

What's Next?

A Pastor's Spouse Dilemma

The role of a pastor's spouse has a very special calling and gifting that is unlike most ministries. While the pastor receives the majority of the focus and attention from the church, the spouse brings a unique set of qualities that make every ministry more fulfilling and successful. Most spouses understand their role and feel like it is a definite calling. Others seem to drift along a path, refining and polishing their role, until they feel comfortable in understanding what God is designing especially for *them* and their church. We loosely use the term "*them*" to describe the oneness of the ministry of the pastor and spouse. Over time, this oneness in their ministry can be fulfilling and yet relies upon the strengths of one another to survive and succeed.

Past traditional roles of what a pastor's spouse may do, such as playing the piano, being the leader of the ladies group, teaching Sunday school, or performing some other function of the church that no one else wants, may have changed through the years and really does not rely upon the gifts and callings of that spouse.

Another difference in today's world is that more female pastors are entering into the role of being a pastor than ever before, which means their spouse will be a male. This situation brings a whole new set of questions to what a spouse's role may be. I believe that each spouse, whether male or female will be a set of unique qualities that can enhance any ministry.

There is also a trend to publically announce or create the position of being co-pastors. Whether a pastor's spouse is a co-pastor or satisfied in being called the pastor's spouse, one should focus on the oneness of their ministry, their gifts, and their calling. Titles are less impressive than fulfilling the call with which God has richly blessed them. Most spouses have told us that knowing their call is very satisfying, challenging at times, but nevertheless bringing them a whole sense of purpose and dedication

While a pastor's spouse may feel "called" into his/her position, there may be circumstances that can greatly shake their foundation and perhaps challenge or alter their future calling. Listed below are a couple of instances that pastor's spouses have faced. They have shared their story with us in hopes of encouraging and helping others get through this journey.

There are three things that will greatly shake the world of any pastor's spouse and question God's calling for them. Many will ask, "What's Next?"

Death of a Pastor. It is very hard for anyone to lose their spouse. The grieving process may take time and is different for each person. It is a journey that carries a person down a path that is new. There are many emotions, questions, twists and turns, hurts, etc. that

challenge any person, especially one who has been dependent upon her spouse to define her role in life and in the ministry.

If a pastor dies, what happens to the role and calling of the spouse? Many spouses have asked, “How long do I stay in that church? Will I perform some of the same duties of the pastor if I am considered a co-pastor? What about my time vested in the church, community, and people? If I have to go, what happens about my heart-felt calling for those people?”

We have a story of a spouse who was married for about forty years. She was involved in the church in every way. She never thought about her husband dying or how her role would drastically change if he died. Even though they faced a prolonged illness and talked about planning, she was not prepared for what was going to happen and how her faith would be shaken.

“When my husband died, the church and community were very supportive. They made sure that someone took care of the business of the church, making sure the bills were paid and that someone spoke in all of the services. But soon I realized, they were also preparing to get another pastor as soon as possible. They were not trying to be rude, but they were trying to prepare for the future of the church, of which, I now seemed to have no part. Forty years of working, sacrificing, giving my all for those people, and all of a sudden it became vapor!

People were still nice, but seemed to expect me to either vanish or be a pew-warmer, no longer having anything to do with the ministry of the church. Did they not realize I still had a heart-felt desire to help? Did they not understand I have a calling too? All of a sudden, I realized that my role has completely changed! No one asked me for this change, no one asked me to work in the church anymore, no one even asked my opinions about things: they simply left me alone.”

What is the Spouse’s Role Now? This person stayed in the current church, hopefully to help the new pastor and his wife through the transition or help them in any way she could. “I thought this would be helpful and would give me some time to concentrate on ministry things that I was familiar with. I wanted to feel needed, wanted, and not alone. It never came.” She then asked, “What’s next?”

She eventually went to another church in the same town. She knew some of the people and thought she might fit in well or perhaps feel wanted once again. After much prayer, she discovered that there were ways she can still be helpful, productive, and still have an active role in the ministry. She suggests three things that have helped her to find her new role:

1. **Pray, Pray, Pray!!!** Most of the time, especially when grieving, we are asking God for strength to get us through our situation and journey. This person found out that she was crying out to the Lord, “Oh, Me!” instead of “What’s Next?” Once she realized that God was helping her through the grieving process, she needed to know whether there could be

anything she could do for the Kingdom. As she began to broaden her view, God revealed some ideas for her.

2. **Seek Help!!!** She felt that God was helping her understand that her calling and work for His Kingdom was not necessarily tied to the church that she and her husband had pastored for so many years. As she optimistically looked for another church, hope began to develop. Once she started attending her new church, she felt the peace and presence of God once again. She felt it was God's will to stay. She then scheduled a meeting with the pastor and told him that she was a pastor's wife and that she still had a calling to do something in the ministry. She did not want to undermine anything that he or his spouse or even the church is doing. Fortunately, the pastor was very receptive to her and did not feel threatened by her presence. He encouraged her to be more involved. She felt this was certainly an answer to prayer and was glad she listened when the Lord told her to stay!
3. **Ask and Be Flexible!!!** Time passed and she began to be worried that her conversation with the pastor and spouse had been forgotten. She knew from times past in ministering to others that God has His own timing. But, nevertheless, it was still hard for her to sit back and basically do nothing. She decided to have another joint meeting with the pastor and spouse. God had already prepared them. Both pastor and spouse stated that they were really glad that she had asked again. They brainstormed about different ways that she could be used and be relied upon. The pastor asked her to speak one Sunday night, the ladies group asked her to speak on a certain topic. The prayer team asked her to be involved in praying for others, and the church involved her with roles of exposure to either speak in the church or become involved in church planning and outreach.

She stated that she now has a new role and can still do some of the same things she did before. She has a burning desire for people to come into the Kingdom, she can pray, she can be involved with some of the planning and outreach of the church, and best of all, she feels needed.

Pastor Resigns or Let Go. Many spouses have told us that they have adjusted well in times when they knew that God was moving them to another church or ministry. They mentioned that it was hard at first to leave a church in which they have vested so much energy or time, but they knew that God was placing them in another church that needed them.

Many spouses and pastors have told us that there is a huge difference when their ministry ends abruptly, either through resignation due to physical or personal problems and when a pastor is "let go" from a church. Many will have questions that arise and many have asked, "What's next?"

One spouse had told us, "There was a crushing feeling deep inside of me when I heard the news that we were being "let go" by the church. I knew there were problems, but believed that God would undertake on our behalf somehow. I know the ministry is demanding at times. I feel that

we have sacrificed and got to the point of actually being burned-out. My husband tried to seek employment with other churches but soon felt tired, worn out, discouraged, and seemingly had less energy with each dead end.

I found myself in the “pity-party” game that I once laughed about when talking about others. I now realize that it is so easy to sit back and feel sorry for yourself and find fault with your spouse, church, and denomination. I soon realized that nothing would improve while I was in this mood. I had to do something!” Here is what she did:

1. **Pray, Pray, Pray!!!** Does that sound familiar? She began asking the Lord for direction with the same energy she did when they first started in the ministry. She asked the Lord to give her strength to help her husband through encouraging words, deeds, building self-esteem, and purpose.
2. **Involve Your Spouse!!!** She realized that there is strength in numbers and that her family needed to be unified in their new journey or ministry that God has for them. They set aside special times in morning and evening for times of prayer. They gave praises to the Lord first, then they prayed over each other taking turns, and then they prayed for the answer. They prayed for God to open the doors, open their eyes, and be willing to go anywhere and do anything the Lord needed them to do.
3. **Involved their Closest Friends as a Support Group.** As they began to pray, they asked a few ministers and close friends to meet with them for prayer and fellowship. They provided snacks and had fellowship with one another but spent most of the time praying over each other, not just for their needs. They found out as they gave out to others, others gave back to them with their support, knowing that this pastor and spouse needed to hear from God. This couple gradually stopped feeling all alone, looked at their blessings, and knew God was going to do something for them.
4. **Contacted their Denomination Regularly.** The spouse stated that when they were let go, they felt embarrassed and was reluctant to contact their denomination for help or ask them for suggestions. They finally met face to face with denominational leaders to discuss possible options. The denomination first suggested they fill in for ministers who needed time off or going to a church that just lost their pastor as a way to fill in until the church found someone as pastor.

The pastor and spouse started feeling appreciated having purpose, and their desire to minister increased. Finally, one of the churches where they were filling in asked them to consider being their full time pastor. After much prayer and excitement, they decided to accept. They have now been in that church for many years and look back on those trying times as times of decision, positioning, and allowing God to move in their lives. This pastor and spouse thanks God for His faithfulness and continues to thank Him and others for not giving up on them.

The pastor also appreciates having a partner to stay with him during trying times, bringing the encouragement and help that was so vitally needed. Her ministry role changed for a short time in

order to be more focused on her husband, but in reality, she was helping to build faith and purpose for herself and her husband. Both agree that God has His timing and never imagined being at their present church. They would not have been there if they had chosen to give up.

Divorce. Yes, pastors and spouses can have their differences and have sought divorce. One particular spouse felt betrayal from her mate and that her calling is now over. She shares her story.

“I could not understand why this was happening to me. I have been faithful to my husband and I am forgiving him but our marriage is at an end. The church found out and had asked for us to leave, even though it was not my fault. Our denomination seemed more focused on the church than on our hurts and needs. At times I knew they were interested in healing and restoration, perhaps more with my husband. They suggested counseling as a way to help with our marriage but without my husband’s consent and willingness to stay together, it was hopeless.

I cried for myself and asked God why? Why did this happen to me, with all the service, sacrifice, and commitment I had given to the ministry? After some time of embarrassment, hiding away from fellow members of the church and fellow ministers, I realized that I had to do something. I cannot be embarrassed all my life, I cannot run away from my situation, and I needed direction and healing for my life.”

Once she realized that she needed help, she began to do the following:

1. **Pray, Pray, Pray!!!** She no longer had a “pity party”. Sound familiar? She began to earnestly pray, read and study God’s Word, and asked God for Wisdom. James, chapter one says we can ask for wisdom and He will supply it. She not only asked for wisdom but also provision, strength, and guidance for a work she could do. She began building the “inner man” and started walking in truth.
2. **Get Out!!!** She finally realized that she spent most of her time being “hoarded up”. She was being reclusive and slowly dying inside. She began visiting other churches in a nearby town on off nights, hoping that no one would recognize her. She also visited on special events when she could “blend in” with larger crowds. She soon began to build courage to pray in front of people and discovered once she “let go” and prayed without any hindrance, there was a huge release on her spirit. She began to have boldness and peace once again.
3. **Laugh!!!** She had forgotten how it was to be normal. After the divorce, she felt helpless, gloomy, and without purpose or having the energy to care. She knew that she had wasted so much time and needed change. She began to watch comedies and laugh. She soon found out that laughter is sometimes the best medicine. Proverbs 17:22. She laughed as a way to focus on more positive and lighter things in life.
4. **She Found Employment and Volunteered.** She knew that she had to provide for herself and her family. She asked God to provide the right job for her. She was not

trained or experienced in any other occupations or skills outside of the ministry. She volunteered to do small things in the church and in their office. She had asked the pastor and others if they knew employment opportunities. One day, someone told her of a business owner, who was a church member who had a recent position vacated. She contacted this person. The business owner was excited to have an employee he could trust, hired her immediately and trained her in a field in which she felt comfortable with. She began to build self-confidence.

5. **Inviting Others into Her Life.** She began inviting certain people over to her house for games, movies, and Bible study. These were new people whom she became acquainted from church and work. Her old friends, that she and her former husband had, mostly fell by the wayside. She relied on her new-found friends for comfort and support. They did not criticize her or take sides. They accepted her for who she is, just as the Lord does!
6. **Giving Thanks.** As things began to develop in her life, she found purpose again in the church, she found purpose with her relationship with the Lord, she found purpose with others that became friends, and she found new purpose for herself and family. She began giving thanks through songs, hymns, and psalms. Her prayer life has increased. She is now walking with boldness, freshness, and hope.

Her life has changed and she has not given up. She sought God first and placed Him first in her life. She has remained faithful to the church, even though the church in which she had ministered for so long and her denomination were not supportive and there for her when she needed help the most. She has kept her family together and has actually entertained the idea of dating and getting back into ministry full time once again.

All of these situations were never planned nor thought they would ever come to pass. When situations like this and others arise, please don't give up. Ask God, "What's Next?" It may take you down a journey you never expected or would have never traveled. I believe that "all things work together for good for those who love God", Romans 8:28. Be faithful: never, never, never give up!

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