

For ministry couples:
Three Shifts for a
Healthier Marriage



By Geoff and Sherry Surratt

Introduction

First a little about us. We're Geoff and Sherry Surratt, we've been in ministry for over 35 years. At one point one or both of us have been a children's pastor, youth pastor, senior pastor, executive pastor, CEO of a non-profit as well as consulting and coaching church leaders across the country. No matter what role you or your spouse have in ministry we've likely walked in your shoes. We don't want this book, however, to read like a how-to manual on marriage and ministry, an old couple telling you how to do it right. The image we have is sitting down together at our favorite Starbucks and talking about the ups and downs of doing marriage and ministry together.

You may be a young couple just starting down the road of ministry, and you'd like to not pay the same "dumb tax" we paid. You may be in the middle of raising kids in a ministry home and desperately need someone to say, "It's going to be all right." You may be in a very rough time in your marriage and struggling to find your way through. The thing we all have in common is we are deeply invested in being faithful in ministry and fruitful in marriage, and we all know how challenging both can be.

Our hope is not that you'll want to emulate our marriage or ministry; our hope is that our stories will spark meaningful conversations for you as a couple. In each chapter we've included an excerpt from our book, *Together: A Guide for Couples in Ministry*, for you to read, a few questions to talk over and an assignment to work on together. We really believe that if you make these three shifts in your thinking it will lead to a much healthier marriage. We just wish we'd made them much earlier in our ministry. So let's begin...

Recalibrate Expectations

After dating for five years I (Sherry) remember sitting with Geoff on a rainy night when the conversation turned serious. Geoff shared how God had called him to ministry, to be a pastor, and maybe someday to plant a church. With a serious look, he asked how I felt about it, because he wanted us to be in ministry together. With my heart racing, my mind quickly slid past the ministry part to what I thought he was hinting at. He was saying he wanted to marry me! He loved me! He repeated his question again. How did I feel about going into ministry? I remember thinking: *“I’ve grown up in church, I love God with all my heart, and I love you. What else matters?”* I must have satisfied his question, because on Christmas Day a few months later, over a romantic breakfast at an exclusive restaurant (the International House of Pancakes), I said yes, and soon Geoff and I became a *we*.

I had pretty typical expectations about what marriage would be, especially for someone who focused on the wedding much more than the being married part. When it came to our life together, I expected marriage to be fun. I expected there would always be enough money. I expected marriage to be an extension of our dating life. We’ll go to movies and eat pizza in front of the TV. We’ll talk endlessly about our hopes and dreams. We’ll be tremendously happy. Sure, we’ll have problems (small ones at worst), but we’d know how to work them out. Probably the most dangerous of all: I expected Geoff to make me happy. But not just happy. Gloriously happy.

It wasn’t until years later I realized I entered marriage with a set of unspoken and unintentional expectations, not just about marriage, but about ministry as well. **I expected being in ministry wouldn’t be all that different from the way I grew up going to church.** My dad was a board member and Sunday school superintendent. As a kid, I ran wild in the church halls while my parents were in choir practice, found the stash of candy in the children’s church closet, and was generally a church brat. I knew the rhythm of weekend services: Sunday morning and Sunday night church, Wednesday night youth group, and Thursday morning women’s ministry. But what I had never given a moment’s thought to was the stuff a pastor did during the week, the actual ministry part.

I expected married life to be me and Geoff, not me and Geoff and the church. It felt like church seeped in everywhere: our conversations, our thoughts, our schedule, and even our bedroom. Our weeknights, weekends, and holidays were no longer our own. We had Wednesday night youth service and Friday night parties and New Year's Eve all-nighters. Holidays now turned into a source of stress. We couldn't visit my family until after Christmas because we needed to be there for Christmas Eve. Easter weekend took a huge amount of planning for an Easter egg hunt and an exhausting weekend of multiple services. The Fourth of July was a church picnic day. Geoff and I hadn't been married very long when I had the wistful thought, "*I wonder what it's like to be normal and have a normal holiday?*"

Somewhere along the way I realized **I was expecting myself to make it all okay for my spouse.** I didn't want him to be disappointed when a family quit the church. I didn't want him to have to worry about who would teach that Sunday school class after the leader quit. I didn't want him to sweat over the finances when we lost major givers. I found myself going to ridiculous lengths to satisfy my own codependence on his happiness, trying to fill every hole in the church myself and talking him out of feeling sad or disappointed. After years of trying to manage my angst and what I thought was his, I realized my worry didn't help his challenges.

Along the way I've been able to talk to other pastors and their spouses who have shared their stories of bumps and bruises from unmet and misaligned expectations. It's been fascinating to hear the stories that sounded so painful, but turned into great moments of learning and healing. It made me think about my own experience as a new pastor's wife and the things I've learned.

First, and this was huge for me, **I've learned I have to admit I didn't break it and I can't fix it.** Early on I would take on others' problems as my own. I would feel badly when I didn't have an answer, and I would take on the burden of worry, feeling responsible for ending their pain and their disappointment when I couldn't. It wasn't helpful to them, me, or my marriage. I learned I needed to right-size my expectations for myself. I can be a wise listener and point them to Jesus. And that's about the end of what I can do.

I've also learned I need to pay attention to what I'm paying attention to, which are the voices in my head. My parent's expectations and how I was raised has a huge impact on what I tell myself today. Growing up, I was expected to get good grades, always be polite, and whenever there was a church event, I was expected to be there. This is fine and good, but it doesn't always translate into being in ministry. You can't be at every event. You won't always perfectly plan that gathering or get an A in every relationship. Sometimes you are going to drop the ball or disappoint someone or not bring your best self to a speaking opportunity. So be it. The only perfect standard to achieve is the one in our heads, and it's a bunch of baloney.

I've learned I need to recognize what my expectations are and say them out loud. Looking back, it was ridiculous to expect Geoff to always make me happy, and that we would always have enough money. It was also unfair not to talk to him when I was caught by surprise by my expectations in ministry. It was confusing to him when he saw me getting all wound up over things that weren't a big deal to him. Being young and inexperienced set me up for not knowing what I didn't know, but it wasn't an excuse for not talking about what I was feeling along the way.

I've learned I don't always understand what I'm thinking or even how I feel about it, but I need to at least try to put it into words. "I'm not sure why I feel so funny about what happened today, but I need to tell you how it made me feel." Sometimes just saying it to each other or to someone a bit older and more experienced is a huge relief to our soul.

If you're in the early stages of a life of ministry and marriage, it will save you years of challenges to really wrestle with the question of expectations now. Do you have expectations of what your finances will look like? How you will spend your weekends? Begin by asking yourself what thoughts are in your head that your spouse doesn't know you have. What experience do either or both of you have living in a pastor's home? What do you know, and what do you think you know, about the impact of ministry on marriage? Use the questions below to begin the discussion with your spouse.

TALK ABOUT THIS

1. What expectations did you have about your spouse when you were coming into marriage? Does your spouse know about them?
2. How have your past experiences or how you grew up shaped how you feel about the ministry?
3. What expectations do you put on yourself? Are they based on reality or on voices from the past?
4. If you could give one piece of advice to a couple just starting in ministry, what would it be? Do you see it working in your own life?

DO THIS

One of the things we've found most helpful in the area of expectations is talking with other ministry couples. If you have another ministry couple, preferably a more seasoned one, set up a time to get together and discuss the questions above. If you don't, with make a list of couples you could meet with and set up a time to connect with them.

Give Up on Balance

READ THIS

One of the biggest challenges for a family engaged in ministry is learning to balance church activities, marriage, kids, extended family, finances, and all the needy people who seem to come along with the job. Just leading a ministry or a church can be a 24/7 endeavor. Volunteers can't meet during the workday, crises almost always occur in the middle of the night, and weekends are the busiest time for someone in ministry. Amid the chaos are recitals, ballgames, and graduations, along with all the other needs of a healthy family. Somewhere along the way you're supposed to have family meals, date nights, and vacations. Balancing all this endless activity requires a spreadsheet, a calendar app, and a daily to-do list. And no matter how hard you try, something always seems out of balance. Either ministry or family seems to always get shortchanged. How does anyone successfully balance all the demands of ministry, friends, and family?

The good and bad news is that it is impossible. The idea of a balanced life is a myth, especially for people engaged in significant ministry. No one can give equal amounts of time to the needs of leading a ministry, the demands of people in crisis, and the proper care and feeding of a marriage and a family. This is obviously bad news that balance is unachievable, but it is good news because we are not alone: every ministry family is struggling with balance.

After thirty-plus years of ministry, and many seasons of more time demands than we could possibly meet, we are learning that balance can't be our goal. There will always be times when our lives are out of balance, times when ministry, marriage, or family will demand nearly all our time and attention. The goal can't be balance; the goal must be health. While Jesus and Paul did not live balanced lives, they lived healthy lives. Paul was so convinced the life he and Jesus lived was healthy, he invited us to imitate him as he imitated Jesus. Here are three keys we are discovering to a healthy life in the middle of the chaos of family and ministry.

Tell the Truth

Growing up in a pastor's home, everything in our family revolved around the church calendar. All our vacations were planned around church conferences. We didn't play youth sports because that would mean missing midweek church services, and school activities never took precedence over something going on at church. I entered marriage thinking this was normal, and I assumed Sherry and I would raise our family the same way. It never occurred to me that Sherry might have a different picture of a healthy family life. As I slowly became aware she wasn't happy with the idea of letting the church calendar dictate family time, I subconsciously created a strategy to cope with her dissatisfaction. I began to shade the truth about time commitments at church. Rather than talking about upcoming events and creating a plan together, I would simply not talk to Sherry about them. As an event neared, I felt the pressure building until I finally admitted I would be gone on Friday night, or this weekend, or all next week. Obviously, this didn't lead to the happy, healthy marriage I envisioned.

After years of conflict around balancing ministry and family, we are learning to simply be honest. We face our fear of confrontation, understand that balance is impossible, and agree to work together to continually create a healthy schedule for our family. These conversations are always challenging and sometimes contentious, but they are the only path to health.

Identify the Seasons

Early on in marriage it felt like life had two modes: overwhelming and complete insanity. Sherry was finishing college while I was learning how to be a youth pastor—children's pastor—janitor. Sherry began substitute teaching after graduation, and then after our son was born she began teaching full-time. My job became more stressful as the church grew and I took on more responsibility. Then our daughter came along. If life continued like this, it would be unsustainable. Life and ministry, however, never stay the same. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens" (3:1, NIV). Just like everything else in life, ministry, career, and marriage have seasons. One of the biggest keys to finding health in the whirlwind is to identify the natural seasons.

The key is to recognize the seasons of life and the seasons of ministry and plan around them. When Sherry was working as a children's pastor, I knew the weeks around vacation Bible school would be crazy every summer. I needed to adjust my schedule to take more of the load with the kids during that season, and the week of VBS wasn't the week to plan a retreat for the other campus pastors. When the kids were young, we didn't have a lot of time for ministry opportunities outside of our regular roles in the church. Now that we are empty nesters, we have the time and margin to speak at conferences, coach other church leaders, and write books. **Balance is impossible in the moment; balance is only possible across a lifetime.** In the immediacy of every season, healthy rhythm is the goal.

Diffuse Emergencies

Everything in ministry can feel like an emergency. The sermon has to be ready by Sunday, a new children's ministry volunteer must be recruited before the weekend, and a parishioner's crumbling marriage has to be fixed tonight. All the good intentions of focusing on family go out the window when the phone rings. It's time for all hands-on deck to put out the fire. Ministry refuses to wait while you sit around the dinner table listening to a kindergartner tell knock-knock jokes. Often ministry feels like a series of emergencies coming in unpredictable waves.

The little-known secret of ministry, however, is many emergencies can be delayed, diffused, or dealt with in advance. Since weekends come every seven days, things like sermons and song lists can be written days, weeks, or months in advance. One of the most freeing habits I was forced into was having to turn in my sermon notes by noon on Thursday so everything could go to the printer. No matter what else happened from Monday to Wednesday, my notes had to be done by noon Thursday, no exceptions. What that meant is the stress of sermon prep was focused on the first half of the week. By Thursday afternoon, for good or bad, the sermon was done. I didn't have to deal with a panicky feeling of impending doom on Friday and Saturday, and by Sunday afternoon the damage was done.

The most challenging emergencies, however, come in the form of unexpected phone calls. A marriage is falling apart, a teenager is off the rails, or there's been a bad report from a doctor.

They need to meet with a pastor right now, tonight, after they get off work. It doesn't matter if this is your date night or the night of your ten-year-old's ballet recital, you're expected to drop everything and step into the crisis. As pastors and ministers, this is what we do: we step into people's lives at their most vulnerable times and help them connect to the grace and healing of the gospel. As important as family life and marriage are, crisis is where we best fulfill our call to shepherd God's people.

The reality, however, is not all emergencies are truly crises of the moment. Many emergencies are serious but may not require your immediate undivided attention. Here are a few clarifying questions to help differentiate between "drop everything and go" and "let's find a time to get together."

- Did this crisis just arise or is it something that has been brewing for a while?
- Is this a crisis you can solve tonight or will this be an ongoing challenge?
- Is there a compelling reason this crisis can't be addressed during normal business hours?

A crumbling marriage is an example of a crisis that, while serious, is not always urgent. It has likely taken many years to get to this point, and the challenge probably cannot be solved in one Tuesday night session in your living room. If the couple isn't willing to take time off from work to work on their marriage, they may not be ready to seriously address their challenges. In a chronic situation, it's important the couple knows you care and want to help, but you can't drop everything right now.

The bottom line is that ministry will never be a nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday job, so creating a healthy rhythm for your family will be a lifelong endeavor. Seasons of imbalance are unavoidable, so you need an action plan to create and maintain a schedule that is healthy for your family. If you don't set your priorities, everyone else will do it for you.

TALK ABOUT THIS

1. What are the most difficult seasons for your family to find a healthy rhythm?
2. Do you have a regular date night as a couple? Do you have family nights? If not, when will you begin a regular rhythm of family time away from ministry?
3. What is your strategy to mitigate the “emergencies” that tend to crowd into family or personal time?

DO THIS

Spend a few minutes planning your next overnight getaway or family vacation. What obstacles do you have to overcome to protect this vital time?

Relieve the Pressure

READ THIS

I (Geoff) didn't really understand the pressure of ministry until I began pastoring a tiny church in rural Texas. Until then I was on staff at a larger church where I didn't have to sweat the budget, count the cars, or pray the air-conditioning units would hold up for one more summer. When I became a lead (and only) pastor, however, all that changed. Now I was the guy responsible for figuring out how we were going to keep the doors open, and I began to understand the big three pressures of ministry.

Attendance was an immediate and constant pressure from the day I became the pastor. We began with eleven adults and we never saw an explosion of growth. We would grow by ten, shrink by twelve, and then grow another six. Before Sunday morning services I would pace back and forth in the empty auditorium, stopping every few minutes to peek out the blinds, trying to will cars to turn into the parking lot. I tried not to focus so much on attendance, but it's hard not to notice empty pews from the platform.

Budget was another form of tremendous pressure; every offering was crucial to our survival. On Mondays we wondered if we would be able to pay that week's bills. One particularly bleak January our top three tithers left the church. If one of the original eleven members had not tithed on their disability settlement at the beginning of February, that would have been the end. When the church finally began to grow the finances did improve, but the financial pressure never let up.

The need for volunteers rounded out the big three of constant pressures. When we began pastoring, there were two "musicians" in the church: a rhythm-challenged drummer, and a piano player who only played songs from a hymnal. One Saturday the piano player called and said she wouldn't be at church in the morning, which meant our worship band was a drummer. Without a piano player or a clue what to do, I drove to a local Christian bookstore and found accompaniment tapes (they're like MP3s made of plastic) of four songs. That Sunday we did karaoke worship and decided it was significantly better than our current band. The next week the

piano player and her husband quit—18 percent of the original congregation. Things were moving in the wrong direction, and the pressure of finding volunteers just kept increasing.

We all have unique pressures in our ministries and marriages, and we all cope with them in different ways. Here are three universal principles for dealing with the pressure cooker of ministry.

1. You are not alone: While your stories are different than ours, if you have been in ministry for any amount of time you can relate to the pressures. It is helpful to know that everyone feels the pressures. If you and your spouse are struggling with the overwhelming pressures of doing ministry, know there are others out there who know how you feel.

2. Change the scorecard: I (Geoff) met recently with a friend who planted a church in Denver, one of the toughest places on the planet to start a new church. His church is already self-sustaining, experiencing growth, and lives are being transformed. But he's discouraged because the rate of growth is much slower than he expected. The healthiest thing he could do is find a new scorecard. Rather than focusing mostly on attendance and offerings, he needs to focus on changed lives. If he could only imagine the impact he is making for generations to come as families are being changed by the Gospel.

3. Remember your first love: It is natural to be overwhelmed in the pressure cooker of numbers and expectations. The urgency of filling volunteer roles, developing leaders, and meeting budgets overshadows the sweetness of seeing someone experience the freedom of the Gospel for the first time, or the fiftieth time. When we feel overwhelmed from dealing with the pressures of ministry, when we find ourselves focusing on church but neglecting our family, when we realize our spiritual tank is empty, it is time to step back and rediscover the passion and call that brought us into ministry in the first place.

TALK ABOUT THIS

1. What three or four areas cause the most pressure for you? Why are these areas pressure cookers?
2. What are some of the positive and negative ways you have handled ministry pressure as individuals and as a couple?
3. What is one specific action step you will take to mitigate the impact of ministry pressures on your marriage and family?

DO THIS

Work together to create a healthy scorecard for your ministry and your marriage. Include the key indicators of health, the ways you can gauge those indicators, and how you will celebrate as you see growth on your new scorecard.

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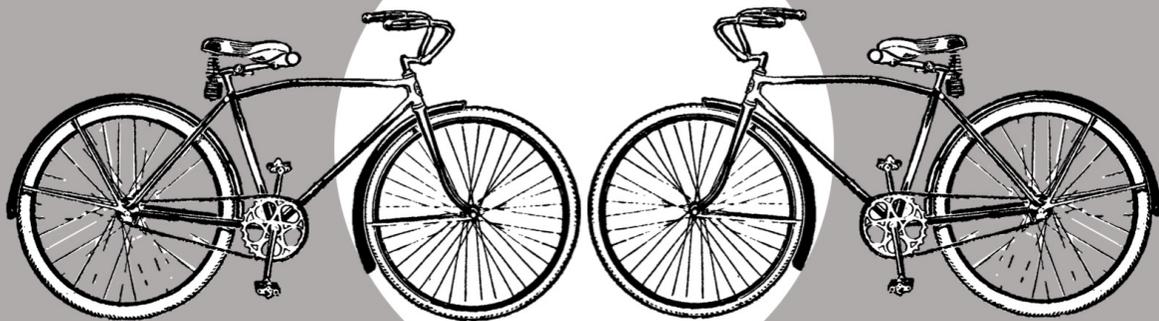
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