

# PROTECTING YOUR MINISTRY MARRIAGE

by Karen Holford



“HUSBANDS, LOVE YOUR WIVES, JUST AS CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH AND GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR HER.”

*Eph. 5:25, NIV*

I looked at the leftovers in the fridge. Each evening I would come home from work, heat the leftovers of the dinner Bernie had eaten at lunchtime, and then cook our dinner for the next day. He would eat it at lunchtime and I would eat it alone in the evening. By the time I came home at 6:00 p.m., Bernie had already gone out to help with a local evangelistic campaign. I knew the members wanted me to be there, too, but there was no way I could work all day, go straight to church and stay there till 10:00 p.m., arrive home at 10:45, go to bed at midnight (after doing the housework and preparing for work the next day), and still remain sane.

So I spent my evenings alone in the apartment—in bed before Bernie came home and out of the house almost before he was up. I realized then that ministry was going to have a profound impact on our marriage. I was free in the evenings and on weekends when he was busy, and Bernie was free during the week when I was at work. And that wasn't all. There were phone calls to take, messages to convey, dinners to cook, children's stories to research, visual aids to create, and a multitude of assorted requirements (such as making 200 flour bombs for a youth retreat when we had three young children sick with influenza at home) that suddenly appeared on my job description as a pastor's wife! We tried to plan at least one day off together every month, but something would almost always disrupt the day, or Bernie's cell phone would ring with an urgent call . . .

There's no doubt that life in a ministry family can seriously challenge your marriage. Sometimes ministry cou-

ples become utterly disheartened with their relationship because it seems that ministry, the needs of the church, the plans of the administrators, large evangelistic projects, meetings, social events, and local members' emergencies all come before your own personal needs and the needs of your marriage. I have seen many ministry marriages fall apart because the non-church-employed spouse felt so alone, so neglected, and so worthless.

One pastor's wife told me, "My husband spends an hour a week visiting an elderly housebound lady in our church. People think it's wonderful that he's so dedicated, but it's been years since he spent an hour a week totally focused on me." Another said, "Somehow I always feel that I'm at the bottom of the list—the last person to get a visit, be ministered to, or thought about. I feel as if I'm the only person in the church who isn't allowed to have needs. My minister-husband chats to members, takes them flowers, plays with their children, and mows their lawns. But he hardly ever does any of these things for us." Another wife said, "My husband is always doing God's work. What right do I have to ask my husband to spend time with me when he needs to write a sermon or visit someone seriously ill in the hospital? There's always something more important and urgent for him to do than to be with me. How can I compete with God's work?"

These are real issues and attitudes that many of us face. They can seriously undermine our worth as a spouse and as a human being and can quickly erode our marriage. I remember one pastor's wife telling me, "Many pastors seem

to be married to their churches! So we have a choice—we can nag them till they run deeper into ministry to avoid us, or we can seduce our husbands with love, admiration, and delight back into a wonderful marriage!” Then she pointed out Ephesians 5:25 and said, “Christ has already given Himself up for the church! That’s not the pastor’s job! It’s his job to love his wife!”

The closer a minister is to his or her spouse, the happier they are both likely to be, and this happiness will shine through their marriage to their family and their congregation. A minister who takes care of his own wife’s needs for love, closeness, appreciation, and spiritual companionship sets a positive example to the other men in his congregation and protects his own marriage. When a minister’s home is happy, he is better equipped emotionally and relationally to help those in his church who are struggling with unhappy marriages and families.

So what can we do to invite our spouses into warm and energizing relationships? Be positive and make a list of all the gifts and good things that ministry offers your marriage. Often your spouse can pick up children or be home to receive deliveries. Sometimes you are able to travel together to interesting places and conferences. You may have a secure income. What else do you enjoy about being a ministry spouse? Sometimes we can be so resentful of the time that ministry takes our spouse away from us that our negative feelings become a barrier to our closeness.

Explore ways in which ministry work might put your marriage at risk. Identify the challenges: which are the riskiest and what can you do to protect your marriage from these dangers? What effect is ministry having on you as a couple: your spiritual life, your sexual relationship, your experience of love, your communication, your family, your vacations, your ability to have fun together, etc.? Once you identify the ways in which ministry work may come between you as a couple, you can also find creative ways to counteract the effects of not eating together in the evening, your spouse coming home tired at 11:00 p.m., and not seeing each other as often as you would like.

Take care of yourself and find something you enjoy doing when your spouse isn’t around. View this time as an opportunity to build yourself up spiritually, get some exercise, socialize, do housework, enjoy a hobby, etc. This may help you to feel less resentful of the time your spouse spends on his or her work.

When do you and your spouse feel closest? When you feel close, who usually initiates the contact? What do you both do and say that helps you to feel close, and how can you make sure that this happens more often? What else would you like to do that would help you to feel even closer to your spouse?

On a scale of 0 to 10 (where 0 is not close at all and 10 is as close as you can imagine), how close do you feel as a couple? What could you do as a couple to score your closeness one number higher? Make a list of things you

can do to show your closeness at every level up to 10. This will give you a “road map” to help you know what to do next to increase your spiritual, relational, and sexual intimacy as a couple.

Tell each other how much you appreciated the last time you were really close. Be positive and only say what you enjoyed. Appreciation does far more to encourage someone to be close to you than nagging or criticizing. Try saying something like, “I love it when we have time to be close. I really feel very close to you when we \_\_\_\_ (describe something that you know your spouse enjoys, too). Let’s make time to do that again today or some other time this week.”

## SIMPLE IDEAS FOR COUPLE CLOSENESS

- Praying together
- Taking a bath or shower together
- Reading a book together
- Eating out together
- Driving together and talking about something important or special
- Giving each other a back massage
- Finding a tiny gift for the other person
- Going for a walk together in a beautiful place
- Cooking together or making something creative together
- Soothing each other after a busy or troubling day
- Going away for a weekend or midweek break together
- Holding each other close
- Planning a surprise for the other person
- Messaging or emailing each other
- Meeting together for a lunchtime picnic
- Visiting a historic place, a church, a museum, or a gallery together
- Gardening together
- Cycling, sailing, or boating together
- Spending an evening doing different peaceful, non-work things in the same room as your spouse
- Watching a positive, funny, or inspiring movie together (download interesting discussion guides and read movie reviews at [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com))

Surprise your spouse. Find a free slot in the calendar and whisk him or her away for a special time of closeness. Book a one-hour weekly cafe appointment to talk together as husband and wife without any church issues—and agree to turn off your cell phones. Both of you deserve the other's undivided attention! It can be disappointing to go to a cafe together and then have to listen for half an hour while your partner deals with a church/work issue over the phone.

Try a short experiment. Spend at least 15 minutes a day doing something simple together. If you are stuck for ideas, see the list of ideas for couple closeness. Then spend one block of three hours per week and two blocks of one hour per week doing something you enjoy doing together—and don't talk about work or ministry or church members (this can be quite difficult). Better still if you can manage to spend one whole day together relaxing and doing things that bring you closer as a couple or that help you create positive memories of your relationship. Do this for at least two weeks. Then ask yourselves what effect your times of closeness have had on your marriage. What effect did they have on your pastoral ministry?

Couples often find that their times of closeness strengthen them for the other things they need to do. When couples feel topped up with love and the good feelings that come from spending time with someone who cares for them, they can often face challenges with greater courage and optimism, and they will have more emotional and spiritual resources to help others.

One church we know is passionate about protecting the families of their pastoral staff. They insist that staff members spend at least three complete days and at least four other evenings at home with their families—with no work contact—during each two-week period. They know the devastating effects of a ministerial marriage breakdown, both on the family itself and on a church, a congregation, and a community.

We experience God's love through each other. When we feel loved and close to another human being, it is easier for us to believe that God loves us and cares about us, too. When we feel neglected by those we love, it is harder to experience God's love in our lives. When we keep each other topped up with love, God's love has a greater opportunity to flow through our lives and into the lives of those around us. Nurturing our "couple closeness" is one of the best investments we can make to strengthen our relationships with each other and with God.



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# QUIET TIME IN A CRAZY WORLD

by Sarah K. Asaftei

**Quiet** time is tough to find. At least it is where I live.

I suppose pastors' wives in different cultures may manage to live at a slower pace, but the increase of technology makes life run faster nearly everywhere. Just to write this article, I'm snatching a few peaceful moments at 6:00 a.m., before our household explodes into the day's activities.

"Come away, and rest awhile," Jesus told His disciples when they were so busy ministering that they hadn't even taken time to eat (Mark 6:31). But if you're like me, that can be a tough invitation to accept.

The thing is, if we want to minister effectively, if we want to have a lasting impact, if we want to be agents of revival in our congregations and communities, quiet time is something we cannot do without. Revival at church can come only after we experience personal revival at home.

It's an inescapable fact: We simply *cannot* minister to others when we are empty ourselves. Even Jesus needed time away with His Father to rejuvenate and refill. But how do we actually make it happen? Where do we find the time?

Sometimes I look at older women or younger women, and I envy the extra free time they seem to have. Probably their lives feel just as busy as mine, filled with different activities. But it's easy to imagine that *other* people have more time to rest or pray or study.

As younger pastors' wives, we tend to fall into a narrow set of categories: fiancée, newlywed, young mother. I'll admit that there are times when I daydream about the flexibility and freedom I had to spend time alone with God during my six years of being a "newlywed," back when my day's schedule was dictated by what I chose to do instead of by feedings and diaper changes and nap times.