

### **Life in the Front Pew- The Depressed Pastor's Wife- Part 3**

The pain of unmet expectations is a common one in pastoral ministry, especially for inexperienced pastoral couples. During our days of training, whether it's Bible school, seminary, or an online course, it's normal for pastoral couples to imagine what that first church will look like. I'd heard about, and personally observed, healthy examples of multi-pastor staffs. Therefore, when God opened a door for my husband, Ken, to serve as an associate pastor over education and youth, I felt excitement. I'm not sure anything could have prepared me for what was in store for us in that first assignment.

During our candidating weekend, a few red flags emerged concerning the senior pastor and his wife. Something seemed akimbo in their relationship. Only married three years myself at that time, I couldn't articulate my uncomfortable sensations. Besides, they were so welcoming and friendly. And although we didn't necessarily connect tightly with them that weekend, we did sense an immediate affinity for the members of the search committee and the vision of their church they shared with us.

At first, we seemed to bond well with the senior pastor and his wife, although more red flags kept popping up. We made excuses for them. Meanwhile, we fell in love with the congregation and they received us with great love and warmth. During our time there, Ken nearly died of a freakish form of pneumonia. Never will I forget everything that church family did to pour love on us while I spent my days at his side in intensive care. They cared for everything from doing the laundry, yard work and even playing with our dogs and scooping their "presents" up in our backyard.

Back to our relationship with the senior pastor, looking back, it's not surprising now, how quickly he began to turn against Ken and me. His philosophy of ministry was quite different from ours. It included some large red flags that he'd proudly proclaim as strength and wisdom and expect Ken to model, after him.

Two examples that stick with me are:

- Pastor's don't need days off. Vacation weeks are enough to regroup and restore.
- Never make close friendships with the people of your congregation.

When Ken didn't knuckle under the pressure of the senior pastor's unrealistic expectations, and insisted that he did indeed need a day off a week, things became tense. The funny thing is, that the elder and deacon boards urged the senior pastor to make days off a habit, but he always refused. They should not have let him get away with that. They, of course, strongly supported Ken taking a day off. The senior pastor did not.

By the end of our third year, things became very strained between Ken and the senior pastor. We now believe that he was personally experiencing a mid-life crisis or crisis of faith when we arrived on the scene. Ken's popularity and successes amongst the congregation provoked jealousy in him and he took it out on both of us in many subtle, yet effective ways and deliberately worked to undermine Ken. He also missed no opportunity to criticize Ken in not very grace-filled ways.

The effect of all this on me was to become quite depressed. Our relationship with our senior pastor and his wife resembled nothing of my imaginings. At one point, the pastor even sat Ken down to specifically talk about what an uncooperative and nasty person. That's the sanitized version. He actually used very crude language to talk about me. That was an awful day for both Ken and me.

Very shortly after that is when Ken became critically ill with the pneumonia, and the senior pastor realized the depth of the congregation's love for us. We believe he feared reprisal and damage to his own reputation if he came at Ken anymore. So, the church was large enough that for the rest of the years we served there, he settled into a cold indifference towards both of us. Incredibly sad.

I didn't know a lot about depression back then, but I did know that Christ didn't want me to retaliate with gossip, negative attitudes, unforgiveness or bitterness towards this pastor. Amazingly, even though I most likely had some significant chemical imbalances back then, once I made the decision to keep my heart right, the depression started to lift.

God helped me to see this couple's unhappy marriage and their three hurting children, all fallout from having such an unhappy workaholic husband and father. We never became true friends with this couple and that still makes me sad. For now, let's focus again on the connection between unmet expectations and depression.

The Bible says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." (Prov. 13:12) I kept hoping that this man would come to his senses and start to treat us better. When I saw that probably wasn't going to happen, it made me heartsick. If you are feeling that way right now because something in your life or ministry has not gone AT ALL as you imagined, may I offer a few suggestions?

- **Put your hope in God and not anyone else, including your husband.** I know you this in your head but I'm telling you, you must make it more than head knowledge. Once, I released the senior pastor and his wife from my expectations and instead started seeking God as to how I could behave around them, everything changed for me. "Why so downcast oh my soul? Put your hope in God..." (Psalm 42:11) Once you choose to take your eyes off the people or situations that have let you down, depression will get better. Once you anchor the hope of your soul in God, people and their failings won't depress you as much.
- **Recognize that delays and disappointments are part of the Christian journey, not unique to you.**

"But I thought our church would have grown so much more by now."

"I expected we'd get a much larger raise than we did."

"I really thought more people would turn out for this."

"I can't believe how hard it is to get volunteers to....."

These kinds of unmet expectations are common in every ministry, every church. They can tempt you to be depressed and discouraged. Instead, understand that this is part of God's growing process in us. Consider the years of delays and disappointments between

Joseph's dream and his rule in Egypt. Think about the delay and the fears for his very life between Samuel anointing David and him becoming king over Israel.

If I can help even one sweet soul today to understand this concept that eluded me in our first church, that will be a victory. It took me three years to understand that God *allowed* that set of circumstances in my life and Ken's because that's the tool he chose to use to refine and shape us. Maybe if I hadn't wasted so much time feeling depression and self-pity..... who knows?

Feeling disappointment and depression initially when confronted with disappointing, painful circumstances, is fine. Those are normal, human responses to sadness in life. But, *don't choose to set up your tent and camp there*. Feel what you're feeling and then turn to God to develop your move on strategy. I promise, he has good things for you during your largest disappointments.