

From Section 6: Living within God's Good Limits: Making a Plan

*"Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance." Psalm 16:5-6*

Ministry Potluck:

11 Tips for Balancing Your Ministry and Family Life Inside the Church Doors

Potluck Sundays! Yum! Yum! At least, my kids certainly thought so. There was rarely anything green and vegetable-like to eat, and usually their favorite macaroni cheese and hot dogs, not to mention the desserts. They sat with their kid friends and we sat with our adult friends and it was a good time had by all. In honor of fellowship and (lack of green) food fun, I present you with 10 tips on balancing ministry and family life, over at church.

1. Cooking in Front of a Studio Audience

One of the great benefits for each ministry family to come to their own version of balance, is that it provides different godly examples for all the families in your congregation. Remember: nourishing the congregation isn't just through the preaching from the pulpit. It's also observing your husband leading and caring for his particular wife and his particular kids. There's going to be some people who will be so encouraged by looking at how Mark loves me and leads our family. And there will be others who will be far more encouraged by looking at the example of another elder/pastor in our church and how he cares for his family. It helps the congregation know that there's also not going to be just one cake recipe for being godly families within the church, either.

2. Some Food Doesn't Taste Good, No Matter How You Cook It

After 30 years in ministry here at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, I can say that Mark and I had learned a pretty decent balance between ministry and marriage. But there are some things even after all these years, even after we've done the best we can, that is just hard. It's not because we're doing them wrong; it's just because it's what they are. I don't think I will ever enjoy sitting alone most Sundays in the pew. That doesn't make it wrong. It's part of us choosing to be in the ministry of him preaching to the congregation.

My husband's study is on the second floor of our house. And while there is a separate staircase that goes directly up to that study, there are dozens of people other than my husband in our house almost every single day, able to hear almost everything going on in every other part of the house. This makes it hard when I am vacuuming or playing music and he is trying to record a podcast. When I'm having a hard day and feel like crying, I have to think about where in the house I can go and not be heard. There are many times people don't use Mark's special office staircase, but come right into the regular part of the house. Privacy is not high in commodity here, and it rarely has been.

Sometimes I wish his study was over at the church and we didn't have so many people in our household all the time. Sometimes I'd like a bit more privacy. But we both agree that what we've chosen to do is best for what God has called us to do. So though sometimes I don't always like the "taste," of so little privacy, I would rather eat it than not. We do come back to this topic from time to time when I am overwhelmed. Mark is always willing to figure out a new way to use our house so that I feel comfortable in it. But so far, every time we both have come to agree that this way is best.

So, what do you do with the food that don't taste good even when it's cooked right? You season them! Butter, sugar, salt, and cream can make almost anything taste good. Putting spiritual seasoning on the things in ministry that you know you have to eat, but don't like, helps, too. Seasonings are thankfulness for all of the ministry that is taking place in that second for study. Remembrance of all the times those same men invading my house are the ones who brought in my groceries or helped me do some other chore that I needed help with. In sharing the house as we have, these men have become like my sons. And don't forget the seasoning of eternity: remembering that these little inconveniences we suffer we know now can bear eternal fruit.

3. Make Good Plans, But Expect Emergency Substitutions

More times than not, Mark and I know what his schedule is and can plan around it. I typically know what his office hours are, what nights elders' meetings going to be, when he's going to be preaching and prepping his sermons when he travels to speak at conferences and the other parts of his schedule that are very predictable. I have a pretty good sense of how many hours a week he is going to spend at the office and out of the office in ministry-related duties. It helps to be realistic about what this regular schedule looks like.

Together, we need to decide if it's too much or if it's a good fit for our family. And when we make the decision that it's a good fit, even though sacrifice will be involved, it's important that we can be, or ask God to help us become, cheerful about that reality. Nagging and complaining about the basic lay of ministry land that cannot be fixed by shifts in schedules or better communication, points to the question of whether ministry is a good fit or not.

No one likes to feel that they are the reason why their husband quit the ministry, but us being basically cheerful about what her husband is called to do is part of what her husband is called to do. Without it, he cannot come in the gospel to the church and certainly before God. It's a terribly difficult conversation to have, but one that is very needed. And sometimes it does turn out that a few more schedule shifts make all the difference. But sometimes marriage -shaped ministry, means stepping down from being a pastor and continuing to be a part of the church as a regular family.

Cheerful realism about your husband's calling no doubt will also include the last-minute adds to his schedule. This is hardest when your husband is the only pastor and they're not even any lay elders to help him. It's the difference between being a sole practitioner OB/GYN doctor who is responsible for delivering every baby in his practice in contrast to a practice of partners. Somebody has to be on call 24 seven. Emergencies and other after-hour needs can't help but arise. And if your husband is on his own (without other pastors on staff or a plurality of elders), guess who all of these needs fall upon?

This is another aspect of the ministry that you need to carefully consider for the health of your husband's ministry and your family. On one hand, pray for God to raise up others who can help cover these contingencies, so they don't fall all on your husband. Be wise about the impact frequent unscheduled meetings or visitations are having on your family. Try to see if there's some way these can be moved to regular business hours or at least more convenient times for your family, such as after the kids have gone to bed instead of right during the middle of dinner time.

Get the advice of other pastors. Find out what they do to juggle these unscheduled calls. But on the other hand, ask God to grow a cheerful heart in you that encourages your husband to help those in need and that trust God will help you and your family in his absence.

4. Sharing the Load, Training New Staff

The encouragement of other ministry couples on the outside can go a long way in helping your husband and you persevere under the ministry load yourself. But sometimes the ministry load itself can change and change in ways that not only make what your husband does more doable and share the support you give him but makes for a stronger church. What tonic could do this? Does it sound more like snake oil than a real possibility to you? Well, if 30+ years in ministry has shown me anything, what I'm speaking of is no snake oil. It comes down to our husbands equipping members of the church to share the load, as pastors, deacons, and deliberate disciplers/encouragers of one another.

For example, your husband is called to feed God's people with God's Word. But as he's feeding the sheep, he can be training others to learn how to feed the sheep, too. Does he lead the public worship services every week? He can begin to train others to lead those services well, too.

He is supposed to get to know the members so he can know how to lead them and love them well. He can encourage them to get to know each other through deliberate, transparent conversations at church and by inviting each other into their homes for hospitality.

Your husband will always have a special calling to serve your church, as pastor. But that doesn't mean he is supposed to be the only one who does this. The New Testament is filled with admonitions of how God's people are to build each other up with God's word and in love. Even in the Old Testament, you see Jethro encouraging his son-in-law, Moses, to train up men under him to help bear the weight of leading the people.

Do you see how there is training potential for almost everything our husbands do? They can encourage and equip the congregation to care for each other in many of the same ways as he is caring for them. This biblical strategy helps the church grow strong and thrive. It also grows the church's compassion for the ir pastor as they strive to build one another up, and see how complicated it can be.

Raising up a well-equipped church is not only best for the church, but it's best for the pastor and his family, too. It helps them be able to thrive even under the pressures of the ministry. It moves the church away from the pastor being the sole source of spiritual growth to him being the catalyst for spiritual growth within the church and frees him up to care well for his family even as he is caring well for the church.

5. Changing Portion Sizes

Sometimes ministry swirls fall so frequently outside of regular office hours that there just isn't room for another twirl time for your husband and you (or your family). This is especially true for those men who spent a lot of time counseling. Two things that our pastors have done here at CHBC has been to encourage members who want to be counseled to take time off of work to meet during normal business hours. They wouldn't ask a doctor to meet them after business hours, and so in the same way, they can ask for time off for an appointment for counseling. (Of course, I'm not talking about emergencies. That's a completely different matter.)

But if they do have regular counseling time scheduled outside of normal office hours, or even a special obligation, such as they lead youth group on Friday nights, they have been given extra time off during normal office hours, such as a Friday morning or a Monday morning. This has been a great way to care for those in need of their time after normal office hours while replenishing time available with their wives/family.

6. Change in Venue, Change in Menu

Changes in staff, changes in congregation size, changes to another church. These are just three of the common changes your family will deal with in the ministry. And with each change, comes a time of transition. Be patient with each other, especially when the changes are fresh. Expect these changes to come with a heavier workload as your husband is learning how to cope with it. I like to say that there are "places where we visit and places where we live." That is, when we are in a transition time, our husband's extra work hours are fine during a reasonable period of adjustment and we need to help them navigate our family through this unusual season, but it's important that it doesn't become the long-term norm. If no reasonable end is in sight, then we should pray and work together for a change for the better.

And if your change is a move to a new church, it helps to remember that it's more than just ministry that has changed. Your whole family will be adjusting to new friends, a new community, a new culture, and even a new language. Be extra patient with each other as you make your new to new-normal. And, beware of blaming everything hard you might be experiencing on the church when really there are so many other changes that are making life different. Keep connected with old friends as you work your way to new friends. Find other families with kids the same age as your kids for play dates. Get recommendations from others as to where to shop or go to the doctor. Getting these basics to life in place can help you establish your family more quickly in your new setting.

7. You, A Church Junior Chef

The smaller the church or the more classic the church culture, the more likelihood there is that the pastor's wife may find herself being expected to be a leader of a ministry or being asked to be a leader of a ministry. The benefits as well as the costs of you being a leader of a ministry in the church where your husband is pastor can be great. Go about this very carefully!

The Benefits

The benefit of you being a leader in a ministry, such as Children's Ministry, Women's Ministry, is it provides other church members an opportunity to see you humbly support and look to your husband and the other elders for the vision for that ministry. And, as someone who probably understands your husband's vision for that ministry better than anyone else (just because of your proximity to hand and years of knowing his heart) you're in a great position to help that ministry be shaped by his vision even though he's not currently part of it.

If you're a small church, you can be a great encouragement to your husband to know you will be an instrumental part of shaping that ministry in a way that will be edifying to others and in line with his vision. With so few hands-on deck, you may be one of the few people, especially in the early days of his ministry, that he knows he can have confidence in the direction it's going spiritually and theologically. If you're in a church with what I call a classic church culture that very well expects a pastor's wife to tackle Children's Ministry or Women's Ministry, again, you being an integral part of the leadership of that ministry can help your husband know what's going on and do a better job of leading it as he informs your leadership.

The Costs

As great as these benefits might be, the costs for pastors' wives in leadership positions can be even greater. Finding a ministry-family balance gets far harder with two ministry leaders with busy ministry schedules in the family. It also can perpetuate the idea that the pastor's wife is the unpaid, extra member of staff the church gets when they call their pastor. It can encourage members to see themselves more as consumers who receive benefits from the church's ministries but do not seek leadership or ownership of them.

8. The Wisdom of a Waiting Period for Wives

Pastors and their wives need to think extremely carefully about these costs and benefits before they encourage their wives to take on ministry leadership. This is especially true when they are brand-new to the church. There is so much they don't know about the church or the members. To jump straight into ministry without knowing the dynamics can be pastoral suicide. Far better for you and your husband to have a response on hand for those eager to see you take on ministry leadership soon after your family comes to the church. Something like, "thank you so much for asking me, but the best way I can serve you right now is to help my family get settled in well and take some time to get to know the church before I assume any sort of leadership. And I sure would appreciate your prayers for our family during this transition time."

This waiting period may seem like a luxury that pastors of small churches and especially church plants feel like they cannot afford. But remember: it's always easier to add something in later than it is to pull back. Finiteness is something that's not going to go away even with the pastor's wife taking on a leadership position. Fill these first needs, the new needs are going to come and take their place... Rapidly.

Keep your head and think carefully about what will be best for the church in the long term. If you're in a church plant, you are probably starting out with a small team of others who you know. The pastor's wife filling a leadership role in this circumstance is not the same thing as a pastor's wife filling a leadership role in a church that is already been active. She, as well as your whole family, is already known to the whole team.

One of the most helpful things that your pastor husband and/or the elders can do for both you and the church, if you are considering a leadership position, is to formally ask you to fill that position. This helps ensure that your husband and elders are thinking through your fitness for that leadership position as well as carefully considering whether the time this position will require of you is a good fit, given your even more important role in supporting your husband as wife and mother. This also makes it clear to the church that you are being asked to take this position because the elders'/congregation's desire this, not just because you're married to the pastor.

If you do take on a key leadership role within a ministry at your church, always be on the lookout for others who you can train up to do what you do. You want to always be working yourself out of a job, even if you keep the job. This is a great model for the rest of the church and it strengthens the church to care well for its members. And, it leaves you in a more flexible position should the needs of your husband and family change and you need to step down.

9. Sous Chef Extraordinaire as a Church Member

You help your husband's ministry thrive simply by striving to keep you make with the other members in your church. You try to attend the worship services regularly, you try to raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and help others, just like all the other members. You try to encourage other members of the church to grow in their knowledge of God and to live out their life for him and each other in their lives. You pray for each other and you care for each other's needs. You give support the ministry of the church. You seek to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, just like the other members.

How does this help your husband's ministry thrive? First of all, because you are doing the very things that helps the Body of Christ grow. The more members of your church deliberately tried to live out the church covenant the stronger your church will be. Second of all, because as you are doing these things, you become a second set of eyes and ears and hands and feet within the congregation, living out the covenant in a knowledgeable way.

Few men or women in your congregation understand your husband's good plans for growing your local church better than you, simply because you are so closely connected to your husband. This gives you a wonderful opportunity to help others understand better what he has in mind by your example and in your conversations. And it may also be a way for your husband to learn through your experiences, how he needs to better clarify or guide congregation in these good plans.

This is especially true among the women in your congregation, I have found. Out of carefulness, women do not have the same opportunity for regular, one to one, deep relationship with my husband or any pastor of the church. There may be plenty of conversations that comes with a couple that meets with my husband or another pastor. Or, there may be counseling sessions with a husband and wife or at least with a single woman and a woman counselor meeting together with one of the pastors. There is plenty that can be shared in these kinds of meetings. But nonetheless, me being a woman serving and encouraging other women in our church, simply as another member, has been extremely helpful to my husband better understanding the women of the church and trying to care for them well.

The importance of this, seemingly simple and basic form supporting my husband at church became clear within the first six months of our marriage. We were having one of our "fun" disagreements in which I was sharing a problem and wanted sympathy and he was trying to fix it.

We had made it past the argument phase and the silent treatment phase and the tearful phase and it come last to the heart-to-heart reconciling phase – – that point when you stop being mad or hurt that the other person isn't like you and you get to explain without judgment what you were thinking or feeling. It was at that point I told Mark: "I don't need you to fix it. I don't want you to tell me what to do. I just want you to hug me." He was shocked. He thought about it for a minute, then said, "Do you mean to tell me that when I'm preaching to a congregation, that I should tell half the congregation what to do (the men) but I should just go hug the other half (the women)?" he asked. I laughed and, but said, "Maybe." He laughed, too.

Neither one of us have forgotten that conversation and it's importance. Mark needed help understanding how better to pastor women and I could help him do that. Many times since that day, his ministry to them has been helped by me simply being a woman among the other women in our church. Sometimes, it's helping them better understand him. Other times, it's helping him understand them.

A Plain Ole Person

Another way just being a faithful church member helps your husband's ministry is it shows to the rest of the congregation that you are no different from them in what you're called to do, you need grace to do all this being just a plain old person. But a plain old person in a high-profile position. It's so good for others to see you living under the authority of the elders and within the finite limits of your life under the loving care of your husband. You need God's Word just like everyone else. You're not superwoman and you're not supposed to be.

If the elders have set limits on how frequently someone is to serve in Children's Ministry in order to make sure they are getting well fed themselves, you live within those limits, too! Perhaps you're a great Children's Ministry teacher. Perhaps you are your church's BEST Children's Ministry teacher. Perhaps you are your church's ONLY Children's Ministry teacher. Just because you're the pastor's wife that doesn't mean you have the spiritual strength to miss most Sundays preaching in order to teach the kids.

Perhaps you and your husband agree that there's time in your schedule to meet up with one or a few ladies in a discipleship relationship, but there's not time to meet up with twelve, then you live within that

limit. It doesn't matter that you're the pastor's wife and perhaps most every woman in the church would like to meet up with you. You are called to be a faithful member, caring for your husband and your family number one; and pouring into the lives of other members, number two. Not to mention you might have a job, number three, or other obligations, number four. You are to be faithful with what you can do. You do get to model finiteness, not infiniteness.

These are just two ways pastors' wives are prone to sacrifice too much. Seek out good limits with your husband and live within them. You cannot be a strong church by yourself. You can only be one faithful member among many.

10. Surprise!

Acting like a only faithful member can be surprising to other members. Especially in cases where there is sensitive information your husband knows about them or they want him to know. Many times, members have come up to me and begin talking about their personal issues in a way that assumes my husband has shared with me everything they've shared with him. When I look like I have no idea what they're talking about, they're a bit taken back. I explain to them that I'm just another member like them. My husband only rarely shares confidential conversation with me.

Sometimes, people are a bit disappointed that I don't know what's going on. But mostly, it gives them a respect for Mark's leadership. It's a reminder that my husband is their pastor, not me. He's the one that they were going to for counsel of the special nature. It is not unless they share those things with me, then I will be giving them counsel. Only if they ask my husband to share with me (and he feels it will be not too much of a burden for me to bear) would he share their problems with me.

There are also times when church members come to me first with the question and more likely with the complaint to pass onto my husband, treating me more like his personal secretary or another staff member than just the woman he's married to. In cases like this, we have found it very helpful for me to say something like, "This sounds like a really important matter, but I'm not going to be much help to you in this. I think it'll be far more helpful if you talk to my husband or one of the other elders. They're the ones who will know how to think this through."

I say this even if I might have some good thoughts on the matter because it helps church members treat me like another church member and it helps them know that they should go to their pastor (even though sometimes he seems a little scarier than me to talk to). This allows me to be a part of teaching other church members not to complain about an issue, but to go directly to their leaders with their concerns. This is my favorite way of being a faithful church member who encourages my husband's ministry, but it is surely an important one.

11. Quitting the Restaurant Business

Sometimes ministry is too much. The sacrifice is no longer a place that you "visit" but where you live and it is affecting your relationship with your husband, your relationship with your kids, your relationship with the church, and even your relationship with God. You've tried and tried; you sought advice; you've made changes; you've been as faithful and as wise as you know how to. But it's still just too much. This is when you and your husband need to talk about whether the ministry he's involved in now, or the ministry in general, is too much for your family.

There have been times in our ministry when Mark has asked me this question: "Is this too much for you? The church can always get another pastor. I am called to love you and care for you first. Do I need to resign and find another kind of job?" I have felt incredibly loved by him for noticing the strain upon me

and choosing me over dear Capitol Hill Baptist Church and all the work he's put into the ministry here. The answer for me each time has been, "no, it's not too much. Let's keep going. Let's work this out."

But through the years, a number of men we know have found that marriage -shaped ministry meant leaving the ministry. Sometimes, because the ministry was not a good fit for them. More often, ministry was not a good fit for their wives. That's why my husband always says to single men headed towards the ministry, "choose your wife carefully. It takes a special wife to be a ministry wife. And you will be her husband before you will be anyone's pastor. Find someone to share the ministry life with you. For once you're married, caring well for her (and your family) will be the biggest, most important shaper of your ministry."

Coming to decide that enough is enough for you and your husband is a huge decision. It's one, in a sense, that should always be on the table. But one that is never come to lightly, never spoken of lightly, and is best arrived at through the wise counsel of others who know you well.