

## **Ministry and Marriage**

### **The importance of a great marriage**

I think it is vital that church leaders should work at their marriage, aiming not just for a good marriage but a great one! The growth of the church at King's and the increased demands that came with such growth showed Deb and I that our marriage needed to grow in parallel – a great marriage provides a strong foundation from which to serve God together. I would say that marriage is a vital partnership – and as such is worth giving time and energy to. This wouldn't be a hardship as far as I'm concerned! Deb is the love of my life so any excuse to spend time with her is fine for me!

When I see leaders who seem to prefer 'doing ministry' to being at home I recall that early in our marriage, young and ambitious, I could be out six nights a week – not a healthy way to live! It all came to a head about nine months before we moved to London and centred on a ministry trip to India which required me to fly out on Christmas Day. While there I was challenged by God that I needed to prioritise Deb more. When I returned home I told Deb what I believed God had said to me, repented of that attitude and sat down to take practical steps to adjust my work/life balance. I had to re-order my priorities in order to put Deb and the boys above the demands of ministry - and it's an on-going process, one that requires regular attention.

The first five years at King's saw us not only building a church but also a marriage that would be a place of mutual support and rest – vital if we were going to achieve all God had called us to. The personal life and the corporate leadership of a church leader are totally linked together – I believe our culture makes a great mistake in separating the private and public aspects of a life; integrity is always an issue of character.

### **Attitude is key**

*When Steve and I got engaged in the summer of 1988, I had little idea of what God had in store for us as a couple. Yet ours is a gracious God, who leads, directs, and even carries us when needed. Looking back over more than 20 years of marriage, I am able to see just how much He has taught me along the way.*

*One of the most important things I have come to realise is that having a sense of being caught up together in the call of God is vital to being partners in the mission God has given us together. Steve and I aren't experts in this area – we owe much of what we have learned about this to the example of other ministry couples – Dave & Liz Holden, Terry & Wendy Virgo and John & Liz Lanferman come immediately to mind.*

*It is important to recognise that different couples operate in different ways, according to their own gifts and the call they have. Some ministry leaders' wives have a very public ministry of their own; others take a more supportive role. There is no set rule for this – it has to be worked out couple by couple. But one thing that has become clear to me in recent years – and especially since we have been at Catford – is that my attitude to what God has called Steve to do is key.*

*When Steve first went into full-time ministry as a youth pastor, we had been married just a year and I was in full-time work with a demanding job. While I was supportive of*

*what he was doing, my involvement was minimal! When I gave up work to be at home with our children, I had more time to be involved in church life and so that changed. But, there were times when I would feel resentful of the time when Steve was away from home and there was a real sense in which I didn't feel part of what Steve was doing and so not actively involved in his call.*

*A few months after we had arrived in Catford, God met me in a powerful way. While away together on a leaders' weekend, I found myself deeply challenged about my attitude to Steve's ministry, and felt the need to confess and repent of it. At that moment God showed me that He would give me grace to release Steve into what he was called to do. Over the next weeks I experienced a sense of freedom and strength which transformed my attitude.*

### **A good barometer for a marriage**

For some years now Deb and I have run an annual seminar at King's entitled *Sex, Romance and God*. For married couples only, it takes place on a Saturday morning providing protected time for couples to think about their relationship and to talk together, as well as giving Deb and I the opportunity to address the subject of sex and romance in marriage far more openly than would be possible on a Sunday morning. Some of the questions we have faced have been challenging, some have been fun! When we first ran the seminar we had to repeat it the following Saturday in order to meet the demand!

It goes without saying that sex is just one aspect of marriage – but it would be our observation over our years in pastoral ministry that the quality of a couple's sex life provides a good barometer for the health of the marriage overall. Where a couple are not communicating, or have problems in one part of their relationship, it is almost guaranteed that the problem will be quickly reflected in the bedroom.

As part of that seminar we spend time looking at the differing needs of men and women when it comes to maintaining intimacy in marriage – as a broad generalisation (and there will always be exceptions) women tend to need to feel emotionally connected in order to be physically intimate whereas a man finds emotional connection through sex. Interestingly, men are wired in such a way that they are often more emotionally open after sex. It is important that men and women understand how each other approach the matter of closeness and intimacy and how each defines and expresses it. Communication – both talking and listening – are vital in this understanding.

Two books I would recommend in this area would be

- *Sheet Music* by Dr Kevin Leman
- *The 5 Sex Needs of Men and Women* by Gary & Barbara Rosberg

### **Meeting each other's needs**

*In recent years Steve and I have made it a regular practice to read helpful books on marriage and to discuss them together. One that we have found particularly helpful is an enlightening book called 'The 5 Love Languages' by Gary Chapman. The author identifies five different ways in which people like to receive love - time, gifts, kind actions, physical touch and affirming words. We came across this book some years ago now, and reading*

*it helped us understand one another to a far greater degree than we had previously done. Knowing each other's love languages and trying to show love in the way that our partner likes to receive it will help to create a healthy marriage.*

## **Strengthening your marriage**

Building a great marriage takes time and effort. In a ministry setting it also takes determination to ensure that ministry priorities don't take precedence. For Deb and me, every time we have seen ministry breakthrough, our marriage has had to strengthen accordingly. Involved in this has been a commitment to talk about the challenges involved and being clear as to what it means to continue to show love to each other. I firmly believe that for church leaders, the strength of our marriages will have a direct impact on the effectiveness and potential of our ministries. This is another good reason to be committed to investing in our marriages.

So much is at stake here. To fall morally can mean the loss of wife, children job and calling. Behind each story of a failed marriage is the pain caused to families, churches and to God himself. I see this clearly lays out a need to take responsibility.

Take responsibility for your marriage. Talk together about how you are doing. Ask your wife if you are meeting her needs and be honest if your sexual needs are not being met. (In talking with others I find that it generally works this way but it is totally possible that it could be the other way round.) As part of our commitment to our marriage and to each other, Deb and I have agreed that we will read a book on marriage every year. We discuss together what we each read – it gives us the chance to look at things from a point of view we would not necessarily have arrived at on our own.

## **Partnership**

*For me, being in partnership in mission with Steve has ultimately meant owning the call on Steve's life and doing all I can to support and release him into it. At this stage and season in our lives I don't go with Steve on all his trips away – but it does mean that he knows he goes with my support. It means that I do my best to make sure that home is a place of relaxation and refreshment for him to come back to. Steve might be the one going to the meetings and conferences and standing up to lead and preach on Sundays – but I am still caught up in what we would see as very much a joint call. I pray for him, talk to him and discuss with him what he's doing and I act as a sounding board when he needs to offload.*

*As Steve's areas and levels of responsibility have grown and increased I have had to step up too. I am discovering that owning the call and continuing to be releasing and supportive is an ongoing process. It isn't always easy and it is a choice I have to make each time.*

## **A vital investment**

If your marriage isn't a positive thing that refreshes and refuels you both you will struggle in Christian ministry. Even if you have a strong marriage there will be times when life will be hard, but a weak marriage will compound the issues many times over.

As further safeguards to and investment in this most important of relationships I recommend the following:

- Invest time in your marriage. Don't let ministry demands and opportunities take time away from your wife and family. Ministry will take all the available time you have - and more, so putting time with your spouse and family into the diary well ahead before any other demands seek precedence - and protecting that time - is the only way to ensure that it happens.
- Remember the Biblical principle of example. Like it or not, we provide a role model of marriage for those we serve. People will always be looking at you - it's the goldfish bowl of ministry! We cannot dodge the biblical exhortation as leaders to be an example to others. It may be challenging but it is true - the strength of your marriage will have a direct impact on the strength of the marriages in your church.
- Teach regularly on the subject of marriage. This will show to those in our churches that our marriages are to be valued, worked at, invested in - and not taken for granted. Teaching in this area will prepare those still to launch into marriage and encourage and redirect the stumbling. Such teaching will help our people to refocus their attention on their own relationship and at the same time you are helping to lay the foundation for the marriages of the next generation.

### **Changing seasons**

*I have come to realise that the changing seasons of family life have a great influence on our marriages. During the time when I had babies and children under five, I was often out of the Sunday meeting in crèche, sometimes as a helper, sometimes looking after one of our own boys. Unlike most other couples in church life, it wasn't a role I could share with Steve - he had to be in the meeting! Yet, although I missed out on Sundays there were many positives in that season. As a mum of under-fives who had recently moved to London, I had numerous opportunities to make connections in the community. It was a demanding but very sociable time.*

*Once our youngest son went to school, I chose to work part-time. This has brought new and different challenges. I find that I don't have as many automatic connection points with others and have to be more proactive in maintaining friendships. Attending a home group/small group has become more important - and Steve and I are in constant discussion to ensure we are balancing family life with three lively boys, with Steve's ministry and my work at school.*

*Looking ahead, we are aware that one of the most challenging seasons is still to come - when our children leave home. It will inevitably bring more freedom but there will be adjustments to make, having spent the last 20+ years pouring ourselves into bringing up children. This season is often combined with the increased responsibility of caring for elderly parents.*

*But God has shown us that no season lasts long - although it may not seem like it at the time! We need to embrace each season as it comes along and enjoy the good within it. We also need to be willing to make thoughtful adjustments in our marriage and family*

*time as those seasons evolve and make sure that we keep on communicating as a couple.*

**Keep building a good marriage. And have FUN!**

One of the observations Deb & I have made over our years in ministry has been that as ministry responsibilities have increased our marriage has had to grow to in parallel to meet the new challenges. This recent series has summarised some of the lessons we have learnt over time.

My encouragement to all of us would be – continue to invest in your marriage and to read widely together on the subject. We have recently read Mark and Grace Driscoll's *Real Marriage* and I am planning to read Tim and Kathy Keller's book *The Meaning of Marriage* over the summer. Deb and I would say that at the very least a weekly date night is important and should be protected. Also, ensure there are no 'no go' subjects between you, and further, that you regularly ask each other these questions:

- Am I meeting your emotional needs?
- Am I meeting your sexual needs?

We would recommend the book *The Five Sex Needs of Men and Women* and the companion book *The Five Love Needs of Men and Women* by Dr Gary and Barbara Rosberg - both are worth reading, as are two books we have previously recommended, *Men Only* and *Women Only* by Geoff and Shaunti Feldhahn.

As a leader you are an example and a model to your church. It would be true to say that the strength of the marriages within the church leadership will be reflected in the community you lead. By investing in and prioritising a good marriage for yourself you are building a foundation for the young couples who are in your church. It's a vital investment! I would also encourage you to preach annually on the subject of marriage – here at King's we also run the excellent HTB Marriage Course once a year.

All this can sound heavy and weighty – I would also say that you need to prioritise having FUN together! Marriage is a gift from God, to be enjoyed and that enjoyment has got to include some fun! Deb and I celebrate our 23<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary this week. The longer I am married to Deb, the more I realise God has been amazingly good to me! I am incredibly fortunate to be married to such a beautiful, intelligent and godly girl and to get to spend the rest of our lives together!

**Steve and Deb Tibbert**  
**May 2012**

[www.kingschurchlondon.org](http://www.kingschurchlondon.org)