

Groomed to be the First Lady

Lois Evans wants to provide senior pastors' wives with a hedge against the overwhelming demands of home and ministry.

She readily admits that her initial years as the first lady of the church she founded with her husband, Tony Evans, were two of the most difficult seasons she's lived through. To Lois Evans, the senior pastor's wife was a very isolated, much unappreciated role; a stifling position that a loving, supportive wife accepted as her lot, even as she mourned the slow death of her own gifts and talents. Growing up in church, Lois watched as the senior pastor's wife of her childhood attempted to find happiness in that limited, narrow space, and she knew by the time she was a teenager that she wanted none of it.

When Lois accepted God's call into full-time ministry at the age of 15, she told the Lord her heart was open to do whatever He wanted her to do—except serve as a pastor's wife. And when she met her future husband, she was satisfied with young Tony's assurance that although he too felt called into full-time ministry, he wasn't interested in becoming a pastor.

Now as their church, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship (OCBF) in Dallas, one of the most respected in the country, celebrates its 30th anniversary, Lois says, "I think the Lord has a sense of humor. What you say you'll never do is exactly where He'll put you because He wants us to depend on Him."

Out of the Comfort Zone

Lois feels a real kinship to Esther of the Old Testament, a tremendous woman of God who had no clue that she would be the one to bring deliverance to the children of God—Esther was simply serving where she found herself. And over the years the places and circumstances in which Lois says she's found

herself each represent unique seasons in her life. "I kind of base my life on Esther's story," she says, "because I, too, just served where I found myself. First as a wife and a mother, and then I helped Tony start the church, and later our ministry The Urban Alternative, never knowing what God would lead me into years later."

Where God has led Lois not only includes her endeavors as OCBF's first lady and a member of The Urban Alternative Board of Directors, but she is also a highly regarded community and civic leader. She has held a number of executive management positions with The Urban Alternative since its inception in 1982, and currently serves as the ministry's senior vice president. She holds a bachelor's in business administration from Dallas Baptist University, and in 1996, she was honored with a Doctorate of Humane Letters from Eastern College.

A much sought-after speaker, Lois has also recorded two music albums and authored *Seasons of a Woman's Life* (Moody), in which she writes about her own life and the lives of others (including the biblical Queen Esther). Her book inspires women to discover God's purposes for their lives and depend on Him as He teaches the lessons of each season. The couple's four children, Chrystal, Priscilla, Anthony Jr., and Jonathan are now adults, and the Evans are the loving grandparents of six little ones.

Though Lois' first two years as a first lady were challenging, she says her husband always supported and encouraged her. In fact, it was after Tony looked his wife squarely in the eye and told her that he was not asking her to be anyone else but Lois that the light bulb flickered on.

"I don't know why that was such a big deal," she says, "but it brought me to a reality that yes, God created me to be me, and even before He placed me in my mother's womb, He had a plan for my life." Lois' struggles with her identity as a first lady lessened significantly after that revelation, primarily

because her personal perspective was transformed.

"I have a Mordecai in my life," Lois says, "Tony Evans, who encouraged me to wade into some deep waters, and do some things I'd said I would never do. He would say, 'You can do it; just keep preparing yourself.' So I had somebody in my life, I still do, who really pushes me to do things that I don't always feel comfortable doing or feel called to do.

I think it's seasonal for me, as I've watched the Lord develop my desire for certain things and develop my skills. He's put people around me to make it happen, and here I am today thanking Him for how far He's brought me."

A Heart for Pastors' Wives

It's been said that God often places us in situations where our past misery forms the basis of our current ministry. In Lois' life, God's orchestrated turn of events is represented by The First Lady Ministry, the safe place for senior pastors' wives she created in 2000.

The ministry speaks to the unique position of first ladies, presenting tools for improving time and stress management, how to identify the call on their lives, and family and health issues. This summer, June 8-10, Lois will welcome women from around the globe to Dallas for her seventh annual First Lady Conference.

"Because of what happened to me during those first two years," she says, "God planted a seed in my life for pastors' wives. Not all pastors' wives experience the same struggles, but there [is] quite a high percentage of them today who are struggling with the challenges that I faced.

"In 1 Corinthians 12 the Bible talks about the gifting of the body," Lois says. "We are gifted women of God who are married to pastors. God has gifted us before the foundation of world, predestined us to do a particular thing or two or three. Things can get frustrating when a pastor's wife tries to fit

the role of the last pastor's wife or the ideal role that has been passed down culturally in the church. You need to be who God has gifted you to be."

The three-day conference will feature workshops designed to spiritually strengthen, equip and motivate first ladies. A host of respected speakers, including Lois' daughter Priscilla Shirer, an author and Bible teacher, will lead a set of intensive workshops. Topics will span the various issues first ladies typically encounter, from recognizing depression to managing women's ministries.

"I develop the workshops as a result of surveys we take," Lois says. "We help them understand their own personalities and giftedness, and the different personalities in the [pews]. If you're developing a women's ministry you have to understand the women you're trying to reach."

A networking session will provide opportunities for first ladies to exchange ideas, share solutions to similar challenges, and build friendships. Round-table discussions will afford conference attendees the chance to sit at the feet of seasoned first ladies and learn from their years of ministry experience. The weekend ends with a gala banquet on Saturday evening where a deserving first lady will receive the Annual Esther Award for Excellence.

"This year is particularly exciting," Lois says, "because the women asked for a little more advanced Bible studies. A lot of pastor's wives have not had the opportunity to go to Bible college or seminary, and for some, seminary doors weren't open to them as women."

Unique Ministry Needs

Though the life circumstances of first ladies and other women called to ministry have improved tremendously since Lois' childhood, the following recent statistics remain disheartening and indicate there is still much work to be

done:

1. Eighty percent of pastors and 84 percent of their spouses feel unqualified and discouraged in their role as pastors.
2. Fifty percent of pastors' marriages will end in divorce.
3. Eighty percent of pastors' spouses feel their spouse is overworked.
4. Eighty percent of pastors' wives feel left out and unappreciated by the church members.
5. Eighty percent of pastors' spouses wish their spouse would choose another profession.
6. Eighty percent of pastors' wives feel pressured to do things and be something in the church that they really are not.

The majority of pastors' wives surveyed said that the most destructive event that has occurred in their marriage and family was the day they entered the ministry. Even as they are committed to full-time ministry and are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to support their husbands, Lois says first ladies often find themselves under the tremendous pressure of expectations placed on them to act or serve the church in ways that may not be in alignment with their personalities and personal goals. The 21st century first lady is married to the man, not to the church.

"I think tradition has defined the role of pastor's wife," Lois says, "whatever that might be, depending on her denomination or her church practices. So a woman steps into the role and attempts to fit in so her husband can comfortably do his job.

"Another percentage, a large percentage of women and pastors, are afraid of losing their jobs, and they're doing what a denomination or tradition expects of them. So they just succumb to tradition, to the way things are, and they will often use their gifts and skills outside of the church. What I'm saying is that if first ladies choose to use their gifts and skills in the church, they should be allowed to do so."

Lois' ministry for first ladies attempts to not only address the needs of the women, but to also encourage their husbands to include their wives in partnership, to make sure the congregation understands they're working together as partners. "Some women are not given the opportunity to really blossom and bloom and use their gifts and skills," Lois says. "My percentage might not be right, but I believe 70 percent of pastors' wives work outside of church. There's nothing wrong with that. But my point is that 70 percent of them are gifted and skilled and could use their gifts and skills in the church if they were seen as partners in ministry. The message that it's OK and acceptable has to come from the pulpit."

Lois says that in the seven years she's led the First Lady Ministry, she's witnessed a major paradigm shift, in that the Lord is calling women into ministry equipped with a tremendous variety of gifts and talents. Many of these women are sometimes better suited for work in the boardroom, or in the hospital room, rather than in Sunday school. In addition, many are mothers of growing children, who may not yet feel called, or released, to commit themselves full time to the church.

She's observed that space is being made for pastors' wives who yearn to serve the church in nontraditional ways as evangelists or co-pastors. Overall expectations of senior pastors and their congregations are changing for the better.

She says, "I think a shift is occurring right now where men are releasing their wives to be who God's called them to be, and that's my passion, too, to encourage women to use the gifts and skills God's given them."

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