About the Author

Alvina Becker teaches at Christ Community Lutheran School, St. Louis, at the middle school campus. Her husband is Assistant Director of Recruitment for Concordia Seminary. Alvina has two sons, Jeremy, D.C.E. at Concordia, Kirkwood, Missouri, his wife Kristin, teacher at Lutheran South, St. Louis, and Andy, D.C.E. at Immanuel, Giddings, Texas, and his wife, Nikki, teacher at Immanuel.

Before teaching at CCLS, Alvina taught a variety of grade levels in Lutheran schools, ranging from preschool through high school and has experience in teaching and designing a multi-level art curriculum, worked extensively with youth, and directed numerous choirs and musicals for children and adults.

She most recently has completed her Masters of Science in Family Life Ministry from Concordia, Seward, Nebraska, which, she states, was a tremendous, spiritually-renewing and educational experience as her passion has always been for the family.

Discussion Guide

Add value to your reading of this LEA Monograph. Use the PowerPoint® or PDF print discussion and reflection guide available to LEA members. Go to the LEA Web site at www.lea.org, click on Resources, and scroll to Living in the Glass House of Ministry under Monograph Bonus Features.

This LEA Monograph includes slide cues in the left margin. For example, < ppt 1 > refers to an appropriate location to view the first PowerPoint slide.


It’s more than the legendary *Big Brother* who is watching you. Professional educators working in Lutheran schools and congregations labor and live in the proverbial glass house. People watch you. While you may not be the subject of anyone’s investigation, the very fact that you work for the church puts you in the spotlight—if only when you do something to which your parishioners or neighbors object.

Professional image is important to professional church workers. By virtue of working in a Lutheran school or church, your professional image includes the element of Godly behavior. Unfair as it is that professional church workers may be singled out for such scrutiny, the fact is that your professional role makes you a role model for others.

This *LEA Monograph* intends to help you accept your glass house by taking care of yourself. After all, if anyone is watching you, they might as well have something wholesome, happy, and otherwise good to look at. You’ll not find commands or platitudes. You will find some illustrative stories from Alvina’s experiences—written in first person, and you will find suggestions for reducing the stresses of life as a professional church worker—including the stress of various “overloads.”

Overload often results in living outside the boundaries of what people expect of church workers. Caring for self invites people to look into the glass house, because they will benefit from what they see. Whether this is fair or not isn’t an issue for anyone but us! And God.

Of course, as soon as we bring God into the picture, another dimension develops. He doesn’t need a glass house to inspect our lives. Good thing God is merciful! Good thing God sent His Son to live, die, and live again that we may do the same. Good thing God loves us so much that He wants us to take care of ourselves, to avoid that which will tempt us to live in ways that hurt both God and our reputations.

The LEA staff hopes you profit from reading this *LEA Monograph*. Consider using the Internet-based discussion guide for corporate discussion or private reflection. And one more thing—you know what they say about people who live in glass houses!

Edward Grube
Director of Publications and Communications
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It was spring 1966 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My pastor passed out a sheet of paper with Bible verses on it. He asked our eighth-grade religion class to take a few days and look them over. We were to search for one that really spoke to our hearts, because this verse would become our Confirmation verse, and it would be significant through the course of our lives. I took the assignment seriously and chose Joshua 1:9—“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (NIV). This verse would prove to serve as a strong lamp and guide for my life. At every turn, I have heard the Lord whisper these words to my inmost being, providing His comfort and assurance.

Growing up in the 1950s, coming from a two-parent-working home, with non-church going parents (a back-slidden Lutheran mother and a non-practicing Greek-Orthodox father)—owners and hard-working restaurateurs, and attending a largely German-Lutheran school in a predominantly Dutch Reformed community, I was something of an oddity. I spent my elementary years in Lutheran elementary school, soaking up the stories of Jesus that I had never heard; always eager to learn more and to ascertain how this Jesus could be a vital part of my everyday life.

My eighth-grade Confirmation signaled a serious right of passage in which I would publicly acknowledge the faith of my baptism and proclaim my allegiance to Jesus Christ and my church. The verse in Joshua spoke to me. It gave me comfort and hope. It was a promise that I could sink my teeth into. Little did I know then how meaningful this verse would truly become or how much comfort and assurance it would give me throughout my life, just as my pastor had said.

When I graduated from high school, I ventured across the state to Concordia Lutheran Junior College in Ann Arbor. I was the first from my family to go to college. I went there with excitement and fears, to be out of my troubled home, to be free to make my own decisions, and to begin study to become an interior designer. God’s Word spoke again and again, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

In those days, Concordia was a junior college, largely training young men and women for professional ministry, with just a smattering of general studies students like myself rounding out the student body. Through the grace of God and love of dorm mates and professors, I finally was able to connect the missing pieces in my faith walk. The Lord God was truly with me as He had promised.

As a result of my Ann Arbor experience, I felt called into professional church work and switched to the teacher education program. I continued on to Concordia-Seward (only my second time to leave the state of Michigan—and a bit frightening), finishing my undergraduate study in Lutheran education there. I also met and married my husband at Seward, and he received his first call as a DCE to Ann Arbor.
Our lives have been blessed richly. I have served as a teacher from preschool through high school in six Lutheran schools. My husband has served as a DCE in two congregations, in Michigan and in California. We were blessed, beyond imagination, with two wonderful sons.

My husband felt led to continue his education into the pastoral ministry at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The role of pastor’s wife is one that I never sought, and, in truth, did not desire. Once again, God’s words spoke to me, calming my anxiety and fears, and He taught me to accept and grow in my new role. My husband served in parish ministry in two congregations for 13 years. Our sons, now grown, have chosen DCE careers and are married to two marvelous young ladies, who are teachers in Lutheran schools. God’s words that first came to this young, troubled, fearful, unchurched little girl have become a dynamic influence in my life. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Life in ministry has been a glass house experience. Anonymity is not an option. For many years, because of my position as a teacher in the congregation’s school and my husband being the pastor, my business and the business of my family have been often open for public display and scrutiny. While this has sometimes been frustrating or humorous, it has always been a reality.

On one occasion some friends visited from out-of-state. They arrived in town only to discover they had left our address and phone number at home. They stopped at a local gas station and took a chance on asking the cashier if she knew of us and where we might live. Though we did not know the people who worked at that gas station, the cashier recognized our names and was able to direct our friends to our home. This was an eye-opening revelation of how open and public our lives were, even outside the church.

On another occasion our church was going through some difficult times. An issue divided our congregation, and a split seemed inevitable. I went to my doctor’s office for a routine visit. During the course of my appointment, my doctor, a Christian man who was a member of another congregation (not Lutheran) in town, told me that he and many members of his congregation were praying for my husband and my family because of this difficult situation. I cried openly on the spot. It struck me with great power, that while we were very much in the public eye, sometimes this public openness also became a blessing and prayer for our family.

The public element of professional church work can have a positive side. People in our school and congregation became family. They genuinely knew my husband and I, they adopted our children and loved them as though they were family. They supported us and often treated us with honor.

We received invitations to everything. I admit that sometimes this caused time burdens and constraints, and sometimes even a financial burden because of gift giving, but it also gave us a rich extended family where we were included in
the lives of the people we served. The many warm friends that we gained in parish ministry have given us and our children many special memories, which resulted in bonds that continued, even after we had moved away.

God has called us into a very public ministry. In a world where people clamor for positive role models, where the church is looking to its leaders to model positive Christian marriages and Christ-centered child-rearing, we have always been keenly aware of the influence and responsibility to be Christ’s lights to the people we serve and with whom we come into contact. He has called us to be positive, caring, and professional people of integrity. Our word must be good and our care must be genuine.

On many occasions I have had an opportunity to speak positively of marriage, to encourage those who are married or contemplating marriage, in a manner that is far different than the world’s offering. I have led parenting classes where I not only taught but also learned new Godly techniques for raising and discipling my own children. I have been in situations where God gave me an opportunity to be a caring pastor’s wife, a nurturing teacher, and a good friend. I have been privileged to be able to speak and talk with great influence, largely because of my position in public ministry.

I have also learned that I do not have to be perfect, nor can I be. I am a sinner who relies heavily on the grace and forgiveness of my Lord and Savior. When I finally learned these lessons, I was freed to be who I am, to allow my children to be who they are, and to allow my marriage to grow and flourish into the kind of marriage that Jesus wants it to be.

God desires to use us, with our unique gifts and abilities, our diverse back-grounds and insights, and He desires to grow us into the vessels where we can most graciously be of service to Him and to others. I am reminded of Jesus’ response to the Pharisees when they asked Him what the greatest commandment was. He said to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30 – 31 NIV). This really is the calling for every Christian and perhaps even more essential for those in professional church work.

It is so important to do our homework, however! We can be of no good to others or ourselves if we do not continue the work needed to maintain our relationships and health. In a world—and yes, it has crept into our churches—that constantly promotes excess or overloads in self, greed, wealth, status, affluence, and a host of other unhealthy attitudes and practices, we must be diligent about making our relationships—especially marriage—and homes safe and obvious havens that openly welcome Jesus and His manifestation of love and forgiveness.

Professional church workers are prone to become victims of the dysfunction of overload. Lives are very busy with the duties of ministry, the demands of family, and the overload of congregational living and expectations. It takes a concerted effort to build margin into their lives, to become good managers of
time, to become aware of the enticement of overload, and to confess areas that need adjustment.

First and foremost, those in ministry need to recognize that margin is necessary. Margin is space that provides opportunity for relaxation, renewal, and refreshment. It revitalizes our physical and emotional energy and gives us time.

Second, ministry professionals need to accept that they have limitations. We often run around, scurrying from activity to activity, from program to program, as though we are indispensable, invincible, super-humans who are almost god-like and able to keep going and going—like the bunny on television battery commercials.

The truth of the matter, however, is that God creates limits. “He decided early on that limits were not only good but necessary. It was His way of preempting any ambiguity about who is God and who is not. He is the Creator—the One without limits. We are the Created—the ones with limits” (Swenson, p. 27). One might wonder if we are being seduced with the same lie given to Eve in the garden: “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5b NIV).

Dr. Richard Swenson, in The Overload Syndrome, explains that when we cross into the land of saturation, or living at approximately 120 percent of our limits (where many ministry professionals live), we actually choose a life that is downright painful. We enter a world that can dump all sorts of negative consequences on us—loss of joyful living, deterioration in physical health, jeopardy of human relationships, and burnout. In fact, left unchecked, marginless living will, in time, cause psychological, physical, behavioral, and spiritual consequences.

We live in a society bombarded by multiple overloads, and we in ministry are acutely aware of their sting. Dr. Swenson assists us in tackling our overload by identifying the types of overload that confront us:

- **Change and Stress Overload**—There is so much change in our society—jobs, careers, houses, relationships, and moves. These changes can cause great stress. Counters to this overload can include making your home a safe haven, establishing stability in your marriage and family or other God-pleasing relationships, exercise, eating well, prayer, and being in the Word.

- **Choice and Decision Overload**—So much of everyday life includes decision-making, from the type of salad for your meal to what appliance or computer to buy. We are forced to take time and energy to research, absorb, and decide on large and small issues. Simplifying decision-making by not allowing oneself to be trapped into more and better, and being content to choose the things of God can assist us in not being so frequently goaded into the glitter the world has to offer.

- **Debt Overload**—This one almost needs no description. We are a society in which debt is normal. We drive cars, own homes, take vacations, and do all sorts of other stuff on credit. It is a scary way to live. Tackling this one may include living on a budget, paying off debt, disposing of credit cards,
simplifying one’s lifestyle, and making spending need-based as opposed to greed-based.

- **Expectation Overload**—This overload may come as a surprise to you, but I am convinced it is a prominent and dangerous one for professional church workers. People expect us to be intelligent, well-educated, great leaders, attractive, fashionable, affluent, have nice homes (that are always clean), newer cars, and pretty nearly perfect marriages and parenting skills. And let’s not forget spiritual and moral expectations. This overload can deliver a crushing weight, and where expectation does not come from without, we manage to help it along by letting it come from within. To free ourselves from this overload, we need to adjust our expectations and respect our limits. We need to be aware that this overload is a trap that will destroy us, if not kept in check. Simplify, give yourself a break, take and make time for margin and family or friends, and pray, pray, pray.

- **Hurry and Fatigue Overload**—Many times in our ministry we were over-extended, exhausted, and still had a long and overwhelming list to accomplish before bed. The speed at which we travel damages relationships, especially within our families. The divorce rate among church professionals is not surprising. It is truly sad, but not surprising. Servant-minded people move at an accelerated pace in scattered directions, often leaving starved relationships to sicken or die. To curtail this overload takes ruthless work on the calendar and in one’s heart.

- **Information Overload**—So much information comes in the form of things to read, things to watch, and Web sites to click on that we cannot keep up. Sometimes we need to give ourselves permission not to read, watch, or click and be selective in the material so accessible to us. Be mindful that what we really need to know is God and His Word.

- **Media Overload**—I recently was a teacher/leader at our seventh-grade outdoor education experience. The St. Louis Cardinals were in the midst of the playoffs and Game 2 was on the first night of camp. I did not bring a radio and was horrified to discover that there was not one in our camp, nor a TV in our cabin! What a relief when one dad disclosed that he brought his miniature TV to catch the score! Several adults were huddled around the little screen to watch the last two innings of the game! I was reminded once again how reliant I am on reading, hearing, and watching media for news and entertainment. There are many ways to approach this overload, depending on its allure and trap for you. Be creative. I know a camp that could use a television!

- **Possession Overload**—Dr. Swenson states so aptly, “Affluenza turns the good life into the goods life… Not only do we want more—we want bigger. Not just quantity, but bulk” (Swenson, p. 162). It sometimes seems that our wants cannot be extinguished, and if we cannot see this in ourselves, we need only to look at our children to observe this truth! Trim down. Perhaps it is time to change your value system and lifestyle. Appreciate the fact that being a ministry professional may preclude an even more extensive allure to this overload!
Many ministry professionals actually believe that work overload is Godly! Instead of recognizing that a healthy day’s work is good, but endless work is bad, they actually treat this overload with reverence. They neglect family and other relationships. They slip into immorality because of their great needs and long-term self or marital neglect. They disregard their health and refreshment, and they worship at the altar of long hours, high expectations, high stress, and insurmountable goals. They have deluded themselves into thinking that long hours of work make them more effective, more revered, and more Christ-like. They are leaving destroyed marriages and wounded children or other damaged relationships in their wake. They become burned out and ineffective. They become bitter, disillusioned, and unhappy, and then blame the church and God for the mess He got them into.

Ministry professionals need to be brave enough to ask, “How much work is enough?” They need to pray and study God’s Word. They need to be accountable to their spouses and families or others to whom they relate. They need to realize they are limited creatures and God is God. They need to repent and be ruthless about critical lifestyle changes before too much damage is done!

I had the privilege of learning from Rev. John Nunes at a teacher’s conference. He shared a statement that rang true with me. “Letting go doesn’t mean losing, or giving up, or giving in. It means living within your limits.” He also said that we need to have “filling-up disciplines” and “emptying of all junk disciplines.” These statements describe the importance of being in constant check with the Lord, being open to confession, adjusting limits, and letting God forgive and set us on His path again.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” These words have rung true over and over again. Whether I was involved in a move from my childhood to college, or from Michigan to Nebraska, or from single to married, or becoming a mother or a teacher, or in moving from Michigan to California, or from California to seminary, or moving from parish to parish, or school to school, God has been my center. He has given me the courage and strength to follow Him, to not be crippled by discouragement, because of His gracious promise to be with me. He has opened doors that I never even dreamed were there. He led me on paths that I may never have chosen for myself. He was with me when my father died when I was 10, and when my mother died when I was in my late 40s. He graciously equipped me in His wisdom for being married and for parenting. He has upheld me through congregational difficulties and struggles, even through a congregational split. He has strengthened me to stand firm in His Word, amidst faculty divisions and tough times. He has never ever failed me.

God has been true to His Word, and I strongly suspect He will continue to be faithful. My glass house of ministry has been crystallized by His teachings as He showered me with His love and forgiveness. I pray that I can utilize the rest of my days to His glory and service.
Summary

Five Tips for Living in the Glass House of Ministry

1. Recognize that God has called you into a very public ministry. He has given you a unique opportunity to be a positive role model in a world clamoring for positive leadership. Embrace this opportunity for ministry and witness.

2. Be free to be who you are. Recognize that you are not perfect, nor can you be. Realize that you are a sinner who needs Jesus, His grace, and His forgiveness. Accept who you are, relax in your gifts and abilities, and use them for Him.

3. Do your homework. Recognize that you are no good to others or yourself if you neglect yourself and your marriage and family or other God-pleasing relationships. Spend the time and care needed to build up your health and to build up and maintain the relationships that God has given you. Be diligent about the work of making your home a safe haven that openly welcomes Jesus and His forgiveness.

4. Ruthlessly guard against overload. Admit that you are not indispensable, invincible, or superhuman. Professional church workers are constantly confronted with demands and duties, overload, and expectation. Build a margin around your life to prevent overload.

5. Recognize that God calls us to be servants of love. He directs us to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love neighbors as ourselves. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9 NIV).

May your life of ministry be a joy of service, a rich life of growth and learning, and include a safe, grace haven of love.

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Resources


Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version. CPH, St. Louis, MO. 1984
LEA Monographs Available Online

*Child Protection: A Practical Program* by David Florine (2004)
*eMonograph* available at no extra charge to LEA members at www.lea.org/emonosum04.htm.

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*The Ecology of Ministry: Beyond Shepherds and Shepherding* by Shirley Morgenthaler (1991)

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