there’s a lot of stuff that goes on behind the scenes that we don’t know about, and then I think it’s really just knowing the reality of the church, and knowing that we’re all broken and seeing people has truly helped me to prepare like for ministry.

Topics on interviewee views on the church ranged from gossip, to politics, to negative perceptions of what the church was, but most participants limited their negative opinions and feelings towards the church to their specific congregation, as opposed to the church as an institution. Allie spoke to this, saying “I think I was really fortunate in that my negative idea of the church was bound to that specific church.” Joy recalled seeing the conflict in the church through the eyes of her dad, saying “My dad would come home from board meetings, crazy stressed out, all the time... And when he would come home I would sometimes overhear him talking to my mom about a certain person and it completely changed my perceptions of that person.”

Each participant could point to a specific time that there was a conflict in the church, and for some those conflicts led to more severe views about the church. When asked to explain his early relationship with the church, Carl described it as a battlefield, saying:

Church is supposed to be a sanctuary, but for me it was a battlefield. That was a huge, that was actually a huge thing for me, where I step into a church and I view it as, I have to be protective, I have to be careful of what I say, I have to, you know, there was no freedom and so I think that was a huge part of my youth period.

Nonetheless, all participants spoke about how, amidst these negative elements to church life, people need the church and that the church was a tangible example of God’s love for His people. After leaving the church for a number of years, while continuing his relationship with the Lord, Jacob realized the importance of community and the church after reading *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren (2003). Whereas he previously felt he could be a Christian without the church, Jacob soon realized that he needed the church, saying “you know, Jesus died for the church. The church is the bride of Jesus so I didn’t really understand kind of the depth of the relationship I guess.”

Ruth expressed a sense of frustration with people that lose their faith as a result of actions

by people in the church, saying:

(If people's experience with the church makes you lose your faith, your faith isn't really in who it's supposed to be. If you lose your faith based on your experience with the church then you're not really having a relationship with God, it's based on the church. Some people lose their faith completely because of the church and well, who is your faith in?

### *Opportunity to Serve*

Six participants spoke about the greater opportunity they were given to serve in the church, and while they may not have appreciated it at the time, they all were thankful in hindsight for the lessons that serving in the church taught them. Allie spoke to how she does not feel that going to church on Sunday is enough, saying "I feel it's not church unless you're involved and that's something that my dad really drilled into me." Andrea received a scholarship for all of her service and volunteering in the church and in the community, and while she is now grateful for the scholarship and the experiences she had, she said that now living in Calgary and having a choice to serve means that she "is more willing to help out kind of because I'm not being forced to." Beyoncé referenced the chance to serve in the church as one of the most positive aspects of being a pastor's kid, saying:

What I liked was that we were always involved in the church and they always encouraged us to serve, so I was always given the opportunity to be involved and serving was always something we did, not just because we had to but because we actually wanted to serve too.

David admitted that while he resented the amount of serving while growing up, he is now thankful for the opportunity he was given and for the work ethic it instilled in him. He added that pastor's kids should be advised that while serving may be difficult and one of the more difficult parts of being a pastor's kid, they will likely be thankful for it later in life.

### *Recognition and Special Treatment*

Seven participants spoke about the recognition that came with being a pastor's kid. Jacob

spoke to the pros and cons of this reality, saying “because of my selfish nature growing up, I kind of did like the spotlight at times. But then also being an introvert I was like ‘okay no, I just don’t want this anymore.’ So, it kind of comes and goes.” For some this recognition was a positive experience. Jane spoke to the access she had to youth events because her dad was the youth pastor, despite not yet being thirteen, the age necessary to participate in youth events.

While there were positives associated with being a pastor’s kid in this regard, there were also negatives, the biggest one that people assume they know you. Four participants spoke about how there were some in the church that would come and start talking to them as if they were the best of friends, while the participant could not remember who they were. Jane attributed this feeling of kinship to sermon illustrations, saying:

I think when I got a little bit older it was a little bit harder for me to (deal with) the constant anywhere that you go, being like “oh you’re Paul’s kid” or everyone in church being like “I know Jane” and you have no clue who you’re talking to, but like people from random places have heard a sermon illustration about you or that sermon illustration was embarrassing stories

Edward felt the same as Jane, speaking about how many people in the church treat pastors and their families as celebrities. Church members make it sound as though they know the pastor’s kid, even though in reality they have no idea who they are outside of the one hour on Sunday morning.

#### *Sense of Celebrity and Being “Holier than Thou”*

Five participants spoke about how the reputation of being a pastor’s kid, combined with their greater knowledge of issues happening in the church, led to a sense of pride in their lives. David admitted that his parents would openly “air the churches dirty laundry” out at the dinner table and as he heard more and more about what was going on in the lives of other congregants, he developed a sense of arrogance and pride about the state of his life; he began to embody a

“holier than thou” feeling. Beyoncé also admitted to this, as was shown in her answer to the question of whether or not it bothered her that people would snicker themselves around her once they realized her dad was a pastor. She responded:

I kind of liked that people would do that around me because, I think it was sort of a pride thing that I liked that people wouldn't do that around me because I'm like “oh yeah, you know, I'm better than you” and all that stuff, right? And it wasn't true at all.

### *Unique Blessings*

In Stoffel's study *Pastor's Kids are the Worst* (2004), he referenced that unique blessings can also come along with being a pastor's kid. All ten participants gave examples of the unique blessings that their family received, and most attributed it solely to their family's position in the church. For seven participants, these blessings were physical objects and gifts, such as boxes of chocolates at Christmas, homemade food, and financial supports. Joy recalls receiving passes to the aquarium and other activities that her family of six could do together, something that they would not have been able to afford otherwise.

For others, they defined these unique blessings in terms of relationships for themselves and their family, as opposed to tangible objects. When asked about unique blessings that he had received, Edward immediately referenced all the people in his congregation who were willing to take him under their wing and mentor him in a variety of areas in his life. After moving away from the majority of her extended family, Ruth spoke about how there were some in the congregation who could fill in as pseudo family.

### God and Faith

From the conversations surrounding God and who participants viewed God to be, three themes emerged: making their faith their own, who God was and is to them, and the importance of summer camp in their faith development.

### *Owning one's Faith*

Nine participants spoke to the importance of being able to find their own faith apart from their parents. Seven participants reported that going to church was mandatory, and many understood the reason why, having come to understand that their actions could impact their parent's reputation or the congregation's view of their parents. This observation relates back to previous findings regarding wanting to protect their parent and shine a positive light on them and the job they are doing. Two reported that they did not go to their father's church for a significant amount of time, and that they were encouraged in their pursuit to explore faith on their own terms, which was hugely beneficial to their faith development. Jane felt as though she did not have the opportunity to explore her own faith growing up, and as a result found herself craving that chance to discover God later in life, saying:

(I)n my mind it's better to have your kid go through a rough patch and then find their own faith afterwards, than to try and protect them from ever questioning anything, because for me, I kind of feel that in a way I'm jealous of people who didn't find out about God or didn't come to God until they were 20, because I missed out, they all have this 'God changed my life, God saved me,' and I'm hardened to it, I've heard it since I was born.

David, whose family had a deep history with one denomination embodied this desire, as he recalls him and his three younger siblings leaving the denomination later in life to join a different Christian tradition. He said this was a result of having questions that seemed unanswerable by his religious tradition of origin, and he and his three siblings were able to find answers to those questions in a different denomination.

Carl engaged the parable of the prodigal son as a metaphor for the pastor's kid experience and what can potentially happen if one is not given the opportunity to explore their faith and make it real to them, saying:

Pastor's Kids, we are the, we are the good kid that needs redemption and it's even harder because you know, there is no, often there is not an 'aha' moment. It's not one moment

where ‘oh no I did drugs and I drank and I partied and suddenly I figured out that I need to come back to God,’ but it was like, you know, I’m always there. It’s like the older brother (in the prodigal son parable), you’re always there, you’re always in the presence and to really try and sense God in those moments, that I think, and to come to terms with it and not to act like you’re a Christian and to realize what authenticity is, what genuineness is. I think that’s even harder.

By allowing pastor’s kids to have doubts and questions and to explore what their faith means to them, instead of assuming that they are doing well in their faith because of who their parents are, pastor’s kids are able to take ownership of their faith in a way they had not been able to do previously. Because of this, there is an amazing opportunity for church staff and other congregants to come alongside the pastor’s kids and provide a mentoring relationship that many participants expressed a desire for. Andrea says:

I didn’t really know what a relationship with God looked like, because there was no one that I really had to talk to. Because it’s like, I didn’t want to talk to dad about it, but he’s my only pastor and it’s like, I didn’t really have the older influences either.

#### *Who God Was and Is*

When asked who God was to them, and how that understanding had grown and developed over time, most stumbled over how to answer the question. Beyoncé referenced a typical “Sunday School” version of who God was to her as she grew up, saying, “He comes off, when I was really little He came off as this really friendly God who loves all His people, and it’s Jesus and He holds sheep.” As she grew older that loving and sheep cuddling God evolved into more of a judgmental and punishing God, similarly with Edward. He viewed God as full of judgment as well, but has since been able to see forgiveness as well, saying:

Where I used to see a lot of just judgment, that’s what I used to kind of think of Him, now I see just a lot of forgiveness and that can be a hard thing to accept some times though. You know, it’s kind of just like I am forgiven and often times it’s like ‘no I’m not, I’m still screwed up’ which I am but yeah.

Once again, it is important to note that because I did not do a comparative study, I am unable to

determine whether or not these perceptions are related to being a pastor's kid or simply being a child who attended Sunday school.

Ruth, a twenty-year-old, is the daughter of two pastors. She spoke highly of her relationship with God, saying that "He was always just kind of present." She recalls struggling through church conflicts and how it drew her closer to God, saying "when it got difficult I prayed to God and I just need your help with this or I need you to get this to stop or deal with it, and I think it just helped build my relationship more." Similarly, Carl spoke about how God had to reveal Himself in his life, because "when you're in it [the church as a pastor's kid], God better come through. He better come through or this is all completely a sham in that sense."

### *Summer Camp*

Four of the participants spoke to the significant role that going to summer camp played in their faith development. For three participants it was a place where they could feel like a normal kid without being associated with their role as pastor's kids. For David, who identified himself as an extravert with very little social connections at school, it was a place where he was able to find community and solid friendships that he so desperately craved during the school year.

There was a distinct freedom found in all four accounts of summer camp. For Ruth, summer camp was a place to ask questions and not fear people judging her parents, or herself, as a result of her doubts and questions. Speaking about her and her brother, she said "we went and, well cause everyone else was asking questions so we were like what are questions you have about God or about this or we could just ask and they'd just answer them and they didn't know who was asking it either." For Allie, summer camp was one of the first and only times that she felt she could not be perfect, and could break down and still be welcomed into a community that loved her. She recalls her summer camp days where she started to open up, saying "you know, if

you're crying in the cabin someone is going to come and talk to you." She participated in a leadership program at the camp and expressed her love for the community they created there, recalling "you're in a team that's all sharing together and you're all sharing each other's pains and what you're going through and you have an accountability partner."

David's dad was a pastor during the school year, but his family all relocated to summer camp every summer, where his dad was the director. David spoke of the place and people with adoration. He expressed a lack of friends after his family relocated for his dad's job, and being a socially awkward extravert made it difficult for him during the school year. But once summer hit, he came alive and was welcomed into a loving Christian community like he had never experienced before. Being the director's kid also provided him certain privileges, like taking the go-karts out for a spin and being recognized and loved by the "cool" summer staff. This sense of community and camaraderie was something that neither Allie nor David were able to find in the walls of their church or their school, which made camp a haven of sorts for them.

## DISCUSSION

As demonstrated in the literature review, pastor's kids and their families face increased amounts of pressure, believing they are held to a higher expectation compared to others in the congregation (Kinnaman 2013; Lee 1989; Tighe 2011). The findings from this study support those claims, but additionally provide insight into the "why" behind this pressure and how pastor's kids respond to these realities. Overall, there was a yearning for what I define as "normal," a narrative that appeared in all ten interviews across the four major themes examined in this study – family, friends, church, and God. This desire in large part came from the increased pressure and expectations that participants felt in many areas of their life.

In their relationships with friends, some participants felt that they could not be themselves for a variety of reasons, from feeling the need to protect their parents and a desire to represent their parents and their ministry well, to fearing the social repercussions of being a “super Christian,” as referenced by Edward and others. For some, summer camp provided the opportunity to just be a “normal” camper, which allowed interviewees a freedom to ask questions that they did not feel comfortable to ask in the context of their home church. Summer camp also provided a lot of mentors, and while it may only be for a week or two, participants referenced the importance of having a mentor who is not their parent in their lives. Arguably, in the minds of interviewees, many congregants assume that they may not be able to serve the pastor’s kid in regards to spiritual growth, as the congregants may view the pastor as the ultimate spiritual mentor. In this sense a sort of bystander effect seems to take place, where many think that the pastor’s kid’s spiritual life is better than others in the congregation because of who their parents are, thus do not need other adult influences in their lives. However, for many in this study this narrative is quite the opposite, thus opening an opportunity for the congregation to help pastor’s kid in the same way they may help other youth in the congregation. In this vein, many participants emphasized the importance of having mentors who provide a safe place for the pastor’s kid to go. They need to feel comfortable going to that person, and know that what they say will not affect their parents’ job and their family at all. As some shared with me, pastor’s kids may have questions about their faith, and right now, many of them are not going anywhere with those questions. This observation leads to the next point, on the importance of being able to choose and explore their own faith.

Sociologically speaking, we know that the freedom to choose one’s faith and make it their own is key in people retaining their faith and being active in their faith community

(Anderson, Desorcy, Harder, Hiemstra, and Penner 2011). This theme came through in all ten interviews, and was emphasized as something that pastor's kids do not have the freedom to do, with the exception of one participant. Through the lens of rational choice theory (Finke and Stark 2000), we see that there are many costs and rewards presented to pastor's kids, some that they have the ability to assess and decide on, and others that are simply prescribed to them based on their role as a pastor's kid. For pastor's kids in my study there are costs and rewards that they are conscious of, such as the social ramifications of their faith and their title of pastor's kid. Some participants spoke to weighing the pros and cons of being a "super Christian" in school, noting that they were not willing to incur the potential social costs that would come with them being more vocal about their faith. They chose the reward of social connections and status over being more public and transparent about their faith. Another cost incurred, unwillingly in many circumstances, is the sheer amount of time that the pastor's kid spends at church. From going to church early to set up or just wait for the event to begin, to going there while their parents were busy working, pastor's kids schedules suffer, causing them to potentially lose things such as family time at home or time to be with friends. Most participants in this study had no choice about whether or not to go to church, so even though they may have been aware of the costs and rewards associated with being a pastor's kid, they were unable to make that decision as a result of their role and their family's position in the church.

In part this reality contributed to the desire among all ten participants to explore and choose their own faith and beliefs. As Kinnaman (2013) demonstrates, pastor's kids are not unique compared to their peers in grappling with religious doubts of some kind. A recent report, *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying, and Returning to Church* (Anderson, Désorcy, Harder, Hiemstra and Penner 2013), also supports this

finding that those raised in the church generally desire to explore and choose their own faith beliefs. Yet importantly, researchers found that as young adults want to explore their own faith, they also want someone to aid them on their journey of discovery rather than spoon feed them the answers (Anderson et al. 2013). Young adults want to explore their faith and wrestle through the questions under the guidance of others who are wiser than they are. Participants like Carl acknowledged the potential fear that parents can have about their child losing the faith if they are given the opportunity to find it themselves. While Carl acknowledged the risk he also said:

You can either be very sheltered or you took the risk of exposing them (PK's) to things and then letting God work it out, and I think the safe bet for a lot of pastors today is, you know, to be as safe as possible, um, but I, you know I'm not sure if that is the only way to go about it? Um I think exposing them to the truth of the church will really help build their faith later.

Allowing them this freedom may be scary for pastors and parents at first, but there could be great potential for a payoff for the faith development among pastor's kids in the end.

Lastly, despite public perceptions that pastors or their kids struggle greatly because of their respective roles, the literature summarized earlier points toward pastors doing relatively well, measured by overall job satisfaction (Fredrickson and Lee 2012; Lee 2010; Smith 2007). From my interviews, the same seems to be true for pastor's kids. Pastor's kids, like pastors, face immense pressure, and unlike their parents, pastor's kids have no choice in regards to their role. However, while many participants humorously acknowledged the stereotypes associated with being pastor's kids, such as "the rebel" or "the goody two-shoes", all participants seemed to fit somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. For instance, all ten participants still report being active in their personal faith, and eight report being active in the church, with two still looking for a church in their new city at the time of the interview. Additionally, five participants plan to pursue some form of ministry after they graduate from their respective programs. Carl, who has

dreams of being a pastor, remarked quite ironically that “in a way it’s kind of like the idea of the church hurt me the most and it is the thing that I love the most.” Outside of their faith and the church, these participants seemed to be very well adjusted, with most claiming to have a very healthy and happy relationship with their parents and their friends.

Having said this, it is important to note that my sample was entirely made up of people connected to Ambrose University, which is a Christian university – a limitation that I discuss later on. Still, these findings seem to resonate with David Kinnaman’s (2013) research that pastor’s kids do not generally leave their Christian faith in rates different than their peers, suggesting that pastor’s kids are not leaving the church in droves because of their experiences as pastor’s kids.

## CONCLUSION

When I first set out to conduct this research I sought to answer the question of how being a pastor’s kid impacts a person’s relationship with friends, their family, the church, and God, and how they perceive and have experienced these institutions and relationships throughout their lives. Overall, participants weathered the challenges that came with being a pastor’s kid well, as evidenced by the number that are interested in pursuing ministry as a career and/or are currently involved in church or attempting to find a church to get involved in. Six participants, without prompting, said that if they were given the chance to go back in time and not be a pastor’s kid that they would not change a thing. Each participant was able to take the pains and blessings of being a pastor’s kid and incorporate them into their lives and their faith development in a way that eventually ended up to be overwhelmingly positive in the long run. Despite seeing conflict in the church and the toll that it took on their parents, participants claimed to have a more grace-filled approach and relationship with the church as a result of this. They were able to redeem a

lot of the struggles they encountered, with many attributing this result to the example set by their parents as well as their parent's openness regarding conflict confronted in the church.

Underlying these unique challenges associated with being a pastor's kid was a desire to be simply a normal kid, in all areas of their lives. Across the board the theme of increased pressure and expectations permeated several aspects of the pastor's kid's life. While these pressures did not ultimately cause any participants to leave the faith entirely, it did result in three taking a break from their parent's church for a time. Along with the desire to be normal was the desire to find their own faith. Nine of ten participants expressed a desire to explore and question their faith in a way that they had previously been unable to. There were a number of factors that participants cited for not participating in the exploration of their faith, from not feeling safe enough to do so, to fear of impacting their parent's job and reputation, to a lack of clarity regarding how to explore and question their faith. This presents a huge opportunity for mentors from outside of the pastoral family to walk alongside pastor's kids and present a safe space for them to explore their faith.

Overall, consistent with the literature, this study suggests that pastor's kids do not necessarily leave the church or their faith altogether, despite the additional hurdles they may have to overcome to arrive at that decision. While there are areas that both pastors and the church as a whole can become aware of and potentially improve upon, the pastor's kids I interviewed are not fleeing the church in droves. In fact, there are some aspects of being a pastor's kid that may actually strengthen their faith in areas that those outside a pastor's family may be missing out on.

### Limitations

Even with these conclusions, and as with other studies in this area of research, no study is

perfect. One limitation of this study is that all ten participants still identified strongly as Christians. One could argue that drawing a sample from this group possibly skews the results toward a positive outlook on one's experiences as a pastor's kid. This is a fair observation. How might responses vary among those who have possibly left their Christian faith behind?

Additionally, the fact that the researcher is a pastor's kid could potentially lead to a bias inherent in both the interpretation of the literature and data. While I consciously sought to keep my biases and experiences at bay throughout the research process, my supervisor was helpful in this regard. He called my biases into account and made me more aware of them so as to avoid them throughout the phases of the project.

Lastly, studying people's perceptions complicates matters in terms of how truthful and realistic one's perceptions actually are, specifically on the pressures and expectations that pastor's kids perceived the congregation put on them. While the majority of participants were able to provide concrete examples as to times the congregation were outright about their higher expectations for them, some simply alluded to feeling these pressures and were unable to provide a concrete circumstance that they felt these increased pressures. In future studies one way to combat this may be to try and interview congregants and see if they, intentionally or unintentionally, have placed those pressures and higher expectations on the pastor's kids.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

Looking forward, future research could explore the different reasons for why some pastor's kids are able to redeem their experiences as pastor's kids and continue on in the faith, while others are simply unable to do so and as a result leave the faith. Due to the population from which my sample was drawn, there is no way to fully determine some of the factors that allowed my participants to redeem their experiences, but some initial suggestions may be a positive

relationship with their parents as well as the understanding that the church is made up of broken people, yet they embrace a narrative that God is still able to love that group of people.

Conducting a comparative study and drawing from a wider pool of participants would help fill in some of the gaps left by this study and the sample.

The following two areas or research questions were brought up in the interviews from multiple participants. The first suggestion is to see if church size plays a role in the pastor's kid experience. The majority of participants in my study came from small churches, with the largest having around 500 attendees per week. Additionally, there is room to explore the relationship between personality and one's experience as a pastor's kid. This suggestion came up primarily around the discussion of introversion and extraversion, but there are many angles from which a researcher could approach this particular question. On the topic of introversion and extraversion, participants who identified as introverts felt that being an extraverted pastor's kid would be easier, as so much of the role of being a pastor's kid is interacting with people. It would be interesting to see if pastor's kids who are deemed extraverted, based on personality testing, reported a more positive experience as a pastor's kid, compared to introverted pastor's kids.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Schedule

#### Demographic/General Information:

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. Do you have any siblings?
  - A. If so, how many?
  - B. Where do you sit in the birth order?
4. What degree are you taking in university?

#### General Church/Denomination Information:

1. Who in your immediate family was a pastor?
2. How long have they pastored for?
3. What denomination is the church your parent(s) pastors in?
4. How long have/did they pastor(ed) in that church?
5. What was the approximate size (i.e. weekly attendance) of the church that they pastored?

#### Family:

1. Tell me about what it was like growing up in a pastor's family?
  - A. What did you most like?
  - B. What did you least like?
  
2. I am going to read you a quotation and following that I would like to hear your response: Cameron Lee has done a significant amount of work on what life in a pastor's family is like, and he describes the pastor's home as a "glass house," writing "the very credibility of a pastor's ministry may seem to hinge on what church members see through the walls of the glass house. There is the added pressure to be a perfect family: to be perfect spouses and perfect parents and to rear perfect kids" (Lee 1989:164).
  
3. From your vantage point, how did growing up in a pastor's home impact your relationship with others in your family (e.g. parents, siblings)?
  - A. What were some of the positive impacts?
  - B. What were some of the drawbacks?
  
4. If you could tell pastors one thing that they should know about what their children are experiencing as pastor's kids, what would you say?

#### Friends:

1. Tell me about what impact, if any, growing up in a pastor's family had on your friendships and social networks? Were these primarily positive or negative? Explain.
  - A. Would you say that many people knew that you were the child of a pastor, and if so, did that influence their decision to be your friend or not be your friend?
  - B. Were most of your closest friends from your local church? School? Community or neighbourhood?

C. Did your friends treat you any differently because you were a pastor's kid? If so, how?

2. The literature reports that many pastor's kids feel pressure to behave in a certain way with their friends and peers, because they are pastor's kids. One participant in a research study explained that when she was around friends, even outside of church, her friends would say, "don't say that around them, they're pastor's kids" (Kinnaman, 2013). Did you ever experience anything like that? If so, how did that make you feel around your friends and peers?

3. How has being a pastor's kid influenced your understanding of friendship?

4. If you could talk to another pastor's kid as they are growing up, would you give them any specific advice relating to their status as the child of a pastor and making and maintaining good, solid friendships?

**Church:**

1. Tell me about what impact, if any, growing up in a pastor's family had on your perception toward and/or experience of the Church?

A. In your view, was this impact primarily positive or negative? Explain.

B. How have these experiences impacted your image of the church over time through to today? (If it has not come up yet, probe about current levels of church involvement and reasons for this level of involvement or un-involvement. Related, if a negative image has emerged, probe how this has played out in the context of their relationship with parents as well as friends).

2. Do you feel that being a pastor's kid brought unique pressures on you within the local church (e.g. with your peers or in the eyes of others)?

A. For example, one study cited a pastor's kid attending a youth group where they would not start the Bible study until she arrived. This was unique to her because her father was the pastor, and alerted everybody to the fact that she was even just a few minutes late. In comparison, her peers in the youth group could come in late and it wouldn't disrupt anything.

3. In the literature there was also references to the number of unique blessings that being a part of the family of the pastor brought with it. Can you remember a time that a member of the congregation blessed you and your family in a way that probably would not have happened if your parent was not the pastor? How did this make you think or feel?

4. There was a lot of discussion in the literature around having a negative impression of the church, particularly after seeing how they treated a parent, or conflicts that other children within the church may not have been aware of. Would you agree with this? Why or why not?

5. If there was one thing that you could tell congregants when it comes to the children of their pastor, what would it be?

**God:**

1. What would you say was one of the main messages you received about God as a child growing up in the church?
  - A. Would you say that this message you received was helpful or harmful in your understanding of God?
  
2. Overall, would you say that being the child of a pastor helped or harmed your relationship with God and faith development? Explain.
  
3. One study showed that pastor's kids often feel that they can't have doubts or questions about their faith and God because, as is shown through Lee's writings on the glass house, they feel as though they are representing their parent, and to show doubt would reflect poorly on their parents. Would you say that this does or does not apply to you? Explain.
  - A. If so, how have you processed these thoughts and feelings over time?
  
4. Do you have any advice for church staff working with pastor's kids as they try to grow and develop their understanding of and relationship with God?

**Closing:**

1. Are there any topics that you would like to go back and discuss?
  
2. Do you have anything else you would like to add, even beyond the questions that have been asked already?