

She Found the Grace To Forgive

Marte Tilton, the ex-wife of televangelist Robert Tilton, is candid about the pain she walked through after her 1993 divorce. PLUS: Rosey Grier, Dennis Bennett, John Wimber

Marte Tilton's troubles began in November 1991 when PrimeTime Live aired an investigative report that blasted her husband, televangelist Robert Tilton, and his Word of Faith World Outreach Center in Dallas. She had poured 18 years of her life into the church, serving as general manager of the enormous organization.

Her husband was one of TV journalist Diane Sawyer's prime targets. The PrimeTime segment focused on the estimated \$80 million a year Tilton's ministry received in donations—and his organization's methods of raising it.

For the next two years Marte stood by her man, fighting legal battles and facing unwanted media attention. Then in August 1993, Robert filed for divorce. It was finalized the following October, and three months later he married charismatic minister Leigh Valentine—who became an associate minister at Word of Faith.

Meanwhile Marte began her search for a church that would welcome her. Rather than leaving Dallas to get a fresh start, she stayed put and learned to handle each obstacle as it came her way.

What she learned in that process has become a book, *The Only Way Out Is Through* (Creation House). Its key themes include forgiveness and redemption.

In 1995, after dealing with some deep emotions, Marte had a personal "burial" service in front of Word of Faith's sanctuary when nobody was around. She wrote on a note card the emotions she was struggling with, such as disappointment and cynicism, and prayed that God would help her forgive those who had betrayed her.

"I read that card, and cried and wept," she told Charisma. But after burying the card she received a fresh revelation: The church was God's vineyard because He had built the house. Nobody else could claim ownership of it.

Marte says that within the last year her former husband has apologized to her and their four children "to the degree that he can." Two sons, Marc, 17, and Matt, 14, live in the Dallas area with Marte, who now works for the Christian Men's Network directed by Edwin Louis Cole. Her two other children, Amy, 30, and Jon, 27, live elsewhere. Marte also owns her own gift business.

While some people have ostracized her, Marte says three close friends have supported her since the beginning, especially during Word of Faith's numerous legal battles. As of March 1999, 11 lawsuits had been finalized. One was settled out of court, and the ministry claimed victory for the 10 other cases that involved various parties ranging from the church to Marte and Robert individually.

Following their investigations, the Internal Revenue Service, FBI and U.S. Postal Service found nothing wrong with Word of Faith's practices or procedures. Word of Faith World Outreach Center also won the right to protect its church members' records in a case that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Today the church meets in a different building with a Sunday morning attendance of approximately 150, according to a church spokesperson.

While Marte says PrimeTime Live's accusations were not true, she believes God used the exposé to give her ex-husband an opportunity to "get it together."

"All of the stuff they reported didn't even relate to what needed to be exposed," she says. "The media could never expose the cause. You don't know what's going on in the private lives of ministers."

"You can be at the top, and you can fall—it can happen to any preacher. If he doesn't keep it together and isn't on perfect watch, he can be seduced by things, women, his own desires. The devil is subtle. He comes in a very convincing way."

Robert Tilton won a legal battle of his own in May 1997, a year and a half after filing for divorce from his second wife. The jury ruled that Valentine did not have a right to transfer millions in assets from Word of Faith to her own church. Further, the court found no evidence to support her claims that Robert had pushed her down a flight of stairs.

Today, Robert lives in the Miami area, where he has continued his television ministry.

Meanwhile, Marte has tried to keep out of the spotlight. She says she has come to realize that "ministry" ended up being a machine that drove her instead of her driving it. "I truly became a workaholic because there was so much to do," she confesses.

Although many people expect her to deny the prosperity gospel taught by Word of Faith, Marte doesn't discount the message. "I believe God's Word is true, and if you serve and obey Him, honor His commands and put Him first in your life, then you will have prosperity," she says.

Perhaps her definition of prosperity has changed, however. She believes prosperity is "having all your needs met and having enough to help other people. It is not a \$1 million house or a

Mercedes.”

In days gone by, the Tiltens were under fire for a lifestyle that included a 5,000-square-foot parsonage on a golf course in Dallas, a waterfront condo in Florida and a mansion in California, which PrimeTime valued at \$4.5 million. Although the couple owned only the Florida condo, Marte said she addresses these extravagances in her book as an example for ministers not to follow.

Marte believes she is finally entering her “new land”—a land of promise. “I think I’m going to reap the land that God has for the rest of my life,” she says. “What I have to share isn’t a story about my ex-husband, but a story about how God will help you through tough times.”

Carol Chapman Stertzler lives in a Dallas suburb and works for a television ministry.