



Five Markers of Healthy Planting Wives



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INTRODUCTION

KATHY LITTON

Take a good look at the image of the tree above. Its symbolism is critical to the Send Network Spouse Development team. It symbolizes what we hope for the spouses we serve. This image displays life and flourishing—a simple tree that puts down roots and bears fruit. A process of growth and life easily observable in plant life all around us—roots and fruit. This same process in plant life is available to us spiritually by the power of the gospel in our lives.

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Colossians 2:7).

As church planting wives, you literally plant your life in cities and communities to birth new churches. We want to do all we can to encourage, support and foster your emotional, physical and spiritual vitality.

In this book, we won't set goals for you or teach you skills. But we will point you to five markers that have tremendous potential to create life-giving roots that can manifest genuine fruit—roots that will nurture and feed your soul as well as provide stability in storms and difficulties and fruit of your transformation and life change, plus the fruit of new lives coming into the kingdom.

Whether you are just learning to hear the voice of God, are new to developing spiritual rhythms as a Christian, have known Christ for a few years or have 20 years of cultivated relationship with Him, these concepts will speak into all stages of a believer's life. The truth of becoming more deeply “rooted” in Him and genuine transformation are both ongoing processes in a believer's life.

And just like every tree is unique, every woman uniquely grows and uniquely produces fruit. We have no cookie-cutter model for the perfect planting wife to suggest to you (just as a heads up, there isn't one). Think of the thousands of diverse and unique species of plant life God has created to bear fruit—the same is true in His creation of people and planting wives. God wants to use you in a unique way, and He will give you all you need to accomplish what He has called you to be and do.

So, thank you for engaging this journey with us. Let's get started with a little peek at the five markers we believe will contribute to a vital spiritual life:

1. **Spiritual Formation:** She engages the process of maturing as a believer.
2. **Authentically Connected:** She exists in community with God's church and others in a genuine, biblical way.
3. **Growing Emotional Health:** She moves toward emotional maturity and wholeness as result of spiritual maturity.
4. **Engages Lostness:** She functions as a missionary by connecting with a lost world around her.
5. **Gracefully Resilient:** She walks in the power of the Spirit to withstand challenging conditions.

*“She shall be like a tree, planted by the rivers of water,
that brings forth fruit in its season, whose leaf also
shall not wither and whatever she does shall prosper”
(Psalm 1:3).*

CHAPTER 1

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

LINDSEY CARLSON

The healthy planter's wife engages the process of maturing as a believer.

My husband and I were only twenty-two years old when we headed to south Texas with our five-week-old baby for his first, full-time pastoral ministry position. We packed our tiny apartment, loaded it onto a horse trailer and moved into a rental house where every wall was freshly painted mint green. Church members welcomed us with groceries, ready-to-cook meals, diapers and baby gifts. We were eager, excited and ready to love and serve our church body.

It wasn't long before the welcome wagon disappeared and reality set in; ministry wouldn't consist exclusively of warm hugs, reheatable casseroles and nods of approval. It would also deliver blows of conflict, sin, slander and sorrow. During these times, I was far more eager to hide and dodge conflict than I was to love and serve others. I was young and unprepared for the demands of ministry, and it showed. Instead of responding to trials with grace and self-control, immaturity and foolishness seeped out. Despite feeling convicted and ashamed, I didn't know how to change.

The reality was that I was young in age and in my faith. I needed discipleship, godly mentors and time to grow. I didn't want to wait on or work for spiritual maturity; I wanted God to just impart it to me. He didn't. Instead, He used those difficult few years to confront areas of immaturity and to refine and mature me for the coming years of ministry work.

Ten years later, the Lord continued to refine me even more by calling my husband to church planting. Leaving all of my family and friends and the church we loved was painful, but we were eager to serve God in a part of the country that needed healthy churches.

In 2015, with the help of the North American Mission Board, we moved to Baltimore, Maryland. This time we were older and a little wiser. We anticipated the difficulty and challenge ahead. We had four kids, a dog, a hedgehog and way more boxes. But we also had a much better understanding of our need for God's merciful help. The years of trials and pruning brought with it a deep humility.

Twelve-hundred miles later, we pulled up to our new home in a city where no one knew us with tired kids and a stuffed U-Haul. There was no welcome wagon, there were no church members and our eager excitement was largely dampened by all of the unknowns and the weight of enormous responsibility. And yet, as we stood in an empty house surrounded by boxes, we felt an overwhelming sense of peace. It wasn't because we trusted ourselves or our own abilities; we knew we weren't enough. But we could trust God to accomplish His purposes. He would use every victory and defeat ahead to shape us into the servants He would call us to become.

NO MORE PLASTIC PLANTS

I want to be a plant lady. I do. Specifically, I wanted a Fiddle Leaf Fig Tree like the cool lifestyle bloggers; an urge I stifled, due, in large part, to one major problem: *I don't do live plants*. I'd read that supposedly this particular plant is needy and temperamental. I don't need more of that in my life. I briefly considered purchasing a fake one, but I couldn't bring myself to pull the trigger because they were just so offensively expensive and fake-looking.

To be a plant lady, I had to work to overcome my black thumb. I started small, caring for a tiny asparagus plant my friend swore I couldn't possibly kill. My plant-nerd friends caught wind and gifted me a few more practice plants. I spent the fall and winter

soliciting their tips and tricks, correcting faulty watering habits and troubleshooting wilting or discolored leaves. And you know what? All my plants lived. With help, I became a successful plant mom and competently nourished healthy plants.

In March, I spotted a Fiddle Leaf Fig on sale outside of the grocery store and decided I was brave enough to risk thirty-five dollars. I'm glad I did. With a little know-how, attention, water and light, it is still alive! I, "Lindsey the Plant Killer," turned over a new leaf! Just like the Instagram influencers, I have a healthy, growing tree adorning my living room corner.

Originally, I thought I had what it took to become the picturesque church plant lady. Plan a few Bible Studies, invite friends to coffee, host some dinners. "I've got this."

But it wasn't long before the swirling vortex of ministry expectations threatened to eat me alive. Ministry strategizing meetings, outreach events, graphic design needs, hospitality and weekly community dinners left me feeling distracted, divided, drained and dry. Something inside me needed to change. To actually help my husband faithfully take the gospel to the lost, disciple new Christians and love and serve the people inside my church plant, I'd need to do more than be hospitable and look the part; I'd need to actually become a healthy church plant lady.

In Matthew 7:17–18, Jesus says, "So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit." You are not a plastic plant; you need water and light. If you are neglecting your own spiritual health, your nutrient deficiency will be noticeable by your lack of growth and fruit. Plastic trees with plastic fruit will not fool or feed your people.

As you work alongside your husband to plant a church, what kind of trees are you working to plant? Plastic trees or healthy, living ones?

In order to plant, water and grow a church filled with healthy trees, you and your husband must strive to cultivate your own healthy roots and bear your own healthy fruit.

MARK OF A HEALTHY SPOUSE: SPIRITUAL FORMATION

You, beloved of God, are a unique planting of the Lord, growing into an oak of righteousness (Isaiah 61:1–3), a blessed planting of the Lord (Psalm 1:3), made to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Titus 2:10). As His planting, you are made to be a tree planted by streams of living water, fully dependent on his nourishment to keep your leaves from withering and yielding fruit in its season.

While your salvation was a one-time, instantaneous rescue, God has predestined “those who are called according to his purpose” to “be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:28–29). While this work takes a lifetime, you should eagerly anticipate growth. The Apostle Paul longed to see this supernatural change take place in the Galatian people, waiting in “the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed” (Galatians 4:19) inside their hearts. Instead of being driven by the distracting longing for your church to grow or a building to be funded, long for glimpses of God at work, refining your heart!

Have you been radically transformed by the good news of the gospel? Do you desire to engage the process of progressing in holiness? Consider whether or not your life is marked by signs of life and growth. As God’s child, you are called to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) and to “grow up into salvation” (1 Peter 2:2–3). The best way to be a healthy church planting wife is to be a growing Christian.

AVOIDING DISEASE: POTENTIAL MINISTRY PITFALLS

Spiritual growth does not shield you from experiencing trials or suffering. But trials and suffering are often used by God to grow you. A healthy church plant lady must learn to pay attention to the withering leaves, dark spots and dry soil that are known to plague women in ministry contexts.

Most often, these diseases of the heart tend to sprout up in the form of busyness, apathy, pride, escapism and idolatry. Each are important indicators that point to a lack of needed nourishment. Here are a few ways you can avoid disease, pursue health and stay firmly planted in the gospel.

- **Avoid busyness**

Your affection matters. Don't allow preoccupation with the ministry or the people to overshadow your desire to cultivate a tender affection for Jesus. Martha was chastised for becoming sidetracked by the flurry of practical demands, while Mary was praised for her posture of worship. Don't skimp on your fellowship with Jesus. Proactively protect your time and emotional energy in order to cultivate intimacy with Him. Jesus said in John 4:14, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again" and that "rivers of living water" will flow out of the heart of "whoever believes in him" (John 7:38). Take the time to water.

- **Avoid apathy and pride**

Your humility matters. Don't allow a legalistic checklist mentality to drive your pursuit of the spiritual disciplines. Proverbs says, "Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 18:12), and that "The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life" (Proverbs 22:4). Read and memorize Scripture. Pray and serve because you fear the Lord and desire to know, love, worship and obey Him. When you notice apathy or legalistic pride creeping in, repent, confess and pray for the Holy Spirit's intervention. Take the time to pluck out the weeds.

- **Avoid escapism**

Your helper matters. Don't allow weakness, weariness, pain or trial to lead you to the arms of any other savior. Relationships, food, television, social media, or money will not provide you with the strength, comfort and help you need. In trial, say

with Simon Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Look to His reassuring covenant promises and ask for his help to “count it all joy” when you meet trials because they yield steadfastness and maturity (James 1:2). God frequently uses hardship, not ease, to grow His people. Don’t run from Him, turn to Him. Take the time to root yourself in Him.

- **Avoid idolatry**

Your identity in Christ matters. Don’t worship your ministry; worship Christ. You are not defined by your husband’s successful outreach events filled cafeteria seats on Sunday morning, stellar teaching or a catchy kids’ ministry. Like Paul, you were “a blasphemer...and insolent opponent of Christ who received mercy because [you] had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for [you] with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:12–14). Minister from a heart that rests its identity in the good news of the gospel. Take the time to worship the God who planted you firmly in Him.

WATERING FOR LIFE: STRENGTHENING STRATEGIES

Healthy plants don’t just depend on eradicating disease; you also need strong roots and healthy soil. Christ’s mercy has been poured out for you, and this good news should water your soul and strengthen you for growth. You can help cultivate healthy soil by nourishing it proactively.

What practical methods do you utilize to pursue wisdom and knowledge? Do you fill your life with people and pursuits that fertilize the soil of your life for weeds or for fruit? Do you look carefully for evidence of good growth?

Followers of Christ must continually present themselves to God as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), submissive to the process of sanctification, in order to be strengthened. “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of

Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11). Strengthen your roots by engaging the process of maturing as a believer by:

Watering wisely and regularly. Throughout all of Christian history, God has utilized three means of grace to grow and mature his saints: His Spirit, His Word and His people. Investing your time in these resources isn't optional; it's essential. Books, blogs, podcasts and conferences may be helpful, but should be considered as bonus material when there's time left over. Regularly read and study Scripture for the purpose of knowing and loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Praying earnestly. Expand the focus of your prayers. Most of us pray for ourselves or for the growth and strengthening of our own local church, but how often do we pray for the furthering of the eternal Church? Praying earnestly for God's kingdom to come, His will to be done, on earth as it is in Heaven (Matthew 6:10) roots your ministry efforts inside the greater context of the eternal kingdom and prevents you from obsessively pursuing your own will and desires. Pray for steady faithfulness to glorify God as He builds His church.

- Rooting yourself in the body of Christ. You cannot grow or maintain spiritual health on your own; you need the body of Christ. While it's unlikely the pastor's wife would physically “abandon the fellowship” as we are warned against in Hebrews 10:25, she might be tempted to do so emotionally. The planting wife needs the people in her church to refine her, just like they need her to refine them. Pray for a tender heart toward your people. Prioritize fellowship together. Worship, study the teachings of Christ, break bread and pray together (Acts 2:42) in the Lord, so that your joy might be complete” (1 John 1:3–4).

As you grow in godliness, you will grow in spiritual health and wholeness. Christ is in the process of making all things new—even Christians who've been walking with Him for decades, even a pastor's wife, even a church planter's wife. God wants to grow and

sanctify you and help you to become spiritually healthier than you are today. He's going to use church planting as one of many ways He will accomplish this good endeavor.

GETTING HEALTHY

Today, I am a healthy church plant lady, watering and nourishing my own soul and those within our fledgling church plant. I've seen God plant deeper roots through pain and sorrow and stronger branches through joy and celebration. I haven't always done everything correctly; I've made plenty of mistakes. But I have learned through the planting process how to turn to the Master Gardener for his personal attention and care. He has grown me so much since those first days of ministry. He has sent my roots deeper and made them stronger. He has produced more visible and abundant fruit.

Do you want to be a healthy church plant lady? Do you falsely think you have everything it takes? (Surprise, you don't!) Or do you have concerns about your ability to care well for yourself or your plant? Have you ever worried you might have a black thumb when it comes to church planting? Don't let your worries or fears convince you to settle for a dormant life of fruitlessness or to opt-out of church planting altogether. Turn to God with your weak roots and dry soil and ask Him to do the work of strengthening and growth. Provide your soul with the spiritual light and water it needs for nourishment.

You are God's planting and God's worker. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Do you trust Him to strengthen, equip and form you? Do you believe that He loves to produce real, living, beautiful fruit of the Spirit in the hearts of His workers? Do you trust Him to use the fruit in your life to feed, nourish and grow His church? God is able, friend. He makes all grace abound to you, and through Christ, will give you "all sufficiency in all things at all times," that you may abound in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8) because He is the Master Gardener, forming you for His service.

Rejoice; in Christ, you can turn over a new leaf. You can grow, even while church planting, into a beautiful, healthy planting of the Lord. As you and your husband labor faithfully for God's kingdom, trust God to use this adventure to conform you to the image of Christ.

*“And now, may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it”
(1 Thessalonians 5:23–24).*

CHAPTER 2

AUTHENTICALLY CONNECTED

CHRISTINE HOOVER

She exists in community with God, His church and others in a genuine, biblical way.

*“We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us”
(1 Thessalonians 2:8, HCSB).*

When God began awakening my husband, Kyle, and I to the idea of church planting, I felt immediately certain He was calling Kyle to plant, lead and pastor. At the time, he had been serving on staff at a large church in Texas for eight years, and his passions, gifts and experience seemed perfectly suited for this grand new adventure.

But what about me? I wasn't sure I had what it would take. I also didn't know what to expect or what planting would mean for me and our three small boys. My husband, I knew, would preach, lead, evangelize and raise support. But what was expected of me? What was I supposed to do as a fledgling church planting wife? Did I, too, have gifts God could use? These were among the many nagging questions I carried with me into the first few years of church planting.

We've now lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, for more than a decade and continue serving at the church we planted. As I meet with new church planting wives in our city—a great joy of mine—their familiar uncertainty regarding their roles eventually rises to the surface.

She always wants what I myself wanted: a checklist, a battle plan, a formula—anything to assure herself she’s on the “right” track and an asset to God, her husband and the church plant itself.

I tell her what I wish I could go back to the beginning stages of church planting and tell myself: it’s not about what you do. Certainly, you will serve, help and lead in countless ways. But being a church planter’s wife is not a role with a set job description; attempting to formulate one will only frustrate and condemn you. Rather, your focus in church planting must be on engaging an authentic relationship with God and with others. Out of the overflow of these relationships, ministry opportunities will come, and they’ll be as specific to you as the individual God’s created you to be.

Your goal in church planting, then, is intentionally cultivating authentic, relational connection in every sphere of your life.

MARK OF A HEALTHY SPOUSE: AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to the time, love and attention you give your marriage and children, if you want to be a healthy church planting wife, you must intentionally cultivate three primary relationships: your relationship with God, relationships with people in your church and relationships with friends both inside and outside the church.

As a church planting spouse, the most important relationship you have is with the Lord. You must tether yourself to Him, returning to Him daily through prayer and Scripture reading, filling yourself up in His love for you and preparing to pour out onto others what you’ve received from Him. John 15:4–5 communicates why this is vital for all believers—but especially so for those ministering in His name:

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 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.”

You can't and won't endure in church planting apart from intimate connection with God, but in gulping His refreshment each day, He'll enable you to persevere in church planting and the Christian life for the long haul.

As you cultivate an intimate relationship with God, the Spirit grows in you a supernatural love for others. His love working on you, in you and through you produces genuine care and concern for the people He brings into your local church body. However, love in the name of Jesus is also intentional. You must intentionally engage people in your church by getting to know them and their needs, looking for ways to meet those needs and helping them discover and utilize their spiritual gifts. You won't be close friends with everyone, but your goal is to be authentically open, available and honoring to all you encounter. Paul gives voice to our goal: “We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8), HCSB. You may not lead the children's ministry, teach or lead worship, but if you genuinely love people, you've done well.

As you walk with the Lord and others in genuine love, you will draw other women to you. In addition, your position and influence in the church plant provide you countless opportunities for ministry-based relationships—women who need counsel, for example. Gladly pour yourself out as the Lord leads you. However, you must also make time and space for authentic friendships with other women. Friendships are distinct from ministry-based relationships in that they are mutual, life-giving and provide you space to be a person rather than merely the pastor's wife. Friendships involve both a pour-out/pour-in dynamic and are vital to your emotional health and well-being as a Christian and a church planting wife.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS IF AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS AREN'T CULTIVATED

Before discussing how you can cultivate these relationships, let's first consider what potential pitfalls you'll avoid by intentionally pursuing authentic connection with God and others.

The first pitfall you'll avoid is identifying yourself primarily as a worker for God rather than a worker with God. Without an intimate connection to God and a deep, abiding embrace of the gospel of grace, we stand apart from God, attempting to prove ourselves, earn something from Him or do great works in His name for our own honor. We may begin to think we can manipulate the work of the Holy Spirit through sheer effort to save people, change hearts and grow the church. We quickly forget we're dependent children. Burnout, bitterness and apathy will soon follow. By cultivating your relationship with God, you more likely will avoid this pitfall.

The second pitfall you'll avoid is exceptionalism. As a church planting spouse, you have a unique position, ministry and vantage point. You know things others don't know. You may be called upon to do what others aren't called upon to do. You have influence and opportunities that others don't. You have a unique calling on your life that many, including those closest to you, may not ever fully understand. However, any time we use our uniqueness to excuse ourselves from love, service, engagement and sanctification because we are too "different" and convinced "no one understands," we've moved into exceptionalism. Exceptionalism leads to disengagement, self-imposed loneliness, pride, going through the motions and the feeling of cultivating everyone else's community without enjoying it yourself. In cultivating authentic relationships within the church, you'll more likely avoid this pitfall.

Finally, by cultivating authentic relationships, you'll avoid the pitfall of believing you're above sanctification or receiving the care and ministry of others. You're not outside the Body of Christ; you're an important yet singular part of the Body. You're a sinner

and therefore must also be a persistent repenter and forgiver. You're a disciple, both edifying and needing the edification of others. By cultivating friendships, you'll engage in relationships that challenge you spiritually and provide secure places for you to reveal your needs and vulnerabilities.

STRENGTHENING STRATEGIES

Authentic relationships don't happen overnight. They take intentional effort and grow in depth and fruitfulness over time. It's important, then, that you consider how you'll cultivate your relationship with God, the church and other women as you begin church planting.

Strategy #1:

Plan how you'll stay connected with God.

In order to stay intimately connected to the Lord, develop a regular routine of Scripture reading and prayer.

Scripture reading and prayer have become consistent necessities in my life, but for many of my adult years, studying my Bible was neither consistent nor a felt necessity. I wanted to want to do it, but I struggled with motivation and desire. Part of my struggle was that for most of my Christian life, I approached God and my Bible from a legalistic perspective, simply checking a task off my daily to-list.

Two things changed this practice for me. First, I came to understand the gospel more clearly. I learned spiritual disciplines are not a means to get something from God, like His approval. Because of what Christ has done for me, I'm already a securely loved daughter. Instead, I practice spiritual disciplines to make myself available to Him, because I can only hear, know and understand Him as He reveals Himself to me through His Word.

The gospel is not something that comes naturally to any of us; it must be externally proclaimed to us over and over again. We must go to Scripture for a daily reminder and reset around the gospel.

My second point of transformation in relation to Bible reading was church planting itself. I was rocked by the demands and struggles accompanying church planting, and I felt an overwhelming need for an anchor. I knew my anchor was Christ, and as I searched for hope in the Word and consistently found it, I began craving it like I never had before.

This shifting occurred for me when my children were small and we were fledgling church planters. I recognized that if I was going to have consistent reading time, I would have to get up earlier than them. This was a huge obstacle for me; I love my sleep. But a few things helped. One, I invited my husband to get up early with me, and he did. It's since become our routine; we don't even think twice about it now. Two, I began associating certain things with that time: warm coffee, a special place in the house, cozy slippers, a cute journal and pen. It sounds silly, but sometimes that was what got me out of bed in the cold darkness of winter. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, I trained my children to stay in their rooms until a given time. Now that they are older, they're invited to join my husband and me in the living room for quiet Bible reading.

Over time, I've seen the fruit in my life of consistently studying God's Word. Any time I'm tempted to give up my routine, I recall the many benefits knowing God through His Word brings to the believer's life. The fruit of reading Scripture is not immediate, but Psalm 1 tells us that a person who consistently meditates on Scripture will be like a tree planted by rivers of water that brings forth fruit in its season. I don't want to give up. I don't want to neglect what can produce that kind of fruit.

And I don't want you to neglect it either, because if you are to persevere in faith, church planting, and ministry, it will be because you have tethered yourself in relationship to God and His Word.

Strategy #2: Connect Your God-Given Gifts to the Church.

As you consider an authentic relationship with your church plant, picture a funnel. In the beginning stages, your experience will be similar to sitting at the widest point of the funnel: you'll be called upon to do many things, some of which will be completely outside your skill set and comfort zone. You'll engage most, if not all, people and ministries within the church, and you'll engage the community around you. In this stage, you're a generalist—filling in gaps, taking up tasks, leading ministries and helping where it's needed.

Some of what you'll do, you'll absolutely love, and it will feel authentic to how God's made you. Some, however, will feel like heavy burdens, disconnected from your spiritual gifts and passions. Being a generalist not only sanctifies you, teaching you to serve with joy when choice is limited, but it also gives you the opportunity to “taste-test” many parts of ministry. You may find a surprising gift, passion or interest you didn't know you had in your first few years of church planting. Pay attention, learn yourself and acknowledge what sets your heart ablaze, because, over time, you'll begin moving from being a generalist to a specialist. You'll have choices on how you want to connect your authentic self to the needs of the church and how you'll use your gifts to sharpen and edify others. And one day, you'll find yourself in the narrow part of the funnel—your sweet spot.

One challenge many church planting wives face in their relationship to their churches, especially in the “generalist” stage, is managing and juggling all the demands, needs and responsibilities of family life, work life and church life.

In my relationship to our church, one specific skill I've had to learn is knowing when and how to say no to invitations, opportunities or needs that aren't central to what God has called me to do. You'll need this skill as well. For example, as you learn yourself—what you can legitimately handle in your stage of life—hone in on what God

would specifically have you to do to serve others. You'll learn you simply can't do it all. How do you say a gracious no?

My rule of thumb is taking time before saying yes or no. I need time so that I can take it to the Lord and give Him space to lead me—another reason why an intimate walk with the Lord is essential. I also need time to discuss it with my husband, who often seems to know me better than I know myself and offers excellent advice about what I should do or not do.

Strategy #3: Engage Deep Friendships.

Finally, it's vital that you develop the skills of initiating and engaging others in community, conversation and friendship. They are skills that can be learned and honed, so set your mind to practicing them from the get-go. Here are a few places to start:

- **Initiate**
Become an initiator, whether it's stepping forward to greet a new visitor as they enter the church gathering or it's inviting a neighbor for a walk or to coffee. Initiate conversations that go deeper than small talk. Initiate spiritual conversations. Initiate sharing details about your own life or what you're learning in the Word. Initiate invitations to your home, to small groups or to whatever the church is doing. Be a "there you are" person rather than a "here I am" person who waits for others to go first.
- **Make time for friendship**
Learn to distinguish between ministry relationships and friendships, and make sure you schedule time with friends in advance of the church calendar or other ministry commitments. You may feel weary of planning one more thing to do or even guilty for taking time away from your family, but an early morning coffee or an afternoon walk with a friend is food for the soul.

- **Practice vulnerability**

Vulnerability is the key ingredient that takes a friendship deeper. Vulnerability also feels risky, especially for the pastor's wife. Take time to discover who the faithful, trustworthy women are around you, and then practice vulnerability with one or two. Test the waters, so to speak. They may not respond perfectly, but if they point you to the Lord and pray for you, you've perhaps found a friend and a treasure.

GETTING HEALTHY

Remember: church planting is not about what you will do; it's about how you will love. As the apostle Paul says, "If I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). The good news, church planting wife, is that we can't manufacture love. God gives us His perfect love and strengthens us to love others as He has loved us.

You are loved by God. He goes with you into what He's called you to do and will not leave you to your own devices. He's created you and will use your specific gifts and abilities in your specific church plant. And He will use the very people you go to serve to grow, edify and sanctify you.

Go and make disciples. And love big.

CHAPTER 3

GROWING EMOTIONAL HEALTH

KATHY LITTON

*She moves toward emotional maturity and wholeness
as result of spiritual maturity.*

When pastors and their spouses work on their own emotional health, it is a real gift to the church.

After more than forty years of church leadership and ministry, I made the stunning discovery. A huge swath of my life and my behavior had been under surveillance, and I didn't even know it. My emotional health was on display, and I wasn't even quite sure what it was.

A term that gained popularity in the mid-90s that described the reality of our emotional health was, "Emotional Intelligence." Swiftly, the world began to recognize that understanding, identifying and managing our emotions was truly a marker of health. The concept of emotional health entered the Christian context with the groundbreaking work of Peter Scazzero, a church planter and pastor in New York City, with his first book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.

While reading Peter's work, I made the stunning discovery that as a visible spiritual leader, my emotions and emotional health were on public display—and I wasn't even conscious of it. It was eye opening to learn what a significant role my emotional health played in my life, and it was so easily observed by those around me.

So, what does "emotional health" mean?

- The ability to identify and manage your emotions, as well as recognize and identify the emotions of others
- Our ability to cope with life events and how we acknowledge our own emotions as well as those of others
- For believers, understanding the work of Jesus Christ through the cross and applying that to our emotions and emotional needs

None of us are born emotionally mature. But fortunately, our emotional maturity isn't fixed. We all can grow in our understanding of the powerful role our emotions play.

Our emotional health is directly related to a brokenness of the soul and heart brought about by deception of sin and our sinful nature. Yet God desires to bring fullness and maturity into every area of our life, including our emotions.

These questions may help you understand how your emotional health manifests itself:

- Can you identify your emotions and express them in helpful manner, or do you have reputation for explosive, destructive emotional occurrences?
- Do you say “yes” when you should say “no” on a regular basis?
- Do you have a history of broken relationships?
- Do you rarely share your weaknesses and flaws with others, or do you feel the need to project something that is not true about yourself?
- Does disapproval crush you?
- Do you consistently over-function at home, work or church and then resent others?

The answers to these questions are revealing. When others' disapproval devastates or crushes us, it indicates we are too dependent on what people think. A constant cycle of out-of-control outbursts hurts relationships and will handicap interactions with everyone around us. Taking on too many responsibilities to impress others or

fear of losing their favor is a big indicator of our emotional health—not merely a scheduling problem.

So, what is does emotional health look like? In his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Peter Scazzero teaches us that emotional health allows us to:

- Name and recognize feelings
- Develop empathy (identifying with and having compassion for others)
- Initiate and maintain meaningful relationships
- Break free from destructive thought patterns
- Express thoughts clearly
- Learn how the past impacts the present
- Clearly, directly and respectfully ask for what we need, want or prefer
- Accurately assessing our own strengths, limits and weaknesses and freely share them with others
- Develop the capacity to maturely resolve conflicts

We can take this list, open our Bibles and see many moments, narratives and interactions of Jesus where His emotional health was on display. Jesus incarnated human flesh, the human experience and human emotions without sin. Jesus was emotionally expressive—we see scenes of His joy, sadness, anger and even discouragement and despondency. He built healthy and intimate relationships. He was emotionally honest and vulnerable. While He served people tirelessly and generously, He did not please all the people around Him. His identity was secure. He withdrew from people to seek isolation and recharged often.

Being emotionally healthy does not imply we will be happy all the time. It means we are aware of our emotions. Emotionally healthy people still feel stress, anger and sadness, yet they know how to manage negative feelings. Emotionally healthy people can share failures and weaknesses instead of feeling compelled to project an unflawed life. They aren't easily offended. They are able to receive

criticism without becoming wounded, and in fact, they understand criticism helps foster their growth.

As believers, the very moment the Holy Spirit replaces our dead, stony heart with a living heart at salvation, the Spirit begins applying the liberating effects of Jesus death and resurrection to bring spiritual transformation, which includes the power to transform our emotional health.

In I Thessalonians 5:23, Paul prays “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may our spirit and soul and body be preserved complete without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul prays our whole being, spirit, body and soul be sanctified, or set apart as complete, whole and healthy and for God’s service. Sanctification happens to us day by day as God transforms us by the work of the Holy Spirit and we grow spiritual maturity. Our emotional growth and progress also matures over the course of time, life and propensity of our hearts.

“Emotional maturity has nothing to do with emotional perfection, but emotional progress”¹
Patrick Mabilog

Our spiritual maturity is the basis of our emotional maturity. Once again, we must return to Peter Scazzero with this critical statement: “You can’t be spiritually mature and emotionally immature.”²

Our emotional maturity is rarely connected to our discipleship, yet it certainly should be. Unfortunately, if we overweight the accumulation

¹ <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/what.does.it.mean.to.reach.emotional.maturity.as.a.christian/93293.htm>

² Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, 19.

of factual Bible knowledge and theology as spiritual maturity and fail to note necessary fruit of personal spiritual transformation, we miss the dynamic power of the gospel in the restoration of believer's wholeness.

God has provided all we need for our emotional health to be transformed and mature. As an example of how God provides for our emotional wholeness, let's consider two significant provisions.

Both of them are very familiar to us in the spiritual and theological realm, yet they are very consequential to our wholeness and growing emotional health.

1. The gospel

The gospel is just as necessary for my transformation as it was my initial justification. In fact, God's purpose in our redemption is our complete transformation. Not only can the gospel change us from the inside out—and it absolutely should—it also changes and matures us emotionally.

The gospel is a life-long journey of greater personal understanding and application, which produces change in our heart and lives. Peter helps us see that in 2 Peter 3:18 when he says, "We grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We grow as we apply these gospel truths to our everyday realities.

- I am forgiven (1 John 1:9).
- I am sanctified (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- I am free (John 8:36).
- I can do all things through Christ (Philippians 4:13).
- I am an heir of God (Romans 8:17).

I received Christ as eight-year-old child, yet I don't ever move on from that experience. Walking daily in a vibrant understanding and application of the gospel is the most powerful tool in my emotional progress.

Walking in vibrant understanding of the gospel helps us receive criticism. Criticism can evoke humility and growth, or criticism can drive create anger, hurt or personal devastation. When your kids' ministry is criticized or your husband's leadership attacked, it doesn't have to devastate you. Because your identity is not built on any performance or accomplishment but on Christ's unconditional love and His work on the Cross on your behalf. Criticism doesn't have to devastate us. As Tim Keller says, "When I forget the gospel, I become dependent on the smiles and evaluation of others."³

The gospel gives us unprecedented freedom. Walking in vibrant understanding of the gospel gives us freedom regarding our sin and failures. None of us have to pretend we have it all together. Spiritually and emotionally healthy people are aware where they fall short. They live in genuine community as they confess sin to one another in order to seek wholeness and healing from the power of that sin. Bringing sin to the light is the pathway of freedom.

Jonathan K. Dodson puts it this way:

"The wonderful news of the gospel is that Jesus frees us from trying to impress God or others because He has impressed God on our behalf. We can tell people our sins because our identity doesn't hang on what they think of us. We can be imperfect Christians because we cling to a perfect Christ."

³ Gospel In Life: Grace Changes Everything, 49

Walking in a robust understanding and application of the gospel has the power to set us free from:

- Needing constant approval of others
- Being easily offended
- Avoiding conflict
- Covering up weaknesses and brokenness

2. **The love of God**

Our hearts are to be wired to be satisfied by love, security and significance. Christianity is built on the concept that God lavishly loves us (I John 3:1), and we are created to be entirely and completely satisfied in that love.

I made a huge step in my emotional wholeness when I made two discoveries. The first was that only the unfailing love of the Father would meet my deepest spiritual and emotional needs, and the second was that all other sources would eventually fail to do that because they were never designed to completely meet my needs.

Psalm 33:13–18 this idea of God’s steadfast love:

“The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; from where He sits enthroned, He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds. The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.”

David reminds us our hearts were designed to be satisfied by Him. Yet we look to marriage and a loving husband, raising great kids, a flourishing ministry, a career, finding meaning in causes or achievements or being admired and respected by others to satisfy our souls.

These aren't bad things—just the wrong things.

Unfortunately, when we continue to turn to the wrong things, we will struggle with jealousy and comparison. When we run from conflict out of fear (believing avoiding it is safer) we will miss finding resolutions.

When we desperately need the applause of people far too much, we worry far too much about our image and far too little about our actual spiritual reality.

But Oswald Chambers reminds us that “nothing that other saints do or say can ever perturb the one who is built on God.”

Jesus came to show us and teach us how to relate to the Father and live in the Father's love. “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). We learn from His pattern to seek solitude for continual intimacy and dependence with His Father. He drew peace, strength and stability in His Father's love.

Scripture also includes a stunning, vulnerable scene where Jesus's emotional life is in full view. In Matthew 26:38–39, as Jesus is approaching His crucifixion He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane:

“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me. And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

We get no sanitized version of Jesus' emotional agony. On full display is His anguish and fear, yet He takes His emotional reality directly to the Father. Jesus trusted the love and nature of His Father. And His loving Father met Him in that reality with His love and even sent an angel to strengthen Him.

The only reliable love available to us is from God. Running around with a tin cup is exhausting. God is essential for a flourishing life. As Beth Moore says, “He has so made us that He Himself is necessary to us. God never created in us a need He did not intend to fill.”

There’s a freedom that comes when we know our worth is not on the line every day. We won’t look to be understood or praised. We will serve others expecting nothing. We feel no pressure to impress or compete.

John Piper illuminates this idea further in his well-known mantra that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” If the glory of God is the evidence of God, then when I am genuinely, deeply satisfied in God’s love and I stop looking to other sources, my satisfied soul exhibits and testifies to the power of God

Walking in the love of God sets me free from:

- Over-functioning to impress others
- Fear of disappointing people
- Striving to maintain an image
- An unhealthy spirit of competition

Sisters, that church you are planting, its success or failure does not validate you nor will it satisfy your soul. That reputation you want to manage to earn admiration is ultimately unmanageable. In fact, it becomes like spinning plates. That rage you try to conceal is only healed when you drag it to the light of the power of the gospel and the love of your Father.

The road to emotional health and growth is found in Christ—put down all your roots in Him.

*“According to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”
(Ephesians 3:16–20).*

CHAPTER 4

ENGAGES LOSTNESS

JENNIFER HUNTLEY

She functions as a missionary by connecting with a lost world around her.

“The great commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.”
Hudson Taylor

I’m a Pennsylvania girl who ended up in Texas for four years serving in summer camp ministry. Near the end of my time in the Bible Belt, it slowly dawned on me that in those four years I had not met anyone who did not identify as a Christian. If I was supposed to obey Jesus and make disciples, if it was true that those who died apart from Christ would perish eternally, then why didn’t I spend time engaging those who didn’t know Christ?

And when my soon-to-be husband was expanding my horizons with his dreams of church planting in Canada, another question began to challenge me: How could I help start a church in an unchurched culture if I was too afraid to get out of my comfort zone and share the gospel?

In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” And in 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, Paul describes anyone who has been made new in Jesus as being “ambassadors for Christ” who are on mission with

God. He “[makes] his appeal through us” and “[entrusts] to us the message of reconciliation.”

If Jesus is my Lord, He has all authority and here He is beckoning me to be a part of His saving mission to the world, then who was I to live my life in such a way where I didn't know any non-Christians? A really important switch flipped when I realized the Great Commission was for everyone, including me.

A BROKEN TOE AND A GOSPEL OPPORTUNITY

Becoming a church planting missionary with my husband is when a specific prayer began to take hold in my heart. I would pray, “God, give me boldness to share the gospel. Help me to not be afraid. Help me meet people who don't know you so that I can tell them about your saving grace.” This prayer persisted in my heart as we moved into our mission field outside of Toronto.

On a cold Canadian winter day, we were preparing to participate in a fundraising walk-a-thon for homeless youth in our city. But God had other plans when I tripped on the stairs at home and broke my toe. Unable to walk the 5K with our team, I found an opportunity to instead pass out food with another volunteer, Sandra.⁴ We talked as we served together for about an hour, and when she heard we had moved to the city to start a new church, she had a lot of questions. She was not a Christian but had recently been very curious. Circumstances in her life were difficult, and she was looking for hope. She was looking for someone to help explain Christianity to her.

It was clear that we needed to talk again in a more intentional way, so I invited her to our home for dinner. A couple days later, she joined me in my kitchen as I prepped food and I asked her if I could share the story of the gospel that brings hope. She accepted, and I drew a

⁴ Name has been changed.

picture that describes the nature of God, our sin, Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation and the call to repent and believe. I asked her if she had ever heard that before. She had not. I asked her if she believed what I was telling her. She told me that she did!

Right there in my kitchen, she became a new creation! Tears of joy welled up as I experienced the fullness of being led by the Holy Spirit and watching Him regenerate my new friend. This was the beginning of my own answered prayer as He supplied all my needs to be able to share the gospel with boldness.

BEING ACTIVE IN ENGAGING LOSTNESS

When I started timidly sharing my faith with unbelievers, I was stepping into my God-given identity as an ambassador, a representative of Jesus. As a family and as a small church plant, we began scheduling regular time to go door-to-door in our neighborhood or to walk down the main street of the city to pray for people and start gospel conversations.

For Christians, the first part of our identity recovery is reconciliation between us and God for all our sins. This is typically very personal, and it is the beginning of our new relationship with God. The second part of our identity recovery is when God “[gives] us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). We are entrusted with the message of hope that is for the whole world: God has rescued us from our sin and is calling everyone to believe and find eternal life in Him. Our faith has gone from simply personal to actively including others.

The master (who represents God) in Jesus' Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14 says to his servant, “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23). “Compel” means to drive forcibly! God calls us to be active in our effort to engage the lostness around us. And when we continue to walk in step with the Spirit, we will see the fruits of a harvest of lives coming to Christ. This is how the Church truly grows.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

As women who are involved in the mission of church planting, we may feel the weight of this a little stronger. We're surrounded by the lostness of our city and are strategically placed there to engage it and shine a light into it. We want to help see the church grow where we are positioned and help people hear the gospel and be saved. We're discipling other women in our churches and want to show them what it means to follow Jesus no matter the cost. And since we know sharing the gospel is part of our new identities in Christ, we want to know how to model that for others and help them see that in their identities as well.

The problem is, even if we are convinced and convicted that we should be sharing the gospel and engaging lostness, many of us simply do not know how or are crippled by fear. Perhaps you're like me: shy since childhood, a little introverted and a peacemaker who doesn't want to rock any boats. Or maybe you're the opposite. No matter our personality traits, there's always that sinful human flesh part of our hearts that doesn't want to be ridiculed for our faith. It's the part of us that will come up with any excuse not to talk about gospel truths to those who might not agree with us.

For me, even though I had head knowledge about the Great Commission, I did not obey it because I was afraid of it. The root of that fear included a misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God. Firmly throughout all of scripture, God says, "I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isaiah 46:10). There's nothing that can stop the plans of the Lord. Even if I am afraid that I will say the wrong thing or that I won't have answers to the questions people ask, God will guide my words. He declares, "[My Word] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). If I am afraid someone will call me a fool or mock me, I can rest in the words of Jesus when He said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12).

As God works through our weakness and fear when we share the gospel, it is all for His glory and fame. The Gospel is a supreme treasure, the most precious gift. Paul's expression of this is that "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing worth belongs to God and not to man" (2 Corinthians 4:7). I am a jar of clay! I am so shy and tongue-tied when I speak to strangers. My heart feels like it is going to beat out of my chest when I knock on a door during an evangelism outing, and I don't know who is going to answer or how they are going to react. I have to cling so tightly to God in those moments by continuing to pray and trust Him as I go.

We also have an enemy, Satan, who wants to keep the world in darkness. We are stepping on his territory when we engage the lostness around us. Spiritual warfare will rage against your efforts and lie to you about the effectiveness of your ministry. Temptation to busy ourselves with anything but evangelism will be at every corner. I find in my own experience that this is especially true when you are engaging with seriously curious people.

In one instance, we started a little VBS-style camp our first summer in Canada and got to know one of the moms fairly well. As we shared the gospel with her, she invited us into her home to read the Bible together. But there were constant distractions and interruptions that made it almost impossible to focus. It felt like an invisible tug-of-war game between truth and darkness. As you engage lostness it will bring a new clarity to Paul's emphasis that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against...the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12). We must be in constant prayer and dependence on God.

We can't do this without God, and we can't do this without each other. I suggest you find someone to partner with as you go and share the gospel. This is what Jesus did: "The Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two" (Luke 10:1). Jesus gives instruction for prayer here, too. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the

Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). We need to pray that God will inspire and equip others to go and tell the good news alongside us.

A great way to start is to walk together around your city and prayerfully start gospel conversations with people you encounter. This might look like walking up to someone sitting on a bench and asking if you can pray for them about anything. It could also be going door to door in a neighborhood and expressing to anyone who answers when you knock that you’re looking for ways to care for the community by praying for others and sharing a message of hope. That’s exactly how we met a young girl who was instantly curious and was definitely looking for hope on a cold afternoon in Canada. My two friends who spoke to her that day talked for almost an hour on her porch, got her contact information and stayed in contact with her for three months before she visited our church. God later gave her the gift of salvation when she believed in Jesus, and now she is passionate about evangelism and sharing the hope she found with everyone she meets.

“WHERE DO I BEGIN?”

Maybe you need to learn some practical tools like the The 3-Circles illustration or the Bridge Diagram illustration as ways to explain the main points of the gospel message.⁵ You could also order gospel tracts you can hand to someone who is not interested in talking to you right at that moment, and make sure your contact information is written on the back. It’s also helpful to practice conversation-starter questions with a friend beforehand so that you can feel more confident in the moment. Questions could include:

- “Can I pray for you about anything?”
- “If God could do any miracle in your life, what would you ask Him for?”
- “What do you think about the afterlife?”
- “What have you heard about Jesus?”

⁵ Visit namb.net/evangelism for helpful evangelism resources.

Be open to wherever the conversation might take you. There's no way to script how someone will react or how long they will even want to talk to you. Look for opportunities to offer to meet or see them again. You may even find a way to tangibly serve them.

When we were going door-to-door in a low-income neighborhood, we were having a hard time finding anyone who wanted to talk or engage with us. At the last house, a man was loading a truck and was not interested in prayer. But then a young woman came from around the house and heard we were offering prayer. "I need prayer!" she exclaimed. She was a single mom of an infant and was getting evicted out of that house that day, at that moment. We prayed with her and offered to help her pay for a hotel so that she wouldn't have to sleep on the street that night. In the hotel room we walked her through the gospel as her baby gurgled beside her on the bed. She believed in God but had never been born again. She desperately wanted Jesus and she was ready to give her life to him. She started attending our church plant and soaking in the Word of God.

IT'S NOT ALL UP TO YOU

There is something so life-giving about engaging the harvest in the way God has intended. In my experience, the fear on the front end is nothing compared to the joy of obedience. To be able to rejoice alongside those who you have led to Jesus is an irreplaceable experience. We get to share in the celebration as the lost are found and the dead come back to life.

But it's not often going to be something we stumble upon by accident. If you don't already have a regular habit of sharing the gospel, decide on an hour or two on a specific day that you can go with a partner to go pray for people. Put it on your calendar and protect that time. By going with another believer, you can mutually encourage one another. If you bring someone you are discipling, you can model for them how to engage the lostness that is all around us.

Also consider your own circle of influence. Start listing the names of everyone you know who is far from God, everyone who is not following Jesus or trusting in Him alone for their salvation. Pray

over these names and seek God's will on how and when you can share with them. We often pray for God to save people, but we are reluctant to be the ones who are going to open our mouths and say something to them! Let's not let fear of how they might react keep us from expressing the most glorious news in the universe.

Above all, always trust in the sovereignty of God. The weight is not on your shoulders because it is only the power of the Holy Spirit that can cause someone to be born again. We are simply vessels of the message that God desires to carry across the globe and into our neighborhoods. We cannot base the effectiveness of the message on how people react to it because, "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Keep reaching out because you will find people whose hearts God has already been softening to prepare them to learn of Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners. Let us keep in step with Him and trust His powerful grace.

*"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing
worth belongs to God and not to man"
(2 Corinthians 4:7).*

CHAPTER 5

GRACEFULLY RESILIENT

ELICIA HORTON

*She walks in the power of the Spirit to withstand
challenging conditions.*

I was standing in the elevator of a hotel with my hands, arms, wrists and legs strapped with backpacks, a purse, pillows, stuffed animals, blankets and whatever else could fit on any part of my body. I tried to convince my kids to at least carry the items that didn't exceed their current body weight, but somehow, I found myself carrying mostly everything.

I felt like Superwoman—displaying power, strength and brawn. But to others, I looked like a circus act walking down the hallways of the hotel trying not trip over my legs (one of which had a toddler attached to it). I dare not make eye contact with anyone because I already knew I looked foolish, and I could not withstand any snarky looks of judgment.

My husband and I had a “friendly disagreement” prior to me getting out of the car, when I insisted he drop me off instead of having us walking miles from the parking garage with three kids, all their luggage, a cooler, unnecessary bags and a partridge in a pear tree. When I got out, the kind bellhop greeted me with open arms ready to help, but because I didn't have any cash for a tip, I cut him off by insisting I carry everything to our room. Oh, and of course all the luggage carriers were raptured to heaven with no trace to be found.

When I made it to the elevator, despite the load I was bearing. I was venting and saying unkind things in my head, all the while trying to

keep it together in front of my kids. Heaven forbid any conference attendees catch me firing off at my family because what type of witness would that be to those there to hear the good news of Jesus' love and kindness?

I struggled to keep it together and after a grueling trek, I managed to make it to the hotel room. I was sweaty, angry, frustrated and basically embodied most of the Fruits of the Spirit—if they had gone rotten.

I was more concerned doing things my way, disproving my physical limitations and carrying more than I could bear simply because my pride didn't want to admit that I was needy. Nor did I want to make a mistake in front of my kids and have to admit I couldn't do it on my own and really needed help. Thing done independently—especially independently from God—breed pride.

IN CHURCH PLANTING, YOU CAN'T DO IT ALL

This was often my go-to move during the years my husband and I were planting churches. I struggle with the need to prove I'm resilient rather than allowing challenges to prove my resilience. See the difference? Falling and tripping over my feet would have at least shown my humanity. But somehow in our twisted thinking, making mistakes, confessing our sins and expressing our frailties means failure. We should see our deficiencies as a means for grace.

In church planting, we can't do it all, but that's hard to admit. When my husband and I found ourselves facing this fact, it usually meant we were carrying too much and trying not to fall. When we shift our perspective, rebel against the cultural norms and view mistakes and limitations through a biblical lens versus a worldly lens, we see God's truth.

Embracing our limitations reminds me of people like Paul. He begged God to remove that pesky thorn in the flesh, but God responded in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for all of your needs and my power is made perfect in weakness."

Wait, what? His grace is sufficient for all needs? What about my neediness? You mean all my limitations? All my deficiencies and even all my mistakes? And how in the world can power be made perfect in weakness? Is that even physiologically or scientifically possible? How can power be a result of weakness?

We often see quotable verses like 2 Corinthians 12:9 or Philippians 4:13 as taglines or tattoos, but they are frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted. If we don't read them in context, we lose the essence of what Paul was trying to communicate and therefore miss the lesson of what it means to have real power.

More than anyone, Paul had so many justifiable reasons to boast. He had many reasons to feel proud and accomplished. He had an amazing pedigree, an impressive education, an extensive catalog of writings and let's not forget his exclusive one-on-one time with Jesus. Homeboy was at the top of his game. He was that dude, and in the church planting world, he's still the example we are often called to look at. Isn't that like us at times to be more impressed and consumed with the gifts that God gives to us versus the Giver?

But Paul understood he has limitations and he was beginning to understand that he should be willing to boast about the Giver versus the gifts.

Embracing our limitations leads us to be fully dependent on Jesus instead of being fully dependent on ourselves. Paul embracing his challenges (including physical ones, as some commentaries suggest) meant surrendering all of his self-reliance to God. When we rely on the supernatural strength of God to carry us through hard times, we operate in great faith. Deep faith is grown through deep times of adversity.

If you've been involved in church planting, you know adversity comes with this calling. This is why we must remember: things done independently from God breed pride. Things done in full dependence on God breed humility. James 4:6 tells us, "But he gives

more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Paul began to realize his inability became his ability. Not being able to rely on our physical abilities, experiences as a source of power because of enduring a personal weakness actually becomes our greatest strength.

He continues on in 2 Corinthians verses 7–10, “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

JESUS WILL BUILD HIS CHURCH

How many times while church planting have you found yourself trying to carry more than you’re able to carry? As church planting wives, we have all been there at some point. Here are some questions to ask to help you identify what bags you’re carrying and why you’re carrying them:

- What past hurt, traumatic experiences or even hurtful words pushed you towards a strong urge to prove yourself to others?
- Who told you that you couldn’t do something?
- What mistakes and sins in your past have left you crippled with fear, and now you feel the need to do everything perfectly?
- Who told you that you were doing it all wrong?
- What limitation, disability or deficiency made you feel so uncomfortable to the point you were ashamed to accept that as your reality?

Our world encourages us as individuals to get back at the naysayers and so-called haters by embracing the formulas of its definition of

purpose, power and success. It tells us to fight back against adversity by becoming more powerful and full of self rather than embracing adversity and growing in our challenges instead of trying to find the quickest exit door. It screams mantras like “all gas, no brakes,” which basically means “don’t stop at any cost, and it’s okay to overextend yourselves to prove you’re capable.” What about the familiar tune, “Push it to the limit”? This song secretly weaves the idea of adopting a quotable worldly view of natural selection where only the strongest survive. This essentially gets interpreted as “be the strongest in order to survive.”

The good news is Jesus is the One who builds His Church, and His success does not rise or fall based on our church planting experiences. It’s good to remember this during those times when fruit bearing is delayed, or when people complain about your husband to you—as if it’s your job to “fix him.” Take heart, dear sister! These situations, and others like them, provide us not with opposition but opportunities to respond with graceful resilience.

WE’VE ALL MESSED UP

To have a healthy understanding of what it means to be gracefully resilient, we must rid ourselves of the idea that we have to be the most powerful, the strongest and the most perfect. We have to be willing to accept our limitations. We have to be willing to admit our mistakes and sinful disobedience and not allow pride to hold us back from owning and confessing them.

Once Adam and Eve realized they sinned, what was one of the first things they did? They were exposed and tried to hide. I love what J.D. Greear once said in a sermon,

“When we try to cover our sins, God exposes us. But in humility, when we expose our sins, God’s grace covers us. None of us are perfect, and since our identity is rooted in us being hidden Jesus (Colossians 3:3), this provides us with a freedom to be honest with our humanity.”

God uses our limitations as equalizers, so we do not forget that none of us are just and righteous in all of our ways. All of us have issues; some of us just cover them up more. Romans 3:10–11 says, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands and no one seeks God.” And Romans 3:23–24 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Don’t let your wicked heart fool you into believing you will ever be perfect. Don’t buy into the lie that you need to be perfect no matter how good you feel using that Instagram filter. There is power and freedom in knowing that God’s grace covers us even when we fall.

Following the footsteps of pride leads us down the slippery slopes of self-reliance and, ultimately, utter failure. Think of the many times you’ve tried to do things on your own, carried the entire load and constantly resisted the Spirit’s work in your life by simply doing things your way. When I’ve done this, sometimes at the same time as my husband is doing this, it brought chaos into our home and directed our energy away from our church plant.

Our sinful choices highlight the need for grace. We do not live in a grace-filled culture or a grace-filled world, but we do serve a God who exemplified humility, personified grace and demonstrated His ultimate love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

LIFE-CHANGING NEWS AND NEW LIMITATIONS

When I was in that elevator, I felt an overwhelming sense to not only look strong but to feel strong. I was in desperate need to feel validated by doing it by myself. I wanted to prove I was physically capable and that my circus act would defy the impossible, amaze the onlooker and not put my body in complete distress.

What onlookers didn’t know is that earlier that year, I received a diagnosis that would turn my world upside down. Five months prior, a neurologist said what I was experiencing physically would

be something I'd have to battle the rest of my life. After undergoing several tests, MRIs, a spinal tap and having my blood drawn, it was confirmed I was experiencing the early stages of Multiple Sclerosis.

I was having to wrestle with the reality that I have limitations and would have more in the coming years. Would God's grace be sufficient for all my current needs and the future progressive deterioration of my body? Would I find that power that Paul was talking about even in my physical weakness? Would God's grace carry me even if I lose my ability to walk? The athlete in me would rather deal with the physical pain of an injury that is momentary than being told you can't do something anymore.

The Lord had to change my perspective. That following summer, I was sitting in chapel, at Moody Bible College, attending the Legacy Conference and the same passion-filled Bible teacher that told others to not waste their cancer was preaching on 2 Corinthians 2:14–18. John Piper, in his very natural element, was declaring the glorious truths of these verses and our reality as believers in Jesus in a climatic tone, and then when he got to verse 16, he paused. This pause was not unnatural to his listeners, but it was longer than usual. Fighting back the frog in his throat with tears in his eyes, he hit the pulpit harder than an auctioneer and proclaimed, "SO WE DO NOT LOSE HEART!"

I lost it. I cried like a baby in my seat, and I didn't care anymore about the onlooker, the passerby or the naysayer. God knew I needed to hear those words. He then proceeded to read the rest of the verse,

"Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Our limitations don't withhold us from accomplishing God's plan, but rather, God uses our limitations to accomplish His plan. In church planting, in order for us to understand how to be gracefully resilient as women, we must be willing to except our powerlessness. Becoming gracefully resilient means embracing our humanity that comes with challenges, mistakes and limitations while fully employing the perfect power and grace Jesus offers us as we endure.

Our humanity shouldn't paralyze us, but it should turn our eyes to Christ where our power is refined. Our sufferings, challenges and limitations are momentary. They pale in comparison to the eternal glory that is being prepared for us.

My sisters, do not lose heart!

CONTRIBUTERS

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