

Elliotts cope with role

By MARY BELLOTTI
Of the Times

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was written as part of a series of stories on Washington County area couples for other Times newspapers. The idea for the series came from a new study on American couples — what keeps them together, what drives them apart — by two University of Washington sociologists. The subjects of these stories have graciously consented to talk about their private lives in the hope that it might help other couples explore their own relationships and find solutions to their problems. Mary Bellotti is the former editor of the Wilsonville Times.)

Household chores aren't much of a problem for Linda Mines Elliott and Bill Elliott — they share housework. When one cooks, the other does dishes. He vacuums, she cleans the bathroom. They both shop for groceries.

Deciding who does what at home hasn't been a high priority for the Wilsonville couple. They've had to confront a more profound issue: a reversal of roles.

For more than a year, 31-year-old Linda has been the wage earner — she's pastor of Wilsonville's United Church of Christ (Frog Pond Church).

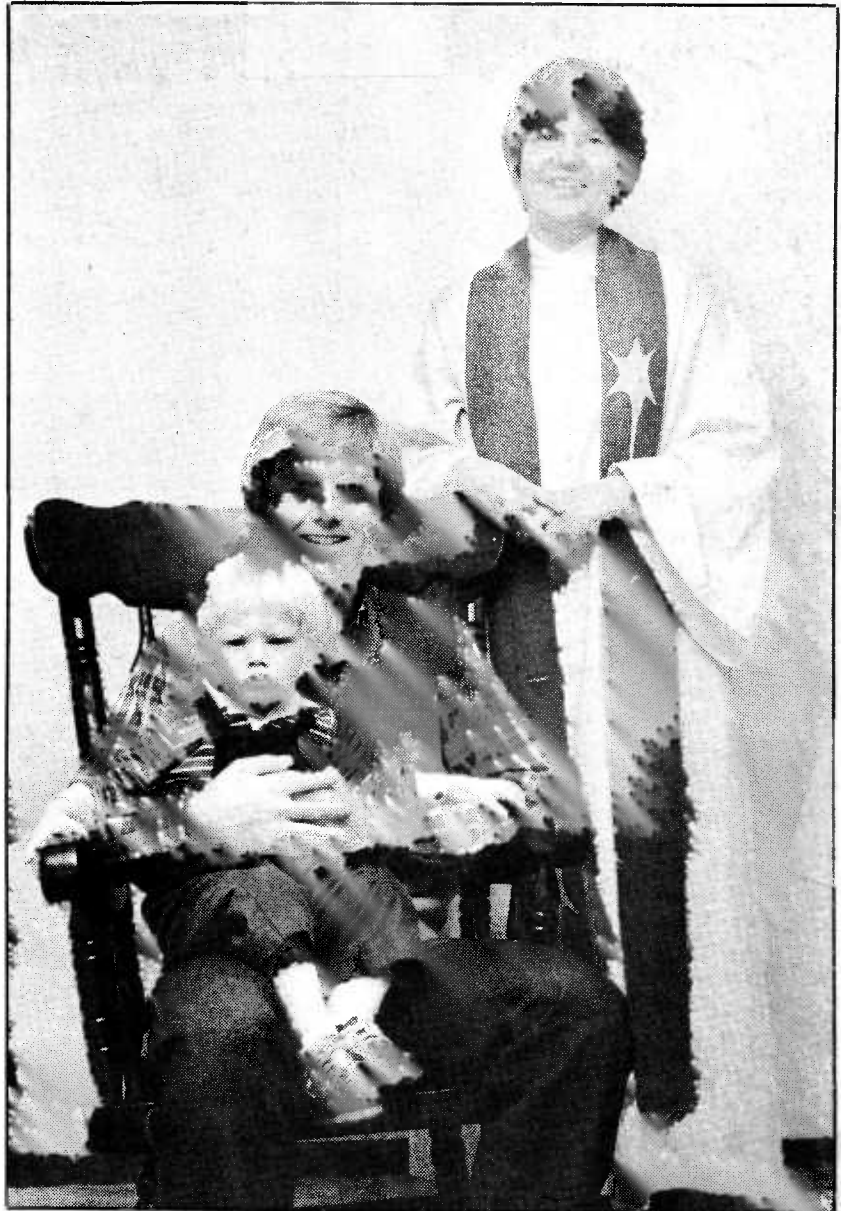
Bill, who's 37, last worked as an instructor at Clackamas Community College. But his job ended nearly two years ago and he's now a student seeking a new career. He also spends much of his time at home caring for the couple's 18-month-old son, Matthew.

Linda's non-traditional role has put unusual pressure on their marriage. Not only is she the main source of income for the family, but she's in a field almost completely dominated by men. The United Church of Christ was the first church to ordain women as ministers.

Meanwhile, Bill has had to adjust to a non-traditional role as "househusband." For the first six months after Matthew was born, he stayed home fulltime with the baby. Then he began looking for work, only to find his theology degree wasn't marketable in today's high-tech job market.

"I finally decided to take my own advice," notes Bill, who, ironically, taught job-search skills in his last job. "I'm taking computer classes at Portland Community College."

Relying primarily on Linda's income has required both of them to make some adjustments. "For me, it was difficult to have my family depend on me economically at the same time an infant was physically dependent on me for its well being. It was okay, but somewhat stressful," Linda says.



staff photo by Steve Dipaola

Bill Elliott, with son Matthew, and Linda Mines Elliott share values

Bill says he felt a bit of "ego-wrenching" when his contract ended at the college. "But on the whole, I think my changing roles has been a positive experience.

"For one thing, I'm grateful I've been able to spend as much time as I have with Matthew," he adds. "And it's been positive in terms of support from my family and the church. I know I'm doing what I need to do at this point in my life."

Although the loss of his job has substantially reduced their income, Linda and Bill agree they've adjusted financially.

"In terms of our history, we've never had much money," says Linda, noting that either one or both of them has been in school for most of their 10-year marriage. "We both paid for our master's degrees. We've had to be frugal to fulfill our goals."

Now, though, this lull in his career has given Bill a chance to re-evaluate those goals. He admits that he'd like to make more money.

"Up to now my professional career has been in human services," he says. "It hasn't been a goal of mine to make much money. I'd like to have more money to invest, to leave to our children, to give to the church, to spend on hobbies."

Linda and Bill talk a lot about "sharing" and "giving" and having common goals. Although they grew up and went to college during the Sixties, when such values were most popular, their convictions developed much earlier.

Linda, the daughter of a lawyer and a teacher, knew she wanted to help others when she joined the church at 14. Bill, the son of a minister

reversal in marriage

and his wife, majored in theology in college.

They recognized that they shared the same values when they met in 1971 at Western Washington State College in Bellingham, where Bill worked as a trainer at a crisis-intervention clinic. Linda was a volunteer in his group.

"I knew two days after we met that we would be married," Linda remembers. "I thought, 'Here was a person who has the same values I have, who has the same background in the same denomination.'"

➔ Besides, Bill didn't laugh when Linda said she wanted to be a minister.

"When I told him I felt called to be a pastor, he took it as a natural experience," she relates. "He understood what it meant to be a pastor. After all he was a 'p.k.' — a preacher's kid."

"My response was, 'Do what you're called to do,'" Bill says. "It made her a more interesting person."

They were married Oct. 27, 1973, at Linda's parents' Seattle home, in a ceremony they designed. "It was a wonderful wedding," Linda remembers. "It was informal, close — we wrote our own vows."

Linda says she hoped that the man she married would take her name as she would take his name. "But Bill is actually Willis E. Elliott III. He would have had to drop a significant part of his identity to take my name. It didn't seem appropriate to ask him to do what I didn't want to do myself."

"I did add his name to mine. But we have an understanding that all of our children will have Mines as a middle name."

Thus, their son is named Matthew Mines Elliott and, if they have another child, "It will be Emily Mines Elliott or whatever," Linda says.

Two months after their wedding, they moved to Boston, where Linda had enrolled at Boston University as a religious studies major.

For the next 3½ years, they lived in a one-room apartment while Linda got her bachelor's degree. Then she enrolled in Andover Newton Seminary in Boston to obtain her master's of divinity degree.

Meanwhile, Bill returned to the seminary, where he obtained his master's degree in 1978, then worked as an assistant manager of a home for retarded men.

Bill and Linda say their life in Boston solidified their marriage. Since one or both of them were in school, they learned to share housework and other responsibilities. That's when they learned to work together as partners.

"Every time we've had a change in

the workload, we've tried to balance the amount of work in the home in relation to work outside the home," Linda explains.

In 1979, when Linda was about to be ordained, they had to decide where to live. Again, her career was the basis for the move. "I felt I could find work wherever we moved," says Bill, who wanted to teach religious studies after his own graduation.

"Bill didn't have a specific thing he could only do," Linda agrees. "He was more flexible in moving. I was more single-focused in my career."

They moved to Wilsonville in July 1979 so Linda could take the pastor's job at the United Church of Christ. Since then, they've bought a house and car, but they have maintained a frugal lifestyle. Their home on Pleasant Place isn't filled with trendy items or furniture.

Church members gave them a warm welcome, and Bill says he's never felt uncomfortable in the role of pastor's spouse.

"At first I feared that the congregation would expect too much of me," he says. "Some churches expect pastor's wives to fulfill certain roles. Part of the reason I haven't felt that, I think, is that there are few role models for pastors' husbands."

Bill and Linda say that Matthew's arrival also changed the direction of their lives — now he's the primary focus of their attention. Now that Bill's in school, they've negotiated a schedule so that one of them is home with Matthew all the time.

Linda maintains office hours when Bill studies at home and Matthew is napping. She brings work home — such as writing her sermon — while Bill is in school. "Sometimes I take Matthew to the office or make calls if it's appropriate for Matthew to be with me," she says.

Matthew has curtailed their social life. "We used to be more spontaneous," says Linda. "Now that's no longer possible. We used to go to movies, do a lot outside of home. But now the sheer physical work of getting Matthew ready for the babysitter works against spontaneity."

They spend more time at home, reading to Matthew and helping him learn to walk, talk, explore.

Do they ever fight?

"Of course," says Bill. But their reasons for fighting, along with their goals, have changed over the years. "We used to fight about money, but we don't anymore," says Linda. "I used to feel that Bill spent too much money on his wine-making hobby. That was a source of stress."

But then they decided to donate some of their extra money to the church and charity groups, as well as

spend it on their hobbies. That made them feel better, says Bill.

Although Linda's career has predominated, Bill says his ego hasn't suffered much.

"I don't think it's ever bothered me that she's had this job," he says. "Of course, I've given up certain choices. I couldn't decide to move to get a Ph.D., for instance. I don't have that opinion. But I want to affirm what Linda feels she needs to do."

However, Bill will soon have to make some career decisions of his own. He's taking courses to become a systems analyst, "where you design the program and the hardware for a specific need."

"Since my career direction will be more defined, we might want to move. Since Linda has been the reason for our other major moves, I would expect her to have the same consideration."

But they both agree they'll have to negotiate that one. "Bill and I would analyze any potential change based on what God wants us to do," says Linda.

"Maybe it will happen like the last time," adds Bill. "Maybe it will be something we know we'll want to do. If not, we would have to negotiate."