

## Surviving Life as a Pastor's Spouse

by Geri Scazzero

I spent my first nine years as a senior pastor's spouse feeling like I was in the back of a runaway bus going down a steep, winding mountain road at 65 mph. Although I could not admit it to God, or myself, I was unhappy, depressed, exhausted, and angry.

Before we planted [New Life Fellowship Church](#) in Queens, my husband Pete and I spent a year in Central America. During that year, 1985, we took a trip from Costa Rica to Nicaragua.

We boarded a big, old, shaky, 1957 Greyhound bus. During our three hours going up and down mountains, the driver sped and careened around narrow curves (which, by the way, had no guardrails) like he was maneuvering a little sports car down an empty stretch of open highway. I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. The bus was out of control, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I finally got down on the floor and put my face in my seat so that I wouldn't be able to see when we went over a cliff. I crouched and waited for the inevitable moment.

That moment, thankfully, never came and we made it miraculously out of those mountains alive. Little did I know, however, that this frightening bus ride would become a metaphor for my life as "the spouse of a pastor"!

After returning to New York City, we began planting New Life Fellowship Church in Queens. Over the next several years the church grew and so did our family. God was doing many wonderful things.

Yet something was going on inside of me. Outwardly I kept up a very good pretense of being "superwoman." Inside I was overwhelmed by the demands of our children. I lived like a single parent because the church got the best of my husband's time, energy, and focus. I was also overwhelmed by the demands of a growing, frantically paced church.

Like that bus in Central America, I felt like my life was out of my control, and I had no idea how to get control or slow things down. I felt once again at the mercy of someone else's bad decisions and life choices (in this case Pete's). The pace of our lives was exhausting, and there were no brakes anywhere in sight.

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Finally, we did crash. I said, "NO MORE." I had had enough of single parenting and giving up so much of myself for the sake of the ministry. I left our church. I told my husband I wanted a marriage, a father for our children, and a church that brought me life, not death.

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This one act of declaring myself unleashed a revolution in me, our marriage, and, ultimately, our church family at New Life. That happened in January 1996. The last eight years have been wonderful, but it has been a new walk of Christian discipleship for me.

That decision also launched us on a journey that would lead us to the marriage and family of which I had always dreamed and to a ministry that truly flowed out of the quality of our marriage.

As I speak with the spouses of pastors, elders, deacons, and leaders – regardless of race, ethnicity, denomination, or age – most are unhappy, tired, and stressed. They love their spouses and love Jesus. The problem, however, is there is little time left over – for loving themselves, their spouses, or others. Many secretly would love to be out of the ministry. Almost all want to do it differently.

The demands of being married to a leader are enormous and complex. It is very difficult to maintain and nurture your own life, let alone an intimate, fulfilling marriage in the midst of caring for a church family.

The apostle Paul understood this. In fact he made it one of the prerequisites for leadership in the church, arguing that if the life of your marriage and family is not healthy, how can you lead God's family (1 Tim 3:4-5)?

The following are a few simple, but powerful, principles that I learned from that journey these past eight years.

**First, be honest.** I used to believe that certain feelings were "off limits" for a good Christian wife – like depression, anger, and sadness. These were seen as being weak, and weak was seen as not measuring up to being a good role model of a pastor's spouse. I was wrong. God uses them to speak to us in profound, significant ways about his will and desires for us.

**Second, seek help.** After I was finally able to be honest with myself, and then my husband, about how I was truly feeling on the inside (for example, I did not respect his leadership or share my anger), I needed to share it with another mature person.

Honesty is messy. It is a gift to have an objective, mature person that can help you discern what God is telling you. Honesty without boundaries can be destructive. Isolating yourself out of shame, I learned, is equally destructive. The truth in love, as Scripture teaches, is powerful.

**Third, take personal responsibility for your life.** One of the most important lessons of all was realizing that nobody is responsible for me except me. I do not blame Pete for what happened to me. Up to that point in our married life, I had

unconsciously given responsibility for my life to him. I had not been forthright in declaring my wishes, needs, desires, and goals. I was so caught up in the image of a "good Christian pastor's wife" that I never wanted to appear difficult.

Many women, in particular, are frustrated because their needs and desires are secondary to their husband, their children, and their ministry. Their potential in God is suffocated. This is a tragedy.

**Fourth, learn to stop over-functioning.** The spouse of any leader is in a very unique position. The responsibilities and demands of a leader naturally puts the leader in the spotlight and the center of attention. This leads to the spouse's life revolving around him or her. This is not healthy.

You then, as the spouse, are in the vulnerable position of making your needs secondary the leader's goals and life. As I read once: "To live unfaithfully to yourself is to do others great damage."

My husband was able to do so much beyond his own human limits because of all I was carrying in our home and as a parent (beyond my limits of what was healthy). I was doing double parenting duty, not taking time for myself, and compromising my own marriage vision. In short, I over-functioned with our family so he could under-function.

I have learned not to over-function and to let my husband bear consequences for his decisions and choices. This has matured and changed him.

Let me ask you: What can be more important for a leader than the quality of his or her marriage? Scripture makes it clear we are to minister out of our lives. Yet the reality is few of us invest the time, energy or resources necessary to have marriages worth emulating.

The "deadness" in you and your marriage is an indicator that something is desperately wrong. God wants to bring about change.

Have the courage to feel and be honest. Start with yourself, then with God and then with your spouse. "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (Jn. 8:32).

*For more information on this radical approach to discipleship, read The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives (Zondervan 2003) and Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (Nelson, 2006) by Pete Scazzero. You can find these books and other related resources at [www.emotionallyhealthy.org](http://www.emotionallyhealthy.org).*





Article by Geri Scazzero

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