

# TOGETHER FOR GOOD

A COUPLE'S GUIDE  
TO THRIVING IN  
CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

JUSTIN SMITH



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2026 by Justin Smith

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

*P&R Publishing offers special discount rates for bulk orders and ministry purchases. To inquire about a special rate, please write to us at [sales@prpbooks.com](mailto:sales@prpbooks.com).*

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

A Scripture quotation from the ESV's translation of the New Testament uses its alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

*Cover design by Jelena Mirkovic*

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Smith, Justin, M. Div., author.

Title: Together for good : a couple's guide to thriving in Christian ministry / Justin Smith.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, 2024. | Summary: "Christian ministry is full of challenges for husbands and wives-both individually and as couples. Work through this book together to build up your mutual support and a sustainable ministry"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024019650 | ISBN 9781629959825 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629959832 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Clergy--Office. | Pastoral theology. | Married people--Religious life.

Classification: LCC BV660.3 .S67 2024 | DDC 253--dc23/eng/20240521

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024019650>

For Allison, my beloved and my friend.

Our first twenty-five years together have gone far too fast.

You are still my only love and always will be.

Watching God's work in and through you  
is one of the joys of my life.

I can't wait to see what God has in store  
for our next twenty-five years.

# CONTENTS

Introduction	9
<b>Session 1: Identifying Stressors and Pressures</b>	13
<b>Session 2: Embracing Weakness by Design</b>	31
<i>Case Study: When Ministry and Marriage Clash</i>	40
<b>Session 3: Evaluating Your Health Inside and Out</b>	51
<b>Session 4: Cultivating God’s Restorative Gifts</b>	67
<i>Case Study: When Tenderness Overcomes Tragedy</i>	78
<b>Session 5: Strengthening Your Marriage Bonds</b>	85
<b>Session 6: Building a Community of Care</b>	105
<i>Case Study: When Duty Overrides Devotion</i>	121
<b>Session 7: Thriving Together in a Sustainable Ministry</b>	129
Conclusion	149
Acknowledgments	153
Notes	157

# INTRODUCTION

**E**arly in our marriage, my wife Allison and I ventured to the Grand Canyon woefully unprepared. It's not uncommon—standing atop the rim, hikers often miscalculate what the trek will require. What starts as a pleasant descent ends with hikers finding themselves deep in the canyon, without supplies and unable to get out before dark. Fortunately, our story did not involve dramatic rescues or gruesome survival tactics. But our lack of preparation did mean that we had to turn around and head back to the rim just a couple of hours into our hike. After traveling across the country, spending time and money when we had precious little of both, we were forced to settle for a cursory glance at one of the greatest natural wonders of the world. How different it could have been if we had loaded backpacks, budgeted time, reserved a campsite, and soaked in the experience over several days.

How similar is that to ministry! We start off enthusiastically, enthralled with the sights along the way and enjoying an easy downhill stroll. But as twilight falls, we find the path growing dark and difficult. Unprepared and alone, we may even begin to think about turning back. The unfiltered reality is that Christian ministry can be hard. Sitting at your desk, you wonder if you really have what it takes to

rightly handle the Word of truth, as you teach and minister to people facing situations far more complex than you ever imagined. Others may even tell you that they're wondering the same thing. What can you do when feelings of loneliness and inadequacy make thriving in ministry seem like an unattainable ideal?

Marriage isn't much different. After a leisurely descent into the canyon, you assume you will coast the rest of the way. But it doesn't take long before you and your spouse are confronted with the reality that you are still two sinners. As singles, you could hide your faults and foibles, but now you see each other's unvarnished version. Never mind the friction caused by the big issues of life; even minor decisions like what to serve guests for dinner, whether to make that extra purchase, and whose turn it is to pick up the kids all test your commitment to self-sacrifice. As the way gets rugged, it's tempting to call it quits or settle for mere survival over thriving.

Whether you're in the valley of ministry, marriage, or both, there is a way out, but it's not the way back. It's the way forward. There will be seasons of dryness and torrents of rain, but this canyon also holds indescribable beauty. When you come up on the other side, your relationship will be richer and deeper for having seen the sights and experienced the journey together.

Allison and I have learned (and are still learning!) these lessons through twenty-plus years of overseas ministry and even more years of marriage. Through his Word and timely counsel, God intervened when we were on the way to becoming two more stranded travelers. Though we lived in a country known for its hostility to Christianity, the greatest threat to our marriage and our ministry was ourselves. Pressures multiplied, yet I dismissed them as trivial. Pride kept me pressing on when it was time to slow down and heal. While these challenges threatened to pull our marriage apart, our story is one of God's faithfulness to preserve his servants. I share it with you in hopes that he will do the same for your marriage and ministry.

As you read this, do you feel like your marriage is locked in a permanent stalemate? Are you wondering if there's someone better out there for you? Are you regularly escaping into the grip of pornography? Have you begun plotting your exit—from ministry, from marriage, maybe even both? No matter where you find yourself, my prayer is that this book will restore your hope that God is indeed at work in your life, in your marriage, and in your ministry.

This book will take you, as a couple, through seven sessions. In these sessions, you will be challenged to think, talk, and pray together about the pressures you're currently experiencing in ministry and family life. You'll contemplate how God magnifies his strength through our weakness. You'll evaluate your spiritual, emotional, and physical health as well as consider the gifts God has given to renew your health. Finally, we'll turn our attention to positive changes you can make as a couple to strengthen your ministry marriage, build a community of mutual care, and grow together for the long run.

Along the way, you'll read three ministry marriage case studies highlighting well-known Christians of the past—whom you may not know as well as you thought. Each session will include questions for discussion and reflection. These are here for you—use them in whatever way will be most beneficial to your marriage. Or bookmark them to work through at a later time. In any case, remember to go at the pace that works best for you. I designed these questions to bring real issues to the surface, so they may prompt some raw—even painful—conversations. Resist the urge to rush through them. Take your time.

This book grew out of a burden to help couples thrive in ministry. How Allison and I wish we could sit down with you face-to-face to talk about these things! Our own brush with relational and spiritual disaster has only strengthened our desire to help others. Whether you're a lay leader, musician, youth worker, pastor, counselor, administrator, or missionary, this book is written for you. Know that my goal here *isn't*

to nag you with everything you should have done. Nor do I believe that “three easy steps” will answer all the woes of marriage and ministry. Both can be full of trials. But I have seen God prove himself true over and over again during times of stress, grief, loss, anxiety, tension, and depression. He will light your way through the deepest depths.

Sure, it’s easier to stay on the rim. It’s safer to view the canyon from a distance. Talking with your spouse about the real things in ministry and marriage that hurt you, fill you with shame, or make you want to scream in frustration may feel uncomfortable at best and terrifying at worst. But adventurers know that the risk is worth the reward. It’s in the struggle where we will find that God has given us the resources in himself, in each other, and in the church so that ministry together can become the adventure of a lifetime—leaving us nearer to Christ, closer to each other, and in awe of God’s creative power. So that ministry can be something we do together for good.

My beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:58)

## SESSION 1

# IDENTIFYING STRESSORS AND PRESSURES

Late on a Saturday night in the parsonage, a pastor and his wife host a missionary couple. Kids in bed, coffee cups in hand, they sit around the kitchen table unloading their burdens. Past hurts, current struggles, and future dreams are all up for discussion. For many pastors, a visiting missionary means an understanding ear as they vent their frustrations about pastoral work.

Over the years, my wife and I have often encountered ministry couples who had no one else to confide in. Hearing from them highlighted just how much we all need care. No matter what type of ministry you're in, you've probably experienced some of the stressors and pressures that come with this work. You may not even realize how they are affecting you and your marriage. Our goal for the first session is to raise our awareness of how ministry can impact marriage.

Grab a pen. As you read through the list of stressors below, given in no particular order, take note of which ones are present in your life right now. While identifying the stress you're experiencing won't make everything better overnight, there is power in discussing with

your spouse how you both encounter these pressures. Why? Because putting words to hard experiences invites someone in to share the burden. As Shakespeare said, “Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break.”<sup>1</sup>

Talking through these stresses together can also build a verbal bridge between you and your spouse. Without this bridge of understanding, we find ourselves on opposite sides of a chasm, wondering why the other won’t just cross over to us. By an extensive (but not exhaustive!) list of stresses, we’ll find common ground while respecting each other’s varied experiences.

This guide is designed for you to work through together. In each session, you’ll find questions to discuss as a couple. Set a time, find a quiet place, and make a date of it as you complete these seven sessions. It’s natural to want to jump into problem-solving, but hold off for now. At this stage, just focus on hearing one another well. Give each other the gift of listening.

One more thing: Hang in there! You might feel a little discouraged after considering the strain of ministry. These topics may recall painful memories. Yet remember that these pressures will not have the last word. Despite the opposition, God is still working in you. Recognizing the magnitude of the challenges will only make us appreciate all the more how he accomplishes his work through his servants.

## **A Continual State of Urgency**

After a long week, you sit down on the couch with the kids for a family movie night. Minutes into the opening scene, the phone buzzes. It’s yet another church member thinking this argument might be their last as a married couple. “Pastor, please come help us.” You’re moved by their situation, but you’re also torn. Should you wait until tomorrow or drop everything and rush to their aid? Whether or not you go, the relaxing evening has already been shattered by one ring of the telephone.

Ministry fosters an acute sense of urgency. After all, what could be of greater consequence than eternal life and death? Those in ministry often deal with serial crises without relief. Even physicians have days off, with others on call who can cover emergencies, but what is a pastor or counselor to do when the call comes about a sudden death in the church or a marriage on the brink?

A constant state of urgency creates a continual need for triage. Priorities clash as wife and husband may define an “emergency” quite differently. When that happens, competing priorities compound the feeling of urgency. If you’ve ever ventured into a kitchen on Christmas Day, you’ve seen how conflicting time-sensitive demands create pressure and strain. Everyone is jostling in limited space to get their job done lest dinner consist of burnt turkey and undercooked casserole. When that occasional stress becomes an everyday reality, marital tension increases.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of a continual sense of urgency right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- In which areas do you and your spouse feel a different sense of urgency? Here are a few areas to get you started: guarding family time; spending time alone together; maintaining relationships within your ministry; following policies; protecting the safety of others; addressing the needs of the congregants . . .
- In a typical month (if there is such a thing!), how often do you cancel personal plans because of sudden ministry demands?

## **An Inability to Solve Every Problem**

Those in ministry often have an intimate knowledge of what others are going through, which may lead to a feeling of helplessness when they are unable to resolve the situation. The counselor who unsuccessfully urges a battered wife to seek shelter knows this. So does

the pastor whose friend fails to heed his pleas as he heads toward moral disaster.

Most couples in ministry don't get there without a sense of responsibility. Yet that sense of responsibility can leave couples haunted by the mistakes they've made or by the foolish choices of others.

Ministers can't save people by force. No court order can require people to attend to their souls. No restraining order can keep sin away. Even the best pastor will see some members stray from the faith. Over time, a feeling of failure can weigh on those in ministry. Despite the many who have been helped, regret over the ones who could not be saved looms large. We can't help but wonder whether—if we had just said something different or reached out one more time—those lost ones could have been helped. Like Elijah, we wonder if we are no more effective than those who came before us (see 1 Kings 19:4). Or maybe someone else could do better?

We often don't have to look far to find intractable problems. Even within our own homes, disagreement and conflict might seem never-ending. When we preach reconciliation yet feel gridlocked at home, we may soon feel disillusioned with the promise of marital harmony.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of an inability to solve every problem right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- Think of a recent situation that lies beyond your ability or responsibility to solve. What makes it difficult to accept?
- How do you and your spouse respond to problems that you cannot solve? What similarities and differences do you see?

## **A Perceived Lack of Accomplishment**

There simply are not always visible results to measure the effectiveness of one's labors in ministry. To compensate, we create artificial measurements, such as busyness, church attendance, offerings,

academic achievements, number of baptisms, and so on. Statistics are a poor substitute for genuine life change. When we don't see measurable progress in these areas, we may mistakenly take this lack of evident "success" as a sign that we shouldn't be in ministry at all.

A pastor close to me occasionally spends a few days a week doing manual labor. He has often commented how fulfilling it is to put in a hard day's work that produces tangible results. Perhaps that's why building programs seem to attract so many pastors! When you complete a building, you leave behind a visible memorial of your work. Ministering to people is more like building sandcastles—you can never be quite sure when a rogue wave will wash away the whole work. After a bad day, have you ever found yourself browsing "help wanted" ads in hopes of a job with more measurable results?

A perceived lack of accomplishment can introduce tension into a marriage when it weighs on one spouse more than the other. Your spouse may be content to take the long-term view of what God is doing through your ministry, while you are ready to move on to a more visibly fruitful ministry. When one of you has "checked out," the other will likely feel even more pressure to validate their ministry through results.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of a perceived lack of accomplishment right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- Which artificial measurements of success are you most likely to use to validate your (or your spouse's) ministry? What are your unspoken assumptions of what ministry success should look like?
- When have you or your spouse been less engaged in ministry because of the lack of visible results?

## **Criticism and Conflict**

"Christ is the reason many enter the pastorate. Conflict is the reason many leave."<sup>2</sup> Churches are not always the safe havens they

ought to be. The collective nature of the church body means that many opinions are present. Often church conflict centers on vision, direction, or personalities rather than on sin issues. There are different opinions about how the pastor is doing, where the church is headed, or how to resolve a problem. When these differences become contentious, discouragement sets in, and pastors begin to look for the exit.

Church conflict also comes hand in hand with criticism of the pastor, and because the minister's professional and private lives are so intertwined, criticism quickly becomes personal. Perhaps only teachers and politicians experience a similar level of criticism from a constituency who is unable or unwilling to leave. You might be able to brush off criticism directed at yourself, but it might not be so easy for your spouse. A pastor's wife sees his sacrifices firsthand and wants to protect him. She knows the late-night calls and private concern for the members. She and the children might also bear the brunt of some of these criticisms, a fact that compounds the anxiety of an already difficult relationship. The wife might be offended on the husband's behalf, making reconciliation within the church more difficult. Or she might agree with the criticism, only ratcheting up the tension between husband and wife.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of criticism and conflict right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- How did a recent church conflict negatively (or positively) impact your relationship with your spouse? How did you work through this together?
- How do you and your spouse respond to criticism and conflict? What similarities and differences do you see? For example, does one of you tend to confront, while the other prefers to withdraw?

## Unrealistic Expectations

Like criticism and conflict, unrealistic expectations can devastate a ministry couple. Parishioners may expect pastors to put in long hours for little pay . . . all while raising perfect children; attending every church function, birthday party, wedding, funeral, and hospital bed; remembering every name; and ending each sermon in time for Sunday dinner. Since the pastor has no line manager in the church, everyone becomes his boss. “I’m a tithing member, so the pastor must do what I say” is the ecclesiastical equivalent of “I’m a taxpayer, so the government works for me.” Churchgoers may feel more freedom to share their opinions in church than in other venues and may even boldly assert that their opinion is the only biblical view.

You may also be expected to participate in *all* ministry activities in order to “set a good example.” If you are the wife of a pastor, you may feel pigeonholed into being the unofficial women’s pastor—unpaid, of course—even if you do not have the gifting or the interest. And you better play the piano! The old joke that ministry couples are “two for the price of half” sums up a common expectation of pulpit search committees. These pressures can lead a couple to succumb to feelings of uselessness or inadequacy. No matter how many people are happy, that one disapproving look or loaded comment will linger.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of unrealistic expectations right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- List the spoken and unspoken expectations each of you feels in your ministry. (To get started, finish the following sentence: “I am expected to . . .” or “I must . . .”)
- What unrealistic expectations, if any, do you each feel from one another?

## Pressure to Be an Example

In addition to struggling under the weight of unrealistic expectations, many ministry couples feel the pressure of being a model for others. Sometimes we just want to be one of the sheep rather than the shepherd! While ministry leaders *are* called to lead by example, this pressure can leave couples feeling as if they must hide their flaws in order to measure up to a higher standard.

Ministry couples who have faithfully parented and accurately taught others how to raise children in a God-honoring way may find their own children struggling. All their experience and biblical wisdom *feels* instantly invalidated. Who hasn't known the draining power of a family argument on a Sunday morning? Scrutiny of one's marriage and children within the "fishbowl" can weigh on the ministry family with enough pressure to crush a submarine.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of having to be a good example right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- How have marriage or family struggles affected your ministry?
- List all the ways you feel pressured to be an example to others.

## Blurred Lines Between Home and Church

Sometimes pressure stems from a lack of distinction between your home and the church. This may happen in a literal sense: When your home *is* the church or is a parsonage right next door, you may lack privacy and independence. In a house-church situation, members naturally begin to view your home as shared property,<sup>3</sup> leaving you and your family with no place of retreat. More commonly, however, lines between home and church are blurred when both spouses are

heavily invested in ministry, whether both are actually employed by a church or not. It's difficult to avoid bringing your work home with you. Tensions in the church become tensions in the home. Joint counseling sessions lead to “proxy fights” at home where each spouse litigates the case of their client. When tension arises between you and your spouse, you wonder whether it is a problem between husband and wife or pastor and parishioner.

In the corporate world, you probably wouldn't seek your spouse's input on whom to put in charge of the HR department or which line items to strike from the marketing budget. Work is work, and home is home. But in the church, you would be foolish not to consider your spouse's input on important matters such as who should run the youth ministry or who might be effective as a deacon. A pastor's wife may have insight and wisdom to offer regarding the vision of the church, the clarity of the message, and the “temperature” of the church for visitors. Since pastors' wives do not typically join elders' meetings, their influence is usually felt indirectly through conversations at home.

Unfortunately, this can all have the effect of bringing church tension into the home, especially when the pastor's wife does not agree with the elders' decisions. Some in the church may even try to use the pastor's wife as a means to influence the pastor. Thus, differences between husband and wife might be manifested more publicly than they are for non-ministry couples.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of blurred lines between your home and church right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- How have you seen tensions at church spill over into your home? If you have children, how do you think they have been affected?
- Examine the boundaries between home and church. Which boundaries are healthy, and which may be unhealthy? How do you and your spouse differ in your view of these boundaries?

## Limited Resources

Many ministry couples, especially in smaller ministries, get by on an income that is well below average for their community. It is not uncommon for pastors or Christian teachers with multiple advanced degrees to earn less than blue-collar workers with high-school diplomas. I knew of one Christian school administrator who, when wages began to be calculated hourly by the state, had to be given a *raise* to reach minimum wage! Wondering how to pay the bills while others are living comfortably can weigh on the ministry couple, especially when combined with other pressures. Couples may also feel especially self-conscious about their spending, knowing that members have sacrificed to pay their salary. What pastor wants to be the one asking for a raise, when he knows widows are giving their last mite?

A lack of time—one of our most precious resources—may be the most prevalent factor in anxiety. A chronic shortage of time has left many a minister depleted. While money and time will not eliminate anxiety, disregarding one's limits will surely add to it.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of limited resources right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- How often do finances come into your conversations at home? What is the typical tone of those conversations?
- In a typical week, how many meals do you eat “on the go” or in front of a screen? How many times each week do you linger at the dinner table in conversation?

## The Need for Confidentiality

Being a keeper of secrets is not for the faint of heart. Often, ministry couples have few people with whom they can share the burdens they carry for others. In many cases, the need for tact and confidentiality

is so great that you cannot share details of a counseling situation with your spouse. When a man in the church relates some concerns and criticisms to an elder, the elder might realize that sharing the details of this conversation will only add to the tension his wife feels toward this man. So, the elder is forced to bear the weight of the situation, processing his own reaction to the criticism while also protecting his wife.

Protecting confidentiality may also mean that others don't understand the decisions you make. They may think a church discipline decision was too harsh because they are unaware of the details. Or they may push back against a policy made in response to situations that cannot be divulged. My wife is a professional counselor, and I often meet with church members for informal counseling. At times each of us may be burdened by what we've heard in a meeting yet cannot share all the details. At times like that, we feel the distance created by the need to steward others' privacy.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of a need for confidentiality right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you share with your spouse regarding confidential ministry matters?
- Do you have others with whom you can share confidential information without burdening your spouse—perhaps another pastor or elder, a counselor, or a trusted out-of-town friend?

## The Burden of Secret Knowledge

If it is not carefully handled, the secret knowledge that comes from counseling others can begin to color your view of everyone. After counseling numerous church members, you might wonder if *anyone* is really doing well. When you have a front-row seat to every church discipline tragedy, sometimes you begin to ask, “Does everyone harbor dark sins and secrets?”<sup>4</sup>

One pastor-teacher told me that he is careful about how many depression cases he counsels on a given day to avoid being overwhelmed. It is true that the counselor may be drawn into the counselee's worldview. Trauma counselor and author Diane Langberg warns of the need for the counselor to protect herself from any false views of God that the counselee may hold. If pastors and counselors are not careful, they might be in danger of believing a counselee's "slander" of God, leading to an "erosion of faith."<sup>5</sup>

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the burden of secret knowledge right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- How is the burden of private knowledge impacting your view of yourself, of God, and of others? For instance, have you found yourself slipping toward cynicism or mistrust because of secrets others have shared with you?
- What are some helpful ways you and your spouse process painful situations that others aren't even aware of?

## Compassion Fatigue

Those in ministry are continually concerned for others, even if they are not overwhelmed with nonstop activity. The minds of a ministry couple are continually pulled to consider not just what is *happening* but how people are *doing*. How are those newlyweds adjusting? How is that teen's struggle with same-sex attraction? Will a church member have to move away now that he has been laid off? Often these concerns are known only to a few. The private nature of this burden only increases its weight.

Over time, though, you might find it harder and harder to care. If caring for people means sharing their pain, you may try to protect yourself by separating from them. When you see people continually

making foolish decisions, you might conclude, “Hey, if they don’t care about their lives, why should I?” Throw in a few situations when your compassion is met by rejection, and your well of compassion will run dry unless it is regularly refilled.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of compassion fatigue right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- When you are “off duty,” what do you notice about your thoughts? For example, do you find it difficult to quiet your mind?
- What attitudes do you generally have toward those you minister to?

## **Isolation and Loneliness**

Research indicates that pastors are, on average, significantly lonelier than non-pastors.<sup>6</sup> The church is a place of belonging, yet for some ministry couples, it can be a place of isolation. This is particularly true of cross-cultural missionaries or those who move to another town to minister in a church or plant a new one.

Even if you never leave your hometown, your status as a minister can create social distance. You may feel alone even when surrounded by people. In some church cultures, pastors and their wives may feel they cannot have close, open friendships for fear of being accused of favoritism. Personality differences, lack of maturity, and other factors may also hinder strong friendships for those in ministry. This dynamic adds to the strain. On the other side, some people feel uneasy around “clergy.” They guard their language or refrain from sharing details of their lives.<sup>7</sup>

Couples who have been burned by opening up with a church member will be hesitant to do so again. Past church conflict can leave couples wary of being betrayed again. So they crave authentic, unguarded relationships but dare not look for them within their church.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of isolation and loneliness right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- Can you each name three people with whom you can be completely unguarded and authentic?
- When you have felt isolated and lonely, how did that affect your relationship with your spouse?

## Lack of Standing

Around the world, and increasingly in some segments of Western culture, people may be openly hostile to you as a church leader or ministry spouse. They may dismiss your message or suspect your motives due to your vested interest in bringing more people to the church. This is especially hard for us in ministry because we want to be used to attract people to Christ for their sake, not for our own. These cultural pressures weigh on each of us and remind us that we are sojourners in a strange land.

Misconceptions regarding this work may lead some to view those of us in ministry as charlatans or beggars. Our work is not our identity, but society hasn't gotten the memo. When meeting someone, we still first ask, "What do you do?" In restricted access nations where you can't even identify as a pastor or missionary, you're left without a sense of public identity. That constant feeling of not belonging will wear on ministry couples.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel the stress of a lack of standing right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- How is your ministry position viewed by the general culture around you?
  - a. with respect and admiration
  - b. with cynicism and suspicion

- c. with ignorance and misconceptions
- d. with hatred and animosity
- e. with no framework or opinion whatsoever
- How has the culture's view of your ministry affected your sense of place in society?

## **Lack of Oversight and Accountability**

Because ministry can be lonely, you may lack an outlet to voice your struggles. Like a container with no vent, you will eventually burst. Due to the sensitive nature of ministry, it's common to feel as if you can't talk with anyone about your temptations. Perhaps you're afraid of jeopardizing your position or your ministry. When I surveyed men and women about the challenges of ministry, it became clear that a lack of meaningful accountability is a common problem. A consistent response was "But who can we really trust with our stressors and struggles?"

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you personally feel a lack of accountability right now? How strongly do you think your spouse feels it?
- Do you have meaningful accountability and oversight in your life? Does your spouse?
- Why is it important to have accountability with others in addition to your spouse?

If you are reading this and harboring secret thoughts and temptations, or if you are overwhelmed by the pressures of ministry, I beg you to talk with someone *today*. If you can't start with your spouse or a trusted friend, call up a professional biblical counselor and lay it all out.<sup>8</sup> Under the protection of confidentiality (as much as is possible), he or she will begin walking with you on the road toward wholeness.

## Conclusion

In this session, we've looked at several common stresses of ministry and examined their impact on you and your spouse. No doubt you could add a few of your own to the list. My goal is not to make your burden heavier but to help you appreciate the weight you are under. When hiking, you have to appreciate your load and your limits. If you try to carry a weekend's supply of camping gear in grocery bags, you won't make it far. A heavy load requires adequate equipment and careful planning.

In the next session, we'll see that weakness is part of God's design. These pressures are not signs that something is wrong with you or that you're just not cut out for this work. They're part of God's design to use us in our weakness so that his power is made more evident.

As many ministry couples can attest, ministry is not all stress and pressure. Serving together in ministry can be rich with blessings: spending time together in meaningful service, watching each other flourish in God's gifting, witnessing firsthand as lives are transformed through the work of Christ, dedicating time to pursue a close walk with Jesus, and so many more. These blessings are not the only reasons we serve, but they are wonderful gifts of God's grace along the way.

## Session 1 Wrap-Up

- Share something from this session that particularly struck you.
- Share which stressors and pressures you're facing right now.
- Consider one practical change Christ would have you make to address the stressors mentioned in this session.

## **Prayer: *Give Relief to the Stressed***

O God of all comfort, you are the God who sees every stress, every pressure, every trial, every tear, and every sacrifice. Lift our heads when we are downcast and our hands when we are weary. Keep before us your power to transform lives even as we look to you for transformation. Make us agents of comfort to one another as we share in your labor. May we show forth Christ in the church as well as in our home. Throughout it all, continue in us the work you have begun until we are completely conformed to the image of Jesus, for it is in his name we ask. Amen.

### **Scripture for Meditation: *2 Corinthians 1:2–7***

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.