

Before you pursue the office of pastor, you know that you need to be ready. But have you asked whether your wife is ready?

Formally, I don't believe there should be extra expectations placed on a pastor's wife. There is no office of "pastor's wife" in the Bible. But practically, being married to a pastor is a tough role. Does your wife have what it takes? Is she up for it?

Those are the questions I want to help you ask in this article.

It is critical for you to ask such questions. Men preparing for the ministry can easily become blindly ambitious, even idolatrous, without realizing it. When that happens, we risk turning our wives into means to making much of ourselves. If they get in the way of our goals, we run them over. It's therefore critical, as I say, to stop, loosen our grip on the ministry goals, and give real honest thought to our wives.

It has taken me a long time to realize how vulnerable our wives are to us. They take our name. They live with the consequences of our decisions. And they just might have to crawl under the pew—at least in my case—when we use poor grammar in a sermon.

So please be careful. And be careful in how you use this article. I am not proposing a new law for our wives: "Honey, read these eight points. You have to be these things!"

I just want to keep some people from trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole. There are a variety of roles within the church. Knowing where you and your wife fit will bless you and the church.

My wife Cathi and I have been married for almost 30 years. Early on I discovered that I had punted beyond my coverage. No matter the situation, Cathi has been an incredible source of support, wisdom, and grace.

She never wanted to marry a pastor. She did not "feel called" to this role. But she was willing to follow me, and along the way God has proven her well suited to the position. For the last twenty-four years we have been members of one church where I have served as the senior pastor. Although she chooses not to be highly visible, she has a very important—and not easy—role.

On the other hand, another senior pastor recently told me that his wife could no longer handle the work. If someone left the church or was upset at him, she took it personally. If the church was not growing, she felt the weight of failure. The demands on his time, her feeling neglected, and the weight of the whole ministry had brought her to the breaking point. He loved to preach and certainly had been affirmed in it, but he realized that living with his wife in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7) meant considering what she could and could not handle. So he planned to resign.

This does not necessarily mean failure on his or her part. God may have different work for them to do, and men in such situations should encourage their wives with whatever God might have next.

Still, what questions should a potential pastor think through concerning his wife?

A WORD TO THE CHURCH

Before I answer that, a word to the church. When a church hires a pastor, the church hires a pastor, not the pastor *and* his wife. Granted, she is going to be a member of the church and will serve in the church like other members. But the Bible does not provide a specific job description for an elder's wife.

So resist the urge to place additional expectations on her. Her primary responsibility is not to organize the annual mother-daughter tea, VBS, or the ladies retreat. It is to be the wife of her husband and to be his helper. That is a major responsibility. Elders' wives are critical to helping their husbands manage their households well, and to help him providing hospitality for members in the congregation as seasons permit. The fact that a woman's husband is in the ministry does not mean that she has more time; she probably has less.

A WORD TO THE HUSBAND

A preliminary word to the husband, too. There are differences between the role of a senior pastor and the role of other elders, which means his wife will encounter different expectations than their wives.

Here are a few that come to mind. First, the senior pastor's wife will face increased visibility. Every time you preach on marriage, the congregation will think about your marriage. Every time you preach on parenting, they will think about your family.

Second, people tend to assume that the senior pastor's wife knows about everything happening in the church's life, like who is in the hospital, what time the bus returns from the junior high camping trip, and which teams are playing Friday night in the softball league.

Third, the senior pastor feels responsibility for the whole church in a way others don't. This is perhaps the greatest challenge of being a senior pastor and, therefore, of being married to one. You may have supportive elders and staff, but your senior position means you own the church, feel the church, breathe the church. Your elders and associates are wonderful, but you feel responsible for them too! You cut the grass thinking about the church. You discuss the church at meals, on walks, and on vacation. Others may rotate off the elder board for a time, but you are always on. Others can take a weekend to go visit children or get away. But Sunday is not the weekend for you, it is the main event. And it feels like it comes every three days.

QUESTIONS TO ASK OF YOUR WIFE

How can you know if your wife can handle this? Here are some things to consider. Some of them may be tough to work through, but it is better to address these now, before you get into a ministry role.

1. How territorial is she?

First, how territorial is your wife? Is she willing to share you with people? After the Sunday service, other people may be able to hang around for a few minutes and then go home. But not you. If you preached the Word, people want to talk to you, and generally should be able to. Hopefully, your wife will see this as an opportunity, not a burden.

Is she willing to share herself? The ministry is not a profession; it is a passion. My wife is extremely organized. Her "to do" list is daunting and she loves the thrill of checking things off. But when she makes her list, she does not plan for three phone calls from women who need counsel and encouragement. When she gives herself fifteen minutes to run into the store for fresh veggies, she does not plan for long conversations with members and neighbors. Yet they happen. How does your wife handle those "interruptions"? As opportunities to serve others, or as obstacles that get in her way?

Is she willing to share your home? Does she see your home as your retreat from the world, or as a base for ministry? Your home is a wonderful tool for establishing and developing so many relationships with others—as long as your wife shares that vision.

By the way, there are times when your wife needs to be territorial, particularly when you need to be home with your kids and you are tempted to do something else “for the church.” In cases like this, she is fighting for you and for your kids and for the church, and you need her help to see it.

2. Does she really love others?

Second, does your wife really love others? Some ministry wives view the church as a burden to bear, and it shows. If your wife sees the church as a means for validation, instead of as people to serve, she will grow exhausted.

Over time, your church will sense whether your wife really loves them, or whether she is only doing what is expected. Cathi says that this is really at the heart of it all.

3. Is she high maintenance?

Third, is your wife high maintenance? Does she take herself too seriously? Is it all about her? Is she impossible to please?

If your wife thinks that everything in the church reflects on her, then she is going to be paranoid. The church is a bunch of messy sinners, who, like porcupines, tend to poke each other when they get close enough. If your wife does not handle others’ failures with grace, then life at home will be miserable, even while you attempt to put up a brave front.

Your wife needs to be able to handle her own issues with others without pulling you into them. If she has a conflict with someone, she needs to address it as Christ taught us in Matthew 18. It is neither right nor fair to the other person for you to step in.

4. Is she insecure?

Fourth, is she insecure? Of course, we are all insecure to some degree. Just because your wife has feelings of insecurity does not mean that you cannot be a pastor. No wife can match the expectations of others, especially since they are constantly changing. But there is a difference between struggling with insecurity and being owned by it. Is your wife owned by it?

One Sunday morning early in my pastorate, an older usher, a pillar in the church, stopped Cathi from entering the sanctuary. He explained that he didn’t let in “riff-raff.” Without a pause, she pointed to me on the platform and said to him, “See that guy up there? I wash his underwear. You can let me in!” He did.

5. Is she controlling?

Fifth, is she controlling? Things happen that you cannot control. How does she respond?

I once warned a member of a pulpit committee not to pursue a particular candidate because his wife had to run everything her way. Even if she was not in charge of something, she attempted to take over because no one did it “as good as she did.” She had successfully offended many other women, and I knew that no matter how well this brother preached, his wife would eventually blow things up. The church called him anyway, and, sure enough, she blew things up.

Your wife will be able to affect some changes, but can she handle the 1970’s wallpaper in the ladies restroom and not offend the decorating committee that still thinks it looks good?

6. Is she discreet?

Sixth, is she discreet? Can she pass over others' sins silently, rather than gossiping or "venting"?

Another lady in the church once falsely accused my wife. It was ugly. This lady even came over to our home to confront Cathi. Yet I never knew it. That evening when I got home Cathi didn't say a word to me about it.

Months later, this lady was in my office and she told me she was surprised that I was talking with her. I was taken aback and asked her what she meant. She then told me what she had done to my wife. I was able to tell her that Cathi had never breathed a word of this to me. Cathi's restraint freed me to be able to minister to this lady. It also gave this lady a great appreciation for my wife. That evening when I asked Cathi why she never shared that with me, she simply said, "It did not involve you."

Women in my church can trust my wife. They know that their stories will never end up as illustrations in the pulpit, because she will not share what is meant to be private.

7. Is she willing to ask forgiveness?

Seventh, is your wife willing to ask forgiveness? My wife is incredible, but she is not perfect. There have been times when she has spoken before she had all the facts, and has hurt others' feelings. The reason why she has been such a compliment to the gospel, however, is that she is willing to own her failures, admit them to others, and seek forgiveness. For someone who sets the bar high, failing to meet the mark can be debilitating, but she knows that we can only extend grace to others as we live in view of grace ourselves.

8. Is she willing to be honest with you?

Several years ago Cathi pointed out some of my major blind spots. It took an enormous amount of courage for her to do this, and she did it with grace, hope, tears, and humility. It was hard to listen to her articulate my failures, but I needed to hear them. What is more, the church needed me to hear her.

She served our congregation that night by helping me confront some areas that I desperately needed to correct. Many of the weaknesses that she pointed out were echoed in the church. Now I could see them. Her boldness was a gift to our marriage and to our church.

SHE WASN'T HIRED, BUT YOU'RE STILL A TEAM

Pastors, our wives have a tough job. They see parts of our life that the rest of the congregation doesn't, and they still have to listen to our sermons.

Ministry is not easy. I have been tempted to quit a number of times and Cathi not only knows it, she feels it and carries it. The church may not hire your wife, but if you're married you're a team. May God grant you wisdom and grace.