

Serving Alongside Your Spouse



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Beyond the Bunker

God calls our marriages to action.

by Bonnie McMaken

My husband and I love our church family. We believe in the mission and purpose to which God has called us as the body of Christ. We genuinely respect and admire our leaders. We see the Spirit deeply at work transforming lives—including our own. It is a place we both have met Jesus and been changed by the gospel. Because of the profound connections we have experienced there, my husband and I feel compelled to serve our church together. However, sometimes the “together” part can be a bit hazy. Does this mean we commit to the same ministries? What if our gifts take us in different directions? How do we maintain our unique passions while still serving the Lord “as one”?

We have—over time and through prayer, trial, and error—discovered what works for us (and God will continue to challenge us—I’m sure!). We don’t deny the struggle it has been, nor do we deny it’s troublesome for many couples to navigate these confusing waters.





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Even though it can be difficult initially, marriages are meant to be stretched beyond themselves. We are not called to live our lives bunkered in our marital comfort zones; we are called to look beyond the horizon of our marriage into the church and world. Often as we touch the lives of others in this way, our faith grows and our marriage is strengthened.

This resource is designed to help you as you explore—or further discover—what it means to serve alongside your spouse in ministry. Many of the articles found here are stories from couples who have learned rich lessons about ministering together, and you will glean much from their insights, mistakes, and victories. You'll also find tangible steps for taking your service as a couple to the next level. May your marriage and ministry be blessed deeply by the experiences and wisdom found here.

Peace of Christ,

Bonnie McMaken

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Introduction





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THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

Dynamic Duo

Live the adventure of serving side-by-side.

by Teresa Turner Vining



It was a simple blurb in our church bulletin: “Volunteers needed for youth ministry.” As a newly married 20-something, I thought working with teenagers sounded like fun. And I wanted to get involved in our church’s ministry. But the position came with a sizable time commitment, and between work and our other obligations, I didn’t want to spend that much time away from my husband, Erik. That’s when I had a great idea: we could both get involved in working with youth! So I asked Erik the fateful question: “Honey, how do you feel about youth ministry?”

“I guess we can give it a try,” he replied tentatively, obviously having never considered it before.

With that we jumped into youth ministry with both feet. It felt wonderful to do something for God while working together as a couple. It not only strengthened our relationship with Christ, it strengthened our marriage by allowing us to focus as a team on a common goal.

But a few months into our new roles, the youth pastor left, and Erik and I found ourselves heading the weekly youth meetings!

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Because we were both committed to making our adventure work, we hung in there, working even closer together as a team because of the difficulty of the challenge.

Unearthing the benefits

I wish I could say we were a resounding success at our new post. But finding ourselves suddenly in charge, with no training or experience, was more than we'd bargained for. It required more time and creativity than we'd planned or wanted to give.

Yet even in those less-than-ideal circumstances, I began to see strengths in Erik I'd never recognized—and would not have discovered had we not volunteered to work together.

It amazed me how naturally he could get down on the floor and watch a science fiction movie with the guys—not as someone “ministering” to them, but as a friend. I was proud that, even after a hard workweek, Erik would spend his Friday night watching a JV basketball game in some small town just because a student invited him. And even though Erik never asked to be put in charge and wasn't entirely comfortable with that role, he always stepped up to lead the meetings when no one else was available—even when the kids seemed less than interested.

Erik and I also learned to appreciate sharing activities we wouldn't normally choose, such as camping with 40 students. We found our joint ministry responsibilities drew us closer together spiritually, as we dealt with struggling teenagers and prepared for meetings. Those situations allowed us to develop our communication as we discussed and prayed for the best solutions to problems.

When the church finally hired a new youth pastor, we breathed a shared sigh of relief and took a well-needed break. But we were more committed than ever to finding ways we could serve together.

Finding our stride

That first fateful question has been followed by many others—sometimes initiated by Erik and sometimes by me: “How do you feel about short-term mission trips ... homeless shelters ... foster children ... construction projects ... nursing homes ... puppets ... housing Peruvian nationals ... ?”

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We soon realized that we shouldn't assume we have the same gifts or interests. This became evident to me when, without asking Erik, I volunteered us to lead a small group Bible study. I loved it and couldn't fathom that Erik wouldn't find teaching as exhilarating as I did. Erik good-naturedly agreed to being volunteered because it would allow us to be together. But as he struggled through teaching the lessons, I realized that wasn't his gift or interest.

We began to discuss which volunteer opportunities excited us and which ones left us unfulfilled and disinterested. The more we learned about our individual gifts, the more we realized how different we are. We also discovered that those differences weren't necessarily a death knell for working together in the same ministry.

It was often possible to find ministries in which we could use our gifts in a complementary way. When Erik and I directed an annual Christian conference, I used my administrative skills to plan the event and he used his gifts of service and hospitality to keep everything running smoothly.

Because we're so different, we naturally stretch each other to explore ministries we wouldn't have tried on our own. Erik has encouraged me to invite new couples from church over for dinner, and I've convinced Erik to try providing foster care.

We also balance our choice of ministries between those he's naturally attracted to and those I am. Sometimes it's better to give each other freedom to volunteer alone. While we don't always have to serve together, we want the majority of our ministry to be shared.

Even though we're spending time together doing ministry, we discovered we need to be sensitive about becoming over-involved. Through constantly discussing our options, we consider each other's needs and commitment levels and find a balance. I give Erik the encouragement to become more involved, while he keeps me from saying yes to everything.

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Accepting the good, the bad—and the ugly

We've discovered not every experience is going to be heavenly. Sometimes our experiences have been quite the opposite. Erik and I had one of our worst arguments over my inability to navigate Mexican roads and his inability to drive—right in front of a van brimming with wide-eyed teenagers. It was the only time on the entire trip that we had their complete attention! We were both so upset with each other that we weren't able to salvage the situation or talk to the kids about what happened. We just faced forward and tried to hide our hurt feelings.

It's been important to admit that times like these will happen, that we need to give up any idealistic expectations for our ministry experience. That has kept us from throwing in the towel every time one of these "picture imperfect" moments occur. Communication has been key in these situations. We take time to regroup, identifying what went wrong and deciding how to keep it from happening again.

The follow through

Sometimes I laugh when I reflect on our first attempts at volunteering together. We've grown to really know each other. Each experience has been a valuable lesson in understanding our talents and learning to appreciate each other's strengths.

Serving together has become a habit for us: I've grown used to having Erik's strengths joined with mine. The hours of serving together have really helped make us a true team in whatever we do. His strengths fill in for my weaknesses—despite the fact that I was once certain we were a total mismatch.

Just this week, Erik and I found ourselves unexpectedly serving together by helping finish a construction project for a young family in our church. I wound up spending the evening cleaning up sawdust while Erik repaired doors and put up handrails, but just being there together was rewarding. It's a good feeling to know you're helping someone and living out your faith in the real world. But the joy doubles when you share that experience.

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Teresa Turner Vining is a freelance author who lives in Kansas. This article first appeared in the Spring 2001 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Thought Provokers

- *What unique strengths do you see in your husband when you minister together as a couple? Why is serving together an especially good way to discover gifts in each other?*
- *This couple grew spiritually as they learned to serve together. In what ways would you like to grow with your spouse as you minister together? Write down a few specific ways and pray about them individually and with your husband.*

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PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Beyond Happily Ever After



Before we wrote our mission statement, we didn't realize how secular our goals were.

by Kevin & Karen Miller

We thought we were going to a nice, quiet conference for church lay leaders. We would drive a few hours, sit through a few sermons and workshops, sing some songs, and come home. Little did we know that one concept presented at that conference would change our marriage forever.

Before the conference, we were a nice Christian couple. We knew God had brought us together. We went to church together. We often prayed together.

But we also felt a little aimless. We had fallen into daily routines not much different from those of our non-Christian neighbors: commuting to work, driving kids to school, watching videos. Sure, we helped at church, but were we making any difference in our world?

The conference speaker pegged us when he said, "Most believers just want to be happy. They would also like to have friends and enough money, and then if God is pleased with them, that would be great, too."





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We didn't see anything wrong with that. But then he said, "The problem with these subtle, unvoiced life visions that most believers have is that they are destructive lies. Jesus said clearly that if you seek your own happiness, you will never find it. As soon as you make happiness and security your goals, you make them impossible to attain."

Ouch! Could it be that we active churchgoers and Bible readers had, without realizing it, been living mostly for ourselves? That night over milkshakes we had one of the most honest conversations of our marriage.

"I may look like a Christian on the outside," I said to Karen, "but down in my fundamental goals and drives, I'm not much different from anybody else. I think my major goal has been to move to a bigger house."

"I know exactly how you feel," Karen said. "My life vision has been to have children and to live in a big house in the country."

We felt awed, scared, and excited all at once. We sensed that an ugly, long-standing wall in our hearts had been exposed. And now it was falling.

"What if," I asked, "we got rid of these old life visions and replaced them with a new one built on God?"

Beginning the Search

If God had brought us together—and we believed he had—he must have had some reason for doing so. So we decided to begin building our new life vision by composing a short, clear statement of who we were and why God had brought us together.

Looking for help, Karen and I turned to the Bible and searched Genesis for the purposes God designed for marriage. Marriage was created to give people companionship: "It is not good for the man to be alone," we read in Gen. 2:18 (NLT). It was created as a place for bearing and raising children: "Be fruitful and multiply" (1:28, NASB). Most people of any religious or nonreligious persuasion would agree on those two goals.

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But we came to see that Genesis assigns a third meaning to marriage: joint, fulfilling service. God tells Adam and Eve, “I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds, and all the wild animals” (Gen. 1:28, TEV) and places them in the Garden of Eden “to cultivate it and guard it” (2:15, TEV). It’s as if God said, “Take care of this, you two. It’s a big job; and you’ll need each other.”

God has planted a hunger deep within every Christian couple. It’s more than the hunger for companionship. It’s more than the hunger to create new life. It’s a hunger to do something significant together.

Putting It To the Test

With Genesis and our longings to guide us, we began to write a life vision for our marriage. We started with our individual gifts and interests and wrote this:

Our mission is:

1. To model a Christ-centered marriage and family in a world that’s torn apart.
2. To help each other express and blend our God-given gifts: counseling and healing the hurting, teaching people how to live the Christian life, helping, and giving.
3. To serve Christ, his church, and other people more fully than we could alone.

We soon found that what we had written was guiding our decisions. For example, our small church always had three or four jobs crying to be done. In the past, we had sometimes taken on too much. This time, however, our new marriage mission made our decision easy. We decided to lead a small group: I would teach; Karen would talk with the group members and pray for them. It fit what we felt God wanted us to do.

Then we came to a strategic decision, a fork in the road. Should Karen go to graduate school? Whatever we decided would change the course of our married life. The stakes were high: three to four years of classes, many in the evening. Karen would be driving a long distance each way. I’d be watching the kids more, and we’d all feel extra stress.

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If those weren't enough, the financial burden was more than \$20,000. "If you go to school," I said, "it's going to be tight financially. We'll need loans. We'll be staying in this house."

Stymied by the decision, we reviewed our marriage mission.

"Your dream is to counsel and heal the hurting," I reminded Karen. "If you're going to do that fully, you'll need the degree."

"And if you do more writing, which is part of the teaching you want to do," Karen said, "that can help pay tuition."

"Who cares if we don't have a bigger house?" I said. "That's not the most important thing to us anymore." We looked at each other and almost laughed. Something radical had happened to us. We were starting to act as if the most important thing in our lives was serving Christ together.

A Time to Tweak

A few years later, we decided to revise our marriage mission. Points 1 and 3 were things any Christian couple should write. Though important, they weren't specific enough to explain why God had brought us together. We wanted something sharper, clearer.

We also wanted to shorten our marriage mission so we didn't have to look it up. We wanted it short enough to remember and say. We also wanted to put more emphasis on our joint calling, not just our individual ones.

We were struck by Frederick Buechner's saying that vocation is "where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Our mission statement didn't specify which deep needs of the world we wanted to soothe. So we wrote this:

1. To help married couples.
2. To help church leaders.
3. To help the poor.

This short marriage mission doesn't say everything about us. But it does guide us, for instance, in our giving. Each month, in addition to writing a check to our church, we give to a family agency that helps

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marriages, two church leaders we respect, and a group that creates jobs for the poor. We occasionally give to causes not mentioned in our marriage mission, but the weight of our giving is thrown into these purposes. That makes deciding where to give easier, and with focused giving we can make a greater impact.

God's Assignment

For a writing project, we asked sixteen Christian couples, “Do you believe God brought you together?”

All sixteen told us, “Yes, we do.”

Then we asked, “Why do you think God may have brought you together?”

There were long pauses.

Some Christian couples focus on raising children. Kids are an exquisite, priceless gift from God, and raising them is one of God's primary purposes for marriage.

But what if a couple is not able to bear children? Even if a couple does bear children or adopt, the child-rearing period of life comes to an end. Our marriage will last longer than the years our nest is full.

Some couples share the goal of getting ahead—succeeding in careers, getting out of debt, finally getting that dream house. Those shared dreams can indeed bring a couple together, but once they are achieved—or never achieved—what's left?

An On-Purpose Couple

God doesn't want us to be driven or haphazard but purposeful. Long before business texts praised the power of a corporate mission, the Bible illustrated couples living one.

Consider the case of Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18. Roman emperor Claudius expelled every Jew from Rome. Aquila and Priscilla, as Jewish Christians, were forced to flee the city they called home. Had their life vision been to settle in one place or to live comfortably on their business income, this sudden dislocation would have immobilized them.

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But apparently they held a higher life vision: teaching together and opening their home to Christian leaders. During the day, they continued their tent-manufacturing business. And when the Apostle Paul needed a place to stay—for a year and a half—they took him in. When a gifted young teacher named Apollos needed further instruction in sound doctrine, they invited him into their home and helped him.

If Your Callings Don't Click

Given the uniqueness of every individual, trying to define a marriage mission can lead to a few glitches. Here are two questions couples ask most frequently as they walk through this process.

What if your gifts and calling are quite different from your spouse's? Should you try to meld them or just support each other in separate ministries?

One couple told us, "We have absolutely nothing in common. The only thing we like to do together is to go out to eat."

We suggested, "Then the next time you go out to eat, invite someone who needs encouragement. Or invite a non-Christian couple and agree that if God comes up in the conversation, you won't duck talking about your faith." They liked the idea.

Each marriage needs a balance of "his," "hers," and "theirs." While a marriage mission emphasizes "theirs," it's fine to include elements of "his" and "hers" that you jointly recognize and support.

And don't forget that when you support your spouse in her ministry—by praying for her or by watching the kids while she's gone—you turn an individual ministry into a joint one.

What if your spouse doesn't support your calling?

That's painful. Each situation is different, but here are principles that couples have found helpful.

1. Don't assume your spouse's lower level of interest is because he or she is spiritually immature. When you love to give money to the poor and your spouse doesn't, it's easy to think, *I wish he*





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would just trust God and not be so selfish. Often, though, God simply hasn't bestowed on your spouse as much passion for giving (or praying, etc.) as he has given you.

One wife loves to invite guests over, but her husband doesn't. "I used to see that as moral failure in him," she says. "But over time, I've begun to realize he just needs quiet and order. That's normal."

Her new attitude has motivated her husband to meet her halfway. He says, "Now, when she wants to invite four couples for lunch, rather than just kill the idea, I suggest, 'How about two couples instead?'"

2. Ask your spouse to join you. Because we know our spouses so well, we think we know when they wouldn't possibly be interested. We may drop a few "obvious" hints, but surprisingly, we don't often ask them directly.
3. Let your spouse hear about the need or idea from someone else—not just from you. Have you ever thought, *My husband doesn't seem to listen when I say something, but if somebody else says the exact same thing he thinks it's a great idea?* This curious phenomenon can work for you. One woman's husband wasn't interested in teaching Sunday school with her. Then one night when she was going to a teachers' meeting, he decided to go with her to see what she was doing. The result? He says, "I found out you really need two people to handle a class of small kids. That motivated me to help."
4. Find ways your spouse can contribute. When Karen and I worked with a youth group, Karen didn't want to lead relays involving bananas and shaving cream. She didn't like standing in front of sixteen-year-olds and talking about peer pressure, nor did she enjoy driving a van filled with teenagers.

But there were things she did enjoy. When we found those, leading the youth group went better for both of us. For example, Karen liked our "youth board" meetings. This small group included the most mature kids, and Karen planned each meeting and took minutes. Kids got to know her, and when





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they had a problem they usually went to her, not me. Fairly often, late at night, the phone would ring, and Karen would help a young woman navigate adolescence with her faith intact.

We believe every Christian marriage benefits from a mission, one that works in all situations, no matter how rich or poor you are or whether you have ten children or none. Strive to experience what Carl and Martha Nelson describe: “There is probably no higher level of human sharing than that between a man and a woman, united in love and marriage, working on an assignment that’s been handed to them by God.”

How to Discover Your Marriage Mission

Every couple will discover their mission differently, but the essential actions are the same: pray, dream, talk, and write. We suggest you complete the following exercise. Then set up a night to talk about it.

1. What are my God-given abilities? What are my spouse’s?

If you’re not sure, ask yourself these questions:

- a. What abilities do I find so natural that I don’t even think of them as a gift?
 - b. In what areas can I make a mistake, and instead of wanting to quit, I want to do more?
 - c. What needs do I notice that others don’t?
 - d. What things can I do for a long time without tiring?
 - e. In what areas does it bother me when someone does a task poorly?
 - f. What abilities have others observed in me?
2. What significant experiences has God used to shape me?
 3. What kinds of people do I care about and like to work with? What kinds of people does my spouse care about and like to work with?
 4. What kinds of things (computers, plants, animals, food, books, buildings) do I care about and like to work with? What about my spouse?

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5. What are some ways we've accomplished something together? (e.g. planned a wedding, helped a friend move, sang on the worship team)
6. As I've thought and prayed and read the Bible, what do I sense God might be saying to us?

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Thought Provokers

- *Describe your current mission statement as a couple. Is it as explicit as the one described here, or is it implicit? How have you seen this mission manifest itself in your ministry and relationships?*
- *How do you think having a mission statement could draw you closer together and strengthen your purpose as a couple? If you and your husband haven't already discovered your mission statement as a couple, talk to him about writing one together using the steps at the end of this article.*





ONE WOMAN'S STORY

Ministry Times Two



For Eric and Jennifer Garcia, serving together and having a good marriage aren't accidental—they're intentional.

by Dawn Zemke

They were the two people least likely to end up a married couple. At least that's what Eric and Jennifer Garcia would have said when they were students in the same high school. Jennifer had frizzy red hair, braces, and sang with the Songbirds. Eric was the good-looking, popular jock. Though they'd known each other since the fifth grade, they moved in very different circles.

Only after they'd graduated from different colleges and returned to their hometown did Eric and Jennifer come to appreciate all they had in common—especially shared values and a deep commitment to God. Those elements formed a foundation that has sustained their 15-year marriage through the upheavals of career changes, four children, and eventually the daunting task of founding a ministry organization—the Association of Marriage and Family Ministries (AMFM).

Knowing each other well made for few adjustments in the first years of their marriage, when Jennifer was teaching school and Eric was working as a consultant for faith organizations such as Promise Keepers and Moody Bible Institute while running his own distribution company.





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“We didn’t have a big learning curve,” Jennifer recalls. “Nothing rocked our boat. Until the kids came along.”

On overdrive

When they’d been married three years, Jennifer quit teaching to stay home with Hudson, their first child. “I was home taking care of the baby and Eric was having fun slaying the giants,” says Jennifer.

Depending on the season, he could be working up to 16 hours a day. With Eric consumed by his job and Jennifer’s days filled by the baby, they had to work harder to connect with each other.

“I’d call Jennifer several times a day,” Eric says, “so we could touch base about how things were going. That way when I’d come home fried from a long day, we could wind down together, not unload on each other.”

“I knew I could phone him any time and he’d take my call,” Jennifer adds. “He never made me feel I was bothering him.”

But Eric’s intensifying work situation over the next two years put an increasing strain on their marriage. Much of his time was being eaten up by speaking engagements, and the evenings he was home were flooded by calls from clients. Jennifer, now pregnant with their second child, was frustrated, and Eric was feeling burned out.

“I was alone all day—and many evenings—with the baby,” Jennifer recalls. “I grew inwardly resentful of the constant interruptions whenever Eric tried to help with Hudson or we attempted to have family time. I hated what our life had become.”

“I felt disconnected from Jennifer and empty inside,” says Eric. “I was standing at a huge evangelistic event I’d helped plan, looking down into a stadium of 63,000 men, seeing guys going forward in droves to dedicate their lives to Christ. Yet all I could think was, *I wonder who my next client will be and how big we can do it?* That’s when I knew I’d been drained and my priorities were totally out of whack.”

Realizing things had to change, Eric began praying for God to show him what to do. One day at work, he heard clearly God’s answer: Go to Alaska.

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Eric had fallen in love with Alaska years before while on a fishing trip near a church-supported youth ranch. Decimated by a recent fire, that ministry now needed to be rebuilt. Eric knew that Alaska's slower-paced lifestyle would give him the chance to rest, reconnect with his family, and redefine his priorities. Leaving work early, he headed home to talk to Jennifer.

"I told her I was toast," recalls Eric. "I said I thought we should chuck it all and go to Alaska."

"Initially, I was shocked he'd come home early—something he never did," Jennifer says. "But when he shared what he was thinking, I wanted to jump up and down and shout, 'Hallelujah! I'll finally have my husband back. Let's go tomorrow!'"

Through God's leading, they decided to stay put for one more year while Eric wound down things at work and for their daughter, Erika, to be born. Then they packed up and moved their family from Indianapolis, Indiana, 4,450 miles northward to the small community of Kasilof, Alaska, population 470.

Navigating the desert

Once settled, the Garcias fell into a routine of spending half the year (the summer months) at the camp in Alaska, ministering to families. Then, during the colder weather, they'd return to their house in Indiana, which they'd kept, and where Eric had maintained a limited consulting business.

"Eric and I call that time our desert experience," Jennifer explains. "It was when we got our priorities straight. It was about family. About us."

In Alaska, their days were spent building cabins and running a portable saw mill. Their house was 30 minutes from the nearest town, and they received only two television stations. Neighbors dropped in unexpectedly to chat, sometimes bringing dinner leftovers to share. Since Eric's office was now in their home, he was always available. Which meant plenty of opportunities for spending time with Jennifer and the kids.

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“Jennifer got a new husband,” observes Eric. “It was a chance for me to remove all life’s distractions and get to know God, my kids, and my wife.”

He built a deck around the cabin, hammering side-by-side with 2-year-old Hudson. As a family they played games, took long walks, and went fishing, while he and Jennifer reserved one night a week for just the two of them.

The slower pace gave them time to rest and renew their energy, and they became more intentional about doing everything together. “We were getting healthy again,” Eric says, “detoxing from Western culture.”

The atmosphere was so healing personally and to their marriage, Eric and Jennifer were eager to help other ministry couples experiencing burnout. Not long after arriving in Kasilof, they launched Alaska Family Ministries, offering three cabins as getaways for rest and recuperation. “We said, ‘If you can get here, we’ll take care of you,’” recalls Jennifer. Though they didn’t realize it, God was uncovering within them a passion to encourage and strengthen other Christian leadership couples.

Living a day-to-day existence, they survived on financial support from their church, some friends, and the little bit of the business Eric still had going. When times got tough, God always came through—such as the day they received an e-mail from a friend in Indianapolis letting them know he’d felt compelled to send them a \$10,000 check.

Life was good; their marriage was stronger than ever. Then, nearly four years after the move, two events conspired to bring their time in Alaska to a close: they ran out of money and learned that they were expecting. Twins.

But God was faithful.

Assets that they’d had on the market for more than two years sold. People sent groceries, checks, even car seats. In less than seven days, God had provided more than \$30,000. Elliot and Wesley were born in July of that year, 1998. And in October, the Garcias left Alaska for the last time to return to their home in Indiana.

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A new direction

This next phase of their lives found them—especially Jennifer—operating in survival mode. While her days were consumed with meeting the needs of their four young children, Eric began searching for job opportunities. Determined not to forget the lessons learned in Alaska, they set boundaries to guard their time as a family and as a couple—such as Eric’s commitment to eat breakfast and dinner at home.

Eventually, Eric accepted a job in Arizona, and the Garcias moved to Scottsdale. After “church surfing,” they found and fell in love with Scottsdale Bible Church. They wanted to get involved, to give back to God since he’d been so good to them. That’s when they realized they wanted to do ministry together. And what better place than the church’s ministry to married couples?

That marriage ministry convinced Eric and Jennifer even further of the great need for the church support and nurture married couples. “We saw what we thought were the healthiest couples, from the best families, and they were having problems,” Eric explains. “Yet they were saying, ‘Everything’s fine.’”

“They weren’t processing their faith or their life together,” adds Jennifer. “They were on separate tracks. And *we’d* lived that way.”

During a leadership meeting a few months after they began working with couples, Wayne Lehsten, the head of the church’s marriage ministry team, mentioned that he was taking a three-month sabbatical. His repeated attempts to find marriage ministry tools their church could use had been unsuccessful. During the sabbatical, Wayne planned to apply himself full-time to the task.

Eric reacted with disbelief. “I couldn’t believe there wasn’t an organization for that. I’d been consulting in the ministry community for 20 years. I was sure there was an organization for everything.”

Determined to show Wayne that the sabbatical was unnecessary, Eric called his friend John Trent. Trent, the founder of StrongFamilies.com, confirmed Wayne’s assessment: no organization existed for proactive marriage ministry training. He also admitted he was one of a group who’d been praying for eight years that someone would create such an organization.

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In that moment, fueled by the needs of Eric and Jennifer's own church, the concept for AMFM was born.

"I went home all excited," Eric recalls of sharing his dream with his wife. "But Jennifer said, 'We're not doing it.'"

"Eric is an entrepreneur," she explains. "He's always coming to me with great ideas. We'd just finished piloting a new ministry with the married couples at our church. I wasn't ready to start another."

Over the next few weeks, as John Trent and Eric met over coffee, John would mention more "big" ministry names who would get behind the project. Eric would relay that information and reiterate his desire to start a national ministry for marriage and family church leaders. But Jennifer continued to say no.

"I saw such a need," Eric says. "But I'd committed not to do anything unless Jennifer and I were on the same page."

Both Eric and Jennifer continued to pray about the idea. Finally, when he approached her for the fourth time, she cautiously agreed. "I was still apprehensive," she admits. "But I told him, 'If we take baby steps, and God's clearly in it, then we can do this.'"

To avoid a return to the burnout they'd experienced before Alaska, Eric and Jennifer set some strict boundaries—Eric wouldn't be gone for more than three days at a time, and they'd travel as a couple only once a month.

Ministry shared

On November 11, 2003, having given less than two weeks' notice, Eric and Jennifer hosted an initial meeting of 30 people involved in marriage and family ministry from all over the country. The premise of the meeting was simple: If there was an organization that could serve you, what would it look like?

The result was the creation of the Association of Marriage and Family Ministries—an organization dedicated to training, equipping, and resourcing local churches so they can build proactive marriage and family ministries.

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“We’re a ‘train the trainer’ model,” Eric explains. “We introduce resource providers and educators to the church.” They accomplish this through annual national conferences, monthly e-newsletters, and focus groups for 15 different family and marriage ministries—such as stepfamilies, parenting, and sexual wholeness.

“We’re really about building relationships,” Jennifer adds. AMFM is close to their hearts, the fruition of those months in Alaska when they helped other ministry couples. And they are intentional about sharing completely in it. Though Eric is the visionary and main speaker, Jennifer has her own roles to play.

“I love the relationship part,” she says. “I enjoy talking to people about AMFM and recruiting new members.”

“She’s my biggest cheerleader,” Eric adds. “Without her encouraging words and filling in the gaps, I’d run out of gas.”

Their modeling of ministering as a couple has paid off: more AMFM conference presenters are doing so as couples, accepting the challenge of blending differing gifts into joint ministry.

Eric and Jennifer admit it isn’t easy. But the blessings are plentiful. “We have so many things to talk about and collaborate on,” says Jennifer, “whether it’s meeting with other couples involved with AMFM or putting together outlines for speaking engagements.”

“We have all these connection points,” Eric agrees. “We’re writing, speaking, rearing children, and sharing a house together. We know exactly what’s going on in each other’s lives. How many couples can say that?”

Yet they also recognize the need to insure the ministry never competes with their marriage. They have a mentor couple who touches base with them each month, asking tough questions about how each of them is doing. And Eric checks with Jennifer before every trip. If she says she needs him at home, he doesn’t go.

Just as God has blessed their marriage, he’s also blessed AMFM. In the three years since that first meeting of 30 people, their membership has grown to more than 1,000. And so have the number of lives touched by the organization.

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Eric recalls one couple who'd been in ministry for 18 years. "They told me, 'Before we got your phone call, we'd made up our mind to quit. But you've opened a whole new opportunity for our area of work, and we're going to stick with it.'"

Eric and Jennifer stress that they aren't perfect, just blessed. "The bottom line is that God has been faithful," Eric says. "We've been fortunate to be placed where we are."

Their goal for AMFM? To train 10,000 churches in ten years, a 100,000 lay-leader army doing marriage and family ministry for their pastors in the local church.

It's an endeavor they never grow tired of, and one that has brought countless benefits to Eric and Jennifer, their children, and their marriage—the largest being their focus on serving together.

"This is exactly what God designed us for as a couple," Jennifer says. "We really are living our dream. It's not what we'd planned, but it's what God gave us. And it's wonderful."

For more information on AMFM, visit www.AMFMonline.com.

This article first appeared in the Winter 2006 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Thought Provokers

- *In this couple's story, Eric felt God's call to this ministry before Jennifer did. Has God ever given you a calling for ministry before your husband? Did God reveal that call to your husband eventually? How?*
- *The article says, "To avoid a return to the burnout they'd experienced before Alaska, Eric and Jennifer set some strict boundaries." What boundaries have you had to set to protect your marriage from ministry burnout?*





NEW PERSPECTIVES

Is God Calling Us Both?



What do you do when your gifts don't mesh?

by Simon Presland

Gary's side: I wanted to share a ministry.

When Barb and I were first married, she was always the life of the party. She was bold, determined, and she really seemed to know what she wanted. When we became Christians seven years into our marriage, I thought that God's pronouncement that "the two shall become one" included sharing the same church activities.

Although I'd only heard Barb sing at home, I assumed that her outgoing personality, combined with my love for music, made music ministry a perfect fit for both of us. As I thought about us singing together in the choir, it seemed obvious that we both belonged in this couple-suited ministry. But the more I tried to show Barb the benefits of signing up, the more distant she became. She always seemed to be preoccupied with other things, and she avoided eye contact with me. I stopped asking how she felt about the ministry after she answered me one day by screaming, "Will you quit pushing me!"

After that, Barb found other interests. She started burying herself in books and Bibles and listening to different sermons and teaching tapes. But when I offered my point of view about what she was doing, she would get upset. I watched, confused, as the emotional walls between us grew higher. Trying to comfort Barb with a hug was like holding a block of ice. She may have responded physically,





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but her emotions were worlds away. For weeks, even the limited conversation that we held had icicles hanging all over it.

Barb's side: He was trying to control me.

Before becoming a Christian, I was afraid to show my real self to others. My boldness was a facade that I used to hide my insecurities behind. Born to laugh, Gary's ability to carry on a conversation with anyone always made me feel at ease with him.

After I became a Christian, though, God started showing me who I really was. No longer driven by the need to please people, I learned that I didn't really like crowds or big parties. Besides this, God gave me a hunger to study the Bible. I spent hours reading it, digging into reference books, and listening to teaching tapes. In a recurring dream I saw myself standing in front of people, teaching them from the Bible. When I shared this with Gary, he wasn't enthused. That hurt me.

Gary's mind was set on us ministering together. He tried convincing me that music ministry was best for both of us. When I told him I wasn't interested, he suddenly entered my world. He flipped through my notes, read my books, and shared his opinions about them with me.

I felt like Gary was trying to control me. Inside, I was seething with resentment, so I froze Gary out of my life. Since he worked a swing shift, I found all kinds of ways to avoid him. I often thought of saying something to Gary, but every time I tried, the words would get stuck in my throat.

What Gary and Barb Did:

Frosted feelings were damaging their marriage; it was time for some honest dialogue. Together, they decided to meet in their living room with a trusted friend—and full-time counselor—and poured out their hearts.

“That conversation took the pressure off us both,” says Gary. “For the first time, Barb and I openly expressed our own side of the issue. With a third party involved, neither of us could interrupt while the other one was talking. We had to control our emotions, and state our thoughts clearly.”

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“The key to resolving our conflict came when our friend discussed the importance of setting boundaries within marriage,” adds Barb. “We learned that although Gary and I are one before God, it is still okay to be unique individuals as well. Having separate gifts and callings in our lives doesn’t take away from the unity of our marriage. In fact, by encouraging each other to follow God’s leading, our marriage can be strengthened.”

“I never really wanted to spend hours reading Bible commentaries any more than Barb wanted to sing in front of people,” says Gary. “I finally accepted the fact that her desire was to teach, and I was content with music ministry. From that point on, as we stayed within our own callings, the icy feelings melted, and we started growing more strongly together.”

“As we both follow God’s calling, we now have a freedom to share how God is working in our lives, and to be genuinely excited for each other,” says Barb. “Our level of communication has deepened, and that has helped us to deal with other sensitive areas in our marriage. The encouragement we give to each other provides greater strength and unity between us.”

“Aside from enjoying a new-found supernatural peace in our marriage,” Gary says, “we’ve also discovered a greater joy in sharing other things as a couple. We now look forward to taking walks and going for bike rides.”

Jealousy and envy still creep between them, though. For instance, Gary was asked to be a lead singer long before Barb was invited to teach at church. But instead of letting this cause division, Gary and Barb spent some quiet time together to find out how and when the disturbing feelings started. This enables them to deal with hurts and insecurities—together.

“We’re so blessed that God’s love has replaced our anger and resentment,” Gary concludes. “We’ve learned that if we want our marriage to be the best it can be, we need to be at our individual best. And God is always more than willing to bless us when we are obedient to his ways.”

This article first appeared in the Winter 2000 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

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Thought Provokers

- *This article introduces an important perspective to the issue of couples ministering together—God doesn't always equip a husband and wife with the same gifts and passions. Which gifts and passions do you and your spouse share? Which ones do you hold individually?*
- *How can you minister effectively together in the gifts you share and separately in the gifts you don't? List some ways you and your husband can be spiritually intimate while pursuing separate interests and ministries, as this couple did.*

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LEADERSHIP TOOLS

Leading as a Family



A family that serves can be especially blessed.

interview with Stuart and Jill Briscoe

How does being a church leader affect family life?

Stuart: Jill and I agreed before we married that the basis of our marriage would be, “As for me and my house, we will serve.” We recognized that if children were given to us, they would be brought into an environment dominated by a commitment to service. So the children, right from their earliest days, were introduced to the fact that this was a family that served.

Jill: We can talk about how our ministry has impacted our family, but actually, our family has impacted our ministry, because of what Stuart has just said—“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” In other words, our children owned it from their youngest days. It wasn’t, “We’re trying to protect you from ministry”; it was, “How can you not just help in ministry, but how can you minister, even at a young age?”

People discuss keeping family before ministry. Was that an issue for you?

Stuart: We live in Green Bay Packers country, and Vince Lombardi used to tell his men, “God first, family second, Packers third.” But I’ve often wondered what would happen if one Sunday one of his players had said, “Coach, today I’m going to put God first and my family second, so I’m going to take my family to church and I won’t be able to play.” Any simple list of priorities is somewhat artificial.





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We much prefer to operate on the basis that ministry is what our family is about, and you don't take God out of any aspect of your life.

How have you maintained a strong marriage in ministry?

Jill: I hear church leaders' wives use the word *intrusion*. They ask, "How can I limit ministry's intrusion into our marriage?" But we don't see the ministry as a separate entity. Now that we've committed to each other, we can't envision ministry without marriage, or marriage without ministry. The two are the same. Stuart has described it well: "You can sacrifice marriage on the altar of ministry, or you can sacrifice ministry on the altar of marriage." The second makes ministry a threat, something to be held at arm's length.

What are some ways the family of a church leader can be especially blessed?

Stuart: An incredible privilege for a child is the opportunity to see that the life of service is the life that is enriched. Many parents seem to want to protect their children from the ravages of ministry instead of letting their children see that the life of ministry, the life of service, the life of discipleship, is the rich life.

Do the children of lay leaders face more pressure because of their parents' involvement in church life?

Jill: The elders, the deacons, the Sunday school superintendent, in my mind, are in full-time church work—maybe they're tent-making with a job all day and then they do their church work at night. There's more pressure on their children, probably, but I think you can involve the children, whatever age, in ministry and serving and doing, and they will catch the fire of ministry.

Stuart: People who have a full-time job have only a certain amount of discretionary time, and if that is going to be spent in some kind of ministry, other things will not get as much attention. The important thing is for children to be educated to recognize that this is not an imposition but a privilege. By doing this, you begin to engender in them a servant spirit and a ministry mentality.





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Is there any aspect of ministry that lay leaders shouldn't share with their spouses and children?

Stuart: Yes. Some aspects of ministry are strictly confidential, and great care should be taken to preserve that confidentiality. In other areas, confidentiality is not required, but discretion is needed. In the church, difficult issues can arise. They should be talked about in a positive light: What can we learn from this? How can we see blessing come out of this? In what ways can something positive be crafted from this? Young people can become soured on the church if the negative stuff isn't addressed with a view to bringing something positive out of it.

How have you tried to nurture your church as a family?

Stuart: I think the first thing you've got to do is make sure there's plenty of good food on the table. I see that as the teaching and training and instructing of people. The second thing a healthy family needs is good, meaningful employment. We endeavor to do that in our church by making sure people are discovering and developing their gifts and being given the chance to engage in meaningful, effective ministries. And the third thing a good family needs, of course, is loving care. We encourage people to get involved in fellowship relationships with varying degrees of structure.

Jill: The Christian home can be the center of ministry, of fun, of happiness, of fellowship. People love to come into a home. We have grandchildren now who are in their teenage years, and they like to be invited into a home with their girlfriends or their boyfriends. Lay leaders have a huge opportunity to use their homes for ministry—for their children's friends, for their colleagues at work, for small groups.

*This article first appeared in a downloadable resource titled "Marriage and Family," which can be found on **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. Copyright © 2001 Christianity Today. **Click** for reprint information.*

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Thought Provokers

- *Reflect on Jill's words: "Now that we've committed to each other, we can't envision ministry without marriage, or marriage without ministry. The two are the same." Do you agree or disagree? Why? How have you experienced this with your spouse?*
- *Stuart and Jill seem to view ministry in holistic terms—it affects every facet of their family's life. Does this change your perception of what ministry looks like for you and your husband? How?*

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Additional Resources

More places for more help.

As For Me and My House: Crafting Your Marriage to Last, by Walter Wangerin Jr. (Thomas Nelson, 2001). “What can I expect from my marriage?” Engaged, newly wed, and long-time married couples will find gentle and caring answers in Walter Wangerin’s classic. Offering an intimate portrait of his own 32-year marriage, he suggests six tasks for crafting a lifetime relationship: truthfulness and dependability, sharing the challenges of survival, talking and listening, sexuality, healing not hurting, and volunteering and giving. Includes a study guide.

Glorify God Together: A Marriage of Purpose, a downloadable resource from ChristianBibleStudies.com. A marriage centered on Christ is specifically focused on glorifying God. Our main purpose in marriage should be much greater than fulfilling our own wants and needs or even the wants and needs of our spouse. Our main purpose in marriage should be to focus on being of the same mind, according to Jesus, so that with one accord and one voice we glorify God. In this study, we will ask: Why did God give us the institution of marriage? What is the purpose of marriage? How can our marriage bring glory to God? How can the marriage relationship help make us holy?

Leaders & Family, a downloadable resource from BuildingChurchLeaders.com. This theme addresses various aspects of the family in church life — from raising a family in the midst of busy church leadership to helping your church act as a spiritual





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family. Stuart and Jill Briscoe share their perspectives on integrating marriage and children with ministry. Other articles examine the blessings of families and the need for renewal and reflection.

Marriage Ministry: A Guidebook, by Bo Prosser and Charles Qualls (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2004). This book, written by noted pastors, authors, and seminar leaders Bo Prosser and Charles Qualls provides a ready help for ministers who provide premarital counseling, perform wedding ceremonies, and generally care for married couples and their families. Full of information and ideas that encourage conversation, communication, and interaction, this book will help ministers respond to the many needs of couples in the church. Whether your ministerial needs are with the newly married, the successfully married, or the struggling married, Marriage Ministry will surely help you help them.

Recalibrating Your Marriage, a downloadable resource from GiftedforLeadership.com. This packet offers you and your spouse—whether your marriage is in crisis or need of a simple tune up—the wisdom and encouragement to make your marriage a high priority again.

Renewal on the Run: Embracing the Privileges and Expectations of a Ministry Wife, by Jill Briscoe (New Hope Publishers, 2005). Renewal on the Run offers biblical advice for coping with the challenges of ministry, including working with limited resources and high expectations, living with criticism, seeking quality friendships, balancing home and church life, developing a true partnership with your husband, and nurturing your relationship with God.

Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy, by Gary L. Thomas (Zondervan, 2002). Is happiness the ultimate goal of marriage, or is there a greater purpose? Thomas helps you understand the Lord's intention for matrimony—for husband and wife to reflect the character of Christ. See how God wants to use your marriage as a spiritual discipline to draw you closer to him, who is happiness.





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Seeking God Together, a downloadable resource from ChristianBibleStudies.com. The music fades and everyone leans forward to hear this beautiful couple's words of promise to each other. Standing before God, family members, and friends, they declare their love and commitment. After the wedding, the marriage begins. Many factors determine whether a marriage will be a strong one. The wise couple will not leave God at the altar but will invite him into their lives. God watches and waits, eager to respond to hearts that call to him. Marriage is a great time to seek God together.





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Do You Feel **Alone** as a Woman Leader?

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