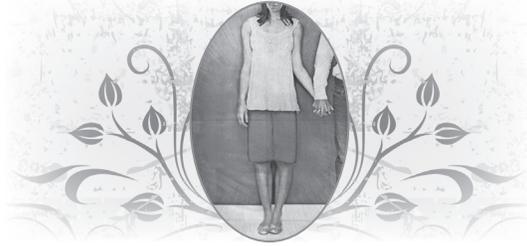




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## *the Heart of the* Church Planting Wife

A fellow mom recently asked me, “What’s it like being a church planter’s wife?” On my best days, when I am overwhelmed by God’s grace and can imagine nothing better than the life I live, I marvel at the privilege I’ve been given.

### The Long and the Short of It

In my darkest hours, however, when I am overcome with self-pity and a longing to be free of the calling God has placed on my life, I have formed a different answer to that question. Rather than an answer, it’s more of a rehearsed soapbox speech in which I spew the self-centered grievances piled up in the corner of my heart.

She looked at me expectantly, obviously wanting the first response, the response that matched her ideal picture of ministry. Feeling guilty for my negative internal reaction, I reprimanded myself and asked, “Do you want the short answer or the long one?”

The short answer is that church planting is difficult and demanding, but tremendously rewarding.

The long answer entails much more because church planting is a lifestyle; nothing in my life goes untouched by my husband's calling. I find it challenging to describe in detail how this work affects the deep regions of my heart or even to understand it myself, both the joys of seeing God change lives through our work and the struggles of bitter disappointments and personal failures. Although our work often defies description, at times my greatest desire is for my friends, family members, our church members, and even my husband to understand the blessings, joys, frustrations, and struggles that come with being a church planting wife. I long for others to see and experience the joys in surrendering to Christ, in going on mission with Him. I want to eloquently express what it's like watching my children grow up among a body of believers who know and love them, seeing immature believers become strong and grounded in the faith, witnessing the gospel transform lives, seeing my husband flourish in his calling, and enjoying those simple moments at church when I look around in wonder at what God has allowed me to be a part of.

At the same time, I want to tell them about the intense spiritual warfare, the sense of spiritual isolation, and the self-death that is required in this work. If they could just understand, I think, they could relate to me, rejoice with me, know my needs, and somehow ease the most difficult aspects of church planting. If I'm not careful, the nature of this calling can create in me a sense of self-focus, self-pity, or isolation. Or I feel misunderstood and long for the rhythms of a "normal" life.

Sometimes I feel unsettled by my vacillation between struggle and joy. *Am I making this harder than it should be? Am I truly called to this if I wrestle with it this much?* Sometimes I grow discouraged that I am still in such a fierce battle between flesh and spirit.

Along this road, I've discovered (to my great relief) that I'm not alone in what I have experienced as a church planting wife.

As a planter's wife, I have the joy of seeing my husband filled with excitement of a calling realized and followed. I have the burden and concern of helping hold up his weary arms during a busy season of

ministry infancy and bivocational physical fatigue. I'm also being refined as I have many opportunities to trust the Lord for provision financially. I am learning to keep fears and emotions in check so that in the midst of inevitable spiritual warfare, I don't become a stumbling block or discouragement to him.

On the whole, I'm thrilled to be a church planting wife. The countless joys are coupled with and balanced by refining moments and trials, and I'm grateful that this is what the Lord has for me in His plan.—Lori McDonald, Corpus Christi, TX

### He Knows the Roller Coaster

Perhaps you too have thrilled at the faith-filled adventure of following God. Maybe you have felt the joy of seeing a life transformed or a marriage healed by the gospel going forth in your community. Most likely you have enjoyed the fruit God has grown through your work. But perhaps you have also never felt so vulnerable and fragile. Maybe you have been wounded, discouraged, or fearful. You may be church planting alongside your husband in a place that is far from your friends and extended family. You may feel alone without other staff members or elders to share the load in your new church. Maybe you and your husband have encountered resistance from other pastors in your area, removing any sense of camaraderie and teamwork. Possibly you have young children or are working to support your family, both of which leave little time to connect with others. Perhaps you have dealt with criticism, hurts, failure, or exhaustion. Or maybe additional pressures have compounded the challenges of church planting, like they have for our co-laborers here in Charlottesville:

Being part of a church plant helped me understand what being dependent on God feels and looks like in my everyday life. I was often discouraged, anxious, and yet had peace. During the season of early church planting, I kept thinking: "Is God really enough? If you take everything else away, would I choose God over all the comforts the world has to offer?"

My husband was diagnosed with cancer the year before we moved across the country back to our hometown to plant a church.

Within a few months of planting the church, his cancer came back. Not only were we struggling with the church plant, but we were also fighting cancer. Through the surgeries and radiation, it was hard to pray. But I could feel the power of prayer and had a peace that could only come from God. He used the people in our young church to support, care for, and feed us. God has made this part of our story, reminding us that He is always there. While we were out of commission dealing with cancer, God grew our church. He provided for our every need, and in each stage of this journey He continues to be faithful in providing for us.—Jenn Atwell

Whatever you have faced, I imagine you have felt the same roller coaster of emotions that I have in this ministry, with both its exhilaration and heart-pounding fear.

Does your heart—like mine—cry out? Does it cry out for rest, love, encouragement, friendship, provision, security, balance, for someone to shoulder the weight with you?

We have needs of the heart, and we wonder what to do or how to handle our struggles. Does anyone notice? Does anyone care? Are all the sacrifices we're making in vain?

Most people assume that church planting pastors and their wives have tamed the temptations of the heart. Certainly, they think, those who take the gospel to an unreached neighborhood or city are spiritually stable and undaunted by fear, temptation, or discouragement. As church planting wives, however, we know the truth. We know that we are like everyone else, that our hearts are prone to wander, to sin, to doubt, and to grow discouraged. We know that we are desperate and needy for Christ, our heart's ally. We feel fragile. A lot.

And He knows.

He knows that it's difficult to communicate how church planting affects us. He knows our greatest concerns, joys, fears, and disappointments. In fact, He is the *only* One who fully understands our lives and hearts. And though few people can identify with us, we should not despair. Though we can and should share our struggles with others, their understanding can only go so far. He alone knows so that we will turn to Him alone.

The Lord's knowledge of our lives isn't as an observer or spectator.

Instead, it is as a participant, as One who is intimately involved and invested in us. Others may not understand our circumstances, our lifestyle, or the inner recesses of our hearts, but thankfully, we have a forever ally in Christ who concerns Himself with our spiritual and emotional needs. When we feel so lonely that our heart aches, He knows. When we are bursting with joy, He knows. When we are weighed down by discouragement, He knows. When our hearts are at rest because of Him, He knows. When we are paralyzed by fear, He knows.

He knows.

He sees.

He cares.

And all the while He whispers to us: *Trust Me with your heart. It's safe with Me.*

This is very good news for us as church planting wives, for He stills the roller coaster of emotion. He steadies our hearts, and He enables us to fulfill this calling.

### "Why Did You Bring Me Here?"

A different whisper, however, comes at the first hint of struggle in church planting: *God doesn't care. He doesn't see. He doesn't want to meet the needs of your heart. He has left you alone.* The enemy of God will challenge your heart's devotion and stir up fear in your soul.

My heart has been tested countless times throughout our church planting experience, starting from the moment I unpacked the last moving box. In the months leading up to our move, we had been asked countless times, "Just how *do* you start a church?" We had read every church planting book in existence, received counsel from seasoned church planters, and developed a clear vision of what we hoped our church would become. But when I hung the last frame on the wall, Kyle and I looked at each other and said, "*Now* what?" We didn't know a single person in our city besides our Realtor and a neighbor who had welcomed us with a plate of cookies. The challenge ahead of us seemed completely overwhelming, and I questioned our choices and our sanity. Could God really make something out of *nothing*?

Over the course of the first year, nothing came easy.

We started a Sunday evening Bible study in our home a month after moving to Charlottesville. On the first night, ten people attended, four of whom were considered church leaders, and three of whom were our children. The kids sat still for worship but then roamed in and out of the living room during Bible study, causing such a distraction that I took them upstairs and missed half of our first church gathering.

Later, after cleaning the kitchen and putting away all of the leftover cookies I had made for our guests, I retreated to our bedroom and cried. In fact, for most of the fall, my Sunday evenings looked similar to that first one: I cleaned the house, made food, greeted people, wrangled children all throughout church, mingled and said goodbye, cleaned

the house again—then cried.

Even into the spring, when we moved our meeting time to Sunday mornings and started to outgrow our living room, I struggled to conjure up the faith and excitement I had come to Charlottesville with. I longed for families to join us—most of our

growth was from young, single people—and especially for God to make things easier and more comfortable for us.

I wondered why we weren't the church planters who experienced explosive growth in a short period of time.

I began putting undue pressure on Kyle because I was emotionally fragile, uncertain of my role, and lonely. Church planting was proving harder than I had originally expected. "Why did you bring me here?" I'd say to Kyle, my words dripping with resentment. He'd gently remind me that God called me here too, that we were a team, and that I'd felt so certain when we were preparing to leave Texas.

I mourned the change and what it required of me: more sacrifice, less of my husband, more uncertainty, less of the familiar routines we had once enjoyed. In my emotional need, I wanted my husband's full attention, but, tasked with a great responsibility, he had so little to give me. I grew disillusioned—with ministry, with church planting, and with marriage. I dwelled there, feeding my sinful thoughts. *What if we had*



I wondered why we weren't the church planters who experienced explosive growth in a short period of time.

*never moved here? What if Kyle hadn't gone into ministry? What if we had ignored God's call to church plant? What if I hadn't married someone in the ministry? What would it hurt just to give up?*

I also aimed my bitter arrows at God. *Why can't You make this easier? I have been obedient and faithful in coming here, and this is what I get?*

### A Heart Monitored

I had entered church planting with a firm faith, but because I didn't closely guard my heart, because I listened to those little poisonous whispers, I forgot that God loved me and I doubted His provision. Resentful, my heart hardened toward Kyle and toward God. My unwillingness to submit to the Lord and accept His good purposes for me made it all the more difficult to hear His voice or receive His comfort.

We finished our first year of church planting under a tent in a muddy pit with thirty-one waterlogged people. When we got home that afternoon, Kyle said, "It feels like we're starting over." We had been asked to leave our meeting place the previous Friday, we didn't have a new one lined up (hence the tent), we barely had a core group, and we were physically exhausted and emotionally beaten down. We—the fearless leaders—were full of fear and doubt. Privately, I questioned God and His ways. *Lord, we put in the hard work during that difficult first year. Where is the dynamic growth?* I wanted to coast into the second year after the sprint of the first. I was too tired and unprepared to run the distance marathon that church planting requires.

I found myself at a crossroads.

God allowed the difficulty of church planting to sift me, to bring the issues of my heart to the surface. I realized that if I didn't address these things, my marriage, my family, and my own heart were in danger. God was refining me, cleaning me out, and teaching me dependence rather than self-reliance. I could continue my attempts at controlling and relying on myself, or I could submit myself in dependence on Him.

I chose to submit. I found myself agreeing with Peter when he spoke

We are to diligently  
maintain a tender  
soil for God's love  
and purposes to  
grow.



to Jesus: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). I chose to trust Him with my heart and let Him do—through church planting—the work He needed to do in me.

Perhaps you can relate to my struggle.

As church planting wives, we love the Lord and long to be obedient to His calling on our lives, but feelings of loneliness, resentment, discouragement, or exhaustion tempt our hearts to wander from Him. The temptations are subtle, but real: to turn to others, to turn away from the calling because it’s difficult and demanding, to distance ourselves from our husbands out of resentment, to feed our children a faint distaste for the church and for God, to believe that our successes in church planting belong to us, to live off of our previous sacrifices and refuse to sacrifice more of ourselves to God. The temptation is to self-seeking our own agenda, clamoring to have our needs met, self-promotion, and selfish ambition. As we seek these things, we become a statistic: burned out, isolated, depressed, and—sometimes—resigned.

It’s no wonder that the Bible entreats us to guard our hearts. Proverbs 4:23 (NIV) says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” The literal interpretation reads, “Above all guarding, guard your heart.” We are to guard our hearts more than our children, more than our marriage, more than our reputation, more than our home, more than our schedule, and more than our church. As Matthew Henry says,

We must keep a watchful eye and a strict hand upon all the motions of the inward man. . . . We must maintain a holy jealousy of ourselves, and set a strict guard . . . upon all the avenues of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, we are to diligently maintain a tender soil for God’s love and purposes to grow, to continually pull out weeds of self-focus, and to allow God to produce fruit in and through us.

This is, in essence, the charge of a church planting wife.

### State of the Heart

At Christmas, I make caramelized popcorn as a gift for friends and neighbors. In order to perfect the caramel coating, the mixture must boil for a very specified amount of time at extreme heat. While it’s boiling, I

have to stir constantly, watching for the liquid to turn the caramel color that will let me know it's ready. Then I must immediately remove it from heat and coat the popcorn before the mixture hardens. I have learned from experience that without my constant diligence and hovering presence, the popcorn will be ruined because it hardens too quickly.

The same hardening process occurs in our hearts when we aren't diligent in watching over them. The pressures, the burdens, and the work of church planting press in on us daily. We need the Holy Spirit's constant help to remain available and moldable before God. Without our submission to the Spirit on a daily basis, it is impossible to have a soft heart and to serve Him as He has called us to. Without that submission, we invite temptation and distraction to draw us away to emotional places and wrong thoughts that harden our hearts. Proverbs 28:14 (NIV) says, "Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble."

Unfortunately, brittle hearts don't just shatter—they also scatter. If we aren't diligent with our hearts, we will have a negative effect on those close to us.

When I was young, my grandparents took me to Yellowstone National Park, which is famous for Old Faithful, a geyser that gushes on a regular timetable. We stood with the crowd and watched thousands of gallons of boiling water shoot up hundreds of feet into the air from underneath the earth's surface. When I think of the heart, I think of Old Faithful. What goes on below the surface, even things that we try to hide from God and from others, will eventually come spewing out. If we are cultivating a joyful, obedient heart and submitting to the Spirit, good works and good fruit will sprout from our heart's tender soil. But if we do not deal with resentment, bitterness, or rebelliousness, we will spew ugliness all over our husbands, children, and churches and hinder the work of the Spirit in and through us.

As He did with me, God disciplines the one whose lips speak His name while her heart remains far away, or the one who cultivates her own reputation, or the one who goes through the motions of ministry but does not serve from love. If our hearts are far from Him, we will have no ministry and in fact may hinder the work of the gospel in our families and in the lives of those we serve.

However, the Lord renews the one with the contrite and humble heart (Isaiah 57:15). We must continually examine ourselves, asking God to make us tender soil for the seeds through which He grows gospel fruit: “But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Luke 8:15 NIV).

The state of my heart determines my ministry and influence. It also determines my attitude and motivations behind what I do. When my heart is His, He empowers me to fulfill this calling. I am able to joyfully die to myself rather than complain about what sacrifices are required



We often feel pressure to say and do all the right things, to be perfect in our service to our husbands, churches, and communities.

of me. I am able to love people rather than grow irritated with their constant needs. I am able to pray for my husband and seek to serve him rather than fight for his attention and time.

As church planting wives, we often feel pressure to say and do all the right things, to be perfect in our service to our husbands, churches, and communities. But God doesn't care to see us play the role of perfect church planting wives, He is not making a checklist of our activities or ministries to evaluate our performance, nor is He making judgments based upon our emotions or circumstances. He is looking at our hearts, not as a gruff man standing at a distance with his arms crossed and face scowled but as a Lover pursuing us with affection. He searches, tests, and weighs our hearts:

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart. (Proverbs 21:2 ESV)

But you, O Lord, know me; you see me, and test my heart toward you. (Jeremiah 12:3 ESV)

What is He searching for?

For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen

those **whose hearts are fully committed to him.** (2 Chronicles 16:9 NIV)

He looks for those whose hearts are undivided, who see the value of His love and His ways. He searches beyond our actions to determine if our hearts are willingly submitted to Him. He weighs our availability to Him: Are we gladly receiving His loving leadership? Are we soft and moldable in His hands? Do we trust Him? He knows our devotions, our intentions, and our motivations.

And when He finds a wholehearted church planting wife who is willing to say, “I need Your help. I am fully Yours,” He delights in her. He strengthens and protects her like a loving Father watches over His child. He tends to her heart—pruning, prodding, comforting, and leading. He offers her restful peace in the midst of the work of church planting. Strength, protection, love, comfort, leadership, peace—is church planting wives, aren’t those *just* the things we crave and need?

When God searches your heart, what does He see? Is it tender and pliable, purposefully set in the hands of the Father? Or is it hard and resentful, turned away from the One who loves you most? This is of utmost importance because, although your husband is out front, you are just as vital to the mission.

*Your heart* is vital to the mission.

As you give God your heart, He will give you His. God’s heart for you is that church planting be the soil in which you grow in Christlikeness. With His heart as your own, your role and the challenges of church planting become opportunities for growth and ministry, and church planting becomes an exciting adventure of radical faith. With your heart in His hands, you will recognize your opportunity and privilege of being a part of a new work from the ground up, to see and be a part of God changing lives, to engage people with love, to go outside the church walls and meet the needs of your community, and to watch God do the miraculous work of building a church.

*If our hearts are His*, it’s a pretty great life.

Going forward, then, let this be our prayer as we allow the Lord to search and test our hearts:

Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
 and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
 Do not cast me from your presence or  
 remove your Holy Spirit from me.  
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and  
 grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.  
 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
 and sinners will turn back to you. (Psalm 51:10–13 NIV)

### Cultivating Your Heart

Ask yourself these questions. Which are the most difficult to say yes to right now?

Am I willing . . .

to accept the trials and discouragement for His sake?  
 to follow Him wherever He leads?  
 to lay aside fear and anxiety?  
 to support my husband's calling?  
 to give up my life to follow Christ?  
 to trust Him with my whole heart?

Take some moments to meditate on these Scriptures from the chapter, and jot down others that are meaningful to you.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.  
 (Proverbs 4:23 NIV)

But you, O Lord, know me; you see me, and test my heart toward you. (Jeremiah 12:3 ESV)

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. (Luke 8:15 NIV)

For thus says the High and Lofty One  
Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:  
“I dwell in the high and holy place,  
With him who has a contrite and humble spirit,  
To revive the spirit of the humble,  
And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” (Isaiah 57:15)

Your experience in church planting will inevitably be determined by the condition of your heart. Thankfully, if you surrender to our good and loving God, He will do the primary work of guarding and cultivating your heart. After all, your heart is what He wants most from you.