



# "CAN I HAVE **FRIENDS** **AT CHURCH?**"

It's a Q&A at a Ministry Wives' conference, and the question comes from a younger ministry wife:

*"I've been given the advice that a ministry wife shouldn't have friends at church. What do you think?"*

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What is your definition of friendship? What are the characteristics of a good friend?

What are your expectations when it comes to friendship in a church context? Do you expect to share your heart or to enjoy a morning out or a shared activity with other women at church?

Are you a good friend to others? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being an excellent friend).

Do you feel lonely?

Undoubtedly there are experiences as a ministry wife that will make you feel lonely. There will be things it is unwise, inappropriate, or difficult to share. You will know things about people and about the dynamics at church that make it harder to be open. You need to guard your marriage and be loyal to your husband. You might look at others and envy the easy friendships they seem to have with others in the church community.

As human beings we are created for friendship and to live in community. It is part of being in the image of the Triune God. It was not good for Adam to be alone so Eve was created as a suitable helper (Gen 2:18).

But in Genesis 3, sin fractures friendship with God, and frustrates friendships with each other. Jesus came to restore our relationship with God and to help us build better relationships with each other.

The Bible – and the book of Proverbs in particular – gives us wisdom for living and wisdom for friendship.

*“The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.”*  
**Proverbs 12:26**

## **A BAD FRIEND IS...**

- **FAKE** (Prov 19:4; 14:20) Wealth or position can mean that people want to be your friend. The same can be true for the ministry wife: You arrive in a new church and there seem to be many offers of friendship, but those friendships fade when you're no longer 'new'; or some people just want a direct-line to your husband.
- **INSENSITIVE** (Prov 25:20; 26:18-19; 27:14) Dave Furman, in his book *Being There*, highlights things not to say or do when someone is hurting. His main headings are:

*Don't be the fix it person; Don't play the comparison game; Don't make their suffering their identity; Don't promise deliverance now; Don't bring the inquisition; Don't be hyper spiritual; Don't play the avoidance game; Don't pledge general help; Don't condemn them.* (*Being There*, Dave Furman, p111-129)

- **FAIRWEATHER** (Prov 25:19) Unfaithful friendship is useless or damaging. It is easy to think of times we haven't provided what was needed in friendship, by insensitivity, ignorance of need, lack of time or choosing the easy path, defensiveness, not being willing to go the second mile or to make the sacrifices called for.

*“We want friendships on our timetable, our terms of agreement. We do not want friendships that move us out of our comfort zone.”* (*The Company We Keep*, Jonathan Holmes, p34)

Could it be that ministry wives close their minds and hearts to the friendship that is available in churches because we want it on our own terms? i.e. we want it to cost us nothing.

- **DEMANDING** (Prov 25:17) This is probably one of the areas we need to be most careful in. Ministry wives often come across those who need a lot of help; there can be emotional manipulation or unrealistic expectations. Wisdom and care are necessary when we commit to friendship with others.

## **A GOOD FRIEND IS...**

- **FAITHFUL** (Prov 17:17; 20:6; 27:10) Consistency in friendship is valuable. Exercising loyalty to others in the congregation builds healthy friendships. Often friendship in church life grows with those who are suffering as you walk alongside them – and there will be those who offer friendship to you when you are hurting, ill or weak.
- **TRUTHFUL** (Prov 27:5-6,9; 28:23) A truthful friend is willing to wound us for our good. Joni Earekson

Tada, who broke her back while diving when only 17 and was subsequently paralysed from the shoulders down, wrote in her devotional:

*“My friends took a risk when they boldly reminded me to obey God and turn away from selfishness. They risked my disapproval, as well as my anger. Thankfully, they cared more for the state of my soul, than my displeasure. Do you know a Christian friend or relative who has become deceived by sinful attitudes and actions? Do they believe in suffering, rather than the God of hope found in suffering? Take a risk. Pray, come alongside, and gently help them choose a brighter outlook.” (Pearls of Great Price: 366 Daily Devotional Readings, Joni Eareckson Tada, entry for 12th Feb.)*

Truth needs to be dispensed with love. Are there friends in your church who look out for you in the way Joni’s friends did for her?

- **INTENTIONAL** (Prov 15:22, 27:17) Good friendship doesn’t just happen, it needs purposeful investment. There may be those in church life with whom friendship could grow but it doesn’t for lack of intention and investment on your part. Ask the Lord to direct you.
- **FORGIVING** (Prov 17:9; 24:28-29) We all fail in friendship. Humility is necessary, as is the need to ask for forgiveness when we let each other down.

## **BUILDING BLOCKS FOR FRIENDSHIP**

- **LISTENING** - Communication is always two way and so you need to ask questions and listen to the answers, draw the person out and find out what is on their heart.
- **SHARING SELF** - You have to be willing to speak about what is important to you.
- **HONESTY** - While exercising wisdom, don’t be so guarded and careful that you don’t share the real you!
- **CONVERSATION** - Your conversation doesn’t always need to be intense or spiritual: chat about life, the funny things, as well as the hard. Think of things to talk about before you meet (especially if you find it difficult to chat) e.g. what you are reading, what your interests are.
- **TIME** - Don’t be so busy that you squeeze out time to hang out with friends – be sacrificial. If necessary, carve out time in a busy schedule to have a coffee with a friend at church, to drop in and chat, to make that phone call, to message and enquire how they are doing.
- **REACHING OUT** - Don’t always expect others to do the inviting, initiating or approach you. Step towards people rather than away from them.
- **ACCOUNTABILITY** - Ask your friend to check in on you!

- **SHARED VISION/PASSION** – Friendship generally grows around shared interests, it might be gardening, reading, cooking, children, sport, walking, as well as ministry commitments – ministering to the needy/ youth/ the elderly.
- **WILLING SACRIFICE** – It’s not all about you!

**YOUR HUSBAND AS YOUR FRIEND:** Make sure you invest in friendship with your husband too – apply these building blocks to your marriage and see it deepen and be enriched.

## WHAT ABOUT FRIENDSHIP AT CHURCH?

- Be friendly to everyone even if you can’t be everyone’s friend.
- You have a limited capacity for friendship so choose friends wisely. *“Everyone possesses a limited ‘friendship bandwidth.’ No one can maintain a large number of biblical friendships while also maintaining their quality.” (The Company We Keep, Jonathan Holmes, p84)*
- Schedule time for friendship.
- Don’t publicly show favouritism.
- Be careful what you post on social media – people will feel excluded.
- Don’t overcommit in friendship.
- Discern the difference between relationship and friendship. There needs to be a mutuality in friendship. (see *How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife*, Christine Hoover, p194)
- Look for godly character in your friends.
- Be careful what you share. Pray for wisdom. There may be topics of conversation that are off limits. Guard your own lips. The ability to maintain confidentiality is vital for a ministry wife so don’t put that burden on others.
- Search across the age spectrum for wise, godly friends.

## THE BEST FRIEND

So many of the verses we have looked at are fulfilled perfectly in Christ. Jesus is wisdom personified.

- Jesus is utterly faithful (Prov 17:17)
- Jesus is consistently truthful (Prov 27:5-6, 9)
- Jesus is wonderfully intentional (Prov 27:17)
- Jesus is absolutely forgiving (Prov 17:9)

Friendship with Jesus isn't to be simply observed – it's to be *enjoyed*! No one is excluded from this friendship – Jesus invites all to come to him. We should be stunned, humbled and amazed by Jesus' words:

*“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends.”*

**John 15:13-15**

Ministry wife, let this sink in. Jesus, the perfect friend, calls you and me to be his friend. Whether or not you have friends at church, this is a great blessing – Jesus is your friend!

### THINK IT THROUGH

1. Which of the *Building Blocks for Friendship* (page 3-4) are the most challenging for you? Are there any missing that you would add?
2. Are there ways of speaking you should avoid in a friendship at church?
3. Will you change your approach to building friendships at church? Why or why not?
4. How can you be a better friend?
5. “*Can a ministry wife have friends at church?*” How would you answer that question?

### RECOMMENDED READING

*True Friendship*, Vaughan Roberts