

Marvelous. Messy. Ministry. 40+ Years, Looking Back

This year, 2026, marks forty-four years of marriage and ministry, and thirty-two years of ministry here at Capitol Hill Baptist Church. So, I thought it would be a good time to reflect on our particular version of marvelous, messy ministry. I'm sure there will be some things in your lives that resonate with the things I'm about to share from our marriage in ministry experiences. But I'm just as sure there will be things that do not resonate with your marriage in ministry experiences. My hope is that the Lord might use my reflections upon these past four decades to leave you with a few things to think about and most of all to leave you encouraged that the same God who has been faithful to us every step of the path marked out for us, will be just as faithful to you.

DUKE (1978-1982)

Mark and I met at Duke University through the great Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship that was on campus at that time. The late '70's were the heyday for Inter-Varsity. Lots of great books, great speakers, and great conferences: Knowing God by J. I. Packer, Basic Christianity by John Stott, Urbana Missions Conference, being a few examples.

For me, as someone who became a Christian as a child, but who had very little good teaching either at home or at church, the time at Duke was when I first really understood what discipleship meant and had the opportunity to be deeply grounded in God's Word. It was a very important time for Mark, too. Mark came to Duke already growing as a Christian, but the preaching at the local church where we both attended as well as the teaching and leadership in the Inter-Varsity chapter shaped his theology in some significant ways and set him on a path towards seminary, instead of law school and/or politics. And, I would have to say that that grounding we received in college helped make our relationship with God and study of His Word the bedrock on which we would grow our lives together and weather the storms that were to come, and come far sooner than we imagined.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

So, my first piece of advice to you would be this: there is no one or no thing that can replace or compare to the mighty power of God and His Word. Keep your relationship with Him growing. Don't let the tyranny of the urgent be the pattern of your life that keeps you from finding time to spend with God. In ministry, it is so easy to fill up your life with all sorts of good things and all sorts of urgent needs that you see and coast along on your relationship with God and what you know about Him already from your times in His Word. Don't make a life of coasting. Make a life of building. Make sure you are sitting regularly under the preaching of God's Word. Find time to spend with God. Work together with your spouse to carve out times for you each to grow and strengthen your relationship with the Lord.

Martin Luther once said that theology, which is just Greek for the study of God, is not dry heady stuff but it's how you live and how you die. Study God. Know Him. Be like the godly man-tree in Psalm One whose roots go deep, who bears fruit in every season and does not wither. You will need it all for what life brings.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. How would you describe your time with the LORD right now? Dry or rich?
2. Are there any particular circumstances that make it difficult for you to have a quiet time on your own or regularly hear the preaching of God's Word? If so, can you and your husband think of ways to help you have these times of spiritual nourishment?
3. How has spending time with God and His Word helped you be prepared for times of difficulty?

GORDON CONWELL (1982-1986)

So, Mark and I graduated from Duke, got married, and headed up to Topsfield, Massachusetts, a little town not far from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. This would be our home for the next four years as Mark worked on an M.Div.

And you know how I said those storms were going to hit us a little bit sooner than I thought they might? Well, here they come. We had a pretty rocky start up in Massachusetts. With few good examples of marriage from our own upbringing and with just a little premarital counseling, marriage was a shock, and we had a lot of bumps. Things seemed so hard to us that at one point, about eight weeks into marriage, we decided that God surely was going to take one of us home soon, because there was no way we could continue the way things were going, and divorce was not an option.

Now looking back, I'm not so sure what we went through was harder than what many new-married couples go through. But the thing is, we were the first to get married, we had moved to a new area where we knew very few people, it was very hard to find a good church, Mark was starting full-time school and very involved in classes, and I for the first time in my life, I wasn't a student and hadn't figured out yet what I was supposed to do with this new phase of my life. Then, I got a very bad case of mono which laid me low for months.

What a lot of changes! But at the time, I didn't see all those pieces. To me, it seemed the problem was that I had apparently married an alien who was very occupied in a galaxy far, far away called seminary, and speed of light travel had not yet been invented. There was so much we didn't understand about men and women in general, and about Mark and Connie in particular. And because we were at the bottom of these learning curves, was easy to think everything was difficult only because of marriage aches and pains, compounded by Mark being so involved in seminary studies.

We did begin to figure out some basic things that helped, such as: any "discussion" that begins after 9 PM must be tabled to the next day and other basic ground rules (for us, we knew if we were going to have a disagreement, and it started after nine it would almost always lead to an argument and tears. When if we would only wait to be a bit more rested, the outcome usually was much more productive and much less emotional).

And, Mark was beginning to learn being a student as a single person is a very different from being a student as a married person. He decided to slow down his study pace and finish in four years instead of three years. Also, he brought me into his studies by reading aloud to me some of the things he was studying so that I could learn along with him. And I audited some seminary classes. These helped some of my loneliness and helped me grow in some of the ways he was growing.

But the truth is, when we got married, we didn't JUST leave behind with our lives as single people. We left behind so many other aspects of life, too. We were living in a new part of the country. We were looking for a new church. We were looking for new friends. We were looking for other married couples. We were looking at a new way of life -- Mark and seminary, and me trying to figure out what the world I was going to do. And really, when we began to establish new versions of these lifelines into our life in Massachusetts, suddenly, our marriage improved. It wasn't because we became such quick learners in the school of marriage and "fixed all our problems." It was because the whole problem wasn't marriage.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

When you go through a transition remind yourself of all the different things that are changing and don't blame it all on the ministry or your husband or your location or whatever it is that you are upset about in

your new situation. Be aware of these different strands and which ones have gone missing in your transition. It can be super easy to place so many demands on a single lifeline, such as your marriage, that can be unreasonable, unpractical, or even untenable. Yes, your new situation will absolutely mean you will need to work together even more to help each other thrive. There will be different ways you do things to help you through this transition time. You can be huge supports to each other.

But chances are your marriage can't be a complete replacement for all those other lifelines that were so firmly and helpfully established in your be established in your new situation. Stick close to God and His Word.

He is the one lifeline that is always there and can bear all things and help YOU bear all things, even this transition. Pray and ask God to grow new versions of these lifelines into your new situation. Strategize and work together to establish them, and most of all, be patient as they develop in your new situation. This will help you be kind to each other and will help you have hope on days your discouraged at what you used to have but don't have yet. Think a YEAR!

And, as you transition into this new situation, establishing these new lifelines (work schedule, friends, church, culture, maybe even language, if you're going overseas, etc.) you may very well depend a little bit more on the lifelines you established from where you just came from. Not as a permanent fix, but as a help and encouragement as you build in those more permanent lifelines right there where you are settling. So, you may have more phone calls with close friends back in back where you lived before as you are still in process of finding and developing strong friends right where you are. And I would suggest both you and your husband doing this, and even regularly scheduling telephone conversations with old friends who know you well. You can even come up with a set of questions you want them to ask you, such as:

1. What is hard for you, your husband, your kids, etc. since we last talked?
2. What has been something good that has happened?
3. What is different from where you were before?
4. How many transitions can you identify?
5. What have you figured out to help your family through any of these?
6. How has God shown His faithfulness to you through these?
7. How can I pray for you and your family?

You want a set of questions that help you identify the difficulties, see the good things, address the hard things, and always reflect on God's goodness and faithfulness, even through the hardest issues.

I like to think of this process of transition being "leaving and cleaving." You want to be putting more of your heart in your new situation and cleave there. You don't want to leave your heart in your last situation. That being said, leaving and cleaving is often more of a process than a "one and done" event. You can find strength from the people/place you left as you are growing into your current situation. It is sort of tricky to both get strength from the old and start transferring your affection. But may help to treat your friends who know you as those who send you out and treat you sort of as their supported workers is there helping you establish new ties where you're going.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Have you ever been tempted to blame a difficult transition on just one aspect when there are really more than one element at play? What aspect did you blame? What other aspects were at play?
2. Are you facing a transition right now or about to face one? What lifelines are changing/will change with this transition? (Friends, church, culture, etc.) Which ones are the hardest for you? Are there any

lifelines from your previous situation that can support you as you slowly get established in your new situation?

3. How has God shown Himself faithful even through difficult aspects of transition?

THREE BIG CHANGES: CHURCH, CHILD, and CARL

There were three other big changes that happened in Massachusetts that would have a big impact on our lives: Mark became involved in his first pastoral position, we had our first child, and Mark met Carl Henry who would influence the direction of the rest of our lives really.

CHURCH

Mark's first pastoral position was co-pastoring a tiny little church plant in our tiny little town of Topsfield Massachusetts. It was a very friendly situation in many ways. There was really no gospel witness in our little town and a number of evangelicals who really wanted to leave behind the little churches they were involved in and covenant together as a gospel preaching church. And even though I was a pastor's wife for the first time at that point, it certainly did not feel that way. We were all just friends gathering together as a church on Sunday. So easy and so few expectations on me other than what would be expected of any member.

But it's where I first began to feel the rub of having my husband be pastor in terms of parenting in the pew on my own. We met in the City Hall and there certainly were no childcare facilities and since we were the only one with the child, I was always in childcare. We finally figured out a way to set up a baby monitor so that I can listen from the next room only to find out the next day that the monitor frequency was the same as the liberal church's wireless mic system and that in the middle of their service Mark's voice suddenly blared through with his preaching. Oops! So much for creative ingenuity coming to the rescue!

CHILD

Our dear little child also had an impact on our ministry in another way. We had had pretty much an open-door policy at our house and especially the younger members felt free to come over any time, assuming they would be greeted with a full welcome. But now with our little girl, my energy was divided, and I was not nearly as available. There were many grumbles from these younger members who did not understand why even when our daughter was down for a nap it might not be a good time for them to come over. Some of the grumbles were such that they were never resolved during our time there. It was hard to be misunderstood. It was hard for others to think I didn't care as much now that we had our daughter, when that wasn't true at all. We knew though that my primary job was going to be using what energy I had to care for our family even if that meant I didn't have as much to give to others in the way I used to. It was not too many years later that one of those younger members reached out to me when she had her children and then understood our decisions so much better. She apologized and it was a very sweet moment.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

This is just one example of the ways your family needs may change what you are able to give others. But, even though it changes what you're able to give, it doesn't mean you have stopped giving. First of all, by my husband encouraging me that it was good in right to set up a new boundary that was reflective of our new family needs, I was teaching this young member something. We like to teach by yeses, but we can teach by no's as well. She was learning about good leadership from a husband to care well for family. It was hard to be misunderstood, but it was a good model, and she remembered it for years... and so have I. I like to say pastors teach not just by preaching but also by their lives. This was one of those instances when Mark and I were teaching by our lives. We are finite and we are called to be good stewards

according to the best wisdom we have from God's Word, form our best counsel we seek, and from the best we can figure out.

And at the end of the day, we stand before the Lord with those decisions, and we trust Him to bear good fruit from them in our lives and even out into the lives of others, even those who don't understand. These decisions for our families' good are just the beginning of many times when we make decisions that were not appreciated or understood by others. Some of these were later further understood as good and right. Many of these we've had to entrust to our good Creator and bear being misunderstood. It's our job to respond even to those who misunderstand with 1 Corinthians 13 love. Welcome to Marvelous. Messy. Ministry!

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Have you experienced a life change that has changed what your involvement in ministry looks like? Did members of your church have a hard time understanding? How did you help them understand your new limits?
2. Where do you/your family especially feel their "finiteness" when it comes to needs the church has? What helps you respond in love, even when your ministry changes are misunderstood by the congregation?
3. Have you ever seen the Lord use the limits on your life help others learn how to live well themselves?

CARL

Okay, that takes care of those first two big things but there is the third one: Carl Henry. You may not know that Carl Henry was extremely important theologian during most of the 20th century. He was one of the few thoughtful, well-educated, academic theologians who stood upon the inerrancy of God's Word when so many were shooting holes through that idea. Much of the evangelical world true to the gospel today stands in part upon the shoulders of his good academic work.

Needless to say, when Carl Henry came to speak at Gordon Conwell, the students, including Mark, were in awe of him and his good work. What a privilege to hear him in person! One thing that I appreciate about my husband is his willingness to treat people as people regardless of their accomplishments or positions. So, he went up to Dr. Henry and ask for time to talk with him. The two hit it off quite well and over the years became regular correspondents and friends.

But perhaps the most important thing from this first meeting at Gordon Conwell was that Dr. Henry encouraged Mark to get a PhD and teach historical theology at one of the Southern Baptist seminaries, especially encouraging him towards Southern in Louisville. At this time, there was a lot of liberal influences at that seminary. The only way to study or to teach good theology there, at that time, was to study/teach historical theology. So, Dr. Henry was encouraging my husband to be a little bit like a Trojan horse and seek to become a professor of historical theology at Southern and so be an influence for the gospel there among the men training to be the future pastors and southern Baptist churches. This idea resonated with Mark, and this became the new target. Not pastoring. but professoring to impact future pastors.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Don't just stand in awe of people whose books you've read or whose talk you've listened to and been encouraged by. (And that definitely includes my husband, Mark, if he is one in that category for you.) They are just plain, ole people, and chances are, they are plain, ole GODLY people, and they probably have wisdom to share with you. And they need friends and encouragement, too. Chances are you will encourage them every bit as much as they will encourage you.

As a funny aside, it is this attitude that led my husband to invite J.I. Packer to dinner at our humble little house when he was visiting Gordon Conwell. I'll never forget the phone calls about two hours before dinner from Mark... "So, do you think we could have someone over for dinner tonight? What about J.I. Packer?" I must say I was a bit nervous. But I also must say, sure enough he was just a plain, ole godly man. And he also became a good friend for many, many years.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Is there anyone you respect and whose ministry has benefited you that you might encourage through an email or in person?
2. Is there anyone who you might be shy to reach out to because they seem too "important"?

SBTS (1986-1988)

(Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)

This new plan to teach at Southern needed a PhD and more. It also meant we needed time at a Southern Baptist institution and at a “real” Southern Baptist church. Up to this point, I grew up Presbyterian, (though through my reading Scripture was baptistic even then), we both attended a Presbyterian church at Duke because it had the best preaching (we weren’t members), attended a Congregational church in our little town of Topsfield, and then planted a little Southern Baptist Church, though it looked nothing like a standard Southern Baptist Church. And Gordon Conwell was interdenominational seminary, with far more Presbyterians than Baptists. In truth, the last, really Southern Baptist thing Mark had done was briefly attend a Southern Baptist church his first year at Duke. Given all this, why in the world would a Southern Baptist institution ever want to hire someone who seemed to be so washed clean of his distinctly Southern Baptist associations. So, off to Louisville, Kentucky, Southern seminary, and my first real Southern Baptist Church it was to establish ties.

Our time at Southern was very brief. Mark was able to complete the coursework and his thesis in a year and a half. But what an extremely important year and a half it was! For me, I was introduced to a whole new culture within the Southern Baptist Church we attended. Back then, healthy churches were extremely scarce if not nonexistent in the Louisville area. Praise the Lord that is not the case today! I knew I had entered a new world when I went out to lunch with the wife of a seminary couple we had met at church. After I excitedly told her the story how I became a Christian, she responded with, “Yes, but when did you become Southern Baptist?” I thought to myself “Wow... This is different.” Part of me was turned off by this. It seemed like the emphasis was in the wrong place. And I don’t think I was entirely wrong.

But here’s the thing, she was seeking honest friendship, and she was asking an honest question. I had two choices: I could decide “She doesn’t get me at all, and I don’t know that we can really be much of friends given how different we are and the perspectives we come from.” Or, I could decide: “Here somebody very different for me, but she seeking to be an honest friend. let’s be friends together and learn from each other.” I am so thankful to say that Mark and I both took the second approach. This couple retained their differences in perspective in many ways throughout our whole relationship. And I’m sure they felt the difference in our perspective, too.

But we learned from each other, and we grew from knowing each other. And we served and loved each other. It was so important for me to see how much I could learn from someone different from me. It was important for me to see that I can be friends with someone so different for me. And that friendship isn’t just about being the same it’s also about growing from each other.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

This has been an important lesson that has served me well over all of our years, especially our years in churches. To not just look for and get close to the people most like me, but to see what I can learn and even possibly what I can teach to people who are not like me. I’m not saying that there might not be someone more like me whose shared perspective leads to an even closer friendship. But what I am saying is, there’s pretty much no one that I cannot learn from and cannot be an encouragement to. God has created them, and He has made their lives in my life’s cross. God can bring something good, even something quite from someone who is not like me.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Do you have friends who are more like you or different from you?
2. How has each kind of friend been helpful?
3. What helps you be friends with people who are not like you?

ANOTHER FRIENDSHIP

The other extremely important friendship that came out of this time was Mark becoming friends with Al Mohler. Al Mohler was a PhD student at Southern the same time Mark was doing his ThM. They became fast friends who spurred each other on theologically and encouraged each other to play some part in helping bring spiritual health to churches, pastors, and future pastors. It's of friendship that has for much good fruit and is lasted even through to today.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

It would be easy to dismiss a year and a half as a blink of an eye and friendships made during that time of such a short expiration date that you might not pour into where you are or who you are with. But you never know how the Lord might use that friendship and even bigger ways and for even more years than you could ever imagine. Never use length of time as a way to value the worth of a relationship. Pour yourself in to where you are and who is around you. Every day is a gift. Every person is a life filled with good works prepared for them and you may be part of God's plan to use that person with those good works to do amazing things. I would say Al's and Mark's relationship has been something of a lifeline, especially during the days when the SBC, in general, and Southern, in particular, was being transformed and a bit of a battlefield. They have helped each other in so many ways.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Is the place you live/church you are see a lot of short-term residents? Or, have you ever had a short-term move? Are you tempted to avoid making deep relationships in these circumstances? What might help you establish friendship in these circumstances?
2. Can you think of a time when you had a short-term friend that has had a big impact upon you? What was that big impact?

STRONG-WILLED WARS

While I was getting use to the Southern Baptist world on the outside, I was getting used to life with a very strong-willed little girl inside our home. I was grateful that the transition to life in Louisville was so much easier for us on the marriage front because we needed all the unity and understanding we could get as we tackled the force of nature that was our child. I remember one afternoon after church we put her in her bed to take a nap and told her she must stay there. For the next three hours Mark and I tag teamed putting her back on the bed and telling her to stay there.

It was a very reasonable request. It was nap time. She was tired. But in her mind, it wasn't time for a nap, it was time for World War Three. It felt like she would never obey, but we just kept putting her back on my bed and telling her to stay there over and over and over. At last, she did obey.

Our spicy little girl continued to do things like this OFTEN on for many years. No, when she grew up it wasn't staying on her bed for a nap. But it was other things. Few of the things in themselves were a big deal. After all, will world peace be impacted if she didn't stay on her bed during nap time? No way. But our daughter, herself, would say that one of the most important things that we did for her was to follow through. When we told her to do something, and it was reasonable, we followed through until she did it. If she spoke disrespectfully to us, and she knew she wasn't supposed to, we addressed the behavior. While ago we had a conversation about this, she said "Thank you so much for being consistent with your

discipline of me. I can't imagine how I would've turned out without it! And make sure you tell other parents to love their little, strong-willed kids with loving correction, too. It's the kindest thing you can do for them."

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

First of all, know the difference between asking your child to do something and telling your child to do something. Asking looks like: "Would you like to set the table, or would you like to pick up your toys?" Telling is like "Would you please set the table or would you please pick up your toys." Don't ask something that you want them to do. Ask them something when they have a choice. Tell them when it is something you want them to do and there is no choice. And then, when you do tell them to do something, make sure you follow through and that they do it. Be very careful about what you tell your children to do, because when you tell them to do it, you need to make sure you have strength to follow through. And do beware of the trend to do away with having children obey you, but simply persuade them that what you want them to do is actually what they want to do. Your discipline of children is what builds self-discipline in them later. Asking kids to obey you can be "gentle" and authority can be good. Give these gifts to your children that will last a lifetime!

Why am I telling you this? Isn't this supposed to be a talk on ministry life? Why am I bringing kids and discipline into this? Because one of the three things our husbands are called to do to be qualified to be a pastor/elder and to remain a pastor/elder is to manage their families well. And one of the ways our husbands are going to do that, and we are going to help them do that, is to follow through consistently with discipline. I am not surprised when kids disobey or possibly speak disrespectfully to their parents. But what I am surprised at is how many times parents don't follow through or they don't address behavior. And I'm not saying that if parents address behavior, then immediately their children never disobey or are disrespectful again. I just gave you an example of having to put Annie back on her bed for three hours. And I'm telling you, that was not the last time we had to fight with keeping her on her bed at nap time. I'm just trying to encourage you that consistently addressing a behavior even if it's all day, every day, week after week, month after month, year after year, is one of the best, most loving gifts that you can give your kids. Don't take my word for it. Just ask my daughter at 41! She's one who wanted me to make sure to say this to you!

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Do you have difficulty following through with disciplining your children? What makes it difficult? Is there any way your husband and you can better work together in disciplining your children?
2. Do you mix up "asking" and "telling" your children to do something?
3. Any words of encouragement for others who are facing especially tough discipline battles with their kids?

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND (1988-1994)

With ThM completed, Mark, our daughter, and I boarded a plane and headed to Cambridge, England for the next and final leg of our adventures in schooling. Last stop: a PhD in historical theology, studying about a wonderful Puritan named Richard Sibbes. Now, PhD's in Cambridge are different from American PhD's. There is no classwork there's only a dissertation. You pass or you fail. It's a very all or nothing thing. So, one of the reasons why Mark chose Richard Sibbes was he was such a wonderful example of a man who taught his congregation deeply and pastored them tenderly. This was exactly what Mark hoped to emulate. So, Mark wanted to study Richard Sibbes because he figured even if he did not pass and get a PhD he would've had the opportunity to study a man who would be a great role model. That was something he could count on taking that home with him, whether he had a diploma to put up on the wall or not.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

There are so many outcomes in life that we cannot affect, no matter how hard we try. There are so many outcomes that we pray for, work for, and hope for. But what we can do is squeeze the most out of each day and be faithful with what we've been given. We leave to God that outcome. Fortunately, Mark did passing get his PhD while in Cambridge. But frankly, all those nights when he would read me passages from Bruised Reeds and Smoking Flax did good to his heart and to mine. And I believe Mark really is a different pastor because of who he studied.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Is there any upcoming future event you are hanging your hopes on, but do not have control over?
2. How can you be a good steward of today even as you wait and hope for that future event?

MORE CAMBRIDGE OPPORTUNITIES

But that PhD on Richard Sibbes in Cambridge brought some other opportunities that would be of even greater impact upon our lives. And much of it centered around the church we joined while we were there: Eden Baptist Church. It was there that we experienced for the first time many of the things that you see when you come to Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Long, solid expositional preaching. Gatherings of godly men and women of all ages who love the Lord and sought to encourage one another in discipleship. A board of elders who led the congregation with wisdom and patience.

First, Mark and I simply attended as members. But soon, we had been adopted as a son and daughter by some of the older godly members (Fred and Elizabeth Catherwood), which was especially wonderful for us, as we did not grow up with distinctly Christian parents. Mark then was invited to preach, then later recognized as an elder, and then when he finished his PhD, was voted in as an associate pastor. Mark would tell you that sitting in on those elders' meetings and listening to those seasoned men work through issues with such godliness had a huge impact on his pastoring that has blessed us even to today. Many of the Nine Marks came as a result to what Mark observed, and we enjoyed in our time at this church.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Funny how on your way to doing what you think you're supposed to do, you can wind up learning things "on the side" that significantly change your life in ways you never imagined. The PhD in Cambridge was not the greatest gift in our time there. It was the people, especially the older people, who poured into us and influenced us. Do the work God is giving you to do but learn from the people God is put around you. I know everyone's used to thinking about God's Word and spending time in prayer with God as the two major spirituals food groups by which we grow. But make sure you add God's people in there, too.

The Bible is filled of examples of this third spiritual food group. So many times, it is God's people who are the means of God applying His Word to our lives in a fruitful way.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. What "side" blessings have you seen God bring to you that you never expected?
2. How has God used His people to feed you spiritually?
3. Are there any older Christians who have poured into you? How could you encourage them with how they have blessed you? Could you be an older Christian who could pour into someone else?

KID CHANGE 1

There were two important changes to our family during this time, too. First of all, it got bigger and busier. I gave birth to our son. With Mark busy on his PhD and juggling church responsibilities it would be easy for him to be in the zone until early dinner and back at it after dinner, coming down to eat a distracted meal with us in between. To me it looked obvious that I had more than I could handle, he should see that, and offer to help me without me saying anything. However, it was not that way in his head. I would tell him that I needed help but that he would get in the middle what he was doing, and he would forget what time it was. There was frustration for quite a while as I depended upon his spontaneity to come to my rescue. Then Mark had a idea: he put on his schedule at 5 PM to stop work and asked me if there is anything he could do to be helpful. It's been many years since those days, but you know he still has that on his schedule!

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Spontaneity is wonderful, but it can be overrated. Mark wanted to be helpful. The point did not need to be that Mark thought up the how and when of that helpfulness on his own. Help the helper help you. Learn his strengths and weaknesses. Chances are he wants to help you. You just may have to help him figure out a way to help you. This has come up over and over in our years in ministry. Me expecting my husband to be a mind reader seeing my needs instead of me just humbly explaining in us working together to find a way to both take care of us and to care well for the church.

Also, use encouragement to help your husband rather than nagging, especially in areas where he is weak. After all, even when someone is willing and even sees they need to do more/improve in an area, it may take a while for that to become second nature. If you see your husband trying to help you or be thoughtful in some way, especially in a new way, appreciate his efforts! Mark calls my encouragement "the wind in his sails." He says it's one of the best things I can do for him. And I'm guessing your husband is not too different from mine!

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Are there any areas where you regularly could use your husband's help, have told him that, and yet he keeps forgetting? Or are there areas like that where your husband could regularly use your help, but you keep forgetting? How could you add a prompt into your life to help you each remember those things?
2. Do you rate spontaneity higher than scheduling? Are there ways in which you and your husband could be helped by valuing the benefit of scheduling more?
3. How could you and your husband encourage one another in ways you have tried/succeeded in responding with the help you need from each other?

KID CHANGE 2

Another important family change came through our daughter who, as she grew to school age, became a source of much learning for us. I know I mentioned that she was gifted with a rather strong will. She was also crazy wiggly. We tried to work around the wiggly but sometimes there were some pretty big collisions. Especially around things like catechisms. Young children have minds like steel traps and Mark wisely wanted to capitalize upon that superpower. So, he found a catechism for very little children and started doing it with our daughter. Unfortunately, we didn't know the best way to use a catechism with a very wiggly child. We didn't know it yet, but Annie had dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity, and this was making learning the catechism in the traditional way very difficult for her. We chalked it up to regular childishness and persevered in the catechistical force feeding it seemed to have become. What we called perseverance led to what our daughter later called panic... as in panic attack. The three of us laugh about it now, but not then.

As our daughter's schooling continued, her extra challenges became clear. And as we understood the impact of these upon how she learned, we learned to separate mode from goal. The mode was a catechism. The goal was to teach our child truth. We eventually changed our format to other forms of teaching the same truths that worked better for her. And thanks to these experiences, a very important concept in education began to form that would impact me for many years as I began to write children's curriculum as well as thought about how to teach truth to our own children. I call it the Triple Crown of teaching truth. And the three elements are understandable, enjoyable, and memorable. Teach in a way the kids can understand. Teach in a way that's enjoyable so they want to learn more. And teach with enough repetition that the truth becomes memorable and stays with them.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

I would encourage you to think about those elements as you teach your children. It may not always be possible for all three of those to be part of your teaching. But when they are, I promise you the truths that you long to get in your children will more easily get in the places you want them to go and will stay there longer. Being aware of our daughter's extra challenges also impacted our discipline of her and what we expected of her. We became more discriminating about what we asked of her. Some behaviors are desired, but not necessary. Other behaviors are desired and necessary. Both sets of behaviors might be possible for some children, but not for our daughter. We began to sift through these.

Here's an example: when she was still quite little there were others who were expected to stay seated at the table for very long dinners. While we didn't let her get up and move around freely without being asked, we were aware it would be better if she would be allowed to get up sooner and quietly play in a undistracted way instead of fidgeting at the table. Some of her special needs became lenses to help us continue to discipline her but in a way that understood her.

I bring this up because while not all of us have "clinically diagnosed" special needs children, all of our children have bents that make certain things easier and others harder. It never hurts for us to understand these bents in our children, not to let them "get away with things" that others aren't allowed to get away with, but in order to strategize how to better help them obey and be disciplined without exasperating them. When you make a way for your child to be able to obey you because you are aware of their frame, it does encourage them to want to obey and to try to obey and it's a beautiful display of God's particular care for all His creatures. The same God who knows when every sparrow falls and knows the number of hairs on their heads is displayed in parents who are sensitive to their children and use that sensitivity to beckon them towards the right things. And I would say that this specific care and tenderness helps soften hearts to hear the gospel.

And again, what is this have to do with the ministry? I will once more remind you those qualified to be elders are to manage their households well and this might be a key to helping your husbands manage your household well so that you all might flourish as a family in the ministry.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. What differences do you notice in your children? How do those differences impact how your children learn most easily?
2. Are there ways you can help your child to struggle less and learn in a more enjoyable, effective way?
3. How have you and your husband helped each other understand how to use your children's strengths and weaknesses to improve their ability to learn? Can you think of anyone else who might be a helpful advisor as you seek to teach your child?

GETTING TO CHBC (1993-1994)

(Capitol Hill Baptist Church)

I mentioned that Eden Baptist Church in our experiences there were crucial in formulating the Nine Marks that have become foundational to much of what the Lord has used Mark to do. Much of that formulation came from a positive witness at Eden. But a little bit it came from a negative witness. Eden became a “multi-site” church with three locations during our time there. The senior pastor and Mark, as associate pastor, filled the three pulpits between the two of them every Sunday. Originally, this morning pulpit commute was only to last a little while until each church plant was well-established. But the vision changed and the plan was to be multi-site and for the pastors to continue to preach all three congregations.

Some of the members’ meetings felt like a tug-of-war as the three gatherings had increasingly three different sets of needs. Eden wanted Mark to stay on as associate pastor, but Mark felt strongly against this multi-site model. A church is those who gather together. This was three, separate gatherings, and therefore three separate churches. This did two things: it helped him formulate more of the ideas behind the Nine Marks. And, it set him up to consider Carl Henry’s suggestion in the letter that came around that time.

You see, Carl Henry was a member at a church in Washington, DC called Capitol Hill Metropolitan Baptist Church a.k.a. CHBC before the word Metropolitan got dropped. For years, Carl Henry had been encouraging Mark towards teaching at Southern Seminary in Louisville. But Al Mohler had taken the reins and was doing a heroic job of turning round the seminary and bringing in gospel- centered professors. Mark and his PhD were not needed as a Trojan horse entering the bastions of liberal theology. And on top of this, Carl Henry’s church needed a pastor. The previous pastor had had to step down due to adultery. The church was hurting and searching for what would happen next. It of been dwindling in size and some thought it should just be close down. But there were others, including Dr. Henry, who felt otherwise. Enter Carl Henry’s letter asking Mark if he would consider submitting his name to the pastor search committee. Mark agreed.

The committee was not impressed by Mark on paper. Mark was 10 years younger than anyone who they were interested in. I think they wanted a seasoned superstar. But Mark was headed to the States to do some teaching the summer of 1993 and he offered to come, fill their pulpit and preach. They accepted. Mark preached that Sunday, and suddenly, the committee was impressed. Questions and answers followed. Mark’s heart was turned. He felt like this is where the Lord would have go next.

So, what did Mark do next when he flew back to Cambridge? Did he simply tell me this was it? No, he did not. Along with his robust views on was a healthy church, Mark had grown robust views on what healthy pastor’s family would look like. When he looked at those key passages on qualifications for pastors in 1Timothy 3 and Titus 1, he saw three things that we’ve come to call Marriage-shaped Ministry. Those passages point to overseers/elder/pastors showing three sets of qualities: they NOURISH the church with God’s Word, they FURNISH the church with godly leadership in a godly example, and they FLOURISH their family by managing them well and caring for their needs. Mark was firmly convinced that if this church in Washington, DC was where God wanted him to pastor, then God would also make it a place for his family could flourish.

So, instead of telling me how excited he was and how convinced he was that this is where the Lord would have us go, he asked me if I would be willing to fly to DC check out the area (especially schools for our daughter), meet the church and speak with the pastoral search committee. This would be the next concrete step in knowing if this was God’s will for us.

I cannot tell you how much this meant to me. Mark had always said “A church can always get another pastor, but I am not supposed to get another wife.” He knew my heart was the “bookends” of Proverbs 31: to do my husband good all my days (31:12) and to fear the Lord (31:30). With that ministry-shaped heart in place, he sent me to DC to see if and Capitol Hill Baptist Church I could see away for our marriage and our family to fit the shape of that ministry in a way that we would flourish.

As you might have guessed, this trip, this church, this possibility was quite the sea change from being a professor’s family in Louisville, Kentucky. Yes, I had been a senior pastor’s wife long ago at that tiny little church plant in Massachusetts. And yes, I had been an associate pastor’s wife at Eden Baptist in Cambridge, but in both of those places there were basically no expectations on me. And, we had come up from the ranks having been members and then Mark was recognized as a pastor.

This time everything was different. This was meeting with the pastoral search committee. This was a church filled with people who I didn’t know and who didn’t know me. This felt like the real deal, and I was scared. I had never thought I could be a real senior pastor’s wife, but here I was, going to check it out.

Back in those days there were a lot of “gray hairs,” a few families, and a few college students, a few of which are still members here at CHBC today. Some helpful members drove me around the DC area, checking out schools and other things to see if we could fit here. I believed we could. Yes, there was a lot of crime. But there was a lot of possibilities. And even though I was scared, God gave me a heart of love for these people. Like my husband, I was drawn to them. We took the next steps in pursuing this pastorate.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Mark’s confidence that God’s calling HIM to pastor a particular church would include providing ME and OUR CHILDREN with a good fit was so important! Matter of fact, it was BIBLICAL! And this attitude that the kids and I were the non-negotiable even in the face of a situation he really desired, highlighted his love for us. This was a love that would stop him from even going to DC to CHBC, if need be. And, it was a love that I knew would continue to care for us well, even as we were about to step into it. I especially needed that knowing how scared I was to be a senior pastor’s wife.

Talk through the passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Consider together what it might mean for you in your current situation, or in a future church situation. Come back and review these on a regular basis, especially as your family or your church goes through changes. Flourishing looks different as life changes. Pray and encourage one another. This may be one of the most important things you can do to continue in the ministry for years to come.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. How does it help you to know that God’s calling your husband into ministry also means that the needs of your family help confirm that calling?
2. What kinds of things did you look for/do you look for to help you know if a ministry situation might be a good fit for your family?
3. What does it mean for your family to flourish, even while in the ministry?
4. How can you encourage your husband in his care for you and your family, even as he is also seeking to nourish the church? Are there other ways that you can work together as a couple to flourish your family even more?

SETTLING IN AT CHBC (1994)

(Capitol Hill Baptist Church)

Well, you know how the story ends. We did wind up here Capitol Hill Baptist Church the following summer and have been here ever since. The name of our church changed while we were here, losing that middle word "Metropolitan". But even more importantly, the church changed in essence as well.

Here's some of the ways it has changed:

- Changed from a church of 130 mainly elderly people who joined by going forward to a church (and some of whom were probably not truly converted) to a church with 800 mostly 25–40-year-olds who join through membership classes.
- Changed from a church with a senior pastor only to one with multiple associate and assistant pastors, as well as other pastoral staff.
- Changed from a church led by a few deacons to a church led by many lay and staff elders.
- Changed from a church with short sermons and an hour-long service to a church with hour-long sermons and two-hour-long services.
- Changed from the church with lots of programs to a church with few programs but committed to gathering together for both a Sunday am and Sunday pm service.
- Changed from a church with very few kids and almost no youth group, to lots of kids and a vibrant youth group.
- Changed from a church with a choir, special music, organ, and children's choir to a church led by very mere instrumentation and who IS the choir, even singing the last verse of many songs a cappella.
- Changed from the church who has its covenant hanging on the wall to one who speaks it to one another every month and lives it out every day and deliberate discipleship and care for one another.
- Changed from a church who thought they would close their doors to a church that has grown and has weathered many storms, and who opens their doors to many from around the world to see what a healthy church with a committed congregation and dedicated pastors, looks like. And, who sends out many of their pastors to speak elsewhere and impact other churches even around the world.

These are just some of the changes bring us to the church that gathers at 525 A Street, NE in Washington DC today.

Wow! So much change! Some elements, others desire to emulate. Others will be distinctives of life here at our particular church, with our particular congregation and pastors. I am so grateful for any good changes that have come. Praise God for them all. He gets the glory. After all, we are simply a church of ordinary sinners who all need a Savior and by the grace of God are being transformed slowly but surely into the likeness of that Savior, seeking to faithfully live out God's Word.

GROWING PAINS

But do know that all these changes also have come with growing pains that our family has felt and continues to navigate. Here's some of growing pains we experienced with these changes and hopefully some encouragement for you, too, if you experience them.

CHANGE IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP (especially the change from deacons to elders)

This was one of the most painful times of our time here at CHBC. While many were in favor of this change, there were those who were matted Mark for something completely unrelated and decided to "blackball" the vote by rallying people who were still considered members but had not attended church for quite a while. They succeeded, and the vote failed. Someone who had seem to be our friend turned against Mark and the vote in a very vocal way right before the vote was taken and I left the room in sobs.

I will never forget Mark coming over and sitting with me on our front porch after the failed vote and asking me what should we do? It wasn't that he was in crisis. It was that he could see it was bearing down on me so hard. So, my marriage-shaped ministry husband wanted to know if it was time for us to go. They can get another pastor, but you can't get another husband. I am your husband, first and foremost." The Lord gave grace and as you know we stayed.

How did I deal with the hurt from that incident and for many other incidents that have followed over all these years? Sometimes it is easy to harbor unforgiveness. Sometimes the thought of responding with First Corinthians 13 love to people who have hurt my husband or me seems almost impossible. It takes prayer and prayer and more prayer for God to change my heart and to keep loving these people. It also helped that I found a new lifeline that I hadn't really needed to depend on before and that was I found a pastor's wife in the area who I could regularly spend time with. I could share my hurts and concerns, she could pray and advise and console. I was so glad I had that friend.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

I would heartily encourage you to develop at least one friendship with a pastor's wife outside of your own who can be your ministry body. Ideally, don't wait for the crisis to build the friendship. Better that you know one another first. But whatever is the case, find a friendship like that. Not only for the crises times but also to be on ask you questions as someone else in the ministry who is trying to juggle similar tricky combination of nourishing the church and flourishing the family. And if you can find someone who's a little bit older than you and who's a pastor's wife, that might be best of all. They may have a little more water that's gone under the bridge that can give you perspective to help you where you are.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. What are some of the ministry heartaches you have experienced?
2. Have you struggled to continue to love the people related to your hurt? What has helped you to forgive?
3. Do you have a friend (especially another pastor's wife) who can be an outside lifeline to you as you endure difficulties and seek to love well? If not, can you think of someone who could be that friend for you? Does your husband have a pastor friend like this to support him during these hard times?
4. We know God works all things for the good to make us more like His Son, Jesus. How have you seen God use even these hurtful difficulties within your church to work for your good and to make you like Jesus?

CHANGE FROM SMALL TO LARGE

Churches in general and maybe the southern Baptist in particular love to see memberships rise. Bigger the better right? Maybe. But one thing I found as we went from small to large is that it meant less people who knew me and Mark and even our kids as the people, and more people who just knew us from the position that Mark held and our connection to him, as his family.

With less person association, came more assumptions and misunderstandings. We found that there were people who were tempted to want to be our friends (or our kids' friends) just so they can get some kind of "inner circle" inside scoop on the pastor's family.

Quirky things happen, especially when you live right next to the church like we do. Our house backs up to the church parking lot. We used to grill out a lot on Sundays, and we even had people just walking across the parking lot because they wanted to know what the Devers were having for lunch. We have a bay window that faces the parking lot if we found that people would be waving to us if we sat at the kitchen table and ate our lunch. (Now, we have a fenced-in back yard.)

At one time, a group of young women who call themselves "The Connie Spotters." They decided they would look for me in order to discuss I don't know a lot about me once they found me. (I am not a front pew sitting wife. I usually sit in the back of the balcony, as my bad back and chronic health problems allow.) There was even one woman who decided to leave the church because we weren't friends. I had never even met her. Not even once.

It's true. Not only do I not sit on the front pew. And, after the service. I don't stand at the door with my husband as he shakes hands as people leave. I would usually be having my own, private conversations with other members, helping with children's ministry, caring for our kids (when they were still at home), or scooting home to prepare lunch. To this day, I'm still not a back-door, shake-hands "first lady." Now, I also face many chronic health issues. There are Sundays when I am grateful to be at the services at all.

Many people say to me "Finally, I get to meet you." We joke sometimes that my new name is "Finally" because people say it so much. We joke, but sometimes I cry. It does hurt. I DO care. I DO speak to members, visitors, and kids. I'm just not in the highly-visible locations where most of our large congregation "learn" about me by sitting in the front center pew in the service or standing with my husband at a door after a service. And if someone DOES take offense that I'm not sitting where they think I should sit or standing at the back with my husband, I've been learning to see this as an opportunity to humbly let them get to know me and Mark a bit better. And, to express the idea that there are many different versions of good pastors' wives who follow their husbands lead and support him in ways best for him and his family. God has borne great fruit through these conversations.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

There are many more tales I could tell along these lines. Most of them are funny now, though they weren't at first. Most have come from innocent, honest questions and have only been unintentionally hurtful. But most leave me wondering (yet again) if I'm capable of being the pastor's wife I'm supposed to be.

The past 30 years at CHBC have given us lots of practice of knowing what to do when I'm having this identity crisis: I go to my husband. He reminds me of those Proverbs 31 bookends:

I am to fear the Lord (31:30) and I am to do my husband good, not harm, all his days (31:12).

And as long as he's happy with what I'm doing I don't need to worry about what those other people think. And, it's really helped me to realize most people might do stupid things or say stupid things but

they are usually not meaning to do or say mean things. And that means I have opportunity to humbly and graciously receive their words and maybe even opportunity to teach them that a pastor's wife is just that the wife of a pastor in my job like every other wife is to support her husband in the best ways for him and their family. And that is one of the best ways that I can serve the church, even more than knowing everyone's name. I would encourage you to remember these things and go to your husband for reassurance when the pastor's wife identity crises come knocking on your door, which they probably will from time to time.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Do you feel expectations for what you are supposed to be as a pastor's wife?
2. Where do these expectations come from? Others? Your husband? Yourself?
3. Have you shared these expectations with your husband? How can he help you think through them?
4. Where do you find comfort when you feel like you are not meeting the expectations of others? How can you and your husband work together to help others understand what a pastor's wife in general is supposed to be, and what in particular, is helpful to him, as his wife?
5. What does it look like for you to live out the Proverbs 31 bookends during your current season of life?
6. How does your faithful living out of these "bookends" look different from other pastors' wives you know?
7. Have you come up with any helpful responses to people who voice their inappropriate expectations that help correct their misunderstanding in a way that is clear but kind? Have you ever been able to make these opportunities teaching moments?

CHANGE FROM LOCAL CHURCH TO BROADER OPPORTUNITIES (1995 to present)

Over the years, Mark has been given more opportunities to speak to other pastors, accept evangelistic opportunities to speak to local college groups, lead classes of interns here at CHBC, host conferences like Together for the Gospel. All sorts of marvelous opportunities, rich with gospel potential. These are wonderful but they are also sometimes very hard for me. My husband, being a good marriage-shaped ministry man, hasn't wanted to overtax me by being away too much. We talk over each request and make the decisions together about what he should do. However, it is so hard for me to say "no" when it comes to these gospel opportunities. I feel like I am being a "gospel blocker" --getting in the way with God using my husband to share the gospel with others.

I felt this way so much that when we had been here about ten years, I started to have panic attacks and I didn't know why. I finally went to see a counselor and as a counselor ask more questions, it unearthed in anger that I didn't even know was there. Who the anger was against I wasn't even sure at first. But the more I prayed and thought, I realized in horror that it was against my husband, and it was due to how much he was way. And the sad thing was, he had been asking me about different gospel opportunities and whether he should do them, and I've been saying yes. So, it really wasn't even his fault!

Oh, that was quite a conversation that night when I shared with Mark what was going on. And frankly I asked his forgiveness. I had been keeping him from caring well for us by hiding the toll all these gospel opportunities were taking on us. But oh, the good that God has done to recycle that pain! We started having gatherings of our elders and pastors' wives which I shared some of these things with them so they would make the same mistake that I did. The group is still going on today and they are so encouraging for us as we talk together about all sorts of aspects of ministry life. They are a great lifeline for all of us.

It was not long after all this that an invitations committee was formed of guys on staff to vet the invitations Mark received and give feedback on whether he should consider them or not. Now, the final word still came from Mark and me. And while I still struggle with saying no to some really good opportunities, I am so much more confident that my husband truly wants to know the benefit costs of every gospel opportunity so that he can make a good decision that this is not nearly as hard as it used to be.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

I would strongly encourage you to realize that your family is not just a side affair from your husband's ministry. But it is actually part of your husband's ministry. Caring for you like we talked about before. Seeing that you flourish. Him being on hand to lead your family well. But realize that him making those decisions to care well for your family (and do "less" for the church) leads the church well. He is doing what every other godly husband needs to do for his family: he is thinking through opportunities and demands and trying to care well for the family. Your husband is being a great model for other husbands/fathers by making these decisions.

There's a very popular saying going around that a wife can half or double a man's ministry; and yes, it is true. But halving and doubling cuts across lines in a different way than you might think at first. It's not, the MORE the wife and children sacrifice, the MORE the husband's ministry multiplies. No! I would say, the biblical model is, when the husband is tending well to the needs of his family and making finite ministry choices to help them flourish, the more his ministry multiplies: NOURISH the CHURCH, FURNISH godly leadership and a godly example, AND FLOURISH the family by caring well for them. This helps both lives and hearts be happy in the ministry. And that, too, helps multiply his ministry to the church.

So, be humble and honest! I'm not saying never sacrifice! I'm just saying don't withhold information that keeps your husband from making the best decision for your family. That's another piece of trusting God's

And if your husband does accept any of these outside opportunities, scheme well how you can use that time when he's gone to make the impact less upon your family. Such as, have a single person or a married couple over or join up with another family with kids during the times when he's gone. Enlist help. That evening that might feel lonely because your husband is out doing something, half a lady over after the kids are down for the evening. I call "this twirling with the swirls." Not only does it make it less lonely but it's also super beneficial.

And, I would strongly encourage you to seek out other ministry wives, either in your church or across churches in your area to get together to share and pray. This group has been such an important lifeline for us all.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Does your husband have extra opportunities outside of his regular "job description"? Is your husband's job description so broad that it seems to have its own set of extra opportunities?
2. How do you and your husband decide which ones to accept?
3. Have you ever over-committed? How do you deal with that to get through it? How do you learn from what happened to avoid that in the future?
4. What ways have you found to make the most of the times when your husband is away?
5. Does your husband have others he could use as a sounding board to decide what opportunities to take?
6. Is it hard for you to tell your husband that it's not a good time to accept a particular extra opportunity?

CHANGES IN ME

The last change that I want to talk about doesn't really have to do with changes in the church, but changes that happened in me that has greatly impacted the shape ministry has taken within our family. In 2013, I was diagnosed with cancer and then treated in 2014 and 2015.

Unfortunately, in the process of treating my cancer some permanent damage was done to my body which has made the old days of frequent hospitality close to nonexistent. There are many times when I can only make it through part of one service instead of being on hand through both services and greeting people afterwards etc. I usually target particular events to take part in, then I have to rest a lot afterwards.

This physical limitation was then compounded with another, eight years later. COVID-related issues hit me hard in 2021 and 2022. They left me with a permanent health issue that impacts most every area of my life, including being able to eat hardly anything without having bad reactions (for those who are interested in knowing is called MCAS--Mast Cell Activation Syndrome). So, not only do we not know how I'm going to be feeling in order to have somebody over, but I can't even taste the food that they're eating or that I'm serving. Good thing I've had so many years practice cooking in my husband is a very plain man in terms of his food!

Then, came January 2025. I developed an extremely rare, very debilitating autoimmune condition that first attacked my kidneys and then the nerves in my arms and legs leading to complete paralysis. I spent 100 days in the hospital over seven stays as they searched for the cause and tried to get control or find a cure for it. A team of church ladies took turns coming to the hospital or to our house to help feed me and even scratch my nose, when I was at my worst.

The elders of the church came round Mark and relieved him of some of his usual ministry obligations in order to have more time to be with me. My husband even cancelled going to the conference that he planned and was to lead celebrating 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.... And he did this without ever telling me that HE was the one who planned it and was in charge of it! He made not even a peep of disappointment over not being able to go. He knew I would feel bad and he didn't want to add to my sorrows. And, most of all, he 100% firmly believed that for whatever reason, it must be God's sovereign will for him not to be at that conference. And perhaps not surprisingly, last year's difficulties lead to him discussing with others as well as me as to whether it was time for him to completely step down from ministry at beloved Capitol Hill Baptist in order to care for me.

But by the grace of God, the support of our church, and some very smart doctors, we made it through the year, I responded to a drug, which gives me four months relief at a time, instead of two weeks. Yes, I'm still in a wheelchair and using a walker. My hospital bed is in our living room and just a few days ago was the first time in almost a year that I was able to climb stairs. I can only walk for five minutes at a time. But I can do dishes, make dinner, and other household basics. With the help of able-legged friends, I've continued to hold kids' outreach events in our front yard and Children's Ministry workshops during the Pastor Weekenders we hold three times a year. It's not what life used to be, but together, we have found a new balance and a way to flourish our family while Mark continues to nourish the members of Capitol Hill Baptist as their pastor.

These changes have been devastating to me as I seen ways that I used to be and serve my husband basically be retired. Talk about feeling like I can't be a pastor's wife like I'm supposed to be! But you know my husband has been so good to continually encourage me with God sovereignty even in these health struggles that have impacted so much of what I can do. And I so appreciate.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

If you are a person who struggles with chronic health issues, my heart goes out to you. I know how hard the fatigue, and the pain, and the uncertainties of what the day will bring impact what you do. And it's easy to think or to only see the ways that those health issues are getting in the way with certain parts of your husband's ministry, especially hospitality.

But do you know, the sufferings that I have been through and still go through have shaped my husband. His sermons are sweeter, he longs for heaven more. There's more nuance in his wisdom, and you can't tell me that's not worth nothing. Our lives are the crockpot in which God cooks and tenderizes His pastors, our husbands. Our husbands teach their congregation through their preaching, but also through how they live. That's YOU and even your frailty that God has woven into His good plans for your husband as their pastor!

Yes, I have learned a few tricks on how to still be hospitable to people even given my limitations; but on the other hand, I have confidence from my husband and from God that even in these things God works for our good and His glory. And I know the same is true for you. So, keep praying that God would even fill your inabilities and your weaknesses with His good plans. I have seen the Lord use my weaknesses with all this illness cause me to lean more upon Him. And in that process, I've seen Him use my weaknesses to comfort and strengthen more people than ever have through my strengths. And I hope these thoughts bring you as much hope as they have brought me.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. Have you or someone in your family had a major change that has significantly altered the way you have been used to partnering in ministry with your husband? What heart struggles have you had in coming to grips with this change?

2. How have you and your husband communicated these changes with your congregation? How have you come to a new normal?
3. Any words of advice to others struggling with these kinds of major changes? Any ways you have already seen the Lord use these trials for good in your lives and in your church's life? Any way you have seen the Lord grow your husband and his ability to counsel and encourage others as a result of your trials?

MARK'S COLLAPSE

For years, I've been the one with health issues. Mark has been the strong man standing in the family, here to support me. But on Memorial Day, 2026, while I was enjoying my first trip with enough leg strength to drive myself to the grocery since March 2025, Mark suddenly collapsed while a walk with a friend. In the middle of a sentence, he just fell to the ground unconscious. His heart stopped beating, in the wake of a huge arrhythmia. If not for the great presence of mind of Mark's friend, and the unknown lady who rushed up and administered CPR, this would not only be the last chapter in this article, but the last chapter of Mark's ministry and life as we've known it.

It cost Mark three broken ribs, but the CPR was effective. The ambulance came and rushed Mark to the very same hospital where I had spent my 100 days in 2025. Mark made a miraculously fast recovery from ICU to regular room to rehab to home in just two weeks. If you were to see him now, you would never guess what happened to him. He's back to preaching; back to leading the pastoral internship; back to travelling.

But especially the first week, when his short-term memory loss was so profound, everything was up in the air. Emotionally, I was in shock and so thankful to still have my husband. But rationally, I was trying to think through all sorts of logistics. Would Mark live? Would his memory ever come back? Would he need memory care? Would Mark be able to continue as pastor? Did this single-income family just lose its only income, with us living in church housing, our insurance through the church, and me so handicapped for life? (Why, I don't think I could even be a greeter at Walmart in my current state!) And, why in the world didn't I think to get us long-term care insurance! Arrgh!

Then, there was simply trying to make sure Mark got the immediate care he needed. I had the needed medical and personal knowledge of Mark to work with the doctors and decide on plan of care that Mark couldn't provide. (Mark couldn't even remember why he was in the hospital for most of the first week, and certainly wasn't pleased to be there!). But with my very limited physical ability, how was I going to be there as much as he needed, even if just to tell him again what happened to him and to cooperate with the medical personnel! Talk about a gap between what I could do and what was needed!

But once more, the gap that seemed impossibly big for me, was no problem for God. Nope. God always takes care of His people. And the deficits we face, He makes into a glory gap, showing how great He is to the encouragement of His people and a beacon to the gospel. Mark received care from some of the very same team as I had. "Oh, yes! You are the ones with the church," quite a few said. As Mark improved, he took the opportunity to speak to some about the gospel. As news spread outside of the hospital, people around the world began praying for Mark. Mark's friends and the elders here at CHBC made daily visits to Mark and to me. They quickly calmed my fears about having to move out of the house soon, if Mark died. They promised to help me, however, needed. They shuffled Mark's responsibilities; they comforted the church; stayed with Mark so I could rest; they gave me rides to the hospital; and, they prayed and prayed.

With my illness in 2025, I could see how beautiful a healthy church was as they supported us. But that

was just the bud compared with the fully-flowered, bursting-with-perfume rose we experienced in the weeks after Memorial Day, 2026. And not only was this healthy church beautiful because of how it cared for us, but it was beautiful because of how the church, itself, coped. If Mark never stepped foot as pastor into CHBC again, the church would do just fine. Yes, they would miss him, but they wouldn't miss out. This was not a one-man's empire ministry, but an every-member discipling church with a plurality of elders to keep on shepherding this local church well. Praise the Lord for that!

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Martin Luther once said that theology wasn't dry, heady stuff, but what life is made of. I suppose some might think that the business of building healthy churches is dry, heady stuff, too. But let me tell you, it's the stuff that beautiful churches are made of! So, encourage your husband as he patiently works to make your church healthier. Stand next to him as he withstands grumblers who don't see the point in church membership, being careful with baptism, the need for a plurality of elders, and other sometimes turbulent topics. Cheer him on, and pray him along! It is worth it, for the church, for your family, and to the glory of God.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

1. How can you pray and encourage your husband as he seeks to build a healthy church that can keep on thriving, even when he's gone?
2. Who can you thank for supporting you through your family's difficult times?
3. Can you think of a time when you have seen God fill the gap of your needs with His provision? How did that bring Him glory? Take time to thank Him!

FINAL THOUGHTS

Forty-four years of marriage and ministry mean there is a lot more that I could say, but I think it's time to close. If you have ever visit CHBC and you like what you see, remember that it did not start out like this. This is a 32-year work and it's still in process! So, if you are in a situation that is difficult, or if one day your husband takes a pastorate and it's in a difficult situation, make sure you don't freeze the frame right where you are. Continue to be faithful. continue to pray.

The way my husband says it is: "Preach, pray, love, and stay." I would have never imagined that all the things that have happened here, would have happened, given what CHBC was like when we first came. This was a church that almost shut its door, but decided to give my young husband a try, instead. All these wonderful things happened at CHBC, not because my husband is some Superman, but because they were God's plans! The Devers are just grateful that we got to be a part of them, and a part of these wonderful people these 30+ years.

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)