



MARY SOUTHERLAND

The Stress-Buster and Women's Ministry Motivator



Who is Your Audience? Mary Southerland

It was Thursday morning and time for my weekly appointment at our neighborhood deli. Carol, the deli manager, met me at the door with a warm smile and silently led the way to my "usual" booth, signaling the waitress to bring my "usual" order of a toasted bagel, fruit cup and Diet Coke. I know – not the breakfast of champions, but it works for me. "Who is it this week?" Carol asked as she cleaned the table. "I'm meeting a young pastor's wife who is ready to bolt!" I responded. "In that case," she grinned, "I'll bring lots of Diet Coke and Kleenex." Just then, a beautiful but obviously frazzled young woman burst through the main door, hurriedly scanned the crowded deli and made a beeline for me as if the ship was sinking and I was her life preserver. "Good luck!" Carol muttered, escaping into the kitchen.

I took a deep breath and prayed for wisdom as Kerry stumbled into the booth, heaving a huge sigh of relief. "I made it!" she gasped. I leaned across the table, squeezed her hand and said, "Relax, Kerry. Take a deep breath. Everything is going to be alright." When her eyes met mine, she promptly burst into tears. I have that affect on a lot of people but it usually takes a little longer to kick in. After gaining a measure of control, this young pastor's wife shared a wounded heart filled with pain and frustration.

Fresh out of seminary, Kerry's husband was the pastor of a small and struggling local church with the well deserved reputation of eating pastors alive. It was their first full-time church and, as far as I could tell, a disaster in the making. Kerry's next words confirmed my evaluation. "Last night, the deacons handed my husband a list of twenty-seven changes they feel I need to make in order to be the right kind of pastor's wife. Everything from the way I dress to where I sit during the service." I thought I had heard it all. After all, Dan and I had been in ministry for over twenty years and had counseled hundreds of pastors and their wives, but I had to admit that a printed list of requirements for the pastor's wife was not only a new idea to me but, in my opinion, straight from the pit and smelled like smoke. Then it hit me! "Kerry, did you say the deacons handed this list to your *husband*?" "Yes," she wailed. "He's trying to keep the deacons happy, so he brought the list home and asked me to consider their requests." It was probably a blessing that my calendar was slammed and finances were tight at that precise moment because I had neither time for jail nor money for bail – both of which I would need after being arrested for clobbering Kerry's husband! "Mary, I don't think I can do this. Maybe I'm not good enough to be a pastor's wife. I'm not a Bible scholar. I've only been a Christian for five years and I can't even sing or play the piano. I don't like sitting on the front row and I really prefer wearing pant suits instead of dresses." I had heard enough.

Leaning across the table, I asked the same question that had changed my life and ministry years before, "Kerry, who is your audience?" Confused, she responded, "I don't know what you mean." "Exactly," I shot back. "Even Jesus couldn't please everyone so why do you think you can? Again, who is your audience?"

Breakfast turned into lunch as I shared my own struggle with insecurity and fear as a woman in ministry, celebrating the truth that God delights in using the unlikely servant, the ordinary woman to accomplish extraordinary Kingdom work. A tiny seed of hope was planted in Kerry's heart that morning as we searched scripture, praying we would both learn to see ourselves through the eyes of God. Over the next few years, I watched Kerry grow into a confident and capable pastor's wife who found her worth in God and ran the race for an audience of One.

A powerful minister has been set free from the prison of unrealistic expectations, understands the pivotal truth that his or her worth rests in God alone and that He is always in search of an empty, broken but totally surrendered vessel that is waiting to be filled with His authority and power. Yet, so many men and women in ministry never get to this truth. Instead, we are caught up in the religious trappings of comparison

and competition. The fact is, no matter what we do or how we do it, it is never quite good enough – if we are running the race for anyone but Him.

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