

Karen Evans: An Open Letter to Pastors' Wives

Being the wife of a pastor for 40 years has had its share of challenges that thankfully we learned to navigate, especially early in our marriage.

We were 28 years young with two small children when Jimmy accepted the call to lead Trinity, which made for several very difficult years for our marriage and family. I know our struggles are not unique to ministry couples—far from it. So when Jimmy asked me to write for the July-August issue of *Ministry Today*, I knew I wanted to share some of my own experiences and story in an honest letter to pastors' wives. (If you're a pastor reading this, you'll likely gain some real insight into your wife's journey.)

What follows are some specific lessons—sometimes learned in hard ways—to encourage you that you are not, and never have been, alone.

Marriage and family are prime targets for Satan, especially pastors' marriages. When we began *MarriageToday*, we were actually going through the toughest times of our lives and marriage. We began to recognize that marriage and family are the areas Satan attacks the most. If you're a pastor's wife, you need to grasp that Satan wants to destroy your family even more than the church.

Understanding how God sees me gives me the freedom to be myself. I knew I was not the typical “pastor's wife.” I didn't teach or have any musical abilities. Our church never put pressure on me to be anything more than Jimmy's wife.

However, the first couple of years were very trying. Jimmy and I had no mentors or experience. We loved our church and the people, but the stress began bearing down on us personally. I

was fighting feelings of not being the wife Jimmy needed to lead the church as well as my own insecurities. The greatest struggle for me was to not feel guilty about who I was as a person before we came to the church. I would beg God to change me and tell Him I would accept the gift to speak if He wanted to give it to me.

The year before Jimmy became senior pastor, I had begun reading the Word every day. I had made a commitment to God to know Him and Jesus for myself. I was growing in my relationship with God and His Word and realized I was gifted in serving. I loved discipling women to grow in Christ. I also had a love for prayer. I found that serving in different areas of ministry helped me feel accepted and take my mind off myself.

The real changes came when I began to see myself through the Word and not my fears and insecurities. The Lord was healing me by His Word, and it caused me to start to see value in myself. I began to deal with the guilt and see my worth as a child of God and to not feel unworthy if I loved being a wife and mother. I began to accept myself and not be afraid to just be me.

When the ministry comes before the marriage, something has to give. Being married to a pastor is even more of a reason to keep your marriage first. Because of his own fears, Jimmy began to disconnect from us emotionally and mentally, which caused me to withdraw, too. Ministry began to take its toll on our marriage. The constant stress of trying to raise young children was difficult. I knew in my heart that being honest about the stress was important. I supported Jimmy with all the church issues but couldn't accept his behavior of checking out on us at home and leaving me feeling like a single parent. The resentment toward each other grew. I would seek counsel from elder friends, but even they didn't seem to have answers.

After months of fighting, we began to realize that the

ministry had come before our marriage. It's funny, but during that time I never questioned if Jimmy was supposed to leave the church. He actually was the one who offered to quit to save our marriage. I knew quitting was not the answer, but protecting our marriage before the church was.

We began to talk about how to cut back on the demands. Jimmy encouraged me to see that just being his wife was a full-time job along with parenting and volunteering at church and other places. My own journey of healing and maturing came as we both learned how to lead the church and have a great marriage. After years of Jimmy driving himself to exhaustion and sickness, we now go over what is important and the timing of his schedule together. Above all else, keep your marriage first.

What one of us goes through affects both of us. Being the wife of the senior pastor had even more challenges. I love our church, and the people are amazing. But every church deals with struggles and pain and hurts from other people. Often, we would hear about people we loved leaving or talking bad about Jimmy and the elders. It hurt deeply to lose relationships; it seemed as if people cared more about the issues than the friendships.

Many times, Jimmy and I would talk about quitting the ministry altogether and moving where no one knew us and just be normal church people. But our hearts wouldn't let us. We would pray and talk and pray some more and forgive again and again. We dealt with the hurts by talking about everything and not allowing each other to withhold forgiveness or harbor secrets.

Jimmy and I are accountable to each other, and he's accountable to our elders. I have even personally called some of his close elder friends to tell them about situations that were affecting him personally. He and I are one, so what we go through individually affects us both. If you know situations at church are affecting your spouse, don't be afraid to get

help!

Kids, even pastor's kids, must find their own faith. We also knew our children were in a fish bowl. So we talked to them about how even if we were working outside the church, we would still require them to live in a way that honored God. We never allowed the church to put pressure on them. But at the same time, we knew it was hard for them. As much as we wanted to protect them, they had to find their own faith and go through the many character-building situations of life.

Despite the potential hurt and betrayals of friends, relationships are still worth it. Being a pastor's wife can be very lonely. I have always had close friends, but I can remember times of feeling very alone in the midst of it all. We give so much of ourselves to the church, and sometimes it's easy to lose our identity. Most of us go through these common feelings, but as a pastor's wife we're afraid to let ourselves be honest with these issues.

I prayed early on that the Lord would bring me friends I could trust. Mature friends who stay with you through the hard times are invaluable. I don't fear being vulnerable as much as I fear the rejection from those I love. I want to affirm all of you who have had betrayal and loss. It hurts more than most people in your church could ever understand. You know both or most sides of every story, and keeping your mouth shut is hard and lonely. But the Lord sees and knows, and it's still worth developing relationships that go through the fire with you and are standing with you after the smoke clears.

Being honest about what you need is the first step to getting what you need. It's important to let your husband know when you have a need to just vent and when you want him to give his counsel. Many times I'm dealing with issues of my own and just want to talk. I'm not necessarily asking Jimmy to fix it. Sometimes I just need him to be my friend. Let your husband know up front what you're thinking. Be honest about your

fears. It's also just as important to let him talk and not give advice unless he asks for it. Jimmy and I share the same values, but there are times he doesn't need my answers as much as my understanding.

The role I play is vital to our family—and ministry. Through the years, I've learned that serving Jimmy in our home is just as important as me serving in the church. I have tried to keep our home a place of peace and rest and order. Even though Jimmy will help me around the house, I always consider him and his schedule and how I can better serve him so he can come home and get away from the demands. We are empty nesters now, so it has been a give and take through all the different seasons of our marriage and children growing up. My friends at church know that Jimmy has been able to do what he does because of my support. I don't struggle anymore with my destiny being like others, whether it's at home or in ministry. I have no regrets about making our marriage first and our home a safe haven. The Lord has honored our hearts and given us so much to steward, but the most important thing has been to keep our relationship with Jesus first and then with each other.

I love being a pastor's wife, and I love our church. Through all the years of trials and joys, I am so grateful for what the Lord has done in our lives and the church. Being part of the bigger body of Christ is an amazing thought, so to all of you who serve alongside your husbands, I say thank you. I appreciate and love the differences we all bring as women, wives and pastors. You are a beautiful part of not only leading but also being an example of helping and serving others. Well done, my friends!