

Confession From A Pastor's Wife

For too long, Pastor's wives have built walls to protect themselves from the women they are called to lead. It's time to break through the barriers.

At the Charisma Women's Conference in April 2000, Cindy Jacobs led a prayer of repentance and forgiveness. She called for a pastor and his wife to come forward to repent on behalf of any pastors and their wives who had ever offended women. I nudged my pastor-husband and indicated that we needed to volunteer. We made our way to the platform and repented before all the women present. God ministered powerfully by His Spirit that night. Since then I have had women from different parts of the world tell me how deeply impacted and encouraged they were by that prayer.

One day I was talking with one of these women on the phone. She was sharing with me some of the encounters she has had with pastors' wives (PWs). In the course of her conversation, she said, "I've experienced all kinds of scenarios with PWs, and I've decided they have been put in women's lives so we can grow."

Ouch! I felt a bit stung by that comment. The implication was that PWs are a necessary evil—one that women in the congregation must come up against in order to mature in Christ.

I must admit that I have joked from time to time: "Women, ugh! I would rather work with men."

But after my phone conversation, I prayed: Lord, am I a PW who is a positive influence? Am I encouraging women to be all God has called them to be? Or am I a PW who is causing women to

stumble?

Giving this prayer some thought, I made my way to the local Christian bookstore in search of books on PWs and the women they minister to. I found books on women in leadership, women relating to their pastor-husbands and so on but very little on the role of the PW as it relates to women in the local church. I guess I'm not the only one who has shied away from tackling this subject.

For 32 years I have preferred not to be called a PW. At times I have even declared to all who would listen: "I am Judy, not a PW, but Judy, a person, period. I stand on my own not because of who I am married to but because of who I am in Christ."

The truth of this statement, however, does not negate the role I play as wife to my pastor-husband. And it does not minimize the responsibility I have in that role to relate in a godly way to the other women in our congregation.

About 20 years ago we accepted the call to a new pastorate. We stopped by a member's home to pick up the keys to the parsonage. The women in that home later told me their reaction to seeing me for the first time: "Well," they sighed, "we have to lose weight."

I learned early that women were watching me. Now, several years and a few more pounds later, I understand better than ever the "weight" of my influence—both for good and for bad.

Through the numerous conversations I have had with women since that April 2000 prayer of repentance, I have learned that the journey to healthy relationships between PWs and women in the congregation has met with roadblocks on both sides. It is my desire to expose some of the barriers that PWs have set up.

WAYS PWs INTERFERE My view regarding women in ministry is not that of a "women's libber," nor do I fight traditional church

views that may inhibit women in their callings. I have read and searched the Scriptures for a biblical view. The conclusion I have come to is that God has a high destiny for all women—and that destiny is becoming mature in who we are created to be.

It includes serving in any area to which God calls us. The Bible says gender is not a qualification: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28-29, NKJV).

A verse in Acts quotes God as saying, ““I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”“ (2:17, emphasis added). Women, this verse refers to us!

Sometimes, however, difficulties arise when women in the congregation seek to find their place in ministry. The PW can:

***Have a snobby or dictatorial attitude.* “I’m the boss; you will do what I say.” This attitude creates a wedge between her and the women in the congregation.

***Choose favorites* (for example, the women who are wealthy or especially gifted or fun-loving). Favoritism alienates others and causes them to mistrust the PW’s motives. Having dear old relationships can be glorious, but opening yourself up to new ones can be even better.

***Be jealous of what others have.* The sin of comparing can quickly overtake women. The consequence? Either a competitive streak, which will drive a PW to brag, or a complaining spirit that tries to elicit sympathy so others will feel sorry for her.

***Speak evil.* Having a negative opinion of others discredits them and elevates the PW in her own eyes. This tendency is

rooted in low self-esteem but must be guarded against because of the potential for causing divisiveness.

***Put people in a box.* PWs sometimes tend to label women and refuse to see who they are or can be in Christ. (The term “Jezebel” is one label that is used far too often.) This behavior discredits many qualified leaders and removes them from the local congregation.

***Become jealous of her husband’s time and ministry to people (especially women) and also see single women as a threat.* Jealousy causes mistrust in the marriage relationship as well as embarrasses and wounds others who are walking blamelessly before the Lord.

***Feel threatened by strong women who move in gifts different from her own.* The PW should operate out of the authority that she does have. She is not required to operate in the gifts others think she should have—only the ones God has given her.

A PW must resist pressure from women in the congregation to become something she is not (a super-prophet or brassy preacher, for example). If she refuses to move in her true calling, the women who are looking to her as a role model will become discouraged and hindered in theirs.

***Put up walls of protection to prevent women from getting close to her.* The hurts and disappointments of walking with others can cause PWs not to trust anyone. They need to see that God puts relationships in their lives providentially to help them grow and to sustain them during life’s trials and transitions. And if they should fail—and we all probably will at some point—they want to be sure that God-ordained people are there to pick them up.

PWs, I know that your public role is a difficult one. But I encourage you to be a positive role model in developing healthy woman-to-woman relationships in the body of Christ. As you are faithful to the call of God on your life, you will

release the women in your congregation to be faithful to God in their own lives.

You are empowered to release blessings into the body of Christ. As a PW, there are two important things you can do:

Set the tone of warmth in the congregation. In the same way we set the emotional climates in our homes, we can help determine how well received into the congregation women feel. Regardless of the size of our congregations and regardless of our personal feelings, our involvement in the life of the congregation does set the flow and “pecking order” for women to serve and lead.

You’ve heard the old adage, “If Mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” Doesn’t that speak eloquently of the power of a woman’s influence?

One of the things that keeps “Mama” from being happy is the failure of her relationships with other women. If you help set a positive tone, you and all the other women will benefit.

Praise the works of your pastor-husband. If you expose his weaknesses or are critical of him, you sow doubts into others. If you don’t praise and support him, who will?

PWs aren’t the only ones who have it tough. For those of you who have been the victim of wrong attitudes or behaviors from a PW such as those I’ve described, I want to repent and ask you to forgive me for:

****Holding your motives suspect, whether you are married or single, and feeling that you are in some way a threat to me or my marriage;**

****Being a hindrance to you by refusing to operate in my calling;**

****Being jealous of your spiritual gifts, appearance, home or possessions; and**

****Responding to you out of my insecurities rather than out of who I am in Christ.**

Dear friend in Christ, I also realize that behind the closed doors of each woman in the congregation there is a whole arena of issues. As a PW, I lack full understanding on these matters.

But as a woman and a believer I stand on level ground with you at the foot of the cross, and I purpose to love God, walk humbly before Him, love and serve others and bring glory to Him in all that I do. To this end, I have opened my heart to you. Now I open my arms as well and seek to sit down with you so we can put any and all ungodly matters between us to rest. Isn't it about time?

Judy Benz serves on the pastoral staff of Covenant Centre International in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, a church she and her husband, Norman, planted years ago.