

How to
THRIVE
AS A
PASTOR'S
Wife

Practical Tools to Embrace
Your Influence
and Navigate Your Unique Role

CHRISTINE HOOVER

“What an excellent book Christine Hoover has written. *How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife* is so thorough and thoughtful, giving serious consideration to the many challenges pastors’ wives face in their unique roles. You won’t find cliches or pat answers here! It is theologically sound and spiritually mature while also being very practical. Thank you, Christine, for this gift to ministry wives!”

Susie Hawkins, wife of O. S. Hawkins and author of
From One Ministry Wife to Another

“I read this book on a Saturday, between preparations for all my ‘pastor’s wife’ responsibilities on Sunday morning. Oh, how this book kept me joyful and true as I was being tempted by pressures to perform. Christine Hoover’s wise and compassionate voice speaks into the lies in which I am often entangled and shows me a way out of the deadly labyrinth of self-trust. Her words must have come at a great cost. Her counsel is not some general encouragement but points to specific, blood-bought promises of God, written in the ink and tears of a pastor’s wife who knows.”

Irene Sun, author of the picture books *Taste and See: All About God’s Goodness* and *God Counts: Numbers in His Word and His World*

“In *How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife*, Christine Hoover lovingly frees us from the trap of trying to live up to a title. She understands our specific calling as pastors’ wives and speaks directly to our significant role in kingdom work. She writes with authentic vulnerability about the distinctive temptations faced in ministry marriages—from bitterness to blaming to burnout—always pointing back to our kind King who will faithfully provide for each of our needs. Read her biblical advice and, for the sake of our marriages and ministries, learn to thrive as pastor wives!”

Jani Ortlund, executive vice president of Renewal Ministries

“The role of pastor’s wife can seem lonely and enigmatic. We are not all alike, but we are all hoping to fulfill a similar calling. Christine writes as one who has been there and is still there. From my tendency toward the savior complex to the complexity of parenting pastor’s

kids, I found kinship, courage, and wisdom in her words. I encourage every pastor's wife to read this book."

Lauren Chandler, pastor's wife, author, and worship leader

"Christine helps us navigate the complex role to which we have been called. I, too, am not the 'typical' pastor's wife and never fit the stereotype. She is the friend I wish I had in my early years to help me avoid unhealthy pitfalls and embrace the unique gifts God gave me to serve the body of Christ out of joy and passion instead of duty. Let this book from a seasoned pastor's wife encourage you as she gives words to your insecurities and struggles and guides you through to full engagement with God's Word and purpose. In Christ, you are uniquely gifted and equipped—embrace the call, celebrate the privilege!"

Donna Gaines, pastor's wife, author, and Bible teacher

"Christine Hoover is a rich, trusted source for any pastor's wife. Whatever she writes on the subject should be read. Her words are honest, vulnerable, and imminently helpful. She speaks to the most critically important compartments of our worlds with a freeing reality and helpful life-giving truth. This book will generously nourish the soul of any pastor's wife. Don't miss it!"

Kathy Litton, pastor's wife and director of Planter Spouse Development at the North American Mission Board

"Christine Hoover honestly and effectively voices the challenges and rewards of life as a pastor's wife. Her vulnerability and grace will encourage your heart, while her practical wisdom offers guidance to navigate the unique challenges pastors' wives face. Whether you've been living the ministry wife life for minutes or decades, this is a must-read, reference, and keep resource."

Heather Creekmore, pastor's wife, podcast host, and author of *Compared to Who?* and *The Burden of Better*

"As a pastor's wife of over twelve years, I found Christine's book to be an intricate mosaic capturing the beauty, pain, and tension of being a pastor's wife all in one place. Like an intimate chat in the home of a seasoned pastor's wife—honest, vulnerable, and deeply encouraging—*How to Thrive as a Pastor's Wife* paints an authentic picture of

what it looks like to not just survive but truly thrive in this beautiful calling.”

Amber Williams, pastor’s wife, Sojourn Church
Midtown, Louisville, KY

“Christine Hoover has given pastors’ wives a true gift in *How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife*. She explores our place in ministry, faithfully reminding us of our identity as believers in Jesus first and foremost. She helps us see how to guard our marriages and families practically while still serving Christ in our local churches. This was the book I needed twenty years ago, and I commend it to pastors’ wives everywhere.”

Glenna Marshall, pastor’s wife and author of *The Promise is His Presence* and *Everyday Faithfulness*

“*How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife* is a welcome compass for navigating church ministry and a beautiful offering for the sisterhood of pastors’ wives who gracefully serve Christ’s precious body. Even after twenty-six years of leadership, I soaked up this reminder from Christine that my role is the gift by which I serve the church, but ‘pastor’s wife’ is not my identity. Through seasons filled with growth, harmony, and great joy and seasons of heartache, disappointment, and discouragement when people mischaracterize your church and leave, she lovingly calls us to rhythms of rest and renewal with the God who sees and knows us, and she helps us move untangled by performance and free to flourish in our uniqueness.”

Dorena Williamson, first lady of Strong Tower Bible Church,
bridgebuilder, and bestselling author of
ColorFull and *The Celebration Place*

“The pains and pressures of ministry can be daunting for a pastor’s wife. Expectations from yourself and others can feel inescapable. But what matters most is this: What does Jesus want from you? In *How to Thrive as a Pastor’s Wife*, Christine Hoover serves as a trusted friend to help sisters steward their unique calling. Whether you’ve always dreamed of being a pastor’s wife or never expected to be one, I trust this resource will help you faithfully walk on the path Jesus has called you to.”

Garrett Kell, pastor of Del Ray Baptist Church and author of
Pure in Heart: Sexual Sin and the Promises of God



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*Practical Tools to Embrace Your Influence
and Navigate Your Unique Role*

CHRISTINE HOOVER



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*To my colaborers in the gospel,
women in ministry all across the globe.*

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DEAR PASTOR'S WIFE

My husband, Kyle, accepted his first church staff position within our first year of marriage. Having sensed since high school that I was called to vocational ministry, I wholeheartedly linked arms with my husband in this new adventure and, with great anticipation for the days ahead, packed the moving boxes.

We'd be moving three hours south from our tiny seminary house and joining the team of the church we'd attended in college—a large church led by a pastor whose preaching had transformed the way we viewed Scripture. Kyle would be tasked with leading the very university ministry we'd loved in our halcyon college days. It was a dream job and would be our first taste together of all that vocational ministry entails.

Together is an intentional word, because you and I both know just how much of a team sport ministry is. When I speak of Kyle's work to church members, I catch and correct myself when I use *we* or *our*—"When *we* were on staff at that church"—because it's not officially my job, and I also want to seize a small teaching moment, drawing for them a delineation between Kyle and me. *This is not my job. This is his job.*

And yet, we are one; his calling spills over onto me and mine onto him. For this I'm thankful, even if it confounds me at times, for we share in a unique calling that carries with it significant meaning and eternal impact.

These are things I learned later, however, long after those boxes were unpacked, when the brightness of our new adventure wore off, and I realized I didn't have a clue what I was doing as a pastor's wife.

We moved into a rental house in that college town a week before our first anniversary, and, because of my instant uncertainty, I was relieved and excited to learn that another of the church's staff members and his family lived down the street from us. He and his wife had years of ministry experience under their belts, so I was eager to learn from her. Certain she was aware of my need, I waited for her to come down the street and check on me. I waited and waited, and one day, to my great delight, she showed up at the door to say hello. We sat on my couch, nervousness emanating from my end, and engaged in small talk. I specifically remember that neither of us sank into the cushions of the couch but rather we remained at the edge, formal with one another.

I waited for her to broach deeper topics, but she never did. And while many pressing questions about ministry were burning in my mind and heart, *I did not ask her a single one*. Looking back, I see that I'd already taken on the posture of self-protection that has never served me well in ministry. I'd also taken on the equally unhelpful posture of waiting on others to go first rather than initiating and asking for help. So, after some small talk, she left, and, not long after, she and her family moved away from our church and our street.

As soon as I closed the door behind her, I regretted all that I had not asked. *How do you support your husband when he's discouraged? How do you and your husband draw relational boundaries? How do you know what God wants you to be involved in within the church? Why do some women stop talking when I come near? Will I ever find friends? How do you kill the sins of resentment, pride, and the desire for self-glory? How do you forgive hurts that no one else sees or knows about? And who can I talk to about all of these things?*

What had held me back? I didn't ask because I believed I was the only pastor's wife at our church (and quite possibly everywhere) who didn't know what she was doing, and I couldn't admit my insecurities.

From Where I Write

Kyle and I spent almost eight years in that church—a large, multi-staff and multi-ministry church in the American Bible Belt. He led the

college ministry and eventually took on missions as well. We grew in marriage, expanded our family through the births of our three boys, and internalized ministry lessons we learned both through trial and error and through the example of other pastors (and their spouses) on staff.

Around the time our third baby was born, God put an inescapable and holy discontent in our hearts. We sensed he was calling us to something beyond college and missions and, after much prayer and seeking wise counsel, the holy discontent finally subsided into peace when we alighted on the idea that God was calling us to plant a church.

Six months later, we moved into a new home in a small city I hadn't known existed a year prior: Charlottesville, Virginia. This new place was liberal leaning, intellectually driven, and just outside the Bible Belt, and we found ourselves facing newfound ministry challenges. For one, we didn't know a soul, so there was that. But also we were church planting, which we quickly discovered was a totally different creature than serving at an established church.

We started our church with ten people in our living room, five of whom carried the Hoover last name. I spent the entire first gathering chasing a crawling baby and keeping a toddler and preschooler snacked and entertained while my husband taught from Philippians. I missed most of the teaching time because I was off wiping bottoms in the bathroom.

There were tears—the first of many to come—when the five non-Hoovers left. And there were new questions and uncertainties nagging at me. *How am I supposed to manage all of this? How will I engage people when I'm always wrangling my kids in a different room? How do I help my husband take breaks from the constant demands of ministry? What do I do with my own spiritual and emotional needs when I'm always pouring out for others? How can I ensure my kids grow up to love God and his church? Will ministry always be this exhausting? Am I going to make it?*

I thought I'd left all my questions, insecurities, and uncertainties behind me at our previous church, but this new ministry opportunity opened up many more that serving in an established church had never revealed.

I write this from Charlottesville, over a decade removed from those first Bible studies in our living room. God grew our church slowly but surely, one relationship at a time. We've since added elders and a few staff members. I've had my hands in literally every ministry of the church except men's ministry. And we've raised our boys—now teenagers—as pastor's kids within this faith family we've planted.

In other words, we've made it this far, and only by the grace of God. Although the tint of church planting remains—our church meets in an elementary school gym—God has established us in this community we've grown to call home.

I tell you this, dear pastor's wife, to give my writing context for you. As you read, you may find I don't completely understand your context for ministry. Aside from short-term trips, we've never served outside of the United States. My husband has not been bivocational, and we've not lived in an urban center. However, although we've served in both large churches and small, inside and outside the American Bible Belt, in both church and parachurch settings (in our first year of marriage, my husband led a parachurch ministry), and in both established churches and a church plant, my experience and context are not ultimately what I rely on as I offer you these pages. "For what [I] proclaim is not [myself], but Jesus Christ as Lord, with [myself] as your [servant] for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5).

In other words, I've written this book to you as that veteran pastor's wife, purposefully coming down the street to see you, sinking into the cushions on the other end of your couch, and digging deeply with you into the challenges we all face at some point in our ministry. Those insecurities and uncertainties you have? You're not the only one.

Imagine my demeanor with you like this as you read my words: I'm leaning forward, listening. I'm willing to hear and address the things you're afraid to say and ask because you think you should be further along by now. I'll tell you stories of my own foibles and fumbles and the tangled webs I've been caught up in, because I know exactly what it's like and can empathize with you. I'll be brutally honest about what's gone on in my heart, hoping you'll see yourself in me and, if needed, be pricked and poked by the Holy Spirit. I'll share some

tips and tricks I've learned along the way that can be applied to any ministry context. And then, with urgent passion, I'll remind you of the ancient truths: God is with you, he loves you, he sees you, he is helping you, and he is worth pursuing and serving. There are challenges, yes, but there is also abundant joy and reward to be had living beside—and *being*—a minister of the gospel.


Envisioning Life as a Pastor's Wife

Throughout this book I'll use a landscape architect's drawing to illustrate life as a ministry wife in order to emphasize boundaries, relational proximity, and priorities. I'll explain in future chapters why, as a visual learner, this has become a valuable tool for me as I navigate life and make decisions regarding my time and relational energy. In fact, God gave me this picture at a time in my life when I felt hurt, overwhelmed, and unsure I could persevere in ministry. I'll invite you into my story in future chapters, but for now, I simply want to note that this is *my* visual picture for *my* life. Your life likely looks different from mine, as you may work full-time outside the home, have no children, have grandchildren scattered across the globe rather than children still in your nest, or perhaps may work for the church your husband pastors or work alongside him in parachurch ministry. I don't want you to follow my plan as you might a formula or a job description or condemn yourself (or me!) for having a different God-given context. Rather, think of this drawing as a tool you can edit according to your circumstances that may help you envision a properly ordered life and help you flourish as a pastor's wife.

What you'll notice in this visual aid is an emphasis on boundaries—delineations that preserve and help cultivate sacred relationships. You'll also notice an emphasis on distance. Some parts of our lives involve more intimacy, accessibility, accountability, and priority than others. When relationships are in their proper place, there is vitality, life, blessing, and thriving, and threats to our spiritual, emotional, and relational well-being are kept out.

God himself sets boundaries for his people. In Isaiah 5, through the prophet Isaiah, God tells his people how he planted them as a

vineyard in a perfect location to produce choice grapes. To protect the vineyard and its fruitfulness, he surrounded his people with hedges and walls. But because they defied his borders, rotten grapes grew on the vines and God withdrew his protection, allowing them to become a decaying wasteland. This word picture of the trampled vineyard reminds us that boundaries enable us to remain within God's will and protection and to enjoy a fruitful ministry.



Dear pastor's wife, may you find *love* in my words. I love pastors' wives and have a passion for helping them thrive. I wholeheartedly believe you are one of the unsung heroes of the global church: often (but not always) serving behind the scenes in unseen ways, a buttress to your pastor-husband, a discipler of your children, a pillar in the community, and a passionate lover of both God and others.

May you also find *truth* in my words. Scripture doesn't offer ministry wives a job description, and this should come to us as great news. There is no mold we must fit into and no formula to which we must adhere, but, thankfully, all of Scripture speaks to this life we live—no matter our experience, age, context, or role. I take great delight in sharing with you what God has shown me in his Word that has carried me through the years and made my weary heart sing.

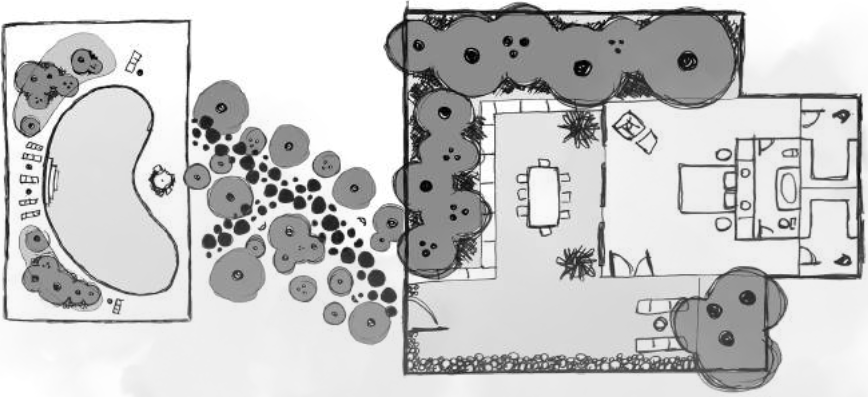
Finally, may my words also remind you that *you aren't alone*. In the global church, God's servants are abundant and are steadily plowing, planting, and reaping. You, I, and the many women like us are counted among them.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. (Heb. 12:1–2)

You are dear, dear pastor's wife.
Let's run on together.



PART 1
Now





one

Locating You

Our wedding anniversary is March 11, 2000, so of course on March 11, 2020, my husband and I planned a nice evening out at our favorite restaurant in Charlottesville to celebrate twenty years of marriage. We were looking forward to a long-awaited (and long saved for) trip two months later, but we couldn't let the date itself go by without reflecting on our twenty years together.

Just before we left for dinner, my husband received a phone call: the school where our church meets on Sundays had temporarily closed its doors to both students and outsiders. Earlier that day, we'd marveled that March Madness and the NBA were canceling their games, that the local university had informed their students not to return from spring break—and now this too? All because of this strange new virus no one knew much about called COVID-19.

March 11, 2020—our wedding anniversary—was the day the world started shutting down, and it was also the day Kyle stepped into crisis leadership that we thought might last a few weeks but that, as of this writing a year later, continues even now. For most church congregations and ministries, the year 2020 mixed a perilous cocktail

of a pandemic, racial strife and nationwide protests, a contentious political environment, and many financial and mental health needs among congregants. For everyone, but especially pastors, 2020 was a year unlike any other.

We didn't get to go on our anniversary trip in 2020, but in early 2021 we slipped away to a warm tropical location at what felt like God's perfect timing. In other words, we were running on fumes, Kyle was close to burnout after a year of crisis leadership, and, frankly, our marriage was suffering. For the few months prior to our trip, God had been bringing what was in our hearts to the surface, and it wasn't pretty.

But in some ways, I also felt vindicated, defended, and seen. I'd felt lost for a while, or rather as if I'd been in a snow globe and someone had been shaking it endlessly. I'd held hurts close to my chest. I'd sensed a loss of connection to others and to myself. It had seemed as if nothing in my life or in our marriage was in its proper and peaceful place but rather that we were running at top speed and getting nowhere.

In the ways God was working, however, I knew he saw me. I couldn't locate myself in the swirl, but he'd never lost me. Over and over, he reminded me that he was shepherding me and coaxed me to trust and follow him.

One of the areas I most felt lost was in relation to church and ministry. I knew my relationship to the church was off somehow, and I knew Kyle's relationship to his work was similarly off, so we spent endless hours on our trip dissecting what that "off" was and asking God to help us put the areas of our life together in their proper places.

The visual picture I'm sharing with you developed out of one of our conversations. Toward the end of the trip, I told Kyle I was apprehensive about returning home, primarily because we'd had such a wonderful and restorative time away together—truly like a second honeymoon. I wasn't ready to return and share him with others.

When we had this conversation, we were sitting in a gated patio outside our room, a beautiful area complete with palm trees waving in the breeze, a hammock, an outdoor breakfast nook, and a tiny private

pool. In other words, paradise. Outside the gate, a serpentine sidewalk surrounded by more palm trees and tropical plants led toward the resort's main pool and restaurant.

Attempting to explain my apprehension to Kyle, I pointed to the gate and said, "I feel as if returning home is like walking outside that gate together. The church staff, elders, and congregants are waiting for you just outside the gate with questions and needs, ready for your attention and time. I have your undivided attention on vacation, and then when we return home, we walk out that gate, and I wave goodbye and release you to everyone else."

That may have been how we'd done things previously, but we needed a new, healthier way of remaining *together* while also parenting, working, and fulfilling God's call on our life.

For both of us, the analogy of the gate and our surrounding environs was like a light bulb flickering on in a dark room. Using the layout of our cabana—a place of joy and restoration—we mapped out where things *should* be, moving forward, in order to protect proper boundaries, thrive in marriage, be engaged with our kids, and also be purposeful in ministry.

Like a mall directory, it was as if God said to me through the visual picture, "You are here." *I see you. I've got you. I have you where I want you. I'll lead you. You're not alone. There is a better way forward for you and Kyle together.*

God was asking me to release fear, self-agenda, and self-protection. He was identifying and locating me, whispering into my heart, *Let me remind you who you are.*

He took me back and reoriented me around the lessons I'd been learning all along, lessons I now share with you.