

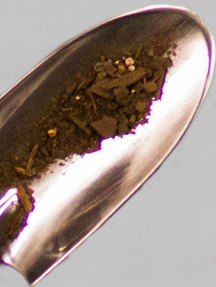


PARTNERS
IN

Planting

HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT
FOR CHURCH PLANTING WIVES

CHRISTINE HOOVER



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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, my husband came home from work, sat down at the dinner table and said matter-of-factly, “Well, it happened again.” Within the span of a few months, several experienced church planters had encouraged Kyle to consider planting a church and evidently the refrain had been repeated that day. “I don’t know what to make of this,” he said, “but perhaps we should pray about it.”

I didn’t know what to make of it either. We were happily ensconced in life with our two young boys and a third on the way. My husband served on staff at our church as the college and missions pastor and we very much loved what we were doing and the people we were serving with. The persistent mention of church planting seemed like an unwanted ripple in a peaceful pond.

However, as I considered the ripple, I knew it originated from God. I looked back over the previous months and recognized some unsettledness that was more of a heart stirring than discontentedness. We both felt that we needed to pursue the idea further, if for no other reason than to see the door firmly shut. So we went to a church planting conference.

Through that conference, through its countless speakers and through multiple conversations between the two of us while we were there, God made it clear to us that He was calling us to plant a church. Together, we responded in obedience to that call.

In truth, that crystal clear calling was our only assurance. We had an endless list of questions: Where? How? What about our children? With what money? How does church planting even work? Are we suited for this type of work? And what if we don’t succeed?

We had the calling, we had our questions and we had our God. We took our questions to Him day after day and simply waited for the answers. We prayed about cities and states, we talked to seasoned planters and still we waited, unsure of our next steps.

A few weeks before the birth of our third child, as we drove in the car together, Kyle and I went back to the conversation we'd been having in various forms for months: where is God calling us to plant? We felt sure that the rest of our questions would be answered after this most important one.

Following the advice of other planters, we'd determined that we wanted to live in a college town with a university that attracts influential students, we wanted to move outside of the Bible Belt and we wanted to live in a place where we could imagine raising our children. In our bathroom, we'd strung up a map of the United States, marked with every college town we could think of and we'd prayed and crossed off and prayed and crossed off some more.

In the car, our conversation turned to the East Coast, specifically to Virginia. We had heard of Virginia Tech, but I wondered aloud, "Is there a University of Virginia? Certainly there is."

When we got home that night, we searched for the University of Virginia and pictures of Charlottesville popped up on my computer screen. We turned to one another and said, "It's beautiful." But children needed to be put to bed and the house needed attention, so we closed the screen and put aside what we'd seen.

The next day, I went about my usual routine, but as I cared for my children, wiped down kitchen counters and folded laundry, I couldn't get Charlottesville out of my mind. I went back to look at the pictures online and to find out more about the city. When Kyle came home from work, he sat down at the dinner table, just as he had on the very first day we'd talked about church planting and announced, "I can't stop thinking about Charlottesville." Breathlessly, I responded, "I can't either!"

Of course the next thought was that we were crazy. We knew nothing about the city, nothing about its spiritual climate, nothing about the university. We'd only done a brief search on the Internet and looked at a few pictures. But again, we decided that we needed to

pursue it, if for no other reason than to see the door firmly shut.

The next day, Kyle called our denomination in Virginia and asked about the need for churches in Charlottesville. The man on the other end said, “My wife and I have been praying for two years that a young couple would come here to plant a church reaching university students and the people in this area. Please come visit and see if this is where God is calling you to plant.”

So we went, two months after our son was born. We talked to pastors of existing churches, we walked around the university, we imagined ourselves living there and all along we prayed. As the wheels tucked into the airplane that carried us back to Texas, I looked out the window at the mountains surrounding Charlottesville and knew in my heart that we were leaving our new home.

Five months later, with all the other questions answered resoundingly, we moved to Charlottesville with our three boys (ages 5, 2 and 6 months) and the real work of church planting began.

I expected church planting to be difficult, but I didn’t expect just how difficult. We started meeting for Bible study in our living room and eventually moved to a community center in our neighborhood, but at the end of our first year, we had all of a whopping 31 people. I felt as if we were still trudging up a steep mountain and wondered if getting to the top--wherever the top was--would be worth all the effort.

The intensity and the emotions of the work were almost overwhelming and I needed help in order to process our church planting experience. I learn by reading, so I searched for resources that might help or encourage me and found there were none. So instead of reading, I started writing. I wrote about the heart sifting God was doing in me through church planting and I wrote about the lessons I was learning. My blog and my book, *The Church Planting Wife*, were birthed out of that writing.

But something else was birthed out of my experiences and my

writing--a desire to encourage and champion church planting wives. I love the Church and I know in a very personal way how influential and valuable a pastor's wife is to her husband as he leads, preaches and counsels. Church planting wives in particular provide physical, emotional and spiritual support not only to their husbands but also to the church that is emerging from their labor.

If you've found your way to this book, it's likely that you are a church planting wife. And if you're a church planting wife, it's likely that you need a bit of encouragement or to read someone else's experience and know that you're not alone. Church planting is such an interesting mix of deep valleys and ecstatic joys and I think you'll find that expressed in these pages. Through this book--a compilation of blog posts on church planting--my aim is to encourage you to hold tight to Him in the struggles, celebrate the victories and above all find joy there out on the limb with God.

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PART ONE:

Preparing to Plant and Starting Well

HOW TO PREPARE FOR CHURCH PLANTING

In some ways, preparing to church plant is like getting engaged: you're moving toward the big day, you really have no idea what to expect other than what people have told you from their own experiences and you're in the midst of a whole lot of planning, preparation and uncertainty.

In the same way that brides tend to prepare more for the wedding than the marriage, as church planting wives, it's easy to focus entirely on getting the house sold, raising financial support, creating a prospectus and making logistical plans for our children without ever considering what will sustain our souls, faith, marriages, families and fledgling churches a month or year or four years into church planting.

Looking back on the six months prior to our plant, the following are the things I did that prepared me or, more accurately, the following are the things I wish I had done that might have eased my transition from established church to church plant:

Develop a consistent time in the Word and prayer

I cannot emphasize this enough. There will be times in church planting when you are desperate for encouragement, the voice of God, the movement of God, help, energy or a renewed faith. You may not be able to rely on your husband for those things, because he will be just as desperate as you. You may not yet have a church body to turn to because, hey, that's what you're trying to build. Your family and friends may be physically and experientially miles away. The help and sustenance you crave can only and will only be found in God. The Word is your lifeline to Him. Teach yourself to crave the Word, drench yourself in it and learn to depend on God for everything that you need.

Feed your faith

As you prepare to plant, you will have innumerable opportunities to doubt, fear, worry, resist God and even back out altogether. The answer? Faith. Exercise it by battling the doubts and fears that rage inside of you. Dig into the Word for truth about God's character that gives you a solid foundation to stand on. At every turn, choose to believe God and to trust that He will fulfill what He's called you to do.

Read helpful resources

Fill your mind with the Word but also with good resources that challenge and inspire your faith. For me, this means reading good biographies of men and women who proclaimed Christ. In addition, read church planting books right alongside your husband so you know what to expect and what this will require from him.

Clarify and confirm your calling

During your time of preparation, nail down your calling. When everyone stops cheering and patting you on the back as they send you off to church plant, the clear calling you've received from God will sustain you.

Make sure you're doing it because God is calling you, not because you're frustrated in your current situation. Church planting is not the answer to your hurts or your frustrations; in fact, it will only exacerbate unresolved issues in your heart.

Journal

As God clarifies and confirms your calling, write everything down. Record how God answers prayer, how He confirms your calling, what verses He uses to speak to your fears and concerns and any and all victories you experience. Return to this as needed, which is to say, every day.

Gather people

Ask people for prayer support and call on them to pray for your specific needs. Gather people to go with you. Finally, if possible, connect with other wise church planting wives who have gone before you so that you can ask questions and share your concerns.

Practice what you're about to do

Church planting is all about people, people, people. If you're not all about people, people, people, you need to start being all about people, people, people. Talk to people, ask good questions, steer conversations in a spiritual direction, socialize with nonbelievers, get to know your neighbors, practice hospitality or join a community organization. In other words, get outside the walls of the church. You will not have those walls in a few short months.

Learn about key church planting concepts

The sower and grower principles found in 1 Corinthians 3:5-8 detail that God is responsible for church growth, while we are responsible for planting and watering seeds. John 15 says that we can't do anything unless we abide in the Vine. Ephesians 6 speaks about intense spiritual warfare. Learn these, memorize them and put them into practice because they affect how you plant and how you will respond to the difficulties of church planting.

Dream

You are about to get to build a church from the ground up. Like parents, you and your husband will implant your DNA into this church and shape this church more than anyone else. That's a great responsibility, but it's also an incredible opportunity to impact a specific people and a specific community with the gospel. Dream big!

HOW DO WE KNOW WHERE WE'RE SUPPOSED TO CHURCH PLANT?

When I speak of our church or our ministry, I find myself using plural pronouns. We moved to Charlottesville. We planted a church. Am I a church planter? In the sense of carrying the load and leading the church, I am not. But in the sense of most everything else-time, effort, concern and goals-I am. I am not just a church planter's wife; I am a church planting wife.

I say all this simply to reiterate that this is a together calling. This is my husband's job and calling, but it's my calling too, because he could not fulfill his calling without my full support, without my being behind him and beside him.

It is vital that, as wives, we know God's call to church plant both for our husbands and for ourselves. I simply cannot say it enough. The "where" is nowhere close to as important as the certainty of the calling to go.

God led us to Charlottesville in a specific way, but God's likely going to lead you to your "where" in different ways. Wait expectantly on Him for direction through prayer, reading Scripture and seeking wise counsel.

George Müller, a pastor and missionary who lived in the 1800s, learned to answer the "where" question in two ways:

- First, that the safe guide in every crisis is believing prayer in connection with the Word of God.
- Second, that continued uncertainty as to one's course is a reason for continued waiting.

The flesh is impatient of all delay, both in decision and action; hence all carnal choices are immature and premature and all carnal courses are mistaken and unspiritual. God is often moved to delay that we may be led to pray and even the answers to prayer are deferred that

the natural and carnal spirit may be kept in check and self-will may bow before the will of God. He who would work with God must first wait on Him and wait for Him.

If you cultivate a tender heart toward God and are willing to go, you can't miss His leading when He speaks.

REMOVING PARAMETERS ON CHURCH PLANTING

A few weeks ago, my husband and I went with some prospective church planters to tour D.C., which is about two hours north of where we live. We heard about how many people live within the District (700,000) and how many evangelical churches are actively reaching those people (a few). We learned about the many obstacles that church planters face in the District, such as the cost of living and space issues, but also about how several are laboring there faithfully in the name of Christ. To sum our trip up: the harvest is great, but the workers are few.

I recently talked to a pastor's wife whose husband is considering church planting. She's willing as long as they stay in close proximity to where they currently live. They live in a place where there are tons of gospel-preaching churches and where almost every school houses a church on Sunday mornings. I know the company line "just because there are already churches doesn't mean there isn't a need for more" but I genuinely wonder sometimes why God would call people to saturate one area but leave another untouched.

I don't pretend to know how God moves and I also know where this pastor's wife is coming from. When we were preparing to church plant, my husband and I tried to think of every possible way we could stay near our families. However, when we were honest with ourselves, we knew we felt scared to leave the only culture we'd known and become outsiders, but we also knew that fear couldn't be our compass in choosing a location. We knew it would be easier (if you can call church planting easy in any place) if we kept the parameter of comfort around our willingness to church plant. But we knew we had to hold our hands open.

I carefully broached the subject with the pastor's wife, imploring her to think of the great needs in areas within the States that are almost completely unreached. Don't discount these places because you're scared, I said. Don't automatically focus on what you know already, I said. You, of course, have to go where God leads you, I said, but please

promise me you'll pray about going somewhere you never thought you'd go. Hold your hands open.

I almost want to encourage prospective church planters to seek places outside their comfort zones. Why? Because I know what it's like to go somewhere uncomfortable and to find out how incredibly faithful God is! I know what it's like to jump out of a plane without a parachute and be caught by the hand of God. I know what it's like to live in a place where the harvest is great and the workers are few and to see the harvest start to come in. It's incredible, simply incredible.

In our first few years here, I said to anyone that would listen, "We will never do this again! It's too hard." Now, I'm not so sure. Now, I see places like D.C. and recognize the great needs in our own backyards. Now, too, I know the faithfulness of God. And my hands are open.

My point is this: If you are considering church planting, I encourage (urge) you to remove any parameters you've put on your surrender to God. Taking off the parameters will, I promise, open you up to experience the extreme faithfulness of God.

WHAT TO EXPECT AS A CHURCH PLANTING WIFE

As we prepared to parachute plant, my husband read countless church planting books and talked to a few experienced planters to get their perspectives and wisdom. I picked up one or two of his books and even read over his shoulder a few times, but the strategies and how-to's that filled the books didn't seem to pertain to me at all. What exactly does the wife of a church planter do? I shrugged my shoulders and plunged into church planting with approximately zero idea of what to expect and a few vague predictions of what this endeavor might mean for me and for our family life.

Wow. I probably should have talked to someone or done something to prepare other than jumping in blindly. Because what happened in the first few years was nothing like what I had imagined or expected. And because it looked so different, I thought I could possibly be the worst church planting wife ever.

To save you perhaps a year or two of confusion and questioning your sanity, I'll do what the church planting books filled with ideas and strategies didn't do for me. I'll tell you what you, the church planting wife, can expect in the first few years.

It's going to be hard.

Discouraging, want-to-give-up hard. You already probably imagine it's going to be hard, but you're thinking it's going to be hard for a little bit and then miracles are going to happen that erase any discomfort or difficulty.

Instead, it's going to take ongoing, intense hard work for multiple years to get this thing off the ground. This hard work is not reserved for your husband. Your work and responsibility level will be different than your husband's, but church planting will require almost an equal amount of hard work out of you.

There will be times when you will want to give up or get out from under the burden that you're carrying because of how weary or discouraged you are. You may question yourself, your husband and God. You may wonder if you will ever see fruit from your efforts.

And these are all good things, because they are part of the process of sifting you and crafting you into the minister that God wants you to be. If God has called you to this work, He is calling you into a process of refinement that is both difficult and sweet. Expect it and embrace it.

You're going to have a paradigm shift.

The end result of God's sifting through the difficulty of church planting is a paradigm shift. You can expect that God will give you new eyes toward people, toward your own heart and, especially toward Him. You will learn that, just as John 15 says, you truly cannot do anything apart from Christ in you. You will learn to depend on the Lord in a way that you have never been challenged to before. You may realize that your faith has never been truly tested before church planting.

At some point, you will recognize that Christ and His gospel are the only things keeping you in the process, working hard, striking up one more conversation and having one more family over for dinner. And you will recognize the infinite worth of Who you've given your life to and for Whom you work. This is both difficult and sweet. Expect it and embrace it.

You're going to experience spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare is real and you will face it in church planting, although you may not recognize it when it comes. It probably won't be a community leader or an unbelieving neighbor shouting at you in the street or picketing your church, although I guess you can't rule anything out. The spiritual warfare you'll face will primarily be with your own flesh and it will primarily affect your marriage. You'll face deep discouragement together and the enemy will try turning you against

one another through resentment, anger, blame, blurred boundaries between ministry and marriage, or just plain exhaustion.

Be on guard for spiritual warfare; look for where it comes. The sooner you learn to recognize how the enemy attempts to drive a wedge between you and God and you and your husband, the sooner you can call a spade a spade and flee from the lies into the truth.

This is not something to fear, just something to recognize and see it as something that drives you into the powerful arms of your Savior. This is both difficult and sweet. Expect it and embrace it.

You're going to be called upon to do a variety of things, things that you may or may not want to do or be gifted for.

You are starting a church. There isn't a secretary, a children's minister, a janitor, or, if you're like us, even a permanent building. There are lots of needs and jobs to go around, but few hands to fill them. Expect to be asked to fill a few roles that you don't love and don't necessarily want to do. Prepare yourself for this because you want to do these joyfully until you can hand them off or delegate them to someone else, which you should do as soon as possible. This is both difficult and sweet. Expect it and embrace it.

You will know God in a new way.

There is so much you will learn by stepping out in faith, but the best thing you will learn is that God is faithful and capable of doing supernatural work that you yourself cannot do. This is sweet. Expect it and enjoy it.

WHEN YOUR HUSBAND WANTS TO CHURCH PLANT BUT YOU'RE NOT SO SURE

Kyle and I attended an Acts 29 church planting boot camp in 2007. We went to that boot camp knowing God wanted change for us, but fully expecting that we would leave the conference able to cross church planting off the list of possibilities. Honestly, at that time, I didn't even have a good understanding of what church planting actually entails. Less than a year later, Kyle had resigned his ministry position, we had raised both a team and financial support, we had moved across the country and we had started the church he now pastors.

This is why. Through that boot camp I knew God was calling us to plant a church.

This is how I knew: when the speakers, all experienced church planters, described the kind of man God uses to do this work, they described my husband.

Church planting, they said, is a difficult and unique work. Similar to pastoring an existing church, it must be done by a qualified elder-able to teach, able to shepherd, able to lead, above reproach, respectable, hospitable. It also requires a competent elder able to fulfill the duties of leadership-prayer and Scripture study, leading and managing the church, caring for people, living an exemplary life, preaching and teaching correctly, working hard, rightly using money and power and protecting the church. But then there is the unique work of church planting. The church planter must have the gifts of apostleship, leadership, evangelism and teaching. He must work tirelessly, serve as the only elder until other elders are appointed and have the ability to pull the church toward God's mission with the strength of an ox.

During the boot camp, Kyle and I stole away for conversation. Clearly, we said, God is speaking to our hearts. My husband questioned whether or not he was a church planter. I saw it instantly. I questioned whether or not I could be a church planting wife. He saw things in me that I couldn't see.

Full of trepidation and uncertainty, we both affirmed to one another that we were available to God if this is what He wanted for us.

Our boot camp conversation is what I thought of when I recently received this email:

My husband feels very called to church plant whereas I have a lot of doubts, fears and sometimes just don't want to. I know I should submit to my husband's leadership but I also hear that, when church planting, the wife needs to be just as on board.

Without a doubt, both a husband and a wife must be on board. The church planting wife is as vital to the health of the plant as the church planter. Because of this, there must be honest conversation between the two of you before you jump in.

If your husband wants to church plant, there are questions to ask about him. Has he sought counsel from experienced church planters and/or mentors? Does he meet the qualifications of an elder? Can he embrace and execute the requirements of a church planting elder? Does he see difficult things through? Is he faithful in leading your marriage and your family? You know the answers better than anyone else and you have a responsibility to speak into his life if you have hesitations. You also have a God-given responsibility as his wife to affirm his calling and help him fulfill it, even if it's something that scares you.

If he is the man for the job and God is leading both of you down this road, then there are questions you must ask yourself. If you have hesitations, why? Are you informed about what church planting entails? Are you willing to sacrifice and serve in order to help your husband? Are your fears valid? Generally, wives are fearful of the instability, insecurity and demands of church planting. I had fears and doubts, too, otherwise it wouldn't have been an act of faith. Fear is not a reason to hinder your husband from fulfilling his call. If God calls you to something, He will provide what you need. You must get on board, not because you are submitting to your husband, but because

you are submitting to the Lord.

That is how you know: You ask Him with a heart to obey.

PREPARING PERSONALLY FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Personal unhealthiness is such a common issue, especially in church planting. Brittany wrote and said, “My husband and I are leaving in under a year [to church plant]. What can I begin to put into practice now as a wife and we as a couple [to prepare] so that we don’t become unhealthy in the process?”

Please don’t be nervous. God called you and He will give you what you need to fulfill this calling. My favorite church planting verse says this very thing: “He who called you is faithful and He will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

Don’t be nervous, but don’t be naive either. You’re headed to the front lines and there should be some holy trepidation as you go forward as a steward of the gospel. You must cling to the Conqueror who leads you to the front lines. If you aren’t daily in the Word, do whatever it takes to make this a priority. I’m not talking about rote Bible reading, I’m talking about heart dependence on the Person of God. God and His gospel are what will hold you when all other securities fail.

Remind yourself daily Who it is that builds and sustains the church. Hint: it’s not you or your husband. Recalling this truth will save you from the most destructive of sins (pursuing success to the detriment of your family and marriage) and the deepest of discouragements.

Embrace the adventure of it all. This is faith in action! Forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead as soon as possible.

As a couple, commit together to priorities for your souls, your marriage and your children. When will you spend time in the Word? When will you spend time together? Will this time be used to talk about the church? How will you save money to do fun things as a family? What are your individual needs and how can the other help meet those throughout this process?

Begin connecting with other pastors and pastor’s wives in the city

you'll be planting. Develop relationships and friendships. Ask them questions about the city, about the culture, about church planting and LISTEN. Plan to be a team player in your city.

Begin coordinating schedules and calendars once a week with your husband. Kyle and I use Google Calendar and we talk about schedules each Sunday evening. We use this time to gauge if a slow-down is needed or if there are openings where, for example, we can invite someone over for dinner. We get date nights on the calendar and we reserve one weekend a month far in advance where we will not do anything ministry-related for the sake of our family. We also use these Sunday night times to talk about how we can be praying for another. These times are a vital connection point for us.

Develop a mentor relationship. If that is not readily available to you, develop a list of people who will pray for you during the first few years. Call on these people to pray for you when you're struggling, discouraged or feeling uncertain.

There are many things you can do to set yourself up for emotional and spiritual health as you enter church planting! The most important thing you can do is commit with your husband to worktogether as a team. If you're both committed to the Word, to marriage and family, to Sabbath, to team-building in the city and all the other things I mentioned, you'll be just fine. In fact, working in tandem in all areas makes for a powerful, kingdom-impacting couple!

PREPARING TO CHURCH PLANT OVERSEAS

My husband had just returned from a 10-day whirlwind tour, having gone to develop mission partnerships for our church. I stayed home with the kids, but I honestly felt so much purpose in sending my husband off, thinking about how far our little church plant has come that we're now turning our attention to sending people out.

On the first leg of the trip, he connected with evangelical pastors in England who are working to break up hard spiritual ground and where fruit is difficult to come by. But they are strategically trying to reach their city and faithfully doing so.

On the second leg of the trip, he visited my former college roommate and her husband, a doctor at a Christian missionary hospital in Ethiopia. The missionaries, he explained upon his return, are doing an incredible work there to save physical and spiritual lives.

I was excited to hear Kyle's report when he returned home. But I was also reminded of the many international church planters toiling often in isolation and with little encouragement or respite. I am thankful for their faithfulness and, although I don't have international church planting experience, I want to be an encouragement to all women in all kinds of ministry situations.

That's why I asked a friend of mine, Mandy Post, to answer a few questions about her life as an international church planting wife. Mandy and her husband Jason have lived in Galway, Ireland, for almost 10 years. They moved there to help start an evangelical church and develop a church leadership training program. Their church, Galway City Baptist Church, began meeting in their colleagues' living room in 2000, then in a nearby hotel in 2005 and in 2009 moved into a local primary (elementary) school. It is their dream to see the church established well with strong, godly leaders and an Irish pastor. Mandy and Jason have four children, who were all born in Ireland.

Q: How did God call you and Jason to Ireland?

A: Jason and I married soon after graduating from college, and Jason began his seminary degree a couple of months after the wedding. We went into seminary knowing we wanted to church plant, probably in the northwestern part of the U.S. But as the Lord would have it, He brought a seminary professor and a missions-minded church into our lives. After a missiology course in seminary and a few mission trips to Russia and Europe, we began to sense the Lord leading us outside of the U.S. Once we narrowed down the organization we wanted to work with, we began looking to serve in a post-Christian part of the world (our hearts were drawn to people in those cultures). This led us to Western Europe. Our organization had just started a work in Ireland and was looking for young people to go to Galway, a city where half the population is under the age of 25. Galway also has two major universities and with our ministry experience with young single and married adults, we felt like it was a good fit.

Q: Tell me about adjusting to life as an international church planting wife. What were those first few years like? What did you learn about yourself and about God in that period?

A: Jason and I had been married six years when we moved to Ireland and we had our first child a year after that big move. The first few years were not only spent adjusting to being a church planting wife and living in another country but also to being a mother. I definitely wouldn't advise starting a church and a family at the same time! However, the Lord knew I needed to learn to solely depend on and trust in Him. Not only did I need energy to care for our young children, but I also needed energy, brainpower and

patience to teach Sunday school, lead Bible studies and host ministry events in our home. I had to learn to ask for help and sometimes say, “No,” to requests for my time and energy, which is not in my make-up! And when you are starting a new church and all hands are required to be on deck, it can be difficult to step back from responsibilities. I still struggle with this and the feelings of guilt for either making ministry priority over my family or vice versa. The Lord has brought encouraging words to me, though, through sermons, Scripture, friends and supporters, our children and my husband. I’ve learned that I’m not going to get it right all the time and the Lord is still on His throne doing His work in the hearts of man, whether or not I’m directly involved.

I also learned pretty quickly into our ministry that my ways are not the Lord’s ways. Within the first couple of years, we had a small group of believers meeting together and they were all from other countries. The church we were planting didn’t look like the Irish church I had pictured in my head. The Lord was telling me that He was building our church His way and not mine. Through connections with their Irish co-workers, schoolmates and neighbors, the Lord was using our non-Irish congregation to reach far more Irish people than Jason and I could have ever reached on our own.

Q: How has international church planting challenged your marriage and parenting?

A: I come from a very close family (especially being a twin) so I knew it might be a challenge for me to live far from them. However, the excitement of living drastically for the Lord far outweighed my concerns of missing my family. I saw moving to Ireland as our adventure with God! Then came our babies. I never imagined how sad and difficult

it would be to have our children so far from the comforts of family (and also to see my siblings having children and missing out on being the drop-in auntie).

My hormonal roller coaster of 8 plus years of pregnancies and breastfeeding led me to moments of serious doubt. I doubted not only our calling but also the Lord. I would even find myself blaming Jason for my heartache (as if he dragged me to this far away place!). After all of my pouting, blaming and threatening to give up on it all, the Holy Spirit would gently remind me this was the Lord's plan for us and His plans were good...not easy, but good. I find comfort in Abraham's story of God calling him to pack it all up, leave his family and head for the Promised Land, knowing that my Promised Land is heaven. And the Lord would use Jason to tenderly affirm me through my doubts and ranting. It is amazing how the Lord works it for one spouse to be up while the other is down!

As for parenting challenges, I've realized I need to let go of my concept of "normal" parenting and embrace the life my children have as third culture kids and the pastor's children. They feel Irish but are constantly reminded that they aren't really because their parents are from the U.S. They are surrounded by Christ's love through our family and church, yet most of their friends come from non-believing homes. We battle the culture of deception and lying, foul language, loose censorship and alcohol abuse and at the same time use opportunities from the culture to teach our children to love and influence their peers for Christ. We've learned to call them kid missionaries instead of missionary kids.

Q: If you could sit down over coffee with a wife who is about to internationally church plant with her husband, what would you tell her? What should she expect? What

are the most important things for her to know as she prepares?

A: Before I say anything, I will go ahead and admit that I need to follow my own advice! So here goes...I think the most important thing to remember is to continually prioritize your relationship with the Lord above everything (spouse, children and church). It is easy to get caught up in ministry and “doing” things for Jesus, but this will leave you empty, exhausted and resentful. Church planting often requires us to do things outside of our giftedness and being with the Lord is the only way to sustain you through that.

Secondly, I would say it is important to love and support your husband and family. You are all working together in the church plant, so be a team and cheer each other on. Keep negativity and complaining to a minimum and continually praise and thank the Lord for the big and little things.

And last I would say to frequently remind yourself of your love for the people you are reaching. There will be times when it is hard to love them, especially when you're clashing with their culture or you see no fruit from your labor. If you lose your love for the people where you are serving, apathy will creep in and suck the life out of your church plant. Also, related to this, I would advise you to study not only the culture you are moving to but the one you are coming from as well. Sometimes we think things are biblical, but they're not; they are just part of our Christian sub-culture. Before moving to another country, it is important to understand that cultural differences aren't necessarily un-biblical or wrong, they are just different.

Q: You and your family labored for many years without seeing many “results.” What helped you persevere and not waver in your faith? What encouragement would you give to other international church planting wives who are not seeing fruit from their work?

A: Thankfully by the grace of God we were mentored by our colleagues who had worked in another difficult country in Europe. They told us the work would be slow and taught us to count small, seemingly normal, insignificant things as huge successes. Results weren't seen in our church meetings or “numbers” but in getting to have a spiritual conversation with a person on the bus or having a family accept an invitation to our home for a meal. And if we were actually invited to someone's home or to meet for a coffee, it was cause for celebration. Fruit from our labor comes in all shapes and sizes; some like berries and others like watermelon, but it is all still fruit nonetheless. And aren't the smallest fruits sometimes the sweetest?

Q: What do you want people in the States to know about your life and ministry?

A: We are ordinary people trying to let our extraordinary God use us in His mighty plan for the world He loves so much. Here in Ireland that means I worry about our sticky floors when a friend pops over for a “cuppa” (tea, that is). It means that Jason sometimes sighs when he has to switch from his pastor hat to his IT hat or accountant hat. Our children kick balls that break things, write on the walls (and clothes and sofas) and yell at each other. But we pray for God to use our ordinary lives to show people His love. That friend of mine will hear an encouraging word while we chat over tea. Jason's time spent working on our church website will draw a new person or family to our fellowship. Our

children practice asking for forgiveness in our home and are now asking for and extending forgiveness to their friends. It's never about us but about letting the Lord work in and through us. And if you are ever in Ireland, pop on over for a cuppa and let's encourage each other in the love of Jesus. Just mind your feet on our sticky floors!

TIPS ON STARTING WELL IN CHURCH PLANTING

My friend Shauna Pilgreen and I have a ton in common: we both have three boys that are almost the exact same ages, we both have husbands who did college ministry (that’s how we met), we both have chosen public school for our kids and we both have followed our adventurous husbands into church planting. However, we’re as different as we are alike. Shauna lives in the middle of the bustling city of San Francisco and the church she and her husband planted in 2011 meets in a high-rise building. I live in a college town on the East Coast and our church meets in a school. Because of this, the way we approach life and ministry is often different.

If Shauna and I could sit down with every reader of this book and hear your stories, we’d find all different kinds of women, families, life situations, churches, backgrounds and places represented. But we all have one thing in common: we all have great influence in the lives of our husbands and children and churches. And specifically for those who are church planting wives, we play an incredibly important role in the church planting process and especially in the transition process.

Because our contexts are all different, transitioning into church planting is an art that will be unique to your family, marriage, community and church plant, but there are things I’ve learned through my own church planting experience that may help you in whatever context you’re in.

Study the culture (and never stop studying!)

When we moved into our new home in our new city, I distinctly remember hanging the last frame on the wall in our bedroom, sitting down on the bed with my husband and saying, “What now?” We felt pretty overwhelmed and didn’t know where to start.

You may face this same moment, when the logistics are completed, you’re settled, you’ve been praying and preparing for this moment and

now you're ready to jump in and start this church. The new culture and the complete unknown can be intimidating. So when you look at each other and say, "What now?", here's your "What now": start studying the culture. You've grown to love the city in your preparation time. Now you need to find out what is at the heart of this city. What makes it tick?

You start as an outsider. Your goal is to become an insider.

Although it takes time, you want to become an insider as quickly as possible, because what does an outsider do when they look at a city? An outsider evaluates and compares. For the first few weeks and even months as an outsider, you may notice all the differences between this new place and where you've come from. You may notice its faults because you're looking at it from an outsider's critical eye. Your job is to become an insider. Insiders love their city! And becoming an insider starts with learning your city.

Becoming intimately acquainted with your city is an antidote to what I call "culture days." Culture days are where you revert to being an outsider. I had many of those days in the first year: roads changed names three times and weren't formed in a grid, the first winter I wasn't prepared with the right clothes and we didn't know how to salt our driveway, people didn't look me in the eye or say hello, the cost of living was higher. What helped? To consider what I knew about my city that I loved.

To become an insider, answer these questions: Where do people gather? How can we (or the church) gather where they are? What are the rhythms of the city? If you have children: What do moms do here? Participate in the typical rhythms of the city. What does this city love and value? How can you, without compromising the gospel, join in these values?

There will be a point when you realize that you're becoming an

insider and it will be a joyous day. A local will invite you into their home. You will recognize a retail worker on the street and know where they work. You will go where people are gathered and you will see people you know.

Make connections with people in your community.

Church planting, when you boil it down, is all about relationships. It's not about strategies or models or locations or worship leaders or signage. It's about meeting people, building relationships with them deep enough where, if they are not believers, you know their stories and their false idols and you earn their trust so that you can share the entire gospel with them. With believers, it's about building relationships deep enough where you know their stories and you can speak grace into their lives and disciple them and become family with them.

There were many times in our first year where we tried to do outreach events and they flopped. My husband and I learned quickly that church planting, especially in the closed-off culture we live in, would happen one relationship at a time. We had to alter our preconceived notions of what we thought church planting was going to be like and commit to putting in the hard work of starting and maintaining relationships.

Because God starts a church with people and it grows one relationship at a time, you have to figure out two things and both of them require you to be an initiative taker.

The first thing you need to figure out is this: How am I going to meet people?

Consider where people are gathering and go there! And when you go there, strike up conversations with strangers. When we planted, our kids were 5, 2 and 6 months. I went to Chick-fil-a and sat in the play area or to the park and struck up conversations with every mom around me. It's easy when they are in your life-stage because you know what they're thinking about and how to talk about things they're thinking about.

Figure out the questions to ask and use them over and over and over. Also figure out the questions that lead to deeper conversation. In our town, everyone is transient so a typical question is “How long have you lived here?” and “What brought you to the city?” That enabled me to share about my husband’s job and our church and ask questions about their spiritual background in a totally natural way.

Join clubs or organizations that connect you with a group of people that you’ll see regularly, things like sports teams or the PTO or a book club. Go meet your neighbors. If your neighborhood or apartment building has community parties, go to them. Get to know the people at the places you frequent most, like coffee shops, grocery stores, the post office, etc. Coach sports teams or help your husband coach them. The point is: go, do and talk to anyone and everyone. Be friendly and don’t be afraid to be “weird” or awkward. Sometimes it will fall flat, but sometimes you will have a great conversation and make good connections.

The second thing you need to figure out is this: How am I going to develop deeper relationships with the people I’m meeting? Invite them to spend time with you. Invite them into your home! There is nothing like hospitality to take a relationship to a deeper level. Serve them in some way. Figure out ways to naturally turn conversations to spiritual matters.

My favorite way is just to ask questions and find out about their religious or spiritual background. When they ask, “What kind of church is your church?” you can answer with the gospel: “We are a church who believes...”

Deal biblically with inevitable difficulties.

Church planting is difficult and we all kind of expect that. But we don’t often expect just how hard it will be for as long as it will be.

There are some difficulties and challenges coming your way. You will have opportunities to doubt, fear and even want to give up. You will

experience opposition and spiritual warfare, which will primarily target your marriage. Satan will look for ways to divide you and cause you to resent your husband. You will experience exhaustion. You will come face-to-face with your insecurities. You may deal with disillusionment or bitterness. You may face discouragement if and when your life and church look different from how you imagined it.

Yes, these are challenges, but these are all very good things because they cause us, if we let them, to trust God, to let go of self-sufficiency and depend on Him. They teach us perseverance and endurance and how to serve sacrificially without looking for anything in return.

Here's my encouragement to you. Because you will face difficulties and challenges, make this your motto: "Difficulties will come. I won't be surprised by that." Instead, I will embrace them. In 1 Peter, Peter says it is a blessing to suffer for Christ. When you embrace the difficult parts of things and move forward in faith, God will shift your whole world. You will experience Him as faithful and worthy of anything you go through. You will gain His perspective on life, faith, church and ministry. So expect them and embrace them.

Cling to Christ.

In church planting, you learn quickly that the gospel holds you in your city. In the beginning, no one cares that you are there and no one would care if you left. People may not be stampeding to the door of the church and there may be very few results for your labor.

What holds you there? What enables you to have another conversation or another Sunday morning or another family over for dinner?

It's not your husband and the fact that this is his calling, because he will disappoint you at some point and what if he's just as discouraged as you are? It's not the church you came from or the team that you're there with. It's not obligation because obligation gets tiring very, very easily.

It's the gospel. It's Christ. It's His calling on your life and your commitment to Him. It's that you know that the power of the gospel is able to transform lives and cities. It's the future reward of the fruit that comes from the gospel.

So your commitment to Christ and to His gospel is your anchor in everything you'll do as a disciple, a wife, a mom and a church planting wife. Nurture this relationship you have with Christ. Know God intimately, because all of ministry flows out of this relationship. You will quickly wither up and die if you are not connected to the sustenance that comes from God.

He loves you and He will sustain you and give you everything you need for what is ahead.

SET APART HOW?

After begging and begging us, my middle son started playing soccer this year. We've now entered the team sports world, which apparently means juggling games on both Saturdays and Sundays. And there is the rub: Sunday games for a church planter's household can be the difference between playing and not playing a sport.

Last year, we had to un-sign-up our oldest son from baseball because of Sunday morning games. Thankfully, he was half-hearted about playing anyway, so the decision to give up baseball was easy for all of us. But my son whose favorite shirt says "Goal-Driven" splashed across a soccer ball? He would not want to give up soccer no matter what time the games were held. I signed him up with trepidation, anxious to see the final practice and game schedule.

In the meantime, I had a conversation with a friend whose child also signed up, a friend who is not a Christian. We talked about what time the Sunday games might be and, to this woman who knows we are Christians, who knows my husband is a pastor, whom we've invited to church multiple times, I complained about the difficulty of juggling church and outside activities. I complained.

I didn't realize what I'd done until later. I thought back on the conversation and realized that I'd made it sound like church and my husband's job are burdens for us and that, without either, life would be so much easier in the scheduling sense. What was I communicating to her about being a follower of Christ? I was communicating that it's intertwined with annoying and burdensome requirements.

I don't really feel this way, so I want to be careful how I communicate about my faith and my life as a believer. But that conversation and subsequent conviction got me thinking about how my life and conversation and attitude differ from my unbelieving friends: Does it? And how should it differ?

When I think of how my life should differ from my unbelieving friends, I tend to think in terms of behaviors: the way I do or don't

watch certain things, the way I relate to money or food or drink, the way I serve, the way I dress, or how much I read my Bible or pray or attend church gatherings. The friend I had that conversation with, however, is like me in many of these ways: she serves people, she is a great mom and friend and she loves her husband well. Perhaps the only behavioral difference is that she doesn't go to church or read the Bible.

I think most of us think of being set apart from the world in terms of behaviors. We value holy living, which is not a bad thing at all and is in fact an important aspect of reflecting our holy God to a world that doesn't know Him. But as I begin to think about what difference my friend might see in me that would cause her to consider the beauty of Christ and desire Him herself, I realized that it would be more of the heart attitudes displayed through word and deed: joy, peace, hope, dependence, sacrificial love, forgiveness and reconciliation, long-suffering, generosity, thankfulness, faithfulness and all the other words that appear in the "put on" passages in Scripture.

Too often we differ from the world in behaviors, but we don't differ from the world in our heart attitudes. We are fearful, we worry, we are proudly self-sufficient, we hold grudges, we don't always keep our word and we complain out of ungratefulness. What is this communicating to an unbelieving world about our God?

I had to ask this of myself, because do I not have hope? Do I not have within me the Spirit, who is the source of all joy and peace and love? Do I not have everything I need for life and godliness? These treasures are what I want to communicate to an unbelieving world about the goodness of our God and what He's done for all those who believe.

“Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life.”

Philippians 2:14-16

PART TWO:

Lessons Learned in Church Planting

25 LESSONS LEARNED FROM CHURCH PLANTING

In 2008, God called my husband, Kyle and me to plant a church in Charlottesville, Virginia. Though we had eight years of ministry experience under our belts at an established church, we didn't yet know all that we didn't know. We had much to learn and, more importantly, God had much sifting and pruning to do in our hearts.

God has shown me that, more than anything, he wants my heart. He wants a tender, moldable heart willing to obey more than he wants any obligatory service I can give him. I've learned a thing or two in this crazy adventure called church planting—and I trust I'll learn more as we move forward. Here are 25 things I've discovered so far.

1. Hospitality is essential.
2. For the church planter, church planting teaches two things more than any other: that God is faithful and how to depend on that faithful God.
3. Programs matter a lot to some people, especially families with small children. It takes special families who can grasp the vision of church planting to invest in a church plant on the ground level.
4. On the other hand, some people love the early stages of church planting but grow uncomfortable when the church grows to a size where they cannot know everyone.
5. Church planting happens one relationship at a time.
6. Sometimes church planting feels like you're pretending to be a church. And then one day (after back breaking work and lots of prayer) you realize you have an honest-to-goodness church.

7. You cannot church plant without support and encouragement from others.
8. The Word is living and active. When we let God speak through His Word, He changes people. Every church plant must gather around the Word.
9. The church plant often takes on the personality and the passions of the church planter and his wife. This is why it's important to have biblical vision.
10. A lot of people, especially outsiders, don't know what it means when you say you're church planting.
11. One of the greatest assets and resources a church planter has: other church planters and pastors in the same city. These relationships should be cultivated.
12. One of the hardest relationships a church planter may have: other church planters and pastors in the same city. Sadly.
13. The calling to church plant must be sure because it will have to be returned to again and again.
14. The gospel is everything: it sustains when discouragement comes (and it always does), it keeps a church planter and his wife in their city (because they will want to give up and leave), it compels its ministers forward (and sometimes it's the only motivation left) and it changes lives (which makes it all worth it).
15. A church planter cannot drive by an established church without appreciating what it took to make it that. And he will first think about the secretaries, nursery workers and janitors.
16. As much as possible, a church plant should be structured

how it wants to look a year in the future.

17. It is unhealthy for the church planter, the church and especially the church planting wife if she is doing childcare during church each week.
18. A failed church plant is not failure. Lack of faith is failure.
19. Slow and steady growth is healthy growth. Explosive growth is often fragile growth.
20. A good worship leader is essential.
21. Spiritual warfare is real.
22. Church plants should never be started by a pastor who was disgruntled or unable to sit under authority at their former church. Church plants cannot be rebuttals to another pastor's way of pastoring. They must be built upon a clear call from God.
23. A church planter and his wife must pray for and develop a love for their city and not just their city and all its coolness, but for the people of their city.
24. The church planting wife's main role in helping her husband is, like Aaron holding Moses' arms up in battle, praying for and encouraging him to keep on.
25. There is joy and reward in sacrifice and service.

DON'T DO WHAT I DID: MISTAKES IN CHURCH PLANTING (PART ONE)

As I write, we're quickly approaching our fourth anniversary in church planting and that has me reflecting on where I've been and where I'm going. When friends back "home" ask me how things are going or what the past four years have been like, I summarize these years like this: "Church planting has been the hardest, craziest thing I have ever done and also the absolute best thing I have ever done, because I have seen that God is faithful and it has completely changed me." There's a whole lot of details and stories behind those words but that is the gist of it.

When I look back at year one or year two, I am grateful for where I am now, for how radically God has transformed my heart and still is transforming me. But I also look back and cringe at who I was or how I responded to the difficulty of church planting. I made mistakes and, at the risk of humiliating myself, I'm going to share them with you, in hopes that you won't do what I did and in hopes that God will somehow redeem my failures.

I made my first mistake before we even moved, but it followed me into our new city and our plant: I had an "us vs. them" mentality. I believed that we were, like Superman stepping out of the phone booth, coming into save the city, as if God wasn't already there and as if not a single church was preaching the gospel. I spoke with certainty about what we would accomplish and I fully believed that our little church plant and our missionary efforts would produce immediate results. After all, we were the answer for our city, or so I thought.

In addition, I attempted to bring the Christianity of my former culture, a culture I couldn't actually see until I was removed from it. My new culture didn't fit in the same box as my previous culture and I plotted how to make it fit. Instead of learning a new one, I talked incessantly about my former culture. Again, the us vs. them mentality.

I like to think that this stemmed from my zealotry, from the

depth with which I felt the calling to go. But it probably stemmed more from my naiveté and from the belief that church planting is an occurrence rather than a process.

But I wasn't careful. Rather than listening, I was talking. Rather than learning a culture, I was trying to change a culture. Rather than letting things unfold according to the Spirit, I forced things. Rather than respecting what God was already doing in the city, I had a savior complex. I didn't yet understand that this wasn't about me or about proving myself.

I recently saw a glimpse of my former self when we had visitors from a different cultural context. They pointed out the things I had seen when I first moved here and proceeded to advise us on how we should change the culture. The advice was pointed and, frankly, offensive to the Virginians present. I was embarrassed, not because of our visitors but because I had once been that brash.

Please don't do what I did. The us vs. them mentality is a rookie cross-cultural mistake.

What prevents it?

- Think of yourself more as a learner than a missionary.
- Reach out to others who are already there doing a similar work. Ask questions with an ear to learn the culture and where God is at work. Be respectful.
- Be careful with your pronouns. You are a "them" now.
- As often as possible, remind yourself that you are a "sower" not a "grower." God takes responsibility for the results and the heart transformation. You are responsible for your faithfulness to do the work He has called you to do.

- Earn the right to be heard and to influence the culture. This takes years.
- Know the difference between cultural Christianity and biblical Christianity.
- Know that this church plant is for you just as much as it is for them.
- Before you understand a people and a culture, don't make assumptions.

Reading Bruchko recently, a story about a man reaching the Motilone Indians, whose culture was untouched by modern civilization, the author spoke to this mistake:

“I thought of the Indian Christians I had seen at the missionary compound. They had been taught how to dress in clothes with buttons, how to wear shoes, how to sing Western songs. Is that what Jesus taught? I asked myself. Is that what Christianity is all about? What does the good news of Jesus Christ have to do with North American culture? In Bible times there was no North American culture.”

I could love the Motilone way of life, but when it came to spiritual matters, I thought I had the only way. But my way wasn't necessarily God's way. God was saying, ‘I too love the Motilone way of life. I made it. And I'm going to tell them about My Son My way.’”

He will do it His way in all of our cultures, in all our churches and in all of our lives. What a great relief.

DON'T DO WHAT I DID: MISTAKES IN CHURCH PLANTING (PART TWO)

My first mistake in church planting was my attitude. The second mistake happened in my heart and it was ugly. I write about it in *The Church Planting Wife*:

“My heart has been tested countless times throughout our church planting experience, starting from the moment I unpacked the last moving box. In the months leading up to our move, we had been asked countless times, ‘Just how do you start a church?’ We had read every church planting book in existence, received counsel from seasoned church planters and developed a clear vision of what we hoped our church would become. But when I hung the last frame on the wall, Kyle and I looked at each other and said, ‘Now what?’ We didn’t know a single person in our city besides our realtor and a neighbor who had welcomed us with a plate of cookies. The challenge ahead of us seemed completely overwhelming and I questioned our choices and our sanity. Could God really make something out of nothing?”

Over the course of the first year, nothing came easy.

We started a Sunday evening Bible study in our home a month after moving to Charlottesville. On the first night, ten people attended, four of whom were considered church leaders and were therefore required to be there and three of whom were our children. The kids sat still for worship but then roamed in and out of the living room during Bible study, causing such a distraction that I took them upstairs and missed half of our first church gathering.

Later, after cleaning the kitchen and putting away all of the leftover cookies I had made for our guests, I retreated to our bedroom and cried. In fact, for most of the fall, my Sunday evenings looked similar to that first one: I cleaned the house, made food, greeted people, wrangled children all throughout church, mingled and said goodbye, cleaned the house again—then cried. Even into the spring, when we

moved our meeting time to Sunday mornings and started to outgrow our living room, I struggled to conjure up the faith and excitement I had come to Charlottesville with. I longed for families to join us—most of our growth was young, single people—and especially for God to make things easier and more comfortable for us. I wondered why we weren't the church planters that experienced explosive growth in a short period of time. How I envied those people.

I began putting undue pressure on Kyle because I was emotionally fragile, uncertain of my role and lonely. Church planting was proving harder than I had originally expected. 'Why did you bring me here?' I'd ask Kyle, my words dripping with resentment. He'd gently remind me that God called me here too, that we were a team and that I'd felt so certain when we were preparing to leave Texas. I mourned the change and what it required of me: more sacrifice, less of my husband, more uncertainty, less of the familiar routines we had once enjoyed. In my emotional need, I wanted my husband's full attention, but, tasked with a great responsibility, he had so little to give me. I grew disillusioned—with ministry, with church planting and with marriage. I dwelled there, feeding my sinful thoughts. What if we had never moved here? What if Kyle hadn't gone into ministry? What if we had ignored God's call to church plant? What if I hadn't married someone in the ministry? What would it hurt just to give up?

I also pointed my bitter arrows at God. Why can't You make this easier? I have been obedient and faithful in coming here and this is what I get?

I had entered church planting with a firm faith, but because I didn't closely guard my heart, because I listened to those little poisonous whispers, I forgot that God loved me and doubted His provision. Resentful, my heart hardened toward my husband and toward God. My unwillingness to submit to the Lord and accept His good purposes for me made it all the more difficult to hear His voice or receive His comfort.

We finished our first year of church planting under a tent in a muddy

pit with 31 water-logged people. When we got home that afternoon, Kyle said, ‘It feels like we’re starting over.’ We had been asked to leave our meeting place the previous Friday, we didn’t have a new one lined up (hence the tent), we barely had a core group and we were physically exhausted and emotionally beaten down. We—the fearless leaders—were full of fear and doubt.

Privately, I questioned God and His ways. ‘Lord, we put in the hard work during that difficult first year. Where is the explosive growth?’ I wanted to coast into the second year after the sprint of the first. I was too tired and unprepared to run the distance marathon that church planting requires.

I found myself at a crossroad.

God allowed the difficulty of church planting to sift me, to bring the issues of my heart to the surface. I realized that if I didn’t address my hardened heart, my marriage, my family and my own heart were in danger. God was refining me, cleaning me out and teaching me dependence rather than self-reliance. I could continue my attempts at controlling and relying on my self, or I could submit myself in dependence on Him.

I chose to submit. I found myself agreeing with Peter when he spoke to Jesus: “Lord, to whom shall [I] go? You have the words of eternal life.” I chose to trust Him with my heart and let Him do—through church planting—the work He needed to do in me.

Perhaps you can relate to my struggle.

As church planting wives, we love the Lord and long to be obedient to His calling on our lives, but feelings of loneliness, resentment, discouragement, or exhaustion tempt our hearts to wander from Him. The temptations are subtle, but real: to turn to others, to turn away from the calling because it’s difficult and demanding, to distance ourselves from our husbands out of resentment, to feed our children a

faint distaste for the church and for God, to believe that our successes in church planting belong to us, to live off of our previous sacrifices and refuse to sacrifice more of ourselves to God. The temptation is to self—seeking our own agenda, clamoring to have our needs met, self-promotion and selfish ambition. As we seek these things, we become a statistic: burnt out, isolated, depressed and, sometimes, resigned.

It's no wonder that the Bible entreats us to guard our hearts. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." The literal interpretation reads, 'Above all guarding, guard your heart.' We are to guard our hearts more than our children, more than our marriage, more than our reputation, more than our home, more than our schedule and more than our church. We are to diligently maintain a tender soil for God's love and purposes to grow, to continually pull out weeds of self-focus and to allow God to produce fruit in and through us."

This is, in essence, the job description of a church planting wife.

DON'T DO WHAT I DID: MISTAKES IN CHURCH PLANTING (PART THREE)

In church planting, my first mistake was my attitude, my second mistake was my heart and the third occurred because of my inaccurate beliefs: I did not actually understand or experientially know about spiritual warfare. I found out quickly enough that as the true work of church planting begins, spiritual warfare begins as well. It is sudden and it is overwhelming, but, despite its all-encompassing nature, it is often also subtle and difficult to pinpoint.

This is how I experienced spiritual warfare in the beginning stages of church planting: overarching discouragement, consistent and urgent thoughts of being stuck in a hopeless situation, temptation to resent my husband for putting me in this situation, sleeplessness due to running fears, circumstantial oppression or setbacks, a constant feeling of heaviness and lack of energy and, ultimately, thoughts that caused me to doubt God's goodness and provision. Everyday for probably two years, I battled almost overpowering thoughts of giving up.

My mistake was my erroneous belief that church planting would be briefly challenging and then everything would be fine. Our church would make it, we would make it and it would all be so easy. I did not expect how the church planting process would shake me to the very core and challenge my every belief, thought and heart attitude.

I think I thought, too, that my husband would bear the brunt of any discouragement or spiritual attack. He certainly experienced it, but I recognize now that I was the ideal target. If I gave up, my husband could not sustain his efforts and might even leave ministry altogether. If I lived in a constant place of discouragement and resentment, it could cost my marriage, instantly dismantle the church and discount everything we had moved here for.

I've seen it happen. And I believe that more difficult cultures, places where the gospel is needed and not preached, create an environment that makes it extremely easy and acceptable for people to leave their

faith, to go their own way and even for church leaders to lay down their callings and float along with the culture. I've seen that happen too.

If we have blinders on to our enemy's subtle deceit, or if we don't rely on God and the truth of His Word to be the power with which we fight spiritual attack, we will, simply put, be chewed up and spit out.

Spiritual warfare is very real. As we shine Light in dark places, there will be resistance and response. Not only that, but the enemy actively seeks the weak and unguarded to devour. Don't make the mistake I did: Be aware! Fight, sisters! Don't let the enemy take down your heart, your marriage, your family, or your church through subtle deceptions.

If there is anything the enemy will tell you, it is that God's way is not the way of joy, that what He is asking of you is too harsh or too hard. This lie is easy to believe because church planting is hard. It will seem sometimes as if He has forgotten you. But He has not and He will not. His way is the way of joy. Sometimes that way is full of obstacles, but it ends in fulfillment. His enemy is subservient to Him and we stand with the One who is victorious and able. Don't believe otherwise.

"We went through fire and through water; but You brought us out to rich fulfillment."

Psalm 66:12

SUNDAY'S COMING

Sunday's coming.

That's what my husband says on Monday mornings, when he leaves for work with a sermon already on his mind. He's on the clock and time is ticking away.

Sunday's coming.

I imagine that our worship leader, Joseph, senses the urgency as well as he listens for the Spirit's leading, chooses songs, gathers the team for practice and prepares his own heart for Sunday's corporate worship.

Sunday's coming.

Adam, our pastor overseeing children's ministry, is likely enlisting teachers, collecting materials and plotting creative ways to teach the gospel to young hearts that will gather in a few days.

Sunday's coming for me, too.

I'm the pastor's wife. I won't preach or sing or lead the children this Sunday. In fact, it might appear to most people that I won't do much at all. But I know the truth. I know and embrace that God has given me unique holy orders to help my husband and minister to others, mostly in unseen ways.

So Sunday's coming for me, too. While Kyle is preparing a sermon and Joseph is choosing songs, I'm arranging my heart and my thoughts, reminding myself of my holy orders, reflecting on my unique opportunities as the pastor's wife and preparing to (hopefully) be a blessing to others.

I'm praying, as I do every Sunday morning, that my eyes would turn outward toward others and upward toward the Lord in worship, that I would not think about myself or my silly insecurities, that I would hear from the Lord and bless Him with how I love others.

I'm praying that God would ordain conversations, that He would lead me to specific people who need encouragement, prayer, or even a simple welcome.

I'm considering my gifts and saying no to good things that pull me away from where I know God wants to use me. My excitement about exercising my gifts is growing as I anticipate Sunday.

I'm remembering my children. How can I help them learn and grow at church? How can I balance my service in the church with my mothering priorities on Sunday?

I'm reminding myself of how Jesus said that it's better to give than to receive. For that reason, I am making mental notes of people I want to pursue on Sunday morning: those who are hurting, those who I have been praying for, those who I've been thinking about.

In all of it, outward and upward.

Because Sunday's coming.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KENDRA DUTY ON BEING A CHURCH PLANTING WIFE

Kendra and her husband planted New Life Church in College Station, Texas, around the same time that my husband and I planted in Virginia. They have three little ones and previously served on staff at an established church. She recently answered my questions regarding being a church planting wife:

What advice would you give to church planting wives who are just starting out?

First, let go of expectations. It's going to be nothing like what you have planned out in your head. There are going to be major emotional strongholds to overcome, like recognizing that your "role" is not a role at all to most people in your church. You and your husband know how essential your calling, support, encouragement and help are in the new church plant, but most other people will not recognize this. If your husband doesn't know, you may also need to have some hard conversations with him. Which leads to the second thing...

Communicate your needs to your husband, not only about your marriage, but also about your gifting and passions to serve the new church plant. Together, come up with a plan to get you involved in the process, but not too much that you have to sacrifice your family. Many times we have unrealistic expectations for ourselves, but our husbands can help us find balance.

Finally, stand committed to the call of the Lord on you and your husband. There may be many circumstances and emotions that will lead you to question whether this is still His will for you. Continue to cling to the original calling and direction that He put on your hearts. Otherwise, when hard

times come (and they will) you will want to give up, wonder why you are doing this in the first place and question the clarity of the call.

How do you support your husband when he is discouraged about how the church plant is going?

Commit to be his number one supporter. No matter if I am also discouraged, disappointed to see people go, upset about something said to him or even if I felt he could have done something differently, I push all that aside to let him know this: even if, in all other areas of his life, he experiences disappointment, discouragement and exhaustion, I am the one place he can turn for spiritual, emotional and physical replenishment. And I do all I can to replenish him in those areas: speaking truth from the Word (even though he knows the Word inside and out, he needs to hear specific truths from me), being bold in prayer (on-the-spot intercession), encouraging him (little things that I know bless him and let him know I care) and most importantly to him, giving him affection.

What has been the hardest part of church planting for you and how have you handled it?

I think it would be finding my “place.” Amidst everything—shepherding three little ones, trying to be a supportive wife, wanting to be a significant piece of the church planting puzzle and maintenance of the home—it can get overwhelming. When it’s hard to find that “place,” maybe even because of my stage of life, it can be devastating. I believe that Satan uses those weak spots in my heart to tell me that I can’t be used in certain ways because I’m not gifted, not valuable and not even necessary to the church. It’s only compounded when I’m not communicating well

with my husband or vice versa and feel left out of the loop on things going on in the church. Although I wouldn't want to do the first year of planting again, I know that God used it to teach me so much through the process. Finding my confidence in Christ and not in the roles that I assume, recognizing that Christ defines me, not my service or recognition, has been most helpful in defeating the lies and emotions that are so hard to overcome.

What do you like most about being the wife of a pastor/ church planter?

I love being able to come alongside him in ministry by ministering to women. There are so many women in our church who want counseling, mentoring and wisdom. I have been able to speak into their lives, boldly pray over them and ask for God to move powerfully in their lives. It has stretched me to depend on Christ more fully, asking Him constantly for wisdom that I don't have.

I love our church body. I don't feel like I am in a fishbowl at all. I just love being a part of the ministry that takes place naturally and organically in our body. I love seeing how the Lord is growing us and refining us in so many ways. I love to think about all the disciples we are making and yet it is harder to send them out because we love them so much! God couldn't have put together a more wonderful church to shepherd and serve.

THE FIRST YEAR OF CHURCH PLANTING

I rarely think about our first year. It gives me shivers just thinking about it. Evidently we did it the hard way, although no one told us so at the time. Very few who church plant do it the easy way, but we chose the extra-hard way, primarily because we didn't know what we were doing or what we were getting ourselves into.

Here's how to do the first year of church planting the hard way:

Move clear across the country into an area where you don't know anyone, which will effectively eliminate all ministry connections and all physical and emotional support.

Start your church in your home on Sunday evenings. Nothing screams "Run away! It's a cult!" like strange people from out of state huddled up in a living room with guitars, Bibles, Kool-Aid and candles. OK, for sure don't do Kool-Aid and candles.

Invite everyone you know: the realtor, the lady you met at the gas station and the neighbors who stared at you blankly when they asked why you moved to town. Oh and don't forget your kids. They will count for 30% of your first night's attendance.

Confidently say things to your church like, "When we grow..." or "As we grow..." even though you feel like you're pretending to be a real church.

Finally, grow big enough that you move the church out of your home and into the neighborhood community center. Make all your neighbors mad that a religious service is being held there, clog up the parking lot and get kicked out via a cease and desist letter. Do this on the Friday before your first big outreach event, at which you plan to invite the entire city to your church that meets at....nowhere.

Lacking a space, end your first year with a bang by meeting under a tent in front of a grocery store with 31 people who brave the rain, humidity and mud in order to be there.

That, my friends, was our first year of church planting. It felt like we were trying to push a boulder up a mountain. We prayed that we might hit a peak and gain some momentum, but the peak and the momentum did not come.

It's no wonder I don't think much about that first year. It was like the first few months with a newborn: a haze, a blur and a mind-numbing stretch of instability. I recall many nights talking with Kyle on the couch or driving in the car or staring at the ceiling in the early morning hours when I was frightfully aware that I was not in control. That there was nothing I could do to make it happen. That all my efforts couldn't do anything to change the heart of a person or to create unity and community among believers.

God used that year to break me, to humble me and to teach me how to depend on Him.

He taught me how to have faith.

He taught me to have hope contrary to my circumstances, to not waver in my belief.

He taught me that He is a God “who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did.” (Romans 4:17)

I'm so thankful for that year, that things did not come easily for us. Otherwise I would think I had something to do with it other than just showing up.

I know there are some of you out there who are just getting started or who are in your first difficult months of pushing the boulder up the mountain. Hold tight to our God, sisters. He is faithful. He will see you through.

THE SECOND YEAR OF CHURCH PLANTING

We finished our first year of church planting under a tent in a muddy pit with 31 water-logged people. When we got home that afternoon, Kyle said, “It feels like we’re starting over.” We didn’t have a meeting place, we barely had a core group and we were emotionally beaten down.

We the fearless leaders were full of fear and doubt.

A few days later, after months of waiting on word, we were approved to meet for church in a local elementary school. The fresh start in a more credible, respectable location re-energized us, catapulting us into our second year.

And we grew, one person and one relationship at a time. I was especially thrilled when a few families with young children committed to our church, seeing as we had been the only family with kids throughout the whole first year. Six months after moving into the elementary school, we hovered close to passing the 100-person milestone and we celebrated when we finally did. But we also knew the work wasn’t done, so we kept going, one person and one relationship at a time.

One hundred is great, but 100 is also fragile. Unlike a long-established church with 100, there are no deep growing roots. We were a church built upon the young and transient in a young and transient town. We had earned some respect and credibility in the community but were still newcomers trying to prove ourselves trustworthy.

Privately, I questioned God and His ways. Lord, we put in the hard work during that difficult first year. Where is the explosive growth? I wanted to coast into the second year after the sprint of the first. I was too tired and unprepared to run the distance marathon.

If the first year is characterized by discouragement and spiritual attack, the second is fraught with danger. I have never been wife to a plumber, firefighter, teacher, farmer, doctor, pharmacist or anything else besides a minister. I imagine that every job requires hard work and

holds imminent dangers. But there are spiritual dangers lurking in the second year of church planting for the church planter, his wife and his family that are unique to the calling.

This topic came up at a recent church planting conference that my husband attended with several lay leaders from our church. The speaker relayed the difficulties of the work and exhorted the church planter to love and protect his family from the demands of ministry. Later, one of the lay leaders said to Kyle, “That isn’t any different than what every husband should do.” “Yes,” my husband said, “but a church planter and his wife are more susceptible to exhaustion, burnout and discouragement because of the spiritual and emotional burdens that they carry and that they help others carry. If we are not spiritually healthy and keeping close watch over our marriages and homes, it has far-reaching effects.”

He’s right. And if a church planter and his wife are not diligent about nurturing their marriage or family or nurture their church more than their home, it will begin to show in the second year. Little cracks and divisions become wide crevices.

As we grew the second year, Kyle and I recognized these dangers to our spiritual and emotional health:

Exhaustion:

Despite its discouragements and difficulties, the first year of church planting is the honeymoon period. Energy is high, adrenaline is pumping and the sprint is on. When we reached the second year, I realized that we had only just begun, that as we grew we would face new and different challenges. I was tempted to dwell in the already done rather than the still to come. I hadn’t paced myself, which led to burnout.

Lack of Structure:

The second danger is closely related to exhaustion and the greatest

danger by far to our personal health: Not purposefully setting a familial and marital structure that can withstand years of church planting. All that we had established in our “previous life” - date nights, clear boundaries between ministry and family, family days-immediately flew out the window when we started church planting. The boundaries between family, marriage, even personal life and church planting are muddy. By the second year, the lack of boundaries was greatly affecting us. We spent that year drawing lines between ministry and marriage and ministry and family, effectively protecting our spiritual and emotional health. That structure has continued to evolve as our church grows.

Pride:

In the second year, pride appears in different forms. One form says, “We did this” and calls attention to self, desiring recognition and appreciation. Another form says, “I am responsible for the people in our church and for any future growth. It depends on me.” Yet another says, “I’ve worked really hard so now I’m going to coast.”

Being Lulled to Sleep:

The first year, we are acutely aware of the spiritual battle raging in our city. We see everyone we meet through spiritual eyes. We pray for God to move in our community and for Him to please use us. In the second year, as momentum is building, it’s easy to forget that there is still a spiritual battle raging. If we’re not careful, we are lulled to sleep in our comfortable relationships, our busy schedule and our church circles.

Ungratefulness:

In our exhaustion lurks the danger of ungratefulness. We see the holes, the needs, the gaps, the failures, the weaknesses. We see how God has not come through for us how we wanted or the person who left the church. We fail to remember what has happened: the answered

prayers, the movement of the Spirit, the opened door in the community, the supernatural financial support and the fruitful connections.

Ungratefulness and forgetfulness is dangerous because it fuels our discouragement and that nagging thought of throwing in the towel and walking away from the whole thing.

We learned a lesson that year. We learned that the very best response to combat the subtle creep of these things in year two is to celebrate every victory and every gift God gives. Thinking on those things that are good and pure and true turns eyes away from what is not and what is yet to be done and onto everything that God is doing.

So celebrate, no matter how small the victory or how seemingly small the gift. Your year two will be the better for it.

THE THIRD YEAR OF CHURCH PLANTING

After describing the difficulties of the first two years of church planting, I know what you want me to say about the third, especially if you are still in the first or the second: that it's all flowers and rainbows and ponies.

I realized today that I have been putting off this post on our third year because I couldn't say that, despite how much I want to. But perhaps encouragement comes not just in relaying the good, but also the challenges.

In the spring, I visited with another church planting wife that I hadn't seen in a year. When she asked me to summarize our year, I said, "Stressful, emotionally difficult and painful."

"Let me guess," she said, "Your third year?"

There have been a myriad of wonderful things we've seen God do this year in our church. We've grown spiritually and numerically. We've earned respect and credibility in our community through service and outreach. Discipleship is a growing part of the DNA of our people. Community is being knit. The people we so love are leading, serving, sharing Christ and practicing hospitality. It's happening. What we hoped for and dreamed of and prayed about it-it's happening. God is faithful. We have rejoiced over all these developments throughout the year.

Just as we have rejoiced, however, we have also grieved.

For now-for now-we have lost the fellowship of a beloved one who has chosen to leave us for lesser things. A hole (and an empty seat) remains because of our beloved one, who was with us from the beginning. The hole, like a cloud, hangs heavy with sorrow over everything. Among us, our hearts plead, even in worship, for redemption and restoration.

Through lies and sin, the Enemy has taken one. (And one so dear!)

Will he take others?

In this third year, as we have built relationships and earned the right to speak into lives, people have revealed themselves more intimately to us. They have shown us their struggle, their temptation and their shame. We have shown ours as well. It's been hard because I too often expect life (and church) to be all rainbows, ponies and flowers.

But this is what community is, what church is. Sin and its effects are a reality for churches everywhere. We are all sinners, weak and prone to wander, gathering together around the cross to lap up grace. Together and imperfect, we cling to Jesus and await His return.

Personally, this year, there has been sadness because I love the wayward one deeply. There has been grief because sin still lives, despite the ultimate victory. There has been pain because it feels personal and makes me question if what we're doing is worth it. But it has also solidified my resolve against sin in my life and in others' lives. My commitment to the Lord and to His calling on my life has not waned.

Though none go with me, I still will follow.

No turning back.

No turning back.

DON'T FEAR THE FRUIT

Several years ago, we set out on a journey into the unknown and the uncertain. We folded our worldly belongings into boxes, we said goodbye to beloved people and we followed God's beckoning into a land that seemed foreign to us. In the spirit of Joshua and Caleb, we set off, trusting God's provision.

Where would we live?

Who would we know?

What experiences would we encounter?

Would we succeed?

What would become of us and our children?

We didn't know, but somehow the answers seemed certain, cemented in our future. We were so full of faith then.

Today we are packing again. Just a few belongings in small suitcases this time, special tokens of Virginia to leave with beloved people, books and journals for rest and reflection. We're returning for a spell to the starting line, where we were seen off in a flourish of faith and celebration. We're returning to say many things:

We have seen the land. We have entered the land. We have seen fruit.

And we're taking it back, so we can say: It is true! God is faithful!

We have seen it with our own eyes!

Mostly, we go back to say it to ourselves, to embolden our own hearts for the next few years. Because the funny thing is that, like Joshua and Caleb, we carry fruit back too large for any one person to carry, yet we still daily face the choice of faith or fear. Is God capable of giving us the land or has He already poured out all there is to give?

The fruit itself is heavy and daunting- the people, the growth, the needs, the space issues, the decisions, the responsibilities, the demands.

Will it never be easy?

What experiences are ahead?

Who will come alongside?

What will become of us and our children and these people we love?

Oh me of little faith, who has so clearly seen the faithfulness of God yet still doubts, who still turns details over in my mind with worry.

And so these days of returning are for me. To remember that girl so full of faith. To express gratefulness to those who have supported us along the way. But mostly, to speak words of life and truth to myself: God is faithful! Remember what you've seen and press on in faith.

AN INTERVIEW WITH TRICIA LOVEJOY: LESSONS LEARNED IN CHURCH PLANTING

Tricia Lovejoy, wife of Shawn Lovejoy and mom of three, recently answered my questions about church planting and ministry life. Shawn is the Lead Pastor of Mountain Lake Church in Cumming, Georgia, and Tricia is a freelance writer and blogger. She leads the women of her church in an environment called Girlfriends and she mentors Pastors' wives across the country. You can connect with Tricia at Sharpenher.com or Flourish.me.

Q: There are definitely different stages of church planting (pre-plant, first year/1-200 people, 200-500 people and 500+). You and Shawn have been through all of them at Mountain Lake. What have you, as the pastor's wife, found to be the essential lesson of each stage?

A: God never puts someone into a leadership position fully ready to take the job. It seems He prefers on-the-job training. A quick look through Scripture proves my point: Moses, Jonah, Peter, Paul...the list could go on. These men were not ready for the tasks they faced, but God equipped them nonetheless and He taught them many lessons along the way.

I can relate. My husband and I planted our church in 2000. We had never been in a "lead position" before, we were new to our community and we had no core group. In short, we weren't ready to face the challenges before us. Well, we thought we were, but that was just young bravado talking. The truth is, God taught us essential lessons at each stage of church planting that not only equipped us to handle future challenges, but also shaped our character. Let me

quickly share a few:

Pre-plant stage:

Our very first small group was an utter flop. 18 people committed to come. 0 showed up. ZERO! We felt like failures that night. But, God taught us an important lesson: accept disappointment, not defeat. In other words, we determined from the start that failures would come, but we could not give up. Too much was at stake. That determination has held us steady in ministry for years since.

First 2 years of Church Planting:

The planter and his wife must be strong ministry partners and strong marriage partners. Don't neglect either role. A healthy relationship between the pastor and his wife is critical.

Years 3-5:

As goes leadership, so goes the church. If you want a vibrant, healthy, growing church, the ministry team must be vibrant, healthy and growing spiritually.

Years 6-10:

The wife of the pastor has influence! Use it! Encourage the ministry team. Counsel people regarding faith and family. Brainstorm with your husband about ministry, messages, staffing and future plans. God has given you this role-use it for the good of His Kingdom.

Years 11-13:

Never exchange “who” you are in God with “what” you do for God. Titles, recognition and status mean nothing. The only thing that matters is integrity before God.

Q: You get to speak with countless pastors’ wives and church planting wives. What are the overarching issues you’re seeing among ministry wives today? What do you say to encourage or challenge women in these issues?

A: Names and faces change, but the issues do not. Most pastors’ wives I speak to struggle to find meaningful friendships and to find ways to balance family and ministry. Here is my general response to these issues:

I can attest that having close friends in your church (as the pastor’s wife) is tricky. My suggestion is to have lots of friends at different levels, i.e., some you laugh with, some who make you think, some you lead, etc. Some friendships will be more casual; others will be more meaningful. And, if along the way you find the perfect BFF who can be all of those things, grab her up and treasure her! But if you never find the perfect BFF, at least you’ll have a treasure trove of friends to enjoy. In addition, cultivate relationships through websites designed specifically for PW’s. Talking with other women in ministry often puts life in perspective.

Forget the myth of balance! I’ve never been able to give equal time, energy and love to every area of my life. My goal is to be fully engaged wherever I am. In other words, when I’m with my family, I am fully “wife and mom.” No other agenda has my attention. And, when I’ve scheduled time to focus on ministry, I give it my all. The key to being fully engaged is SCHEDULING. Plan your work and work your plan.

Q: How do you encourage your husband when he is discouraged in ministry? How do you encourage yourself in the Lord when you are the one who is discouraged?

A: More than anyone else around him, our husbands need to hear US say things like, “I’m with you no matter what. I know you the best and I love you the most.” They need us to keep them focused on living out God’s purpose for their lives, not on the voice of the naysayers. Our encouragement means more to them than a thousand pats on the back by well-meaning friends. Here are a few ways I cheer my husband on:

After each of our worship services, I’m waiting backstage for Shawn. He looks at me while he’s taking off the mic and I know what his eyes are asking: “Was I clear? Did I make sense? I need your feedback.” He’s not asking for a pat on the back. He really wants the truth. And, I give it to him. But, I always build him up and encourage him. It takes quite a lot to do what he does and I understand that having a support system around him will only make him better.

I stand with Shawn in the lobby after each of our services. Don’t get me wrong, I want to be there to hug necks and pray with people. But, my husband needs a partner, too. Sometimes the ministry of “presence” is encouragement in itself.

I celebrate his accomplishments. Anniversaries of big days at MLC, achievements in our community, a spiritual win, whatever it is, I enjoy celebrating with him. My husband is a pretty driven guy, so helping him slow down long enough to enjoy the ride is a pretty healthy thing!

I protect our day off together. We have some pretty good talks on these dates, leaving us both refreshed and ready to tackle another week.

As for handling my own discouragement, Shawn does for me what I do for him. He is my partner in every way. God often uses him to speak wisdom into confusing or hurtful circumstances in my life. But, without fail, the way I battle discouragement is by reading God's Word and journaling my thoughts. I have stacks of journals chronicling my journey with God. I only have to look back over what God has brought me through in the past to gain hope for my future.

AM I WILLING?

Unpacking in our new home in a new state far from our families, I opened a box marked *Fragile* in big black letters. Inside, buried under bubble wrap, I found my framed wedding vows. While I searched the master bedroom for the perfect spot where the frame could hang, I read what I had committed to Kyle on our wedding day. Just as it had when I had first written the words, my heart stopped on one line.

I vow to support the ministry that God gives you.

An Overarching Willingness

When I wrote those vows in the weeks leading up to our wedding, I read them several times, each time imagining myself speaking them on our wedding day and, each time, hesitating at the promise to support Kyle's calling into ministry. Although they were weighty, the other lines about faithfulness and commitment felt right to me; I could confidently make those promises to Kyle. I considered scratching the ministry line because it seemed out of place for wedding vows, but my heart felt unsettled at that prospect, too. I couldn't pinpoint the difficulty surrounding this one vow.

Kyle had a clear call to ministry, of which I was fully supportive. In fact, although I had rarely voiced it, I had felt a similar call on my life from the time I was in high school. I suspected I would marry someone with the same calling. When Kyle told me what he wanted to do with his life, I thought, *Well, of course!* as if it were silly to consider anything else. We rarely discussed the calling—it was a given, a natural next step for both of us, something we were willing to give our lives for. The hesitation, then, to put my support in writing surprised me. Possibly for the first time, in the middle of writing my wedding vows, I considered what ministry might mean for my life.

As I measured the future with a moment of God-given clarity, I saw what a lifetime of ministry might entail: shouldering heavy responsibilities, giving ourselves away to others, living far away from

family, or possibly enduring criticism or defeat for the sake of Christ. Because Kyle had surrendered control of his future to God, my vow of support meant stepping into his shadow and following him where God led. Was I willing? Was my conviction so firm that I would speak those words to Kyle and to God in front of our friends and family?

A Specific Willingness

Eight years after our wedding day, I stood in our new home, holding those vows in my hands. We had just moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, to start a church from scratch. I recalled hearing the term church planter in seminary, but had not known what it meant, certainly not imagining the term would ever describe us. Yet there I stood, dusting off a frame of my wedding vows in a home and a city where we didn't know anyone. Although much had changed since the day we wrote our promises down on scratch paper—we had three little boys and Kyle's experience of serving on staff at a church in Texas—the same questions arose in my heart, urging for a silent renewal of the vow I had made to my husband. When I'd first said those words, they had been a general affirmation of the calling on my husband's life. Now we faced the difficult work of church planting. My support and affirmation of my husband's ministry would be crucial.

Was I willing?

I said yes on my wedding day and I said yes to church planting. And—this is very much the key to being a minister's wife—I have said yes every day since, most of the time with joy, sometimes with reluctance and selfish resentment, but nonetheless a yes.

I vowed a commitment to my husband, but I've discovered the commitment, the yes, that sustains is my submission to God. My yes is to Him and will naturally align itself as support of what my husband does as a minister of the gospel.

An Ongoing Willingness

Three years after the day I laid my head down on my pillow in our new home in a new state far from our families, wondering if something could be made out of nothing, God has done it. He has used His people, so broken and weak, to bring light to a spiritually dark place.

Every so often, I stand in front of my wedding vows, hanging framed on the wall. Just as when I wrote the words, my heart stops on one line.

I vow to support the ministry that God gives you.

Clearly, my support and affirmation of my husband's ministry has been vital. And, clearly, God has moved powerfully around and among us.

But the work is far from complete. The Lord is still calling on me to move forward in faith—loving, serving, discipling and leading. Church planting—and all of ministry—is a faith marathon, not a sprint. Daily He asks for my heart, that He might cultivate it, so as to produce fruit in and around me.

Am I willing?

ENGAGE (A LESSON IN CONTENTMENT)

I live in one of the most beautiful places in the United States and I should know because I've stepped foot in most of our states at one time or another in my life, thanks to generous grandparents and lots and lots of road trips.

Charlottesville is one of the East Coast's destinations for high-end weddings and, because of our native son Thomas Jefferson and his famous home, a magnet for tourists. We've got it all: mountains to hike, four seasons to enjoy, great music, art and locally grown food to devour. Virginia is for Lovers precisely because we have whatever anyone loves and Charlottesville typifies that more than most anywhere else in Virginia.

When we first moved here to plant a church, however, I was an outsider, so I noticed everything that was different than Texas and each little difference got under my skin a little bit. And church planting was just plain hard, so I often entertained the idea of heading back home and setting up shop in a rocking chair on the wrap-around porch of my make-believe home in the Hill Country. Where I didn't have to do anything hard or uncomfortable. And the bluebonnets were perpetually in bloom. And the unfamiliarity of Charlottesville faded quietly (and quickly) into the past.

Sometimes the beauty of this place was the only thing I could point to as a reason to stay and plant roots. Every time I'd turn into our neighborhood and get a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I'd thank God for the simple grace of living in such a place that makes me think of Him. That view led me to choose this place and choose to embrace God's will for me again and again and again.

Slowly, Charlottesville became more than just a beautiful face. Her rhythms and seasons and cares became my own. By engaging the city and seeking to know her, I discovered her secrets, her history, her unique story. But most of all, I began to love the people. Her people became my people and I settled in to a familiarity that has served me

well.

Until this year.

This year I've become too familiar with Charlottesville, too familiar with her beauty and her rhythms and her beauty. I've become so familiar with her that I haven't seen her at all. Like I do with my children and my husband when I'm busy or distracted, I have forgotten to really look at her and take her in and enjoy her. Her people have become muted and almost like a backdrop, because I haven't engaged them as I used to.

I started noticing a discontent in myself about being here and it didn't take long to connect the dots back to my disengagement. I had forgotten what I love about this place. I'd forgotten her secrets and her needs. I'd lost the fire-in-the-belly with which we moved here, to be honest. This has all taught me an important lesson about contentment in ministry: If I don't engage, I won't love and I'll struggle to embrace where God has me.

Once I realized this, I started looking and actually seeing, just like I do when one of my boys crawls in my lap and actually sits still and I take in every breath of that moment. There is, of course, the view of the mountains that always reminds me of God's grace in bringing us here. But it's the people that I see most: the girl at the grocery store's register every time I come through, the parents of my children's classmates, the neighbors, the college students rushing around everywhere.

As I engage my heart and my eyes, I find myself much more open to engaging people and praying for God's kingdom to come in Charlottesville. Always, there is a residual effect in my heart. Joy wells up so high I think I might drown in it. I feel purposeful and as if I'm actually doing the gospel work the title "church planting wife" suggests. And, most of all, there is contentment, knowing that I'm exactly where God wants me.

What about you? Wherever you are is where God has you, no

doubt about it. Are you living with purpose and joy where God has you? If not, how might you engage the people and the place with new eyes? Perhaps that engagement in His name is the very key to your contentment.

BIG PRAYERS

One thing I've noticed about myself is that I am a fixer. I have trouble sitting in uncertainty. Rather than sit in it, I want to do something to bring about change. A problem at church? Let me at it. A need? Let me meet it. A problem in my heart? I can fix it! I want to enact a strategy or plan an event or just do something already.

But what if it's beyond my fixing? What if it requires a capability that I don't have? What if God wants something for me or from me that's different than what I envision? Better yet, what if God wants something for others that's different than what I envision will "fix" their issue?

This is indeed the economy of God: I don't have enough capability in my account to purchase spiritual fruit for myself, for my husband, for others, or for our church. If I, then, want to see God bring our church collectively to unity, to a greater love, to a greater desire to sacrificially serve, what do I do? I ask the One who is capable of doing it.

The problem is that my prayers are too small. I want a quick fix, either by God's hand or through my own. This self-sufficiency and pitiful fear keeps my eyes in what I can see from where I'm standing. It leads me to small prayers, prayers that don't require faith. Praying big prayers, however, gives me the 10,000-foot view of what God might want to do in me or in others. And it always turns my eyes to the character and capability of God.

So I'm praying bigger prayers and believing my capable God can answer. I'm asking Him to change hearts and to let mine be one. I'm asking Him to speak and to move and to ignite a passion under us. This is what I'm praying for myself, for my family and for our church:

From Ephesians 3 (an example for the church)

- Lord, strengthen us with might through Your Spirit in our

inner man.

- May Christ dwell in our hearts through faith.
- I pray that we would be rooted and grounded in love.
- Help us to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.
- Let us know this love that surpasses knowledge.
- Fill us to the measure of all the fullness of God.

From Colossians 1 (an example for my husband)

- Lord, fill him with the knowledge of Your will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that he might walk worthy of You Lord, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of who You are.
- Strengthen him with all might according to Your glorious power so that he might have endurance and patience and joy.

There are others, but you get the picture. At the top of the page where I've written these prayers, I've scrawled in bold letters: Will change come through strategies and to-do lists or by faith in God through prayer?

For spiritual change to come, for fruit to spring forth, for fear to flee, for any effectiveness really, there is only one answer to the question. It is God alone who is capable.

And so let us pray.

5 LESSONS FROM 5 YEARS OF CHURCH PLANTING

My friend Jenny was over recently and my youngest son bounded into the room. “He’s getting so big,” she said. “I remember when he was a baby.” She remembers him as a baby because she’s been at our church since it started in our living room and our baby-baby and our church-baby are only six months apart. Our baby-baby used to sit at the feet of our worship leader during church, drooling and attempting to keep his body upright.

Everyone who has been at our church since the living room days counts the years of our church-baby by our baby-baby and he just turned six, so the church is rounding around to the same number soon.

Jenny’s comment about my baby-baby and our subsequent talk of the church-baby has gotten me thinking. What have each of these years and each of these babies brought, aside from sleepless nights and profound anxiety? Each of these years have taught me unique lessons, things that are just now clarifying. Here’s what each year has taught me:

Year One: Church Planting looks cool and exciting (and easy) only from the outside.

This was the stripping away year. We dove into church planting with excitement and enthusiasm, but we had unrealistic ideas of what it would entail and unrealistic expectations of how God would move. We learned that church planting is not cool, nor is it easy and if we would endure, it would be because of our reliance on God and His gospel alone.

Year Two: Success is spelled F-A-I-T-H.

One of the lingering lies that held on from year one was that success equaled numbers and also a lack of difficulty and discouragement. We rounded into year two having given everything we had and having very

little to show for it according to our definition of success. We learned that success in church planting is faith: believing and following God, relying on God as grower and working hard but trusting God to bring fruit.

Year Three: Sometimes because you care, you will get hurt. But don't stop caring.

God built our little church community. By year three, we knew each other well and were invested in our relationships with one another. And then the bottom fell out and the effects of sin touched us all. It hurt deeply because we cared deeply and we wrestled together with how to respond. I was afraid after that, afraid to invest too deeply or to carry the struggles of others. I learned, however, that part of community is that it's risky. But I also learned that it's worth it to continue taking those risks.

Year Four: You have to change and grow with growth.

Our church-baby was really growing by this point, but I didn't evolve with it. I tried to know everyone (because I did at the beginning), I tried to have most visitors in our home for dinner (because I did at the beginning) and I tried to juggle several roles within the church (because I did at the beginning). I learned that I need to be fluid, ever listening for what God has for me in the present and not expecting that I will always do what I've done in the past.

Year Five: Drift happens. It's good, needed and right to reorient.

Structure. Processes. Ministries. Elders. Good things had been built into the framework of the church and suddenly our attention was drawn more inward onto maintaining what had been built, to juggling plates and going from activity to activity. I lost sight of outsiders, of living with eyes for people. We grew tired and distracted and, through it all,

I learned profoundly the value and importance of rest and reflection.

Year Six: There's always more to learn.

This is the year we're in and I'm still learning so much about God, about the church and about myself. I hope to fill journals and this blog this year with all God teaches me.

Through all these years and all these babies, one thing stands out: God is faithful. Now that we've church planted and seen the faithfulness of God and the beauty of His people, I dare say that I'd go anywhere and do anything that He asked of me. I want to see it again and again and I want to birth whatever babies God has for me to birth.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JEN HATMAKER ON FRIENDSHIP AND OTHER CHURCH PLANTING LESSONS

Aside from being the author of *Seven* and other books, a speaker and a mom to five, Jen Hatmaker is a church planting wife. She and her husband, Brandon, planted Austin New Church on Easter Sunday 2008. I recently asked her a few questions about church planting life. I think you'll find her answers insightful and grace-filled.

Q: From reading your book, you seem to be really good at avoiding the whole “lonely pastor’s wife” business that so many ministry wives describe. How do you prioritize friendship in your life? And how do you prioritize friendship while also doing the ministry thing, a.k.a. meeting with people, hospitality, etc.? It feels difficult sometimes for me to do both well.

A: At my wedding shower when I was 19 YEARS OLD (for the love), my pastor’s wife who I loved and respected gave a talk and she looked me in the eyes and said, “When we were in seminary, John’s professors told him not to make close friends because it would create jealousy in the church and people would resent us. They said part of our sacrifice was to be each other’s best friend to the exclusion of outside couples and families, in order to preserve harmony in our congregation. I want to tell you something: Do the exact opposite of that. Have best friends. Take trips together. Be vulnerable with them. Let love in and give it out with abandon. Have friends closer than brothers and sisters. I’ve been lonely my entire life and I want your future life in ministry to be so full of close friends and love, you can barely contain it.” I did exactly that. I spend so much time with my friends, it’s embarrassing. It’s this simple: I

don't put any "shoulds" or "should nots" into this equation because my husband is a pastor. I'm a girl. I love my friends just like every girl does. The end.

Q: What has been your greatest struggle(s) in church planting and what have you learned through those struggles that might benefit another church planting wife?

A: Early on, I got way too hung up on what people were thinking of me, Brandon and our little church. Are they happy? Are they inspired? Are they moved? Are they cynical? Are they staying? Are they cheating on us with another church because are not _____ enough? It stole a lot of energy away from that season. And as it turns out, I can't control what other people think, no matter how much I practice mind control. Somewhere in our second year of ANC, God's words finally sunk in: "You glorify me, make me famous, do my work, love my people, teach my Word and stay faithful to this vision I've given you and I'll worry about everything else." OK. Check. Off the hook. Someone is always not happy. Someone always wants different music. Someone always prefers their last pastor. Someone always has different ideas. This is OK. We don't have to be everyone's favorite. And that doesn't mean anyone is right or wrong. At the end of the day, are we doing what God asked of us? I mean really doing it? That's all we're responsible for. It's terribly liberating.

Q: With five kids and your own writing/speaking ministry, how do you decide what you will or will not do that is church-related?

A: Well, this is easy for me, because our church is very, very

not programmed. We don't actually have any. All of our community and discipleship and serving is done through our Restore Communities (small geographical groups). Each group meets twice a month for study and discussion, once a month (at least) for service and they take the fourth week off to hang out with neighbors and coworkers. We just believe that we can't expect a faith community to live on mission if we're taking up three nights of their weeks. We run a super lean ship and think of ourselves as a sending church way more than a gathering church, or at least as much as. I'm the most un-church-busy pastor's wife on Planet Earth.

Q: My husband and I talk all the time about maintaining the “heart and eyes” of the church planter, like we were at the beginning: missional, relational with outsiders, hospitable, outreach-minded. There is such a pull toward the comfortable, established-church mindset as we grow (read: inside focused). How do you and your husband maintain the “heart and eyes” of the church planter as your church grows?

A: So, so, so true. The bigger the machine gets, the more it requires tending. And then more Christians come and they require the most tending of anyone. This may sound oversimplified, but we make sure we are sticking to the vision for ANC, which requires a lot from our people. A lot. And we preach the hard stuff. We've found this to be a fabulous filter. We seem to keep two groups: mature, disciplined believers who want more from this Christian life than clever sermon series and one more Bible study to sign up for and jaded, angry, cynical non-believers or barely-believers who are giving the church one more chance and they dig the missional vibe of ANC. But the

middle dwellers are a revolving door. They come and leave, not motivated enough to join the mission and wanting to know when we're going to start offering AWANA's. This helps us not get bogged down with trying to please them, which helps us remember what we're doing, which helps us remember who we care about: the other 65% of people in our country who are entirely disconnected from Jesus and his people. There are enough churches positioned to serve the 35% who already believe. We can be this little random, divergent faith community in weird Austin paddling down a different stream.

PART THREE:

Marriage and Parenting While Church Planting

4 CONVERSATIONS TO HAVE WITH YOUR CHURCH-PLANTING HUSBAND

Life is a chaotic enterprise, especially if we determine in our hearts that we will not live for ourselves but be wholeheartedly invested in the lives of others. If we're going to be engaged with our spouses, purposeful with our children and selfless in our service, we're going to have to get a little bossy with ourselves about what we can and can't do. We're going to have to structure our lives in a way that helps us fulfill what we want to fulfill.

We do this with our words, just as God told the ocean where to let land begin, where the sun should give way to the moon and where winter should stop and spring should start. As He communicated, we communicate, drawing up boundaries and bringing order to the chaos.

My husband is my primary partner in life and our communication draws the lines that keep us healthy and humming in marriage, family and ministry. Especially in church planting, where ministry has been open-ended and has required us to form the structure of a church, I've found there are four conversations I must constantly be having with Kyle. Are you having these with your husband?

Conversation #1: How can I help you?

I'm amazed when I watch my husband on Sunday mornings because everyone wants a piece of him, everyone needs or wants something from him and he handles it all so calmly. But there are few, if any, who seek to help him. So I want to be that person. I want to help him.

Unfortunately, there have been times when I've hindered rather than helped because I've determined how I can best help him without actually asking him. What I find is that when I ask, he doesn't want me to run a whole area of ministry or run myself ragged doing a bunch of stuff; he simply wants me to be an emotional and physical support to him as he carries out his ministry. I've learned that he often communicates this to me nonverbally: his shoulders droop when he's

tired of talking about church, for example.

This conversation has changed a bit since last spring when Kyle said to me, “Christine, you often ask me about my day and what I did, but that shifts us on to church issues so quickly. I think it’s best for me when you ask how I’m doing. That keeps the focus on my heart and helps me open up.” I loved that and it’s been so helpful for me as I try to help my husband.

Conversation #2: I need your attention.

Sometimes the tables are turned and I am the one who needs the heart questions, but my husband is burdened, busy, or distracted and is not asking them. Or we haven’t had undivided time together and the cracks are showing. This is when we need to have the “I need your attention” conversation.

This conversation must be carefully considered because there is a fine line to walk between the extremes of expecting our husbands to meet our every need and not asking for what we need for fear of becoming an additional burden to him. The woman who walks right in the middle is one who trusts the Lord to sustain her but also takes seriously her role of bringing her needs and her husband’s blind spots to his attention.

So we must learn to discern what we’re feeling and thinking, carefully consider what needs to be said or asked for and then approach our husbands with gentleness, clarity and love. Kyle says that men appreciate when we’re able to communicate these things with as little emotion as possible and with clear thoughts and action points. We also should look for ways to affirm them when they respond to what we’ve said.

Conversation #3: Let’s talk logistics.

One Sunday early in our church plant, I sat down in church, read the bulletin and learned along with the rest of the congregation that

there was an event scheduled later in the week and that I was the host! That unfortunate miscommunication was just the catalyst we needed to develop a system for communicating about our calendar. We began a weekly calendar session (ours is on Sunday evenings) in which we talk about the coming week, the upcoming month and we make decisions about we'll do.

We've developed a few principles that guide this discussion:

What can we handle? It's only taken me forever, but I've finally started learning myself and what I can and can't handle as an introvert. Because of this, we don't do more than two nights in a row of evening activities.

What are our personal priorities? We are committed to one another and our children above any others, so we get family weekends on the calendar before the church gets on our calendar. We also plan ahead for date nights and keep Sabbath days free.

Who are our people priorities outside of the home? The people we're discipling and the leadership of our church get the most of our time and those times get on the schedule before anything else.

Finally, what are we saying to each other and our kids through our calendar?

Conversation #4: The glass is half-full.

Ministry can, at times, feel like a constant battle against discouragement. Sometimes we're so overwhelmed with the problems, issues, needs and things that need to be better that we lose sight of what God has done and what He's doing. And the truth is that we're not going to get a whole lot of encouragement from other people. So what do we do? We need to create a culture of encouragement in our homes, where even the smallest of victories are celebrated, where we spur one another on to have eyes and hands of faith, where we reflect on the good things that are happening. We need to be constantly

recounting how God has been faithful and how He is faithful and how He will be faithful in the future. Because He has and is and always will be.

The best thing about these conversations is that we don't have to wait for our husbands to take the lead in any of these areas. We can initiate them; we can create an atmosphere of loving communication that brings order to the chaos and invites purpose, growth, help and encouragement to dwell within our homes.

MARRIAGE AND CHURCH PLANTING

After several years, it's certainly nice to be sitting in this stage of church planting where our church is thriving and uncertainty has pretty much left the building. But as any church planting wife knows, a thriving church plant doesn't start or grow by accident.

A thriving church plant is built on prayer, relationships, faith, generosity and hours of hard work. In fact, it takes so much hard work that it requires an almost single-minded devotion from the church planter and the church planting wife. Priorities get shifted, sacrifices are made, things have to get done, burdens demand to be carried, life moves at a sprinter's pace.

They told me that in the midst of the hard work it would happen, but I didn't believe them. Not us. They said that even the best marriage would be tested in church planting, but I believed we would be different. We had such a solid foundation and truly enjoyed one another. Plus, we had years of ministry experience together and had settled into our partnership quite nicely.

But it did happen. We struggled to communicate well, to keep church planting from encroaching into every part of our relationship, to make time to rest together, to meet each others needs when we had nothing left to give. We fought, sometimes against each other and sometimes as partners trying to keep our marriage healthy and strong. Our marriage has been tested by, among other things, exhaustion and resentment, as well as the normal busyness of raising small children.

In church planting, what I am most proud of is actually not the church itself. What I'm most proud of is that we work hard at our marriage. We refuse to sacrifice our marriage on the altar of ministry. We will not let drift happen due to our inability to say no to others and yes to each other. Our ultimate commitment, our vow, is to one another, not the church.

None of this is easy and here is the key-none of it happens by accident. Respect and love don't just happen. Then again, neither do pure

thoughts, forgiveness, conflict resolution, affection, communication, or romance.

Happy marriages are between intentional people. And when something such as church planting adds ongoing stress and strain, marriage breathes through intentionality. Why do we tend to believe these crazy ideas that pastors and their wives are immune from marital struggle or that it is the spiritual thing to do to make our ministry more important than our marriage?

On a recent getaway, my husband and I reoriented ourselves to one another again. We found ourselves surprised at the drift between us, but we made plans to change that: saving one weekend a month just for us and our family, praying together on Sunday evenings, having more say in the other's calendar, spending more down time with friends and voicing our needs to one another.

There is no shame in the drift. There will always be stress and strain and reasons to forgive. There is only fault when we aren't intentional to change when we need to change, to protect when we need to protect, to love whom we committed to love.

What do you need to do intentionally today in your marriage?

DO IT FOR THE KIDS (PARENTING WHILE PLANTING)

Generally, I am not a worrier, but in the past months I have fretted over my children. The last time I second-guessed myself and worried like this was the year my then three-year-old was diagnosed with autism. Again, I have found myself asking questions, feeling troubled and unsure and grasping for some control over the future. Their future.

My heart has been in knots as I have wrestled with God over my uncertainties, not even quite sure where they've come from or to what end He wanted to bring me. Through it all, He has, as He always does, consistently spoken grace over my life.

Slowly and gently, He has unraveled the rope in my heart, laying it out straight and knotless so that I can (finally) see clearly. What I see is that my heart has not been troubled because I need to make some drastic change in how I parent, although all along I have been asking Him about this. It is something else, something simple and surprising.

Surprising, because I thought I trusted God. Without thought of logic, I have moved across the country and helped my husband plant a church, for goodness sake. I have put myself and my crazy thoughts out into the world through my writing, believing that God could use it in some small way. I have come through a period of grief and disillusionment with a more profound hope in God and longing for Heaven after my son's unexpected diagnosis.

Surprising, because I have seen God's faithfulness with my own eyes, touched it, felt it and held it in my hands. I have believed with certainty that, going forward, He will be for me in the future what He has been for me in the past, perhaps even more.

Yet, at the same time that I have celebrated God's faithfulness, I have wrestled with this uncertainty about my children. Always about my children.

This I see clearly now, that my heart has been troubled into knots

because I have not trusted that God will take care of my children. I get a little twinge in my heart when I consider how they are growing up familiar with things that are unfamiliar to me, that they aren't familiar with things so familiar and beloved to me. I have not trusted that His calling on us to move away from our extended families, plant a church, be in ministry and live in a very secular place is also His best for my children. I have not trusted, truly trusted, that He will provide and care for them.

The knots are undone, the rope taut, a fear laid bare. I have so clearly seen my heart and confessed my distrust. I know, however, that the opportunity to worry will present itself again and very soon at that. Will I tie myself in knots of uncertainty and fear? Or will I keep myself laid bare, trusting like a child for my children?

The Lord continues to use the narrative about Joshua and Caleb spying out the Promised Land in my life. He used it to call us into church planting and He used it to remind me that His care is for me and my children in this process:

And all the children of Israel complained.. "Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our...children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?"
And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who complain against Me. Those who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness...But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in and they shall know the land."

Numbers 14

The land is meant as a blessing for the children, not something to harm them. The question is: Will I believe that and trust them to the Lord?

RAISING KIDS ON THE MISSION FIELD

I went to college with some pretty cool people who are serving the Lord in some incredibly faithful ways, one of whom I get to introduce to you. My former roommate, Christina Gabrysch, is a missionary in rural Ethiopia alongside her husband Jeremy, a medical doctor and their two children. They serve in a Christian hospital, evangelizing patients, training Ethiopian doctors and nurses in medical care and the Word of God and sending local missionary doctors to other underdeveloped areas in rural Ethiopia. I asked Christina to share because she is new to the mission field. I wanted to know what she is learning about God and herself in this adjustment period and I knew her words might encourage those of you who are in your own adjustment period. I hope that's exactly what you find in her wise, insightful answers to the questions I posed about raising kids on the mission field, learning dependence and culture shock.

How did God call you and Jeremy to Africa?

God called our family to Ethiopia through a series of events and over a period of several years. It did not happen overnight, through a dream, or in a loud audible voice as we would often like. Rather, we strived to follow God daily and turned this way or that way as He lead us through gentle whispers. (Isaiah 30:21 - And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.) This has been our theme verse over the last year as we have moved our family overseas and it continues to be the verse that we claim as we live out daily life here.

God called Jeremy to missions as a college student using many of the teachings of John Piper like Let the Nations Be Glad and Desiring God. More specifically, Jeremy felt this calling begin in his heart during a college conference called Passion. I was at the same conference where it hit

home for me that my life is not my own and the very purpose of it is to give glory to God. Flash forward years later as Jeremy and I began dating, he told me of his plan to live overseas and do medical mission work. He was afraid I might run for the door, but instead I told him that if God was calling me to be his wife than God was also calling me to do mission work overseas.

Then we began doing short-term mission trips together. On these trips, God lead us to Africa. It was through a series of short-term trips that God gave us both a heart for Africa, the people and a desire to do longer term missions. Alongside these trips we began praying to be able to adopt a child into our family. God lead us to Ethiopia through our adoption of our first child, Nate.

So it is a long story, over almost 15 years, of how God worked in both of our hearts and lives to call us to Him, His work, His work overseas and specifically Ethiopia.

Tell me about adjusting to life in a different culture. What are the hardest parts for you and what has been easy about it that surprised you?

The veteran missionaries warned us about culture shock and we were trained in the different phases of it and how to adapt to a new culture. But nothing can ever really prepare you for living in a different culture. At first it is adventurous as you try new foods, meet new people and learn new ways of life. Soon enough, the adventure dies and you are left to endeavor to love a new culture that is the very polar opposite of your own.

This is an impossible task without looking to Jesus as our example and relying on the Holy Spirit to help us. Thankfully, we do have the best example in Jesus as He

left His home to come live among a sinful people whom He loved and served humbly. If we try to live in a different culture on our strength, I can testify that we will become frustrated, impatient, angry and paralyzed to do the work that God has for us. To thrive overseas we must die to ourselves, our culture, our ideas and our way of doing things. This is something that must be done every single day and sometimes a few times a day. God has us so far out of our comfort zone here in Ethiopia that we must cling to Him just to do life here. It is a scary place to be sometimes, but it is also such a sweet place as we grow to know and love God more and see His great love for a diverse and beautiful world.

When we church planted, the move really took out all of my “crutches” and caused me to learn to depend on the Lord like never before. Are you experiencing the same thing? What are you learning about yourself and about God during this adjustment period?

When God called us to move overseas, He called us to give up a lot of our “crutches” or comforts. We left our families, friends, familiar places, careers, home and even our dog. In a sense we did feel as we had been stripped of so many things that we held tightly in our hearts. It was and is painful but it also gives me a rich feeling of freedom. God has shown us that He is all we need. He is our family, closest friend, the most familiar place and our home. He has shown us that His promises are true and that He will remain faithful at all times. He has never left us! We are free to have nothing and be far away from those who know and love us most. He is everything and in Him we have more than the comforts of this world can even attempt to provide. In Him, we have the fullest fellowship. In Him, we are sons and daughters of the Sovereign King.

You are raising two children in a culture very different from the one you grew up in. Tell me about the process you've gone through or are going through in trusting your kids to God.

As we prepared to move overseas, I learned to give myself, my husband and my children over to God completely. For my kids, I had to believe, without a doubt, that God loves them more than I ever could. I had to believe that He has a plan for their lives and that His plan is always good. I had to mentally walk down the road of losing my kids or having something "bad" happen to them and then claim that God is in control and that He is good. It was a time where I had to question my beliefs in God and in His promises. I needed to know what I believed to be true and then I needed to sharpen my faith in these beliefs. I had to completely give my children over to God and relinquish any little control I thought I might have had. I decided that I did trust Him, because He can do things that I cannot do. He can give them an abundant life, He can shape their hearts and minds into His own and He loves them unconditionally.

I do feel relatively safe living in Ethiopia. We have not knowingly put our children in harm's way. We try our best to provide safety, security and love for them. We strive to teach them biblical principles and show Jesus to them. And then we pray. We pray for their eyes to see God, their hearts to know Jesus and their lives to be a testimony of God's grace and love to others.

I am thankful that I went through this process in my heart of releasing my children into God's hands. It took a move overseas for me to go through this, but it is something that every mom should do. We simply just cannot make this world a rosy place for our children and we cannot protect them from harm and the mistakes that we made growing

up. The only way to have peace and joy in parenthood is to relinquish control, loosen our grip and watch God do what He does best.

How can people in the States encourage and support women like you? What would you want them to know about your life and ministry?

I want people in the States to know that we NEED their support and encouragement. I want them to know that we are NOT superhuman. We struggle to have quiet time with the Lord. We overlook opportunities to share the Gospel or sometimes even run from them. We have a difficult time doing what God calls us to do. We mess up everyday and almost ruin relationships with those on our team, our spouse, or our children. We need God's grace every minute and we need to cling to the Holy Spirit if there is even a chance for us to do the task God has given to us.

Before I was a missionary, I thought that missionaries had it all together. They had the closest relationship with God, they knew the most about the Bible and they had more boldness and courage than I could even imagine. I put them up on this sort of higher ground. Now, I know that God calls broken people to the mission field. He does not wait for us to "get it all together" or to have a seminary degree. He calls us in our broken state so that we are confident that it is Him working through us. It is His work being done out here and not our own.

We need those on our support team to pray for us to have endurance when we feel alone or tired. We need them to pray for us to have boldness and courage to share the Gospel. We need them to pray for us to have the stamina to make friendships with those who are completely different than us. We need prayer to rely on God and not try to do

things on our own accord. We need prayer to walk humbly and serve others. We need prayer to love unconditionally and to forgive. So, as they pray these same things for their own lives, pray them for their missionary friends as well. Then send them a note and let them know that you prayed for them today.

Oh and we really love care packages!

AN OPEN LETTER TO CHURCH PLANTERS FROM YOUR WIVES

This summer I stood in front of a room full of church planting wives and took questions. Every question broached betrayed some level of desperation, concern and anguish and most were about their pastor-husbands. How do I encourage him? How do I handle my own concerns when I see how much pressure he's under? How can I best help him when I feel so needy myself?

But one woman I will never forget. As soon as her hand shot up, she started crying. What do I do? I feel like my husband loves the church more than he loves me.

It's hard for pastor's wives to let others see them cry, especially in a room full of people that we assume are a whole lot better at this role than we are, but she let it all out, desperate for help. Every woman in the room cried along with her, because we know that feeling. We all know what it feels like to compete with the church plant. We all know what it feels like to realize that, at some level, we've had to sacrifice ourselves and our marriage for the church. We are the first to feel the effects, church planters, when you cave to the pressure of success.

As church planting wives at that conference, we were stuffed into a corner room in a shopping-mall sized megachurch. The rest of the church was filled to the brim with church planters, church planting strategists, megachurch pastors and leaders of all types. I wanted to run into the hallways and rooms, gathering the men to come and hear what their wives were saying, because I hear this woman's sentiment far too often. I think learning about strategy, leadership and ministry paradigms is vitally important, but, church planters, do you consider how you can treasure the resource that is constantly at your side?

Church planting is difficult work because it's all-encompassing. The lines between home and ministry are so blurred that it's easy to lose sight of what appropriate boundaries are and what emotional and physical health looks like. Church planters, not a wife in that room cried

because we don't understand the pressure you are under or because we have unrealistic expectations of you. We feel the pressure, albeit different pressure, as much as you and we care about your success probably more than you do.

We love you, we respect you and we sincerely want to be a help to you. Although we are not a resource just to be used to further your ministry, we are your best resource for life, family and ministry.

We are your helper, yes, but we need your help, too. We need your understanding and listening ear. These are the things we need you to hear, from the perspective of your wife:

Your vow is to me, not to a church. The church is Christ's bride and He promised to sustain her. I know this is a difficult line because church planting truly does require a lot of your time and energy, but I also know this is more of a heart issue for you. Do you recognize and acknowledge by how you live and lead that this is Christ's church and, therefore, Christ's responsibility? Because if not, you will become a slave to success and, as your wife, I will reap what you sow.

I need you to set healthy boundaries and priorities. You teach our church what they can expect from you. If you answer the phone every time it rings, they will call you at all hours with needs and requests. If you make exceptions on your Sabbath day, they will expect to be your exception. The way you handle boundaries not only speaks to our church, but it also speaks (loudly) to me. When you turn off your phone after work so the kids and I can have your full attention, that speaks value and honor to me. When you set aside money and time to take me out on a date, you are speaking love to me. I need these things. Speak louder to the kids and I than to our church. Our church will hear the echo anyway.

I want to help you. I am not afraid of the sacrifice and hard work church planting requires. I want to be a part of your success. But I do begin to resent it when you expect me to carry the heavy burdens with you without giving me time, attention, understanding and appreciation.

Help me help you by showing me appreciation and attending to my needs.

Church planters, can I say it again? We know your job is hard and we know this is an important calling God has placed on your life. We simply don't want to be overlooked or left behind in the process.

CHURCH PLANTING WITH KIDS

Yesterday I mentioned to the boys that someone was coming for dinner. As a church planting wife, we have people in our home quite often for dinners, community group, leadership gatherings, or celebrations, so my kids didn't think this announcement was anything unusual. In fact, my oldest, after a moment of silence, said, "Mom, our house is special." Something like joy stirred in me, knowing exactly what he meant, but I asked anyway. "Why is it special, Will?"

"Because so many people come into it."

He didn't mean that we are something special or that our house is the popular place to be. He expressed, I believe, his understanding of why we invite people into our home and into our lives. In his way, he affirmed that God is at work here in this home and He is at work through this home. His little-boy words could not have meant more and I realized the sudden joyful urge to invite every last person I know to join us at the dinner table.

His words rang in my heart: "Mom, our house is special because so many people come into it."

This from the child who, in pre-church planting days, used to scream and throw fits when a visitor rang the doorbell.

This for a mama who has (regrettably) fretted over how church planting might affect her children, who has felt pulled in approximately 76 directions in helping build this church and who has never quite felt she was getting it right. After all, when we planted this church, my boys were just 5, 2 and 6 months. I couldn't afford to get it wrong (and still can't).

God used those little-boy words to affirm this mama, to remind me that He's got my kids and that this faith-filled adventure is for their good too. For my children to know and love God is what I want way more than our church's success. Perhaps they're getting that. Perhaps we've done a few things in regards to our children that have

helped them understand the heart behind what we do and how we live: attempting to live privately what we teach publicly, limiting what we do that requires them to be tag-alongs, having people come to our home, explaining the whys of what we do, creating sacred family time and involving them in the ministry in age-appropriate ways.

It doesn't always go well. And I don't always get it right. Sunday mornings, for instance, are difficult for me to know how to divide my attention and how to know when to prioritize ministering to my children and when to prioritize ministering to others.

But I am starting to see fruit, small buds of understanding, in my children because of the work we're doing in our church and our community. God is doing that. And this mama is grateful.

FOR THE CHURCH PLANTER: WATER YOUR WIFE

Words of encouragement to a wife are like water to a plant.

When I read that quote recently, I thought about how true that statement is, how every wife needs and craves encouragement from her husband.

My husband is masterful at showing me love: he plans date nights, he gifts me with a box of Junior Mints just when I'm withdrawing, he lovingly engages our children and he leads our home well. But there is nothing like a well-timed word of encouragement from him! Hearing Kyle say that I'm a good mom, that he appreciates my cooking, that I'm beautiful, that he sees God using me—those words reenergize me for days.

There is another reason why his words of encouragement are necessary: my husband is a church planting pastor. For the past three years, God has used us to build a church from the ground up, work that has been both grueling and rewarding. The first year of church planting was especially difficult for me because of the uncertainty, instability and magnitude of the work. Without my husband's verbal encouragement and attentiveness, I could not have made it through.

Your wife too will face unique challenges in your first year of church planting. At times, she will feel discouraged, overwhelmed and even resentful of the time and energy your job requires of you. As you seek to nurture your wife, there are many things you can do: draw clear boundaries between ministry and home life from the very beginning, protect her from essentially becoming a second staff member and strive to ease your own worry and distraction so you can give her your undivided attention. But there is nothing you can do that equals the effect of your encouragement.

After a sermon or a church outreach event, my husband receives a pat on the back or words of affirmation at how God has used him. But

who encourages me in my role as the pastor's wife—the one with the focus on the needs of the pastor? That opportunity primarily belongs to my husband. When he acknowledges and affirms my ministry to him and to others around me, he waters my soul, helping me grow and blossom in my role.

This need that pastors' wives have isn't irrational or the result of a wrong focus. Proverbs 31 describes a husband who is well known in the community sitting among the elders of the land. At the gates of the city, he receives respect and affirmation. His wife also offers him her admiration and honors him by how she lives. But where does the godly wife receive encouragement? "Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also and he praises her: 'Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.'"

Just like the Proverbs 31 husband, water your wife through specific praise:

"I was feeling discouraged but your words helped me persevere."

"You and your gifts are vital to our ministry."

"You are more important to me than the church."

"Thank you for the sacrifices you make that allow me to do my job well."

Church planters, like you, your wife continually gives to others. Many people don't think about or understand her needs or the demands on her life. You may be the only source of encouragement your wife receives on a continual basis and her well-being will have profound influence on your success. Through your words of blessing, you have an opportunity to minister to your wife in a way that no one else can, especially through the first grueling year.

MOTHERING WHILE CHURCHING

I received this question on my blog from Stephanie:

Q: Often times ministry and our social life lines are blurred. For instance, we're with our family while also attending weekly small groups, monthly church dinners and outreach events. This has caused stress and loneliness on my part, because I am watching two young boys (ages 1 and 3) by myself at all these church functions, because my husband is the pastor and this is his job. Any insight on how we find a balance where we can do church things as a family without him always being "on", so he can also help with the kids and I can feel more connected? Or is this a crazy fantasy of mine? Keep in mind, we are a young church plant without many teens or kids old enough to help watch my kids.

A: Stephanie, I can tell you right now that I'm not going to have the perfect answer, because I don't know your specific situation and context, but I can tell you what worked for me in a similar situation. Our boys were 5, 2 and 6 months old when we planted a church in our living room. I spent the majority of church time in an upstairs room with my three kids for the first three months and I cried after everyone left. Every. Single. Time. I felt so disconnected from what was going on and from relationships. After many weeks of this and many weeks of watching me wilt, my husband and I sat down to discuss options. After almost six years now in an ever-evolving church, we've had this same discussion several times as needed. Here are the things we've learned about helping me mother while churching:

Help others know what you need.

Our church was built on a foundation of college students and young, newly graduated singles, which is a beautiful foundation. But for over a year, I was the only mom in our church and we were the only family. After our Sunday evening gathering, they would flit away to a movie or restaurant and I'd stay home to put kids to bed while longing to be with them. I tried to get resentful about this, but my husband gently reminded me that it wasn't that they didn't want me around or didn't want to help me with cleaning up the house after our gathering or didn't want to help with my kids; it was that they didn't know what my needs were. If I actually voiced what I needed, people would probably help me, but he said I wasn't asking.

I've learned that he's right. If we're doing kids ministry every week while all the while hoping someone will relieve us, unless we say something, people will assume that we're perfectly content doing it. The same applies to most situations, including how we handle church events with our children. So if we need help with our kids, we should ask. Most people would be happy to serve you in that way. I have a friend who asked a young woman at her church to meet her at the car on Sunday mornings and help her with her young children so she could use that time to connect with others. I thought that was a great idea, but again, it requires asking.

Let your husband know what is most important to you. And ask him to help.

One of the best things my husband did for me in church planting was to ask a local church in town to provide childcare for our kids during our church times so that I could participate. They sent two college girls to our house each Sunday evening, which totally saved my sanity! Perhaps

it would be worth it to hire someone (with church funds) for at least one thing a month so you don't have to worry about taking care of kids during at least one thing.

As a part of the discussion with your husband, consider these questions: What are the times and events that are most important to you that you have your husband's help or that you are together as a family? What are the times and events that your husband feels he needs to give his undivided attention to others? As you discuss these questions together, you may find that you're able to meet in the middle where you can work together as a team, both in ministry and in parenting.

For example, my husband can't help me with our children on Sunday mornings, but he can help me at social gatherings or small groups during the times he is not teaching or leading a discussion. He gets plates of food for our children and deals with behavior issues. And I often ask him to do those things in the moment if I need the help. I believe an important part of pastoring a church is letting people see him as a dad who cares for his wife and kids.

Ultimately, this is a conversation that you need to have with your husband with clear, tangible ideas in place of how he could help you and communicate without blame or emotion.

Use the stroller.

Strap the kids in at the outreach events or at church. The stroller is your friend.

PART FOUR:

Practical Tools for the Church Planting Wife

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A VISITOR AT YOUR CHURCH?

When was the last time you visited a church other than your own?

We got to visit several this summer while we were away and we even snuck in a Sunday at one in our own city when we returned. I absolutely loved experiencing different styles of worship, preaching and ways of practicing community and communion. It was good for my soul because I saw that, truly, Jesus is the head of his Church.

But I also learned a thing or two about what it's like to be a visitor at a church. We did the typical Saturday night Internet search before each Sunday and discovered, like everyone else who ever searches for churches, that there are some bad and uninformative websites out there. Just so you know, we made our choices based upon the websites and everyone in your city who doesn't know anyone at all is also deciding whether or not to try your church based on your website.

On Sunday mornings, we got up and did the whole running late thing, because we could. And every single Sunday, I was nervous when we got to the church we had chosen to attend. I considered that this is exactly how people feel when they visit our church for the first time: they are worried about where to go, where their children are supposed to go and, no matter how friendly or eager they are, they feel uncomfortable.

We tried all kinds of churches: historic churches filled with pews, church plants where we sat on couches and 25-year-old churches with sprawling campuses. We worshipped using liturgy, 90's worship music, laser lights and acoustic guitar. And we heard the gospel clearly spoken and even rapped in spoken word.

Of course, these things ministered to me and I experienced God and His Body among strangers. But you know what mattered most to me, the visitor? That someone spoke to me. I just wanted someone to speak to me. I was completely uncomfortable and uncertain until

someone came over to us and greeted us with warm conversation and a sincere welcome. As soon as I was spoken to, I relaxed and felt at home.

This recognition made me think of our own church and the new faces that walk through our doors every Sunday. They've done the Internet search, they've tried to get there on time and they're just a little unsure. They will know they're welcome in our expression of the Body of Christ only when they're warmly greeted. How simple!

Thinking about that got me really excited about my role as the pastor's wife. I absolutely love that I can be a small part of creating an environment of community and warmth just by having an eye for new faces and talking with them. And just think: someone's salvation and sanctification may just start with a smile and a conversation before or after church. Warm hospitality is that important.

I hope you have a chance to be a visitor one day, but, if not, take my word for it: practice hospitality! It's a vital ministry in your church.

AMIE PATRICK ON CHURCH PLANTING

Recently, Amie Patrick, wife of Darrin and mom of four, agreed to answer my blog readers' questions and one of my own regarding church planting and ministry. Darrin and Amie planted The Journey in St. Louis in 2001.

First, here's her story in her own words:

God lit a spark in both of us with regard to church planting in college. I was a music major with a lot of friends in the artistic community and Darrin had built relationships with a lot of athletes on campus. We kept seeing a theme that many of our friends didn't connect with or feel welcomed in established churches and started dreaming about what it might look like for that to be different.

Still, I was utterly terrified when God made it clear that we were called to move to St. Louis to plant The Journey in 2001. I knew that my whole life was about to be completely disrupted and that God was going to transform me in ways that would be more than a little uncomfortable. I spent a year alternately kicking and screaming and desperately clinging to Jesus as the one true and steadfast hope I had. God's steadfast love and goodness, though, has far outweighed all of the difficulties of planting and pastoring a church. He has been faithful through every dark and glorious day.

From Rebekah:

My husband and our church as a whole are wonderful about not expecting me to do everything, or even MOST of the possibly more typical pastors wife roles. Sometimes, however, that can actually make it difficult to know what I should take on and/or say YES to. Other than asking your husband for his thoughts, how do you

discern and decide what things you do or take on at your church?

There are seasons in every church plant for everyone to just do what needs to be done – stack the chairs, make copies, cook a meal, etc. But as the church matures, I think the goal is for everyone, including the pastor’s wife to use their specific spiritual gifts in a way that builds up the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:11-16).

For many reasons, I think it can be particularly hard for the pastor’s wife to move out of the “what should/has to be done” mode. We are usually painfully aware of where the gaps and needs are and often feel a lot of self-imposed pressure to fix them.

Sometimes, the freedom to do “anything” is scarier than having roles and responsibilities imposed upon us. Perhaps the most freeing yet scariest question for us is “What do you WANT to do?”

What are you passionate about? What do you daydream about? What energizes you and lights your fire? What would you do if you didn’t feel obligated to (fill in the blank)?

We balk at the question because we know we have some sinful desires in the mix and what if we’re not hearing God at all and what if we’re making it all about us, etc. etc. But I firmly believe that God plants those seeds of things that He wants to grow as little ideas in our hearts and minds. There’s a childlike humility in bringing our dreams and hopes to God and risking the disappointment of Him saying “No” or “Not yet”, or facing the fear that He might say “YES!”. It is, after all, God at work in us and He is certainly able to sort out our longings and desires and gifts in His timing for His glory (Philippians 2:13; Ephesians 2:10).

I'd been dreaming for at least 10 years about publicly sharing my story related to eating and body image issues. Last spring, God made it abundantly clear that the time was NOW, so I taught a 4-week class on how the truths of the gospel can bring life-changing freedom and healing in these areas. I loved every minute of preparing for and teaching that class and was clearly operating in the sweet spot of my gifts. Such a privilege and a joy!

Conversely, I'm a musician, but I haven't done anything with music in our church for ten years. I've had some personal baggage and wounds related to music that needed some time and redemption. I needed freedom to not "have to" serve in that role. In the past year, God's brought me around to a place where there's a new and different longing in me to sing and play the piano. I'm loving music again and the idea of God using me in our church in that way feels like a privilege and not a burden.

Darrin and I have a lot of conversations about these things and he's been my biggest cheerleader when it comes to using my gifts in our church. We evaluate the "state of the union" regularly, as loving each other well and our children is the top priority for both of us after our relationships with Jesus. I'm careful and prayerful about what I say "yes" to, as I have tendencies to live in an overextended way. There will obviously be some obligations and necessary roles for every pastor's wife and some of these won't line up perfectly with our passions. But I think our churches benefit tremendously when we honor and cooperate with God's design in us as we make decisions about how we'll serve.

This one is my own question, something I struggle with:

There are many days (especially Sundays) when I feel pressure as the pastor's wife: to talk to everyone, to give my attention to people even while my kids are there at my

side, to meet every need presented to me. On those days, I feel frazzled and I find myself speaking to myself what I imagine other people's criticisms are of me. Does this happen to you and how do you nip that stuff in the bud?

I've definitely struggled with this one. I've absolutely felt like I was at the mercy of what I assumed everyone expected of me and I've left church many times feeling like I aimed at everything and connected with nothing.

As simple as it sounds, it took me several years to start practically thinking through the question of "What's my role on Sunday morning"? When I started actually asking the Lord about this and talking through it with Darrin, I saw that had a lot of freedom. God's not asking me to be more than just ONE member of the body and the best I can give anyone on any given day enough to be willing and available and even a bit of a mess. It became clear that much of my anxiety stemmed from deeper people-pleasing issues and feeling responsible for things that were God's deal – not mine.

There was another deeper fear, too, that has permeated a lot of areas in my life and it always sounds something like, "You're probably not doing that right". The ugly truth is that I often want to be sure that I'm "doing it right" more than I want to receive and experience grace as I stumble along and depend on Jesus. It doesn't seem like enough to just show up and be available. I'd like a checklist to make sure that I'm doing everything right, please. I'm learning to rest in the truth of the gospel with regard to these things. Jesus lived a perfect life on my behalf and died in my place and my relationship with Him isn't dependent on my performance, on Sunday morning, or any other time.

On a very practical level, I've found that it just doesn't work for me to try to connect with people for more than

a few moments when my younger children are with me at church. At best, whomever I'm talking to is getting less than half of my attention and at worst, my kids aren't safe. In our pre-launch days, our then 2-year old daughter wandered off while I was busy talking to someone and we were moments away from calling the police when we finally found her. Lesson learned. I now respond, or even graciously interrupt with something like "I'm sorry I can't be a very good listener right now - I'd love to connect with you at another time when I can give you my full attention." And in situations where my role is to do a lot of listening and interacting, I either get help with the kids or get a sitter and leave them at home.

From Beth:

What are some practical things you do to make time for yourself and also time with your husband in the midst of the busy life of ministry?

I've been really stubborn and a slow learner with regard to principles of Sabbath and refreshment. My default sin is making an idol out of productivity. At times when I most need to rest or be refreshed, I start scrambling to accomplish and get more done. Frankly, living this way has been sinful and destructive for my family and me.

So the most important thing that I've learned to do is to renew my mind regarding what God says about Sabbath and enjoying God's gifts in my life. I've had to repent for viewing rest as an optional luxury instead of a commandment and a gift! (Psalm 127:2; Hebrews 4:9;). I've had to humble myself and choose to cooperate with the limits God has placed on me as a human being instead of continually pushing past them.

The practical things became easier to implement after that. Some things that have worked for us are:

Darrin and I have a date “lunch” once a week. We kept running into evening conflicts and frankly, were just too tired in the evenings to actually enjoy a date! Regular lunches with some evening dates and time away sprinkled in every so often have worked well for us. We also have a planning meeting once a week to talk through as many logistics and details as possible so that we can actually just connect on a heart level, laugh and have fun on our dates. And we put our kids to be a little on the early side so that we have some time to connect and talk before we go to sleep.

We’ve prayed for God to send us safe and healthy people to help with our kids. We don’t have any family in St. Louis and only knew a few people when we moved here. Finding the right people has taken time and trial and error, but God has been very faithful to answer this prayer for us, once we actually asked Him and stopped just trying to figure it out on our own!

I’ve needed accountability about taking time for refreshment and fun. My current accountability assignment from a couple of ladies in my church who love me dearly is to schedule a time every week for the next month to do something refreshing that I enjoy and then actually doing it. When you’re giving a lot of yourself, it’s vital to ask the Lord to help you find activities and people that refresh your soul. It’s been counter-intuitive for me to think of this as spiritual discipline, but I believe that’s exactly what it is.

Everyone has factors that make it challenging to figure out when to take a day for Sabbath rest. We’ve tried different days, guidelines, etc. to make this happen and some have worked better than others. Some things that work now

won't necessarily work next year. But we're still trying. It's tempting to just give up on making it work, but learning to view rest as a gift that God graciously gives us is making a big difference for our family.

Didn't you just breath a sigh of relief? Amie's words spoke so much freedom over me. Thank you so much, Amie, for your wisdom and insight.

HOSPITALITY: OUR JOY AND OPPORTUNITY

There are many things that set Christians apart from their surrounding culture. Not all of these differences are welcomed differences by the culture, but there is one that both sets us apart and is received by the culture with refreshing gladness: hospitality.

I have found hospitality to be the essential ingredient in church planting. Church services? Perhaps they will come, perhaps not. But to our home for dinner? Always and with surprise and appreciation too.

I cheered when I read a recent blog post at *Desiring God* on the importance of hospitality. In the article, a respected church planting strategist said that hospitality will be the key to evangelism in the 21st century and I whole-heartedly agree. Why? Because hospitality breaks through the multi-layered barriers that the Western culture especially erects: physical barriers that keep us apart, almost hibernating in our homes; emotional barriers of isolation, individualism, independence and loneliness; and spiritual barriers that avoid any heart-felt conversation or disclosure of needs. Hospitality, if done well, promotes physical togetherness, relationships and spiritual community.

Hospitality is our joy and opportunity. By inviting people into our homes and our hearts, we depict our own spiritual aliveness and togetherness. Where we once were alienated from God, now we are reconciled; where once our relationships were broken by sin, now they have been made whole by grace and forgiveness. Hospitality practiced by Christ-followers invites the gospel and its healing components.

I am amazed at the reactions I get when I invite people that I have just met into our home: surprise, delight and gratefulness. One woman said, "I have lived here for many years and my family has never been invited into someone else's home." This is saddening to me, but it also displays the powerful opportunity we have as believers to impact lives through simple meals and warm conversation.

And it is not reserved for outsiders only. Hospitality also strengthens the church and invites friendship. So many women-I cannot begin to name how many-tell me of their loneliness. But upon further discussion, I discover that they are rarely initiating fellowship with anyone. They are living as if they are alienated when in reality they aren't and don't have to be.

Why are we not practicing hospitality more? I know why and so do you. We are afraid and we wait for others and we make all varieties of excuses. Our homes, however small or large, can be used for life-altering purposes, yet we only think of our mismatched plates or our marital status.

I'm not saying these things because I am a joyful hostess at all times, because I have all the right decor, or because I am a gourmet cook. I say these things because I have discovered that hospitality is a simple way of blessing others, a simple way of building relationships that lead to spiritual changes. I reflect often on this passage from Walter Henrichsen's *Disciples Are Made Not Born*:

“When you pour out your life into the lives of others, when you share with them the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and become involved with them in their concerns, you become God's co-laborer in a creation far greater than the first one.

Yet people turn down this opportunity day after day. A man who wanted to help some other men begin in Bible study once asked if I would help him get started. Because the men involved all had busy schedules, we decided to meet at 5 am on a weekly basis in my friend's home.

The evening prior to the first meeting, I stopped by his home with the Bible study materials to see how plans were developing. When I walked into the house, I immediately sensed that something was wrong; I could have cut the air with a knife, it was so thick. His wife was present and before long she pointed out that she did not want those men coming and sitting on her furniture, spilling coffee and doughnut

crumbs on her carpet. Furthermore, 5 am was a ridiculous hour and why should the rest of the family wake up just so these men could do Bible study. Her voice began to quiver, tears came down her cheeks and she began to tremble, so deeply involved was she in the issue.

As I listened to her, I prayed silently, ‘O God, deliver me from the curse of ever believing that my living room furniture is more important than people.’

Are not people’s lives of infinitely more value than the furniture and carpet which God has already promised He is going to burn?”

I say these things because people are the goal of hospitality and God is the recipient. And I say these things because I want the joy of hospitality for you as well. Who will you initiate with today?

NO MORE EXCUSES OR ASSUMPTIONS

We all have the thought: It would be nice to get to know her more. Maybe I should invite her over.

But something often stands in the way of the first thought and the second. Something causes us to hesitate, to shrink back. Something keeps us from asking. What is it? Why do we do this?

Perhaps we have misconceptions about what hospitality is. Perhaps we define it according to a worldly lens, where hospitality can only happen when we finally get our home to look like a Pottery Barn catalog and when get a menu from Bon Appetit perfected. If all cannot be done immaculately and Martha Stewart-y, it's not worth doing at all. So we don't ask, because we live in an apartment and there are Goldfish smashed into the carpet and we only have one bathroom and what would they think?

But perhaps we even use the perfectionist ideal of hospitality as an excuse. Perhaps the real issue is that we're insecure and afraid to ask because what if she doesn't want to be friends? What if she thinks we're weird? Asking someone to get together sometimes feels very vulnerable and awkward. So we don't ask, because of ourselves and this notion of having to be perfect.

Our hesitations hang on assumptions: they wouldn't want to, they're too busy, they are in a different life stage and I don't know what to do with that, from what I know we probably wouldn't have anything in common. Most assumptions, however, are far from true. They typically only serve to create divisions and invite more of my insecurities.

It might help to return to a basic definition of hospitality. The New Testament word means love for outsiders. There is nothing in there about placemats or centerpieces, nothing about receiving a return invitation, nothing about dining with only certain types of people. It seems to imply a strong pursuit, a seeking of those who are outsiders to invite them to become insiders.

We can only take up this definition of hospitality when we are free from our worldly confines of perfectionism and reputation-building. We can only take up this definition when we know and want to live out the gospel.

The gospel takes away all excuses, all assumptions, all self-focus. Second Corinthians 5:14-15 says that the love of Christ compels us outward and, as Tim Keller describes, enables us to experience the freedom of self-forgetfulness. True hospitality is birthed there.

So let's be done with excuses. Let's put to death those silly insecurities and assumptions. Let's ask when we think of inviting someone into our home and our heart.

It may just be the Holy Spirit leading.

And she just might say yes.

THE ART OF HOSPITALITY

In regards to hospitality, we have decided to stop with the excuses and assumptions and simply ask, initiate, invite. We have decided, too, that gospel-centered hospitality has little to do with recipes, place-settings, home size, or centerpieces. Hospitality doesn't necessarily require creativity, nor is it limited by space or resources, but it is an art. Hearts are the canvas, the gospel is the picture we paint, the intangibles of warmth, belonging, welcoming in, celebrating, blessing and love are the palette.

As the artists working with intangible mediums such as these, how can we create hospitality?

It cannot be said enough that we must start with a blank canvas, the worldly idea of hospitality wiped thoroughly away. Love is not built between people through beautiful decor or ornate meals. Love is built when we turn our eyes off of ourselves and are compelled outward.

With a clean canvas, brush in hand, our thoughts then turn toward others: How can we bless? How can we serve? How can we welcome them in?

This is where the canvas expands, where our idea of hospitality grows. The possibilities suddenly seem endless: hospitality can happen at church, at the mailbox with a neighbor, at the playground, at the grocery store checkout, at work and even within our own families. How can we bless our neighbor in our conversation with them? How can we celebrate our children? How can we serve those we interact with at church with our words and actions?

We paint belonging when we talk to new guests and, even more, think of who we can connect them with relationally.

We paint blessing when we remember what a friend expressed concern over and we ask about it later or send a note of encouragement.

We paint celebration when we thank and honor those who serve in

unseen ways.

We paint love when we ask really good questions and listen to the answers, when we pray and care for needs. Sometimes the questions are probing and a little bit awkward and sometimes they require that we share our own struggles and failures in order for the answers to come.

This paints a picture of Christ and this is hospitality. It is not a checklist, a try-harder kind of thing. It is a matter of the heart, a posture toward others that can make art anywhere.

PRACTICALS ON PRACTICING HOSPITALITY

As a church planting wife, I have countless opportunities to invite people over for dinner, host parties and showers and give gifts. Unfortunately, because we are a church plant without a building or a large budget, my husband and I must primarily use our personal budget to carry out our ministry. I have learned, first and foremost, that the goal in hospitality is not perfection or complexity; it is inviting people into relationships and into our heart. Our small budget has also forced me to get creative with how I practice hospitality. Here's what I do:

Perfect a Signature Dish

At the beginning our plant, we invited most church guests into our home for a meal. I developed a menu that I used for every guest that I felt confident in making and was easy and inexpensive. When items from my signature dishes went on sale, I bought in bulk. Sometimes, instead of inviting people for dinner, I will invite them for dessert and coffee, which is much cheaper and less labor-intensive.

Create a Bridal Gift and a Baby Gift

Because I get invited to most showers, I made a cookbook of all my favorite recipes on my computer that I can give to brides. After printing off the recipes, I put them into protective sleeves in a notebook that I make personal with scrapbook paper. (Stay tuned for our link-up tomorrow because I'm going to give you the template to my cookbook along with my favorite go-to recipes!) For babies, I often give practical gifts like diapers, which I can buy in bulk. Because there is a baby born every 3 seconds in our church, I'm still figuring this one out. Any suggestions?

Keep Staples on Hand

For parties or larger dinners, I bought glasses, placemats, pitchers and white serving dishes at the dollar store. I also keep paper products (including kids' cups) on hand, as well as staples such as coffee, sweeteners, lemonade mix and popcorn.

Decorate on a Dime

When hosting showers or Christmas parties, I decorate tables with things in my yard (pinecones, berries) or décor in my house (candles, wreaths, trays). I also bought inexpensive fabric and sewed tablecloths that I use over and over again.

Maintain a Gift Closet

Anytime I see cute gifts or cards in the \$1 bins or on clearance at Target or Michael's that could be given as birthday gifts, I snatch them up and put them in my gift closet. Then, when I need something, I can shop my own closet. I also use these as small appreciation gifts for leaders.

Make it a Group Effort

Anytime I can, I ask people to share the load. Our community group folks take turn bringing snacks, we often have potluck dinners, or we accept a dinner guest's offer to bring something as a side or dessert.

Keep it Simple

Simplicity is the most important thing to remember when practicing hospitality on a budget. Why meet a friend for lunch when you can meet for coffee or, better yet, have her over for coffee at your house? Why buy a cake for a shower when you can make a lovely one yourself? Why freak out about a complex dinner menu when hosting friends? Simple works and it enables you to concentrate on guests rather than

worry about your home or the food.

Hospitality doesn't depend on money. It depends on relationship. With a little creativity and a lot of simplicity, we can all practice it well.

SABBATH REST: WHERE CAN I GET ME SOME OF THAT?

This summer awakened me to the level of overstimulation and exhaustion that I had come to associate with normal Christian living and ministry. Last year, together and separately, my husband and I were leading or responsible for countless areas within the church: preaching (him), counseling (him), hosting and teaching community group (both of us), heading up our women's ministry (me), discipleship training and facilitation (both of us), personal discipleship (both of us), hospitality (me) and all the leadership and vision-casting needed from the lead pastor that cannot possibly be listed here (him). And did I mention that we have three children? And that we do enjoy having a life outside of the church? And that I released my first book last year? I feel the need to take a nap after just writing all that, so no wonder I was tired living through it.

I don't list all those things as list of accomplishments so you'll think I'm superwoman. I list all those things because my husband and I are representative of most church planting couples out there who are working their tails off to get a church up and running, all the while raising kids and trying to maintain a healthy marriage. I list all those things to show that we are asked to give in almost every area of our lives. Where and when, then, do we receive?

God has actually commanded us to receive from Him. He puts forth this crazy idea in Scripture that we should stop working once a week and enjoy Him and the life He's given us. He calls this opportunity the Sabbath and, as is normally the case when a command is involved, He doesn't intend for it to be optional.

But in our case, we thought of it as optional, or more accurately as impossible. How does a couple with so many responsibilities-especially if one person in the couple is a pastor leading a group of people with so many needs-reserve a period of time each week to stop giving and simply receive? We didn't not practice Sabbath, but they were half-hearted at best: we weren't purposeful with them, we often planned

ministry events on our Sabbath and we have young children, which needs no further explanation.

But this summer, within a few days of commencing our sabbatical, we looked at each other and said, “We need to actually take this weekly Sabbath thing seriously.” So we made a plan, because a Sabbath requires planning. And we committed to do it together, because a Sabbath for a couple requires the commitment of both parties. And then we looked at each other and said, “How in the world are we going to make this happen?”

First, we considered this question: “What gives you emotional, physical and spiritual rest?” For me, a few easy answers came: a book and a nap. But then I thought about how journaling, friendship and time with my husband also feed my soul and awaken holy desires in my heart. After my husband answered, we talked about how a good Sabbath would incorporate these things, every single aspect of which, we discovered, had absolutely nothing to do with ministry.

Second, we discussed what hinders us from taking our Sabbath. For me, it’s technology and feeling guilty when I rest. For him, it’s difficult to unplug from ministry needs, whether on his phone or in his mind. Our conversation drifted toward this question: “What drains you of emotional, physical and spiritual vitality?” “Most of what has hindered us are the same things that drain us of vitality.

Honestly, we have reached a sweet spot in ministry and life that will allow us to practice a Sabbath as we’ve never practiced before. We’re about to celebrate our fifth anniversary as a church, we just added a fourth elder on our leadership team at church and our third son started kindergarten this year. We are at a place where tasks and ministries can be delegated and where my husband’s day off can be taken while the kids are in school. BUT a Sabbath is a choice. We can make every excuse about why we can’t do it, but God didn’t say it was only for us in certain stages of life. He didn’t say it had to be on Sunday or that everyone but the pastor and his family are allowed to rest. He offers us this gift of grace. Will we accept it or not?

That's exactly what my husband and I talked about. Because even with where we're at, there are still many responsibilities and burdens and we could continue to allow ministry and life to encroach on time that is for rest and rest only. My husband could answer that phone call. I could say yes to a ministry appointment. We could waste our time and not actually rest. But it just comes down to this: will we accept God's gift of rest or not?

Practically, we planned and committed to this: Fridays (Kyle's day off) are for rest, marriage and family. On Thursday night, we will devise a plan together depending on our individual needs for that week. The computer will not be a central part of my day. The phone will not be a central part of Kyle's day. We'll read, exercise and, most importantly, ask God, "What do you have for us to receive today?" And when our kids come home, Friday afternoons and evenings are family time.

If you don't currently practice a Sabbath, my question for you is this: Will you accept God's gift or not? If so, how will you do it? If you have small children, how can you and your friend or husband switch off so both of you can have a few hours of doing what feeds your soul and affections for Christ? If you are a pastor, are you teaching your congregation that you are or aren't available to them on your day off?

My second question is this: If you are unwilling to stop and rest and receive from the Lord, why? From personal experience, the answer to that question is extremely telling and leads right back to the idea that not only do I need to rest, but, for the health of my soul, I must.

I don't know your life circumstances. I don't know your stage of life or the demands on your time. I just know that no matter who you are, you are a limited person. You need rest. And God has created a way for you to receive what you need. Will you do it or not?

HOW TO'S FOR THE CHURCH PLANTING WIFE

How to meet people where you're planting:

- Meet every single one of your neighbors.
- Hang out in the Chick-Fil-A playground and strike up conversations with other moms.
- Join a book club or the PTO.
- Go to the park and strike up conversations with other moms.
- Talk to your waiters at every meal.
- Shop at the same places on the same days at the same times.
- Go where the people of your city congregate.
- Start a neighborhood playgroup.

How to best support your husband during the first year of planting:

- Think of other things to talk about than the church (or lack thereof).
- Tell him every little thing that he's doing well or how you see God using him.
- Moan and cry to the Lord before you take things to your husband.
- Maintain consistent time in the Word.
- Celebrate small victories.
- Don't tell him what to do or how to do it.

How to figure out your role in all this craziness:

- Always remember that, no matter what you do for the church, your most important roles are disciple, wife and mom.
- Give it time (like years) to definitively narrow down your ministry role.
- Accept that in church planting you will be a generalist for a long time before becoming a specialist.
- Know that your role will change with each year and stage of church planting. Don't get too comfortable in any one stage!
- Ask your husband for feedback on how God often chooses to use you.

How to maintain your sanity in church planting:

- Maintain consistent time in the Word.
- Do whatever it takes to establish and keep a consistent date night with your husband.
- Don't be afraid to take time off to catch your breath or get some perspective.
- Establish relationships outside of your church.
- Make time to do something that interests you.
- Don't be afraid to pursue counseling.
- Find a mentor.
- Don't say yes to every ministry opportunity presented to you.
- Structure your life well.
- Have open and beneficially honest dialogue with your husband about how you're doing and how his job affects you.

SERVING THE CORE TEAM

When we moved to Charlottesville, several people moved with us to help start our church. One of those people was Marylyn Kenney. Marylyn was, at the time, a new college graduate who had served faithfully as a leader in our college ministry and we were thrilled to have her move with us.

Marylyn has been an instrumental part of our church planting core team. She has served in many areas of our church as they've gotten started, including the children's ministry, prayer ministry, hospitality ministry and our setup and tear-down team. But it has been her relational contribution that has woven into the DNA of our church.

The core team is invaluable to the work of church planting and it's important that the church planter and his wife consider how they can serve them. I've asked Marylyn to help us understand how best we can do that.

Q. What have been your challenges/struggles as a member of the church planting core team?

A. I think many of the challenges that the wife of a church planter faces are the challenges of those that are a part of the core team. We all serve in areas that we are not necessarily gifted in at the beginning. We all build new relationships. And we all face discouragement and spiritual attack. However, there are differences in our experiences. Employment has been a big struggle for anyone that has moved here to be a part of our church. We have all worked jobs that are less than satisfying for a season and have sacrificed having jobs that are meaningful and life-giving for jobs that pay the bills. As someone that is single, I have struggled with loneliness and looked at friends who have a partner, longing to have someone on my team to support me in my work here. There have been moments when I

have just wanted to leave and move somewhere where I was more comfortable, where I could just show up and not be depended on, where people didn't know my struggle and my sin. And as a core team member, it is much easier for us to leave than it would be for the pastor or his wife.

Q. What have you learned by being a part of a church plant?

A. Despite the fact that church planting is hard-harder than I ever imagined-I have experienced some of the greatest blessings from being a part of our church plant. I know God more deeply and am learning to trust him more fully since having moved here. I've grown in my belief and dependence on the truth of the Gospel. I know my pastors well. I am so grateful that I can see that the truth they talk about on Sunday is truth they live on Monday. I also know that they aren't perfect and their authenticity encourages me to rest in the grace of God. I can remember where we started and can truly attest that God has brought us to where we are. Seeing the goodness of God in our church is a tangible representation to me of God's love. Watching God provide opportunities and favor in our city has been so encouraging to see his powerful love for people who don't know him. It is the physical answer to prayer.

Q. From the core team member's perspective, what advice would you give the church planter's wife?

A. Invest in your marriage. If you don't have family in the area, enlist church members to baby sit. I love opportunities I get to hang out with the Hoover boys by myself; it is a blessing to know and love them well.

Ask for prayer. We want to know when you're struggling

and desire to lift you up in prayer and support you as best as we can. Let us intercede for you, especially when times are tough.

It's OK to say no. It's so hard to say no, especially when your church is small and the fear is that if you don't do something, no one will. But every time I have admitted that I need help, God has graciously provided someone to step in and help. Saying no allows God to work and to do the work through somebody else. It's humbling and so good for us.

Q. How can the church planter and his wife best minister to those on the core team?

A. Invest in your core team. Christine and her husband know and love me well, which has made this experience so rewarding for me. Christine affirms my struggles but also encourages me with truth; I walk away from our time together refreshed and rekindled in my love for Jesus.

Pray for them. I am always encouraged when Christine tells me that she has been praying for me. Because she knows me well and Jesus well, I know that her prayers are powerful and effective.

Encourage them in discipleship. I think it's easy for church planters to get so caught up in doing the multitude of other things that need to get done, but discipleship is the most effective way to reach your city and is mutually beneficial. Know when to encourage them to step up and when to encourage them to step back. One of the most encouraging phone calls I've received from my pastor was his exhortation that it was OK for me to stop serving in a role I had been serving in from the beginning. Especially when it seems like if you don't serve in this area, it won't

get done, it is so encouraging to hear that God will provide in areas that I had been serving in. It's always good to be reminded that it is not about me.

If you are praying about becoming a part of a core team of a church plant, I will leave you with this: apart from issues that have arisen with my family, this has been the hardest thing that I have ever done, but it has also been the most rewarding thing that I have done. I love our church so much and have grown to experience rich, deep community and the goodness of our God and I would not trade that for anything.

STARTING A WOMEN'S MINISTRY IN A CHURCH PLANT

One of my favorite aspects of church planting is that things are ground-up; theology is becoming reality, philosophy is becoming practice. In other words, if you have ideas of how church can be, you can make them happen. Doors are wide open, obstacles are few.

And in church planting, you're starting something new almost all the time, whether it's a children's ministry, a small group, an elder team, a prayer ministry, or an outreach strategy.

It must also be said that seeing an idea to fruition can also be one the greatest challenges in church planting and because church planters are seeing multiple ideas to fruition at the same time, it is quite the juggling act. This greenhouse-like atmosphere requires diligence, patience and back-breaking hard work. Most of all, I believe, it requires thinking through the "whys" of church. These whys lead to the hows; philosophy of ministry leads to practice and structure.

My husband and the other elders do most of this philosophizing, but when our church reached a point where we needed a more structured women's ministry (which was around the start of year three), the idea-generating fell to me. With an empty drawing board before me, I felt the weight of my decisions. Just how do you go about starting a women's ministry?

I realized quickly that the philosophy—the whys—behind the women's ministry would be the most important decision I ever made. The whys would inform everything we did for and with women in our church.

From our ministry experience, I've seen that there are two main "whys" churches use as the foundation of their women's ministry: to either gather women together around an activity for fellowship or to introduce women into a process of spiritual growth. One is event-based, the other is relationship-based. I knew that we could do a series

of unrelated events that brought women together or that we could develop a process of connecting that would lead to one-on-one or small group discipleship. In the latter, events would serve as an entry into relationships would require a “What next?” after every event, whether it was a small group Bible study or a discipleship relationship or a way to invest in other women.

Honestly, this is still a work in progress. We are two years in and still constantly trying to adjust how this philosophy plays out practically. The philosophy of our women’s ministry is that we would constantly drill down to discipleship. We invite women into Bible study, needs-based ministries, or occasional events so that women can connect in spiritually-sharpening relationships.

Once I nailed down my philosophy for women’s ministry, I had to flesh it out in very practical ways.

The first thing I did was gather a team of women around me who were already investing in the women in our church. At first there were just three of us but now we’ve added three more to our team. We talked about the “whys” of what we wanted to do, our areas of passion and spiritual gifts, as well as the needs we saw in our church. How could we create something that would meet these needs but also meet the needs women might not even know they had?

We prayed, talked, thought and brainstormed. As a team, we formulated a basic structure for our women’s ministry that we have since built upon: we would provide one or two relationally-heavy events throughout the year so that women could come together and cultivate friendships, we would share the vision for our women’s ministry, we would meet tangible needs for the many new moms in our church, we would constantly encourage discipleship relationships and we would provide discipleship training opportunities.

We currently have a six-member women’s ministry team, each of us with an area of focus. These areas fit the needs and makeup of our church but also the philosophy of our ministry: discipleship, events,

meals for new moms, Bible study, college women and Side by Side (a ministry to medical wives).

We've fallen into a routine for our calendar year, which includes a women's community group, a fall day retreat, a bi-annual discipleship training, opportunities to get into formalized discipleship relationships twice a year, a spring brunch, an overnight retreat and summer swim days. Our Bible study is a new offering, which evolved from a bi-monthly get together and discussion at my house for new moms.

In all these things, we try to create an environment of warmth, honest conversation and relationship. We also encourage women to pursue other women through these natural relationships for discipleship. Our women's ministry is not perfect, but we continue to evolve and we continue to go back to the question that started it all: Why are we doing what we're doing?

THE CHURCH PLANTING WIFE'S PRAYER

Lord, you have called me to be a church planting wife. The task before us is great and at times overwhelming, but I know this work is worth it—You are worth it— and I trust You will somehow use us in our city.

Lord, I want to do this well, but I don't know how to be a good church planting wife. I find myself wanting a task list or trying to play the role I think I'm supposed to play. I know, however, that more than anything else, You want my heart. Help me to keep a soft heart before You and to joyfully embrace this calling.

Let me know Your voice, Father, so that as You lead, I can follow. Where You ask me to sow, I will sow and then I will trust You to bring fruit from those seeds as You see fit. You are the Grower. You are the Vine. My job as a church planting wife is simply to depend on You.

Lord, help me to help my husband, not hinder his work. Root out resentment, bitterness, unforgiveness, or anything else that turns my heart away from him, from our together calling and, as a result, from You.

Father, I crave friendship just as much as the women we serve but sometimes I feel alone. You are a good gift-giver. I ask that as I initiate relationships, You would give me the gift of friendship. When I try to blame church planting or use ministry as an excuse to isolate myself, stop me. Give me courage to lay down my title as the pastor's wife and reveal myself to safe women and not just reveal myself but depend on others and share my needs with them.

Church planting is really hard and, Father, You know that sometimes I fight against the sacrifice that is required of me. If I'm honest, there are times that I want this whole thing to be about me and my own comfort. Oh Lord! Crucify my selfishness; I believe dying to myself results in the full, abundant Christ-life, but I need You to move me there every single day.

Lord, the fear and stress threaten to overtake me. There is so much uncertainty. Create a Joshua heart in me, one that is strong and courageous because You are with me and because Your promises are true.

Finally, Lord, help my eyes remain on You. May my validation and the power for my ministry come only from You, not from any standards I place on myself or any I think others place on me. Help me not to love accomplishments, results, or pats on the back. Help me to love people well, but to love Your pleasure alone.

THINK THIS, NOT THAT (VERSES FOR MINISTRY)

When we first entered ministry, my mom relayed what my childhood pastor's wife said when she heard I had married a pastor: "I will always pray for her." I thought this was an odd and somewhat deflating reaction and that tells you everything about the misconceptions and romantic ideas I had about what life in the ministry would be like.

I now know why she responded that way. Ministry is rewarding and I saw that through my pastor's wife ministry and influence in my church growing up, but in ministry, I've discovered, you're also doing constant battle with discouragement. It's just kind of always there, ready to pounce through criticism or complaints or through internal insecurities and feelings of fruitlessness. You're forever fighting to remember the joys and rewards of serving the Lord and fighting to live by His encouragement.

As I learned in the early days, I can't live for a minute on romantic ideas of ministry or even by giving myself a little pep-talk in moments of difficulty or apprehension. I must live and minister by faith or I'll simply wither up from discouragement.

I've learned to combat recurring thoughts, whether true or untrue, with the Lord's encouragement as given in His Word. So taking a cue from *Eat This, Not That*, let's apply it to our thought life and find some encouragement in the Lord today:

Don't think this:

I can't do this thing called ministry. I'm not a good pastor's wife or a good partner for my husband.

Think this:

I am not adequate, but God has given me the Holy Spirit, who

empowers me and makes me adequate for what God calls me to do.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency (competency, adequacy) is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

Don't think this:

I am alone. No one understands or can relate to my life as a pastor's wife.

Think this:

I never walk alone. And the One who walks with me understands sacrifice and service way more than I do.

Let your conduct be without covetousness [of other people's lives]; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Hebrews 13:5

Don't think this:

I am not making an impact. My ministry is not significant.

Think this:

I can't always see the impact of what I'm doing and this is often a very good thing. But just because I can't see it doesn't mean God isn't currently watering the seeds I've sown. Results aren't my responsibility, but faith is my success!

But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

1 Corinthians 12:18

For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, that you have ministered to the saints and do minister.

Hebrews 6:10

And let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

Galatians 6:9

Don't think this:

I am a disappointment to other people, or my husband has disappointed people and I am crushed and paralyzed because of it.

Think this:

My goal is to please God. If I am being faithful with what He's given me, I am pleasing to Him.

Let us lay aside every weight and the sin [of people-pleasing] which so easily ensnares us and let us run with endurance the [specific] race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus....who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.

Hebrews 12:1-2

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Galatians 1:10

Don't think this:

I should be doing more (said while breaking out the checklist of the perfect pastor's wife).

Think this:

My job is to abide in Christ and follow His leading, not to set my own agenda or play some role I think I should play.

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

Don't think this:

This is too hard. I want to quit.

Think this:

Because of the mercy and grace of Christ, I can endure. And there is reward for enduring!

Therefore, since we have this ministry [through the power of the Holy Spirit], as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction,

which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things, which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.

2 Corinthians 4:1, 16-18

Don't think this:

I'm discouraged. Nothing good is happening.

Think this:

God is always at work! He's never sleeping, never stopping, never discouraged or weary. And He is at work in my life and in the lives of others around me.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary.

Isaiah 40:28

The one who called you is faithful and He will do it!

1 Thessalonians 5:24

PART FIVE:

When Encouragement is Needed

HOW TO ENCOURAGE YOURSELF IN THE LORD

There are seasons in life, it seems, when the world is closing in and all hope seems lost, times of utter loneliness, almost irrational in nature. What is going well? What am I doing right? Nothing, as far as my emotions can see. We got no food, no jobs, our pets' heads are falling off. That's the kind of language I use to convey my state of mind to my husband, because he can instantly relate to Dumb and Dumber quotes.

I make light of it, but there really is no lightness to times like these. It's all darkness and confusion and heaviness, times when you just need to know that you're on the right track, that your kids will actually learn to love anything other than video games, that you have a friend in the world and that you matter.

Before my friends start beating a path to my door with meals and concerned faces and tissues (because that's how wonderful they are), I'm not in one of those times. But I have been. And I find that in those times, I crave encouragement from other people. I'm not talking the healthy, Christ-community kind of encouragement. I'm talking an almost insatiable desire for approval, for someone to say something to me that proves my worth and value as a person.

I know this isn't healthy and I also know that God is dealing with me in this area because He continues to withhold what I desire in times of discouragement and He continues to show me that no amount of human encouragement will meet the deepest needs of the heart. He is my only hope. His words are the true words of life. His approval is all I need.

Knowing this struggle of mine, I am amazed every time I read this verse: "But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God" (1 Samuel 30:6). Do you know the story? David and his men have come back from battle to find that their homes have been burned and their wives and children taken. The men turn on David, preparing to stone him.

If anyone could quote Lloyd, it's David: We got no food, no jobs, our pets' heads are falling off. But David seeks no man's encouragement about the type of leader he has been. He runs immediately to God for wisdom, his worth and encouragement. He asks for direction from the Lord, for some discernment in the midst of the grief and confusion. And God gives it to him.

This has given me a framework for learning to encourage myself in the Lord. Of course, it begins for me with recognizing that I must allow God to kill any unhealthy desires for words of approval and worth from others, even from my husband. This is always the beginning: confessing sin, confessing when I am frustrated by unmet expectations and confessing that God is enough. When I recognize and acknowledge that my hope is in God and acknowledge what He's done and doing in my life (that all hope is not lost), I find that He urges me to ask for what I need. What is at the root of what I'm feeling? What truth from the Word speaks to what I'm feeling or thinking? What characteristic of God do I need to recognize and apply to the situation? Do I need to share my struggle with others who will pray for me and speak truth to me?

This process typically has to happen over and over and over for days until the light of hope and grace and truth start to shine in my heart again.

Until, yes, there it is...

I am encouraged in the Lord.

WHEN YOU DON'T SEE FRUIT

Don't be discouraged. I tell myself this and then go to bed early, knowing it will be better in the morning. But sometimes it's not better in the morning, at least not until the Word silences the nagging downcast feelings that gnaw at me.

Last night, I spoke irrationalities to Kyle:

I'm not good at being a pastor's wife. I should have this down by now!

After all, we've been doing this for years. This morning, however, the Lord spoke truth that obliterated all my petty, emotional, self-focused thoughts.

Abide. That's the word from John 15 that kept settling in my mind. I looked out my window and saw the strong tree trunks holding up branches covered in leaves, even a few dogwood flowers left from early April. I thought of our drives up to Carter Mountain, where we see the grape vines spread wide, each connected to one sturdy base. I thought of our trips with the kids to pick strawberries at Chile's Orchard, remembering that the (oh so delicious) fruit never stands alone but is always connected to something else. I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

That's what I want to do. I want to bear fruit in my home, in our church and in our community. But sometimes I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere. My kids goof off through family Bible study. I say something that I wish I hadn't. I wrestle with the same old sins. When I don't see fruit, I grow discouraged and sometimes I just want to give up completely. I don't like the winter season, with its bare trees and its waiting. I want a perpetual spring exploding with color, bloom and fruit.

But that's not the way it works. Spiritual fruit works like physical fruit: it is not perpetually bountiful. It comes, often suddenly, after a period of pruning, watering, tending, cultivating and lots of waiting.

And then it is gone, disappearing again into a season of dormancy.

There is no other way around this process and I only frustrate myself trying to force fruit to come. When I focus on the fruit (or lack thereof), feeling that I should somehow be better at this or further along in that, my heart deflates. But when I look for the hope in this word Abide, peace settles on me, knowing that there is a Vine and a Vinedresser in charge and I am not them!

I am not responsible for producing fruit. If I just stay connected to the Vine, He will do it. I've known this, but to really know it enough that I live it each day is more of a challenge. It's just one step forward, day-in and day-out trust, listening for the Spirit's leadership and simple obedience. Is this not what it means to be a Christian?

And when I settle into abiding, I find myself not even thinking about the fruit but, instead, simply soaking up the water of the Word and celebrating God's goodness when the bounty comes.

Any other way is the way of discouragement.

And today, I'm not going that way.

WHAT YOU DO MATTERS

Moving.

Opening your home.

Initiating conversations.

Learning a culture.

Meeting the neighbors.

Hosting a playgroup.

Meeting for coffee.

Sharing the gospel.

Raising support.

Being disappointed when someone leaves.

Praying for your husband.

Creating the website.

Making a meal.

Setting up chairs.

Leading a ministry.

Encouraging a weary husband.

Consoling the distraught.

Carrying the burden.

Discipling a young woman.

Going to church alone.

Asking questions.

Remembering their name.

Making the bulletin.

Celebrating with others.

Praying for the church.

Serving the community.

Meeting new people.

Believing.

It's the work of the church planter's wife.

And when it's done in the name of the Lord, it is not in vain. My favorite verses tell me so:

“Therefore (because He gives us the victory), my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 15:58

“For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints and do minister.”

Hebrews 6:10

He sees and is pleased with you.

JENN ATWELL ON DISCOURAGEMENT IN CHURCH PLANTING

When we moved to Charlottesville to plant a church, we were welcomed and championed by the staff at another local church, Portico Church. They have given us chairs, advice, encouragement, friendship and the use of their building for occasional meetings. We are so thankful for them!

Chris and Jenn Atwell planted Portico in 2004. When the church was still in its infancy, Chris was diagnosed with cancer and underwent aggressive treatment. While he was receiving treatments and completely out of commission, God grew the church from 20 people to over 100. Portico has continued to grow over the years and has planted another church in the D.C. area.

Jenn recently shared with me about church planting and fighting discouragement.

How do you deal with the discouragement that often accompanies church planting?

I know for me, being part of a church plant really helped me understand what being dependent on God feels and looks like in my everyday life. I was often discouraged, anxious and yet had peace. It is so important to make sure you are reading God's word, growing, praying, so that it can guard your heart and keep the right perspective. Each time I struggle it is always when I have lost sight of the gospel.

How do you help your husband when he is discouraged or overwhelmed by the demands of his job?

Sadly, it took me a while to figure out the best way to help my husband in ministry. I know how not to help him: asking a lot of questions about church when he gets home, being over committed at church, or giving advice. He really needs me to be his biggest fan, respect him and his decisions with church, listen instead of give advice and to take care of the most important thing in his life, our family.

There have been many times he would rather be at home then dealing with the church issues but knowing that I was committed to our family and taking care of things at home was a way I served him.

What has been your greatest personal struggle(s) in church planting and what have you learned that might benefit another church planting wife?

During the season of early church planting, I really wrestled with God. The question I kept thinking about was this: Is God really enough? If you take everything else away, would I really choose God over all the comforts the world has to offer? My husband was diagnosed with cancer the year before we moved across the country, back to our hometown to plant a church. Within a few months of planting a church, his cancer came back. Not only were we struggling with the church plant but we were also fighting cancer. Through the surgeries and radiation it was hard to pray. But I could feel the power of prayer and had a peace that could only come from God. We were so dependent on God. He used the people in our young church to support, care for and feed us. I am thankful that my husband has been cancer free for four years. God has made this part of our story, reminding us that He is always there. While we were out of commission dealing with cancer, God grew our church. He provided for our every need and in each stage of this journey He continues to be faithful in providing for us.

What advice would you give to a church planting wife that is just starting out?

Develop mentor relationships. I am thankful that I have a few godly women that know and love me that I can call for encouragement. I have one friend in particular who is a few years ahead of me in church planting that gives me wonderful advice and encouragement. She told me that there would come a day that people would keep coming to church even though I had not had them over for dinner. I laughed when she told me that but she knew that stage of church planting. It helps to have someone that can share your perspective, to have a mentor or

coach, someone in the ministry that understands the struggles, joy and love of ministry. I have good friends in our church, but I am not going to share personal issues about my husband or anything with women who my husband pastors.

Another piece of advice is to be comfortable just being the pastor's wife. I sometimes feel like I need to serve in a ministry every Sunday, but I have to always remind myself that I have a ministry that nobody else can do: caring for my husband, children and our home.

WHEN YOU'RE EXHAUSTED

I received this question on my blog from a church planting wife:

Q: We are so new to this plant (1 1/2 years in), yet I have hit a wall of such dread, discouragement and exhaustion. How do you manage to get beyond surviving and overcome the doubt that this is where God wants you? I battle wanting to run and do something as far from ministry as possible. My soul is empty.

A. I remember rounding the corner from Year 1 into Year 2 and feeling completely spent. I had prepared myself that church planting was going to be difficult, but I didn't estimate just how difficult and how exhausting it would be. The problem, I discovered, is that we had hit the ground running and had run at a pace that we couldn't maintain over the long haul. At that point, I remember searching for "burn out" on the internet and resonating with every single symptom.

It wasn't just physical exhaustion, it was also spiritual and emotional exhaustion. You described it as dread, discouragement and wanting to run away. I felt as if I had absolutely nothing left to give, yet as a church we were only getting started. Something had to change for me and it sounds like something needs to change for you.

I would encourage you to consider the pace at which you're running. Are you cramming too much into your weeks? Do you have margin? Are you and your husband enjoying each other and making time to be together? Are you spending time as a family away from church people and church-planting related activities? If life is all work and no joy, you are running at a pace that can't be contained and something

needs to change. God does not ask us to do something at the expense of our sanity. He seems to indicate that there is joy and an abundant life for all of us, church planting wives included.

One thing that stands out to me in your question is doubt. If you were sitting across the table from me, I would ask you this with love and gentleness: Is it doubt that you're supposed to be church planting or is it a desire to get out from under the calling of church planting? I would ask you this because for the entire first year of our church plant, I questioned why we were doing it, not because I hadn't heard from the Lord originally, but because it felt too hard to me and I wanted to give up and go home. In reality, it was too hard for me and God used that season to teach me to depend on Him in my everyday life. Perhaps that is what He is doing with you. Release yourself to Him and His will for you. Kill the idea of a Plan B. Your commitment to obedience and God's call on your life will help ease some of the dread and wanting to escape.

In many ways, you may desire to be rescued, but no one can do these things for you. Your husband can't confirm your calling to church planting in a way that will change your heart. Your church isn't going to make sure you have margin in your life. And no one can truly fill your empty soul except for the Lord. I would encourage you to consider carving out a day to rest and hear from the Lord. Tell Him how you're feeling and let His encouragement wash over you. And then keep going back to Him each day for the fuel you need to thrive instead of survive.

Year Two, the year you're in, was the year that we began to wrap our minds around pacing. We studied ourselves more and discovered what we're gifted for (and what we're not) and what we can handle (and what we can't). We put

margin in our lives that hadn't been there in Year One and my husband and I made sure we had time together. We laid foundations that have shaped the rest of our church planting years and it's made all the difference. But I tell you this: you will never stop needing to depend on the Lord to help you thrive. Start now and do it well.

THE GIFT IN CHURCH PLANTING

Today is the Lord's Day. As a church planting wife, that probably means it's not a day of rest. Indeed, Sundays are often the hardest days of the week because of the sheer exhaustion of it all.

Inevitably, when I feel run down, I get a little grumpy. And quite un-thankful.

Someone said to me once about the rote tasks of mothering and homemaking: These are things that must get done, so why not choose to do it with joy?

I think that principle generally applies to all of life, including ministry. Because sometimes the rhythms of ministry-hosting, leading, organizing-feel rote, unending and thankless.

However, let's change it slightly: These are things that God has given me to do. This is the place He wants me to live. These are the people He's given me to love and be loved by. This is the Body in which He wants me to use my gifts. These are the tangible tasks that allow me to practice servanthood.

I can just get by. Survive.

Or I can choose joy and thankfulness.

We can even turn the difficulties of church planting into opportunities to praise:

I am so far from my family and friends.

Thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to live in a different culture and to befriend people I never would have met otherwise. Thank you for growing a family of believers around me.

I am constantly expected to lead, plan and host.

Thank you, Lord, for giving me the opportunity to minister, connect people and influence others for your sake. Thank you for letting me

use my home and possessions in a way that honors You.

My life is not my own.

Thank you, Lord, that when I lose my life for your sake, I find it.

Sweet sisters, although what we do is often exhausting, it is a gift.
Let us receive it with joy and thankfulness.

CHURCH PLANTING: BURDEN OR GIFT?

God is writing the story of the gospel in and through you, no matter who you are. I thought about that yesterday after writing to church planting wives about remembering our calling and His faithfulness. The struggle to do something bold and new or to trust God to act is not exclusive to church planters or their wives; it is the common pursuit of all believers as we seek to follow the Lord.

Nonetheless, as church planting wives, it is our specific calling: to go, to trust, to support and encourage our husbands as they break up hard ground.

I admit that I have not always embraced this calling. In the preparation phase, giddy with excitement and full of big faith, I understood this calling as a privilege. I was going to get to see God move in an up close and personal way-Yay! Then we moved across the country, set up shop, invited the few people we knew (only 2 of whom showed up that first day) and reality stunned me. I wanted to reprimand God, but sensing that might be inappropriate, I had a pity party instead. You called me here. I was obedient. And this is the thanks I get?

Like a two year old, I crossed my arms and whined: This is too hhhaaaaardddd. Why do I have to do this and so-and-so doesn't? Why can't we be the church with immediate, explosive growth? Why ME? Why this way? Why, why, why.

Like I said, I didn't always embrace the calling. I still sometimes just want to be normal, whatever normal is. But when I uncrossed my arms, stopped pointing an accusing finger at God and turned the frown upside down, I remembered my original thought-that church planting was a privilege and an exciting and honorable calling. Perhaps, if I just had eyes to see it, God was giving me a gift.

I don't know how you feel today about this unique calling. It's full of difficulties and obstacles, no doubt. But your calling to be a church planting wife is also a gift, a gift that many don't get. Here's how it's been a gift to me:

I can honestly say I've done something that requires faith.

Because I've done something that requires faith, I've seen how God comes through (countless times).

I can relate to biblical characters like Abraham, Moses, Peter and Paul in their fears and their reliance on God. At the beginning, I felt like I was living in the book of Acts. How cool is that?

I'm being broken of self-reliance, performance and pride. I have learned what it means to depend and how utterly in need of Him that I am.

I have watched my husband fulfill the calling on his life, fulfill his leadership potential and grow in his dependence on the Lord.

I get to be an influencer and a connector for the sake of the gospel within my church and my community.

The Lord has built an incredible group of people into a church. I absolutely LOVE the people He has given us.

I love the church He has built. We would go to it even if we didn't have to.

My kids are known, loved and nurtured because of church planting. They have also experienced first-hand the incredible power of God.

I so often focus on the hard stuff, but miss the blessings entirely. Church planting is our gift to receive, open and enjoy. May God remind you of the joys in it today.

WHEN YOU WANT TO RUN AND HIDE

There was a time in our ministry when I was so wounded that I curled my heart into a ball, tight and sealed, that I might protect myself from possible future wounds. The criticisms and misperceptions were hurtful enough, but that people believed them, didn't trust us and seemed to take sides? I could barely breathe under the strain and the pressure. My wounds consumed my thoughts, my emotions and my every weeping prayer.

And Jesus, who faced mean-spirited critics, said we should not be surprised by these things. Paul, too, assumed criticism, misunderstandings, disagreements and attacks were an aspect of his calling. He certainly knew of what he spoke.

But I was taken aback by it, my idealistic picture of ministry life shattered in an instant. I saw instead (and this is a very good thing) that ministry holds a certain tension, that it is done by broken people for broken people and that the children of God are constantly shifting and growing in the process of sanctification. Ministry done right, therefore, will never be easy, comfortable, or finished.

With my gaping wounds, I finally saw the inside of myself and all the healing and growth I didn't even know I needed before. I suppose this is how God makes good out of what was meant as harm, just like Joseph said about his own familial wounds.

I'm glad this happened early on because I am not surprised by criticism anymore. I don't like it, certainly, but I'm not completely caught off guard, nor do I have a visceral reaction to it any longer. But this I'm noticing: I can take it in, I can prayerfully glean what truths I need to take from it, I can remain somewhat calm, but I still want to wrap my heart into a tiny little ball, tight and sealed off from others for a while. I want to hole up in my house or dart in and out of church without really communing. I want to stay on the surface, protecting myself from what vulnerability might mean.

In all our years of ministry, there is simply nothing like criticism (or

perceived criticism, since I am my own worst enemy) that has made me want to throw my hands up in surrender and completely walk away. I just want to put my head down and my heart away and never put myself out there again.

Fight! I must fight to keep my heart in the game, where I know for sure God wants me. I must fight with the renewing truth of the Word, which God uses to draw my eyes back to Him and reorient my motivations for fulfilling my calling.

Run! I must run to Him, the Person of God, to feel His embrace, to know His protection over me, to hear His approval regarding my obedience (or His gentle rebukes regarding my disobedience). How silly my need to please others appears next to Him and His powerful love.

Hide! I must hide in the shadow of His wings, knowing that Christ alone is my justification and the One who must live this life through me if I am to do any ministry that matters. In the warmth of His covering, I also discover my need to forgive those who have hurt me, as I have been forgiven, for His compassion teaches me compassion.

I am trying to remember that running and hiding is good, as long as I'm running to and hiding in Jesus.

YOUR DIFFERENTNESS IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY

I met a doctoral student recently whose dissertation is about the contribution of church planting wives to the church plant. He told me several interesting tidbits from his research, but the one that stuck out to me was about how church planting wives see themselves. He found that, when asked if they were the same as other women in their churches, church planting wives seemed eager to agree that, yes, they were; they were no different than the average church member. But his research showed that, in reality, their roles, duties and the expectations placed on them were very different from other women.

I understood this dichotomy immediately. I can hear these women saying the same things that I say to myself: I'm no different. I'm just a typical church member. This is, in essence, my wishful thinking: I don't want to be different than everyone else. I want to be an average church member where average church member things are expected of me. Or even my feelings of inadequacy about being a church planting wife: I don't feel very good at this. I am not gifted for this. I should feel "different" from typical church members because I'm the church planting wife, but I don't.

In his research and in my interaction with church planting wives (and pastors' wives of all kinds, for that matter), I see this desire to belong to the church's community, to be seen as normal and like everybody else. I see this push-back on being "different" or having different expectations placed on us simply because of our husband's job.

I get that and have felt all those things. But in reality, we are different. Our needs and struggles aren't different, but there is just something almost unexplainable about this role that sets us apart from the typical church member. And I've discovered in my own life that being different when I don't want to be can either be a source of frustration and resentment, or it can be an opportunity.

When I choose to look at my differentness as an opportunity, I see that my options to influence, lead, minister, share, make a difference, help and change things for the better are almost limitless. I have doors open for me just because of my role that aren't open for other people.

I find also that as I walk through those doors and use my gifts within my role, I build relationships. Within those relationships, I build trust and, within that trust, I can share my own needs and struggles and receive the ministry of those within the church community. I become less different.

But when I get scared about taking advantage of the opportunities given to me or get resentful of my differentness, I become more and more isolated and alone. My role becomes a mini-prison. I become more different.

Where are you on this?

Are you scared to fully leverage your role as an opportunity for ministry? It helps me to remember that God called me to this too, that it's not just for my husband. If He called me, He has something for me in this. He wants to use me and my gifts.

Are you isolated by your resentment of being different? The only way out is to change your perspective, to embrace your role as an opportunity. As you do this, you invite people into relationship with you and you help create the own environment you are looking for to share yourself.

May God help you see yourself, your role and your church with new eyes today. May He help you embrace your life as one big opportunity.

EMILIE GALANOS ON STRESS IN CHURCH PLANTING

I love when I get to chat with other church planting wives, to learn from their experiences and to see how God is faithfully moving all across the country and the world. He uses different people with different gifts in different places to carry out the same mission.

Emilie Galanos, whose husband Chris is the pastor of Experience Life Church in Lubbock, Texas, recently shared with me about the calling to church planting, the stress of the lifestyle and dealing with criticism.

How did you know God was calling you and your husband to plant a church?

When Chris and I first got married, he was on staff full time at a church as the associate college pastor in Lubbock, Texas. Four months after we married we moved to Fort Worth, Texas so he could attend Southwestern Theological Seminary. As his graduation neared, we were both praying about the direction that the Lord would have us to go. He applied to several churches and no doors really seemed to open up. Chris had always talked about planting a church, but I was really hesitant. We continued to pray and we met with some church planting coaches. After a couple of these meetings and attending a church plant in Fort Worth, the Lord really began to work in my heart. We both felt very strongly that planting a church was what the Lord wanted us to do. The next big question was where He would want us to go. We literally had several locations that we were praying about and Lubbock, Texas was not really one of the options. In the midst of all of these decisions, Chris had a conversation with his church planting coach and the idea of Lubbock, Texas was brought up. We decided to take a trip to Lubbock to see if we sensed that this was where

the Lord wanted us. During that trip, we both experienced and overwhelming peace about planting in Lubbock. God opened so many doors and details began falling into place. We moved back in March of 2007 and launched Experience Life in the fall of 2007. Since then we have grown to five weekend services with over 2500 in attendance. We have several satellite locations that meet in smaller towns around Lubbock. Chris and I are both humbled and excited to be a part of Experience Life. We would have never guessed that things would have happened as quickly as they have, but God's plans are always way bigger than ours.

What has been your greatest personal struggle(s) in church planting and what have you learned in those areas?

My greatest personal struggle has been all of the spiritual attacks that our family has faced in the midst of everything. We have two children and they both have medical issues. McKinley, our oldest, has a heart condition. Because of this, she was not able to attend church like most children. This meant that I had to stay home with her most of the time. Our second daughter was born five weeks prematurely and until recently, we have kept her home as well. There have been numerous weekends where we would end up at the hospital on the night before Chris would preach with random illnesses. At times, I get so over whelmed with this type of attack because it is physically, mentally and spiritually exhausting. However, the Lord has been so gracious to me during these times. He always reminds me that these burdens aren't mine to bear and that when I ask Him to renew my strength, He will. In a way, there is joy in the attacks that is unexplainable because I know that Satan only attacks those that he feels are a threat to him. So when I keep all of these things in mind, it makes any struggle that

I have faced well worth it.

How do you deal with the stresses and demands of the church planting lifestyle?

In order to deal with the stresses and demands of church planting, we live a very scheduled life. Not so much in the sense that everything we do is done at a set time, but more in the sense that we put things on the calendar that we want to accomplish for the good of our family. Chris and I both feel that making date night a priority is really important. We have it on the schedule and we rarely miss it. We are also really careful with how we invest our “free time.” We make sure that there is always adequate time in our schedule for family time and rest. In the first year of the church, we weren’t very proactive in scheduling out these times. After Chris had some health issues come up, we both realized the importance of maintaining a balanced schedule. This was definitely an important lesson for us to learn!

How do you feel and how do you respond when you or your husband is criticized or hurt?

This was one of the hardest things for me to deal with initially. We have received a lot of criticism since our church started. I am a people pleaser by nature, so being criticized can be hard to handle. However, the Lord has really shown me that every person on this planet has an opinion about what should or should not be done. But really the only opinion that matters is His. When someone criticizes the church or what we are doing, I immediately take my thoughts and feelings to the Lord. I know that He will always show me how to respond and help me deal with the situation. In these types of situations, I am reminded of how important it is to pray for our husbands as they lead

the church. They need all the wisdom they can get. I pray for my husband regularly that the Lord would bless him with an abundance of wisdom. I think it has also been really helpful to connect with other church planters. Because it is in these relationships you can realize that you and your husband aren't the only one dealing with difficult issues like criticism. And when you realize you aren't the only one, it often makes the situation a little easier.

ON RAISING CHURCHES AND BABIES

When people ask if we're going to have more children, I always say that our church is our fourth child. We birthed it when our sons were 5, 2 and 6 months old and it really did feel like we delivered another child. A tiring, up-all-night kind-of-child.

Everyone told us we would feel this way, that planting a church is like giving birth to a baby, but hardly anyone told us that the baby would have to grow up and that we would be the ones to see it through the sleepless nights, the terrible twos and the perils of puberty. Our fourth child is only 5 so we wouldn't know about puberty yet, although we've experienced a transition this fall that has felt awkward and emotional, so perhaps we're proudly now a tween.

When we birthed this church, because no one told us to focus more on the parenting than the birth, I was taken aback by the extent of the work. I figured 1-2 years max and we'd be off to the races, enjoying the fruit of our labor, reveling in a fully-formed church. A two-year-old can barely talk, however and she is likely not potty-trained. I know that's a weird analogy to use regarding the church, but it gives a picture of the messiness and the grueling work involved. There was a point where it hit me: This child has to be raised and that's going to take years. Church planting is for the long haul and there's no way around it.

In a church plant, everything starts from the ground up. Like a child, each new stage of development is a new start, with its own fresh challenges and unique needs. I admit this is disheartening at times. A few Sundays ago, I looked around at church and huffed at God, "This isn't what I imagined it would be when I signed on the dotted line with You." I hadn't imagined it would be such an extensive commitment and I hadn't imagined the church makeup that we currently have. The Lord quickly responded, clearly and firmly: "Yes, but this is the church I have built."

I knew what He was saying and it stung in a good way. Church planting isn't about me; It never has been and never will be. God will

not condescend to my idea of what our church should be, which is oftentimes centered around my own comfort and desires. I've experienced this same humbling in parenting. The children God gave me are so different than what I imagined, but isn't this His good plan? The questions, then, are not, "How will they reflect on me?" or "How will they serve me?" but simply "Will I be faithful to shepherd them well?"

I knew what else He was reminding me of: This church hasn't been our doing. Just as with our physical children, we gave birth to something God knit together and we are stewards of the gospel as we raise this church-child God has given us. Yes, there were a precious few in the delivery room who have been with this child since the beginning and, yes, this means we care about this baby more than anyone else. But it is not ours. We are but stewards.

When I began mulling over these thoughts, I had two audiences in mind. The first are those contemplating church planting. To you, I simply ask you to count the cost. Are you willing not only to birth a child but also to do the hard work of raising that child? Because church planting is only cool from the outside and it's not going to be about you at all.

The second audience is those doing the day-in, day-out work of raising a child who is different than you imagined, whether the church plant kind or the living breathing kind. And, really, aren't they all different than what we imagined? Maybe your baby isn't growing or maybe she's in an awkward phase or maybe you don't even know if what you've poured yourself into is going to mean anything in the end. To you I say this: What is it that matters? It's faith and the faithfulness that results from that faith. There's nothing cool about that, nothing that will make you a Christian celebrity or Mom of the Year. But it's what enables you to scream forth a baby in the delivery room and raise that baby into a fully-functioning mature adult.

Faith is what matters.

I CHOOSE JOY

When God called my husband and I to leave Texas and move to Virginia to plant a church, I said yes. I didn't hesitate, nor did I fear, but I simply trusted God and followed His lead.

Then we actually moved and started the church and, surprisingly, people didn't stampede to our door. They didn't respond to the gospel or to our invitations. Instead, they were suspicious, hesitant and looked at us as if we were weirdos from another planet.

That's when the fear kicked in, when I began formulating a plan B, when I started questioning everything. I also got mad-really mad-at God. It felt like a bait and switch--I went out on a limb for Him, way out to the thin branches on the tip top and then He didn't come through in the spectacular fashion that I thought He would.

Instead He made me do ridiculous things like depend on Him and wait on Him and believe in Him in the face of spiritual barrenness. He asked things of me that I just wasn't comfortable with, like initiating conversations with strangers and serving sacrificially. And for the love, I had to use my precious garage space to store church equipment and actually serve in ways that weren't within my high scores on my spiritual gift inventory.

I kicked and screamed and threw myself on the floor all the way through the first year of church planting. To my long-suffering husband, there was one thing I said more than anything else: "I don't have a choice." Oh poor, pitiful me who got dragged along into an impossible life.

What I meant when I said this to him was this: I have to do all these things because of your job and I don't like it. It's too hard.

But what my heart was really saying was this: I'm not in control and I want to be.

I couldn't stand the fact that I wasn't in control. Because if I were

in control, things would look a whole lot different than that current reality.

As any good Father would do, God disciplined me when I threw those tantrums and I learned to trust His authority. I actually began to find joy in not being in control. I certainly thought I had learned my lesson.

But this past fall, the chorus of complaint in my head started up again: “I don’t have a choice.” People expect things of me just because I’m the pastor’s wife and I don’t want these pressures, but I don’t have a choice. This ministry needs help and no one else is stepping up and even though I can’t take anything else on, I don’t have a choice. Ministry requires so much from me that, even though I need to rest and hear from God, I can’t stop because I don’t have a choice.

What I meant was this: I have to do all these things and I don’t like it. It’s too hard.

But what my heart was really saying was this: I’m not in control and I want to be.

And I didn’t realize how bad it had gotten until I stopped and took a good look around. I had lost the joy of what we were doing and a love for people. Ministry had become a constant list of obligations, fueled by my own belief that I lacked a choice, that I lacked control over my own life.

In fact, I don’t have control over my own life. That’s what it means to be a Christian. I do, however, have a choice every day in everything. I have a choice in how I live and for whom I live. I have a choice in my attitude, my motivations and my intentions. I have a choice to let bitterness grow or to forgive. I have a choice to seek to be served or to serve.

I can choose dutiful obligation or I can choose joy.

I choose joy.

THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE

Last Sunday night, our elder and staff team came over for dinner to get to know Matt, a pastor from one of our partner churches in Manchester, England. Our boys marveled at his accent and enjoyed the Man City and Manchester United gifts he brought along for them and the adults listened with fascination as Matt told stories about his church and about what God is doing in his post-Christian nation.

There were 13 of us squeezed in my dining room listening to those stories. Eleven were expected, but at the last minute, an elder's wife called and asked if their overnight guests, who were also in ministry, could come as well. The more the merrier, I said! One of our elders—an engineer—rearranged the dining room so we could all sit together in one space.

So there we were, the 13 of us, getting to know new faces and listening to stories of God at work. The two guests, as it so happened, are involved in a ministry to the United Nations in New York City. Before that, they were missionaries in Africa and before that, were involved in campus ministry at the University of Virginia right here in Charlottesville.

After dinner, after serving coffee to an Englishman, we pushed our chairs back from the table and talked. We heard about how wide open the doors are among diplomats coming to the United Nations from other countries. We heard about people coming to Christ in Manchester. And we listened in awe as our two guests from New York talked about how they had prayed many years ago for a church to reach university students in our very city.

At one point, I surveyed the room and pondered all these things in my heart. I saw people that I love that are co-laborers in Charlottesville, but I also saw the bigger picture of God's work in the world. God working in Charlottesville. God working in Manchester. God working among the nations. Amazing, simply amazing.

I've thought about that moment the 13 of us were stuffed into my

dining room several times since last Sunday. I've mainly thought about how extremely blessed I am to be a pastor's wife. Simply because I am a pastor's wife, I get a backstage pass to see and engage with God's work in this world. I get to hear stories and meet incredible people. My children get to hear stories and meet incredible people. I get to talk about Jesus with people and I get to expound on His gospel of grace. I get to see Him bring people to faith and loose their chains. I get a glimpse at the big picture and it's beautiful.

I've thought about this, too, because it's pretty easy to get deflated by all the other things we see and hear as a pastor's wife: the complaints against our husband, the people leaving the church or the faith, the hurts that we can't process with others and the deep wounds and consequences from sin that we watch others experience. Those parts of ministry aren't easy and sometimes if we think too much about them, we want to quit.

That moment around my dining table reminded me to think on the good, to recall what God has done and recount it constantly and rejoice in even the smallest of victories. And to remember that the blessings and rewards of ministry far outweigh the difficulties. Being a pastor's wife is the best seat in the house, even if it's a folding chair crammed in an overcrowded dining room.

LIVING IN A PRAYER

Have you ever lived within an answer to prayer, talking and walking and being with it, experiencing it everywhere you turn?

I have.

In fact, I am currently living among an answer to prayer.

Because five years ago, Kyle and I sat in a coffee shop, fear and doubt falling between us, having the conversation of our lives: was God really calling us to church plant? And were we sure it was to be in Charlottesville? We had already been to the city and seen it with our eyes, traipsing around the University of Virginia with our two-month-old in a stroller. We had already talked with the pastor at our church, Kyle's boss and received his backing and blessing. We had already told family and friends we were going. But there in that coffee shop, the reality of what we were planning weighed heavy on us.

We talked long that night, walking through concerns and fears together. Finally, with that unique mix of trepidation and excitement, we committed ourselves to the Lord, praying that He would use us and asking for His help in our unbelief.

In those months of preparation, I have never prayed so much in my life. There were visionary prayers: Lord, give us a picture of the church you want to build in Charlottesville. There were practical prayers: Lord, please help our house to sell. Help us to raise our support. There were concerned prayers: Lord, our children.

When we arrived in Charlottesville, we had no idea what to do first. We knew no one. We didn't know the city or the culture. I drove through UVA's Grounds and prayed that we would somehow make inroads with the students. I interacted with teachers at my son's school and prayed for connections. And I went to playgrounds with my children, striking up conversations with other moms, all the while praying for relationships to form and for opportunities to share the gospel.

Doesn't prayer give you eyes to see where God is at work and ears to hear the needs of people?

On one of our first days of dreary winter in the city, my husband and I, down and discouraged, went to an indoor playground with our children. On a bench nearby, a man sat watching his children. We talked with him, carrying on long enough to meet his wife when she returned from shopping. Soon after, they left, probably weirded out by my husband's invitation to get together for coffee or dinner.

And then, can I tell you? Kyle ran into the man probably ten times over the next few months. Every time, Kyle talked with him and every time Kyle invited him to get together.

But nothing came of it, nothing at all. They never responded. And they certainly never came to our church, not with such a weirdo pastor who overwhelms you with invitations to coffee.

And then, can I tell you? A family moved in across from them, a family looking for a church. For some reason, the man from the playground recommended ours. The family came to our church and became instantly connected and, at the same time, the family became friends with the man and his wife from the playground. The family eventually moved, but not before connecting us with the man and his wife from the playground.

And then, can I tell you? Four years after the first conversation, we have become friends with the man and his wife from the playground. Just recently, we sat down to dinner at their house, our kids running wild through the house and I had a moment. I sat back in my chair and, as if outside my body, I saw what was happening.

I was living in an answer to prayer. And isn't living in an answer to prayer living in God's faithfulness?

And can I tell you? This is just one example I'm giving you, just one. I could tell you about my son's teacher or about my friend's marriage or about people getting saved. And about all those prayers in the coffee

shop five years ago that have been answered better than I could have imagined.

This is what I love about church planting and about taking leaps of faith. There are times of great fear and discouragement and wanting to give up, yes, but there are those moments when you are overwhelmed with the unexplainable faithfulness of a God who can take broken people and hopeless situations and grow something out of that nothing.

And isn't this living by faith?

CONTINUE

This past Saturday was the fifth birthday of our church. Ten of us (five with the last name Hoover) gathered in our living room on September 21, 2008 to sing, open the Word, eat cookies and talk of what we hoped God would do in our city. To see those hopes realized and to have been a part of it from the beginning is a joy and a difficulty-wrought blessing.

It was fitting, I thought, that during the service yesterday, one of our pastors told us to look at those sitting around us and say, “Happy Birthday!” We are the church and, as we have held fast to our Head, from whom our whole body is nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, we have grown with the increase that is from God.

It was also fitting that my husband soberly reminded us that we are only five years old. A five-year-old can write her name and say her ABC’s and perhaps color within the lines, but a five-year-old has a lot of growing and maturing left to do.

It’s true what he said and I’m glad he said it. He put to words what I sense regarding our church. We’ve come so far and seen God do so much and He truly has knit hearts together with Him and with others in our Body. But we are still finding our places and figuring things out and welcoming new faces into the fold and discipling one another and learning how to love our adopted family. The journey of faith and the journey of a church are the same: moving and changing until the end.

In some ways, I didn’t want to be reminded that we’re a five-year-old. In my opinion, church planting can be counted in dog years. Five years feels like at least double that and it’s added wrinkles to my face and gray hairs to my husband’s head (which I love, by the way). If I’m really honest, as we’ve approached this five-year mark, I’ve found myself considering the possibility of coasting from this point forward. The hard work is done, so I’ll just kind of settle in and enjoy the spoils.

I don’t believe coasting and ministry go hand-in-hand, at least if we’re discussing biblical ministry. I do believe, however, that perseverance

and ministry make a very fine and fruitful couple.

That's what I gather from Paul at least. This summer I read through 1 & 2 Timothy and I'm seeing now that it was important reading for my soul. In those books, as you likely know, Paul wrote to Timothy, a guy he left in charge of the church plant. It seems, poor guy, that Timothy was in need of some encouragement and direction and perhaps also a little boldness. Paul, never one to mince words, is like, "Yep, you're probably experiencing some difficulty and people are probably leaving the faith and there are all kinds of things that are discouraging and wearying you." Because that's the way it goes. He doesn't say it, but you get the sense that he wants to come out with it. Because that's the way ministry goes, Timothy.

This part wasn't good for my soul, other than to affirm that, yep, there will be discouragement and weariness. What made my heart stand at attention was this: Paul's choice of words to encourage him.

Endure.

Continue.

Persevere.

Go forward.

Specifically, he says this:

Continue to be faithful with the stewardship God has entrusted to you.

Endure like a soldier endures on the battlefield.

Persevere in sound doctrine.

Be diligent with the Word and with your work.

Continue in the things you've learned and been assured of.

Continue to go forward with boldness, remembering that God has

given you everything you need to fulfill this ministry He's called you to.

Here I am standing at the five-year mark and I think to myself, "How did we get here?" We took a step forward. We continued. And then others joined in with us and, as a group, we continued in the Word and in the working out of the Word.

How will we get to year six and year fifteen? How will we be able to follow the Lord in faith if He calls us to do this again? How will we see the Holy Spirit produce fruit and bring lives to salvation? How will we reap a harvest?

We continue with our eyes on Him, our finish line, with steadfast hope in our hearts.

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

Galatians 6:9

NO NEED FOR DISCOURAGEMENT

Do you ever get discouraged in your ministry? I certainly do. In fact, it pains me to say it but, throughout the past year, my eyes were too quick to see holes, my own failures, what disappointed people (whether in reality or in my imagination), or what I felt was lacking in our church. If that's not a recipe for discouragement, I'm not sure what is.

In my season of discouragement, I had forgotten that there is a bigger story being written and that I am just one character-a blip on the page really-in a plot beyond my comprehension. By forgetting, I walked around with the weight of the world on my shoulders, thinking that the transformation of our city, the hearts that dwell here and the healthiness of our church had so much to do with me.

This summer, I remembered that I am not the central character of this story and how good it is that I am not.

My tunnel vision expanded when I sat in different churches of different denominations in different cities. They held different kinds of people, different styles of worship and preaching and different types of leaders. One preacher rapped in the sermon. One service was heavily structured by liturgy. One church met in a high-rise building. In one, we sat on couches, while in another we sat in old, creaky pews. But in each one, we heard the gospel. We heard Christ exalted in cities where many do not know Him. We participated in remembering Him through the bread and the cup.

Several times, sitting among brothers and sisters I didn't know, I cried uncontrollable tears. It was just so unbelievably freeing and life-giving to be among the Body and recognize the Spirit at work. I recognized in a profound way, sitting on those pews and couches and set-up chairs, that the Church is God's. It's not the pastor's who is leading or the pastor's wife who is sitting in the front pew (or couch or folding chair). Of course, I knew that to be true and would have said it to be true, but to experience it anew, that's a different story.

It's the bigger story, that's what, this story that God is writing all across the world, this story that our alive God is working out even now. He is drawing people to Himself in different ways and through a variety of people with differing styles. He is sustaining His Church.

This summer, I met and interacted with many of the characters in the greater story that God is writing. I read about them in books. I heard how they've put a stake down in the places God has called them to and committed to be faithful to Him there. I met people who are simply saying, "Here I am, Lord, send me." I received from those who are laboring diligently in the ministry of the Word and I was privileged to encourage and pray for those who are my co-laborers.

I tell you this because this experiential recognition crucified my discouragement. There is no need for discouragement when we know that the Spirit is moving and that there are faithful laborers scattered all across this globe. I am one, but I am one among many in our church and community, my husband and I are two among countless pastors and pastor's wives and each of us are one part of a great, great story that is still unfolding.

There is no need to be discouraged, sisters. The Spirit is moving. Christ is sustaining His Church. We have co-laborers faithfully sharing and living the gospel. We are not alone.

Only let us be faithful with the one part of the story we're in. Only let us remember the true Author of the story and that He is writing it even now.

HOW TO HAVE A STORY

I want to tell you a story, a revealing story about my life and about my God.

My husband and I used to live in a house on a cul-de-sac in the heart of the Bible Belt, USA. We brought three children home from the hospital to that house and, as they grew, I strolled those babies around a neighborhood full of people I hardly knew. I didn't have time to get to know them—at least that's what I told myself—seeing how busy we were at church, hanging out with students in the college ministry my husband pastored, attending Bible study and raising our babies to know and love the Lord. If I were truly honest, being around non-church-going people made me feel uncomfortable and awkward. Instead, I taught college girls, disciplined college girls who were already spiritually mature and shared the gospel on mission trips to foreign lands and with a grand total of one girl that I knew. This was my life and it was a good one.

But I didn't know what I was missing until I left that life.

At some point in that life in the house on the cul-de-sac in the heart of the Bible Belt, I knew God was calling us to leave our comfortable, controlled climate and take a chance on Him. He was calling us to plant a church outside the Bible Belt, to go into the world and make disciples. In a sense, it was easy to leave because, for one, I was ready for a change and, two, because I really didn't know what I was getting into.

Then reality hit and I realized so many things about my old life: very rarely had I desperately depended on God, very rarely had I allowed God to move me out of a self-constructed cocoon of comfort, very rarely had I released control of my life. It was a difficult transition from independence to dependence and, in many ways, I'm still transitioning.

Mostly, I realized that what had been missing in my life was raw disciple making. In our old life, we lived and moved among a sea of mature Christians. I didn't have eyes to see the spiritual needs of our

neighbors or our city and I didn't have a heart that allowed God to use me as He wished.

Life looks different now. It's not all that comfortable and definitely not easy, but I love it. We are doing the work of church planting, slowly but surely sharing the gospel and spending time with people who do not know Him. I finally have eyes to see people and my city and a heart that is open to the Spirit's leading. God has proven that He offers us deep heart-level satisfaction as we follow His plan of going into the world and making disciples.

Life looks different now, but it's not like I'm the second coming of the Apostle Paul. We're not experiencing explosive growth in our church or seeing our city turn to Jesus in massive waves. I'm fearful sometimes, desiring only to hole up in my house instead of doing things that require me to depend on the Lord. I often get things wrong. But there is one thing I know: I will never go back to that old life. I could never be satisfied with that again.

I tell you this story about me and my God because I wonder if there are others who are living my old life and who aren't really satisfied. I tell you this story because our continent (not to mention the world) is full of people who do not know Jesus and full of cities where the gospel is not being shared. In my old life, I could not see this because I had not experienced it for myself. But now I have experienced it and I plead to those living my old life: Go.

Go where there aren't church plants in every school.

Go to people who are different than you, who may make you feel uncomfortable.

Go purposefully and boldly into your neighborhood or your child's school.

Go to God and give Him your yes, no matter where He takes you or what He asks of you.

If you do this, I guarantee that you will have a story too, a story

about your heart transforming and your eyes opening to the world around you. Mostly, though, you will have a story about God and about the lengths He will go to pursue His children. You will have a story about His unrelenting faithfulness and the power He has to heal broken lives.

You will have a story about how God writes new stories.

KEEP ON

Sometimes I feel bad for non-church leaders that Paul, Luke and the rest of the New Testament authors direct so much of their writings toward church leaders. Or perhaps that statement betrays our modern sensibilities that create such a distinction between professional Christians and everyone else. Or perhaps I just read Scripture through my pastor's wife filter, grasping for nuggets of wisdom that will enable me to persevere and finding that most everything applies. I think the truth is that we are all ministers and evangelists and leaders in the name of Christ and that Scripture speaks knowingly about the difficulties and rewards we face as we seek to speak and live the gospel.

When I read Paul's writings about his personal ministry experience, it just about slays me. In comparing my heart to his, I suddenly am aware of all the selfishness and resentment I'm collecting and hoarding and I can do nothing else but throw it onto the cross of Christ in confession. This is the power of the Word and it is so necessary for life and ministry.

In regards to ministry, my favorite of Paul's writings are his final words to his protégé Timothy. He speaks from the end of life perspective, practically walking to his execution. He is certain about what's important and is intent on sharing it with those behind him. Let's listen in because it certainly applies to us:

From 2 Timothy

Chapter 1:

- Use and persevere in the gift God has given you and has been confirmed by others.
- The Spirit of God is what enables a person to be effective, loving and of sound mind.
- Share in the sufferings for the gospel by the power of God.

Persevere.

- This is a holy calling. It's not about paying God back, but about God's purposes being fulfilled.
- Persevere in sound teaching and sound counsel. Do this by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- People will turn away but be thankful for those who are faithful and who encourage you.

Chapter 2:

- Your strength comes from grace.
- Disciple others. Give your life away to faithful people who will do the same.
- As a disciple, you will endure hardship. Endure.
- Your work is similar to a soldier, an athlete and a farmer. It's hard work.
- The Word of God cannot be chained. Rejoice in that!
- Our work and, especially, our endurance, are for the salvation and sanctification of others.
- Be diligent in your study of the Word.
- Do not stray from the solid foundation of God.
- Don't look longingly at your youth or feed selfish desires that you had when you were young. Instead, pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace in community with others.
- Do not become argumentative. A servant of the Lord is gentle, patient and humble even when they must correct someone or call someone to repentance.

Chapter 3:

- Don't be surprised that there will be many in the last days that don't want anything to do with God and will resist the truth.
- Imitate men and women ahead of you who are faithful to God.
- In your pursuit of godliness, you will experience opposition. Just continue in the things you know to be true, continue in your salvation in Christ.
- Scripture is true, essential in your being equipped for ministry and essential for your sanctification.

Chapter 4:

- At every turn, speak the gospel.
- Be on guard, persevere, evangelize and so fulfill your ministry.
- Sacrifice.
- Remember that the ultimate victory is faithfulness.
- A reward awaits the faithful.
- The Lord stands with you, strengthening you to speak to the gospel.
- All of this is for His glory.

You can tell from my bold highlights what my heart needed to hear: to persevere. There is so much in ministry about just putting one foot in front of the other and walking on, about continuing in the calling despite what fruit we are or aren't seeing. Paul knew it and expressed it every which way to Timothy: Continue. Fight the good fight. Keep on.

Today, by the power of God, keep on!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Hoover is a church planting pastor's wife and mom to three boys. She is the author of several books, including *The Church Planting Wife: Help and Hope for Her Heart*, *From Good to Grace* and *Partners in Ministry: Help and Encouragement for Ministry Wives*. Her work has been featured on *The Gospel Coalition*, *Desiring God*, *In(courage)*, *Christianity Today* and *Flourish*. Through her blog, *Grace Covers Me*, she enjoys encouraging women to live and lead from grace and to apply grace to their daily lives. Christine and her family live in Charlottesville, Virginia.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

The Church Planting Wife: Help and Hope for Her Heart

A church planting wife must develop a job description, be a wise helper to her husband, form friendships within the church and within the community, handle stress and discouragement, deal with wounds and more. Christine Hoover knows the joys and challenges. She says, “Church planting is hard work, but it’s so worth it!” Christine offers practical encouragement for church planting wives and interviews with other women who have tended the new ground of a church plant. If you’re a church planting wife, you need this book. And if you know one, you’ll want to share it with her!

“Church planting is not an endeavor pursued in isolation. Husbands cannot succeed in ministry without their wives and vice versa. I am delighted Christine has put together this helpful resource to encourage church planting wives.” --Ed Stetzer, author of *Missional Churches*

Partners in Ministry: Help and Encouragement for Ministry Wives (ebook)

Ministry is not something to go at alone. Written for women serving in any variety of ministries (in established churches, in church plants, on the mission field, in ministry organizations) and in a variety of roles, Christine has written this ebook both as a resource and an encouragement. Covering everything from friendship to Sunday mornings, the book is packed with essays that both speak to the heart and offer practical help for ministry. So you know that in what you’re feeling and what you’re experiencing you’re not alone.

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The Church Planting Wife

A discussion between Trevin Wax at the Gospel Coalition and Christine Hoover about her book, *The Church Planting Wife* and the unique role of the church planter's wife:

TW: What are some of the pressures and challenges that are unique to church planters' wives (different from the pastor's wife)?

CH: Without question, both the wife of a minister at an established church and the wife of a church planter are essential to her husband's ministry. In my experience, however, the church planting wife's role is more ambiguous than the wife of a minister in an established church. In a church plant, the line between the planter's family life and ministry life is often extremely blurred. For example, in our situation, we held our church services and all church events in our home for the first six months. Four years in, we do not yet have a building of our own, so I still host many events and small groups in our home. Because of this, I bear many responsibilities that I did not have as a pastor's wife in our prior established church.

In church plants, out of need, the wife is almost like an additional staff member in the sense that she usually leads

major ministries, such as the children's ministry or women's ministry, in addition to setting up on Sundays, printing bulletins, helping with worship, greeting, or managing the church website, all while being a wife and mother. When we served in an established church, my ministry was easy to define based upon my husband's role, but church planting left it very open-ended. In some ways, this was difficult because I had to do many things I wasn't necessarily gifted for or passionate about for a long period of time. But in many ways, it helped me discern what my spiritual gifts are and learn how to release responsibility for things I'm not gifted for.

These blurred lines and intense requirements create some unique pressures and challenges for a church planting wife, most of which involve maintaining healthy boundaries and priorities that keep the church plant from completely overtaking her life, her marriage and her family. In the beginning stages, the church planter and his wife are, out of necessity, so intensely focused on the plant that it's difficult for them to not rise and fall emotionally based on Sunday's attendance or the success of an outreach event. The church planting wife faces almost constant uncertainty and discouragement. She may wrestle with resentment toward her husband's calling and struggle with the lack of physical and emotional support she might find if she were the pastor's wife in a more established church.

TW: You put a strong emphasis on the heart of the church planter's wife. Why is it important to remember what God is doing in you - not only through you as you plant a church?

CH: I cannot emphasize enough how much influence I have on my husband and, thus, the church. I am his sounding

board, his encourager, his helper. I am Aaron to his Moses. I am not making decisions regarding the church, but I am certainly influencing the one who does. More than starting a women's ministry or practicing hospitality in our home, my ministry to my husband is my most important. It follows then that I must take care with this influence, which means I must take care to keep my heart soft and submitted to God. I must daily reorient myself to the gospel, root out anything that hinders me from loving God and helping my husband and depend on the Spirit rather than my own wisdom. Every church planting wife has this responsibility to God and to her husband.

I've discovered, too, that it's not healthy for me to focus on what God is doing through my service to Him in church planting. Looking for fruit or results is often a futile practice, especially in the early years of planting when growth is slow and the church is young and fragile. But I can always look to God and look for what He is doing in my heart. I can trust that as my heart is soft and submitted before Him, He will use me in whatever ways He chooses.

TW: You say that your calling is not to your husband, but to God. Why is this distinction important?

CH: This is an important distinction for all wives. When Paul tells the Colossians to do everything in the name of Jesus, he follows it up with specific instructions on what this would look like for different groups of people: wives, husbands, children and servants (3:17-24). He asks difficult things of all of them, such as that wives should submit to their husbands. How? Why? With each group, he answers those questions: "As unto the Lord." For a wife who misses that qualifier, whose eyes are on her husband, this instruction appears difficult and confounding. But for a

wife whose eyes are on God, she always has a worthy and unchanging motivation.

This same principle applies to the church planting wife. When her eyes are on a fallible husband, she may quickly tire of the sacrificial demands of church planting that his calling requires, but when her eyes are on Christ, there are deep, holy, lasting motivations to serve, practice hospitality and care for people. I'm not saying that the wife shouldn't joyfully help and serve her husband; I'm saying that her motivation for doing so must be her desire to be faithful to God. This is her "unto the Lord".

In the beginning of our church plant, when uncertainty prevailed and circumstances looked bleak, I missed that "as unto the Lord" qualifier. This created conflict within me and between us because it fed resentments that I allowed to sit in my heart. It set me up against the church, playing tug-of-war for my husband's attention. If my calling is to him, then it opens the door for me to demand my way or to only give so much, to view church planting as his job and my life as separate from that. It also means I can excuse myself from using the gifts God has given me that I am individually accountable for.

I no longer consider church planting to be my husband's job or something that I can excuse myself from. I consider it to be our "together calling", something that works best when we're in it together and we both look together to God as our motivation.

In the end, it's a small distinction because as my calling is to God, He will orient me toward helping my husband. But it is an important distinction because looking to God rather than my husband alters my motivations drastically. I can't build a lifetime of ministry and kingdom impact based on my husband, but I can based on the worth of God.

TW: How have you dealt with the pressure of dealing with opposition (both from inside the church and from outside)?

CH: Fortunately, we have not faced drastic opposition from within our church yet. The beauty of church planting is that we've gotten to lay foundations rather than attempting to alter foundations that have already been laid. However, we have faced opposition, some from other churches in our area. (Having said that, we have also had incredible help, friendship and support from countless other area churches.) The most notable opposition we have faced, however, is spiritually-based opposition: Satan using circumstances to come against us and especially his work to steal, kill and destroy in the lives of our leaders.

I haven't always dealt with this well. To be honest, I entered church planting with what I now see as naiveté. Instead of expecting difficulty and opposition, I expected that our obedience to God will yield immediate respect, rapport and results in our community. Instead of being on guard against the enemy, I assumed that we and those near to us would not succumb to temptation. Now, obviously, I know different on both accounts.

I also know now how to better deal with opposition. I've learned first and foremost to attribute outside opposition to its original source rather than being easily offended and hurt by unbelievers. I now expect opposition so I'm not as surprised when it comes. The hardest part, however, has been opposition from other believers. I've had to forgive, root out bitterness and learn to pray for the success and kingdom impact of those who have hurt us. This has been a sanctifying process in my heart, which is why I focus so much in my book on the church planting wife's heart. I pray for thick skin and a soft heart.

TW: How do you advise church planting wives to cultivate a peaceful heart in the midst of the struggle of beginning a church?

CH: It's difficult to live in constant uncertainty, which is what the first year or two (or more) of church planting requires. Uncertainty, if not taken to Christ, breeds fear. If we desire peace in that uncertainty, it follows then that the lesson in church planting for the church planting wife is to feed faith rather than fear.

How do we feed faith? We go to the Word daily, searching out stories, characters and verses of faith. My go-to verses in this church planting adventure have been 1 Thessalonians 5:24: "He who called you is faithful and He will do it" and the recounting of Abraham's faith in Romans 4:16-22, who "contrary to hope, in hope believed" in God, who "calls those things which do not exist as though they did."

In order to feed faith, we also must search for and recount God's faithfulness. Where is He working? How has He worked in the past? A vital faith-feeder for me is remembering how God called us to church planting, how He has provided for us at every turn and how He has worked in the lives of the people in our city.

In addition, we feed our faith when we meditate on God's character. He says He is responsible for His church. He says He is the One who changes hearts. And perhaps most important to me personally, He says He is my Father. I am not an orphan; I am a child who is nurtured, led and provided for. There is peace in knowing I can hide in the shadow of the wings of my good and gracious Father.

Finally, peace comes when we remember what our success is. Success is not necessarily measured by external circumstances. Faith is success and our victory.