




The power of ministry wives

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The wife of a man engaged in ministry has a difficult and challenging role. But, as one *Briefing* reader shows, it's a role that brings with it a lot of power.

I wish ministry wives realized they have power. I'm aware of the bigger questions surrounding the status and role of ministry wives (working/not working; involved in the women's ministry at their church/not involved; with children/without children), the changing notion of what 'ministry' entails, and the increased professionalism in ministry (with all of its resulting implications for ministry wives). However, I still wish that ministry wives grasped the sort of power they have. I wish this because I think they would be free to act more intentionally if they realized their power, and if they did, it would be a good thing for all concerned.

Of course, everyone has power. It's not 'humble' to acknowledge it, so we hold the idea at an arm's length and don't invest too much time thinking about it. After all, it feels strange to declare you possess power; why should it matter whether or not you're aware of it? But in reality, it *does* matter. This is because, when we have power and don't realize it, chances are we won't use it well.

Most of us have the power to influence others by example. The power of example is extraordinary; we see it in the

life of Paul who urged others to follow his (good) example even as he followed Jesus' example (1 Cor 11:1). When we use our power well, we show people what it's like to be godly—for example, by doing the right thing and telling the truth, or by giving up things graciously and generously for the sake of others. What we choose, say and do tells others what we think about life. It has an impact.

However, when we use our power poorly, the people around us see what we do and it encourages them to drop their defences and act in the same way. For example, we inadvertently say it's okay to gossip when we gossip, and we deny the importance of truth when we lie or refuse to acknowledge the truth. Others may start to think that gossiping isn't as serious a sin as they thought, and that telling little white lies doesn't matter that much.

So why am I so hung up about ministry wives? It's because ministry wives have a kind of super-charged version of this power. They are married to men who proclaim the word of God and who insist that it is through this word that Christ rules his church. This is serious stuff, and because, as evangelicals, it's stuff that really matters

to us, our ministers usually fall under close scrutiny. What our ministers say and do has an impact. Everything is watched. Sometimes this sort of surveillance stems from plain old self-righteous nastiness. But when people are focused on growing as Christians, it is perfectly reasonable for them to treat their leaders as role models. What does it look like to live a life centred on the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? How do you love someone who really annoys you? These sorts of questions are resolved through both soaking up good teaching and observing good examples. It's reasonable to expect the one who preaches

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this word to exemplify the difference this word makes in his life. Therefore, the minister has the bittersweet privilege of being both visible and powerful.

This is where the ministry wife comes in. She also shares this bittersweet privilege, and possesses her own share of the

power which comes with it. But often it seems like ministry wives don't realize how important they are. This could be because they don't have a role in the church (for there may already be a women's worker there), because they aren't treated very well in their congregation (and therefore they don't feel like they have any power or influence), or because they feel unappreciated generally. Whatever their role and status, I wish that ministry wives were aware of the power they possess, and would learn to use it well.

You can see their power at work in how women's groups operate. These days, women's groups in churches are quite varied. In Australia, we don't have the 'Christian women' culture of North American Evangelicalism, but our groups are the same in nature. Groups of people always seek a common ground—a thing (or collection of things) that they all share. Of course, for Christians, that 'thing' is actually a person: the Lord Jesus. We're united in him through the Holy Spirit. This is a reality, not just a nice idea, and it should show up in the way we relate. But, as most of us aware, our groups often have other, unstated common grounds. In women's Bible studies and church women's groups, this common ground often revolves around the choices and preferences of the women involved. The woman (or women) who doesn't fit can often feel ostracized very quickly.

Of course, this problem of creating another criteria for unity apart from the Lord Jesus is not limited to women. But it is here that the influence of the ministry

cated (and vice versa). If the group is full of women who like craft, this means women who don't (and vice versa). If the group is full of women who can cook the ultimate sponge cake, this means women who can't (and vice versa).

Ministry wives have power. They can show the rest of the group what it looks like to include these 'strangers'. They can demonstrate how to welcome people with whom they have nothing in common (apart from loving and following the Lord Jesus). And their power often results in others following their example. Of course, embracing people who don't fit the mould isn't just the responsibility of ministry wives; it's just that often in women's Bible study groups, ministry wives have the greatest power in demonstrating to others what Christian maturity looks like.

Of course, what I'm saying doesn't just apply to Christian women's groups. It also applies to evangelism. How can a non-Christian single woman/married woman with no children/older woman/single mother ever feel welcome in a gathering where most of the women aren't like them if the women in that church don't learn to embrace difference? How can she fit in if she can't relate to anybody in leadership? And if this outsider feels ostracized, why should she ever darken the door of any church—let alone yours—again?

Let me give you one positive and one negative example of what a ministry wife's power looks like. One minister's wife I knew made a significant impression on me. She went out of her way to include everyone in a whole variety of tasks in

words were powerful in communicating that. She managed to draw together a group of women who were both different from herself and from each other, but who worked together, accepting each other and pulling off a ministry that would not have been possible without their varied contributions. She was an example of a woman who knew her strength and worked hard to use it well. It must have been exhausting for her, but her pattern of behaviour has had a long-term good effect on the women in her congregation.

I can't help contrasting her to another minister's wife I know who either doesn't understand her own power or just doesn't choose to use it well. I saw her play favourites among the women in her congregation, only accepting and publicly honouring women who were like her. She informed one stay-at-home mum that the rest of the group all work, and that it's bad for a woman's independence to stay at home. In the scheme of things, this was just a small slight; to live in this world, we need to know how to cope with such put-downs. But it had a huge effect on the group. Suddenly it became okay to reject this non-working woman. They didn't have to take her seriously because she wasn't 'one of us'. This comment had a substantial and ongoing effect on this stay-at-home mum's experience of the group.¹ Would this particular ministry wife have said what she did if she had realized the effect it would have? Maybe she would; we all make mistakes. But just maybe, had she known her own power, she would have been more careful with her words.

So I wish ministry wives understood the kind of power they have. I'm sure they often don't feel like they have power—not with all the criticism they receive and the other difficulties they undergo which are part and parcel of being married to a minister. But most of them *do* possess power, and knowing they do can only make them wiser as they seek to use that power to strengthen the health of the groups they are part of. ☺

ENDNOTE

1. I'm not intending to single out working wives at this point; it would be easy to give examples where a ministry wife who sees her primary calling as being a mother created a similar exclusion for women not like her.

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wife can be critical for including those women who might not fit the criteria which has grown up around the group. If the group is full of housewives, this means women who work (and vice versa). If the group is full of mums, this means women with no children (and vice versa). If the group is full of educated women, this means women who are not so edu-

order to make an evangelistic event work. She made sure they all knew exactly why she thought highly of what they had done, and she took pains to insist to them that their contribution was valued and important. She did it all without being insincere, for she genuinely believed that all these women were working together for something infinitely worthwhile, and that her