

Cover Story: Praise Through the Pain

When you're a pastor who's expected to deliver the "good news" every Sunday, what do you do when sorrow enters your life? For Marvin Sapp, a pastor, best-selling gospel artist and worship leader who's been through a year of personal pain, hope has come through living what he preaches.

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"It's one thing to get up and encourage others with your messages, and it's another to live off what you've taught," Sapp says. "As preachers, a lot of time we study to preach, but some of us study to live. When the rubber met the road in my life, I was glad I had stuff for what God knew we were going to endure."

On Sept. 9, 2010, Sapp's wife of 18 years—MaLinda—lost her battle with colon cancer. Suddenly Sapp the pastor, gospel artist and worship leader was also a single dad and had to carry on, not only with his ministry but also with raising his family of three alone.

MaLinda had been a presence in his life for virtually his entire life—ever since the two met in third grade. She served alongside him at Lighthouse Full Life Center Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., where she was a pastoral staff member and professional counselor.

"I couldn't have found anyone better," Sapp says. "MaLinda was a partner in ministry in every aspect, in every way."

Her "fingerprint" is evident, he says, throughout the

Lighthouse church they pastored together. She was a savvy businesswoman who was able to negotiate contracts with major corporations and serve on community boards. She was a preacher who delivered the Word. Most of all, she was a wife and mother to the couple's children: Marvin II, Mikaila and Madisson.

"She had the ability to multitask like nobody I've ever seen," Sapp observes. "She was still a homebody. Her passion was to make sure her husband was pleased. Whenever I was home, she cooked dinner. She didn't want a housekeeper. She wanted to keep her own house clean."

When Sapp was honored in January by the gospel music industry—named Artist of the Year at the 26th annual Stellar Awards ceremony—he found the experience that normally would have been a time of rejoicing to be "bittersweet" instead.

"It was bittersweet because the person who stood with me 18 to 20 years was not there," he says. "This was the first major event I did without my wife. It was difficult."

Determined to Keep It Moving

Sapp describes his late wife as his personal hero, saying that after her final prognosis was delivered "she never complained; she was at peace." During her final weeks, MaLinda met with the church board so she could "pour [herself] into them," Sapp says. Her concern was not for herself but for the church, and for her family, he notes.

"Not one time did I hear her do any complaining or say anything other than, 'Make sure you take care of Marvin,'" he says. "Not one time did she say, 'Pray for me.' She was at real peace with where she was. She didn't want us to worry."

The Sapps founded the church in 2003 with 24 people in a restaurant facility Sapp still owns, called Praise Place. Today the church has 1,500 members meeting at three locations—one in Los Angeles and two in Michigan. Centered on

ministering to the “holistic” person, the church focuses both on spiritual needs and also on development of life skills and tutorial programs.

“My passion is inner-city ministry,” Sapp says. “I want to see people grow and become the best that they possibly can.”

Before her prognosis, MaLinda had been working on gathering funds for a new facility that would focus on the performing arts. Sapp says plans for the new building are still moving ahead. Losing MaLinda could have been a devastating blow to the thriving ministry and congregation, but Sapp says he’s found confidence and comfort in a motto the couple held on to for years—“Keep it moving.”

“This is one of the last things she said, ‘Keep it moving’,” he says. “That’s what we’re determined to do.”

Tears In Public

For members of the church, the public loss of their first lady and wife of their pastor has been a challenge, but Sapp has been determined to be transparent with his feelings.

“Mourning in public, of course, is a two-sided coin,” he says. “People are looking at your response and looking at how you act in the midst of what you’re dealing with. As a pastor, having parishioners—a thousand people who submit to my authority—they are looking to see how I was going to respond. My response would set the tone for our entire ministry. I had to be transparent enough to shed tears.”

Months after the funeral, which was attended by more than 1,000 people and viewed online by more than 100,000, the process of moving on is still a daily thing for Sapp. But he has no qualms about sharing the challenges with his members.

“I want to be open and honest and transparent about the mountains and valleys and ups and downs. I am going to be real

and honest. How we deal with it and how we handle it—that's important."

To the average churchgoer, Sapp says his loss has no doubt made his message and ministry more "relatable."

"Before, they might have known me based on my music or preaching. Now they have a more intimate relationship based on my bereavement," Sapp points out.

Strengthened by Praise

As a celebrated worship leader and accomplished gospel artist, Sapp also credits the power of praise as a means of healing. "What I've found is music and preaching has been extremely therapeutic for me. You have to praise God to maintain your sanity. To be honest with you, I don't know how people go through situations without God. I can't understand how anybody could go through losing someone you love and making it without God," he says.

"So I found myself singing songs and worshipping God. I knew that we needed to stay as close to Him as possible. What better way to stay close than in worship or in praise?"

Sapp remembers most the burden of grief at his wife's homegoing service, but he was able to relinquish the heaviness of it by standing in praise. "I had to surrender, because I felt so weighty," he said. "The only way I could think of doing it was I just lifted my hands and gave God the most unrestricted praise I could give Him."

Sapp, who released his eighth album, *Here I Am*, on Verity Records last year, has an impressive gospel music pedigree. In 1991, he received an offer from Fred Hammond to replace Keith Staten in the popular group Commissioned. He spent six years with the group until a crowded schedule and family obligations, including a pregnant wife, steered him toward a solo career.

His self-titled debut disc released on Word Records in 1996. Subsequent releases solidified his presence in the industry, including a general market crossover hit with “Never Would Have Made It” from his 2007 album, *Thirsty*.

The singer-songwriter/pastor definitely knows what it’s like to hear listeners share their stories of a song that connects with them in a powerful way. “When I write songs, I pray that they are blessings to people,” he says.

He made his own personal connection with a song—“Let Go and Let God” by P.J. Morton—as he drove home to see MaLinda on her final day. “That is the song I listen to daily,” he says. “I sing it on a consistent basis every morning and even every morning before I preach. That song literally was my story.”

He pauses to recount the lyrics that have meant so much to him: “I couldn’t even fall asleep, there was so much on my mind / I said, ‘Lord, help me praise’ / As soon as I stopped worrying about how the story ends / I let go and I let God have His way.”

Although Sapp hasn’t begun work on a new project yet, he wants his next one to carry the hope that has sustained him these last few months. “I want to make sure my music is uplifting and deals with those who are hurting,” he says. “If I’ve never understood before how people can become hopeless, I understand it now.”

As he continues to find his way without his partner in life and ministry, Sapp is determined not to let his family or church suffer in the process. When asked how he’s managing the responsibilities at home, in the pulpit and on the road, Sapp responds: “I prioritize. I start by knowing that my first responsibility is to my family, the next one is to church, and the next, musical career.”

It’s his way of allowing God to place all the details and work everything out for the good. “If you honor God and you honor

your family, He'll honor your career," he says. "That's what we've done. I'm home every Sunday, every Tuesday for Bible class. It's difficult having a career and being able to do what I do, but I have a great support team of leaders, a great staff."

Sapp says the message of hope and salvation in Christ is stronger than ever for him today. "I know Him now more than before," he says. "My faith is stronger than before. I still believe He's a healer—and still preach it with conviction."

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