

PASTORS' WIVES TELL ALL



Navigating Real
CHURCH LIFE
with Honesty
and Humor



STEPHANIE
GILBERT

JESSICA
TAYLOR

JENNA
ALLEN

“Being a woman in the spotlight at church is HARD. Your parenting, your marriage, even your clothes are under the microscope. And Jessica, Stephanie, and Jenna get it. They’re like your funny best friends, cheering you on as you learn to put down the masks you’re hiding behind, embrace authenticity (even if it makes tongues wag!), and find delight in serving God again.”

Sheila Wray Gregoire, author of *The Great Sex Rescue*
and founder of BareMarriage.com

“Stephanie, Jessica, and Jenna beautifully celebrate their roles as pastors’ wives while reminding those who share this title that they are unique daughters of God with a story, a calling, and individual personality and style. This is the book I wish my mom could have read as a pastor’s wife, and one you will want to share with yours. Grab a tissue to catch your tears of laughter and relief. You aren’t alone, dear pastors’ wives, and you are so very loved.”

Natalie Runion, founder of Raised to Stay and author
of the *USA Today* bestseller *Raised to Stay*

“I’m always encouraged by the authenticity that oozes out of Stephanie, Jenna, and Jessica as they capture the hard, the holy, and the hilarious of this important but often unspoken role. Whether you are a pastor’s wife or you know a pastor’s wife, this book will encourage your soul, direct your prayers, and empower you to love God’s church well.”

Michelle Myers, cohost of the *She Works His Way* podcast,
author, and speaker

“*Pastors’ Wives Tell All* is the book every pastor’s wife needs to feel seen, understood, and encouraged in a role that is immensely important yet surprisingly isolating and challenging at times. While reading the relatable words and stories from Stephanie, Jenna, and Jessica, pastors’ wives will laugh and cry—but more importantly walk away feeling permission to be human, love God, and confidently live the call they have on their own life: to be the unique pastors’ wives God has called them to be.”

Quinn Kelly, author, speaker, licensed marriage and family
therapist, and host of the *Renew You* podcast

“Finally, a book that gets real and relatable about topics the church typically avoids. These pastors’ wives are not preaching at you; they are getting deep in the muck with you. This book is a must-read if you want to laugh, cry, and feel empowered to keep chasing Jesus.”

Christy Boulware, author of *Nervous Breakthrough*
and founder and president of Fearless Unite

“*Pastors’ Wives Tell All* is a refreshing breath of honesty and humor that reminds us that even in the holiest of places, life can be wonderfully, delightfully human. This book is a warm hug from women who really
Stephanie Gilbert, Jessica Taylor, and Jenna Allen, *The Pastors’ Wives Tell All*
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believe and live out the truth that God never called us to be superhuman, no matter what our role or title may be. In a world that can often feel isolating and demanding, *Pastors' Wives Tell All* will instantly make you feel as if you're sitting on the couch with your girlfriends and sipping a cup of coffee, all while learning how to live more wisely and love more deeply. What a beautiful ride it is."

Lindsey Maestas, Christian speaker and host
of the *Living Easy with Lindsey* podcast

"*Pastors' Wives Tell All* is a gift to ministry leaders who feel alone and to those in the congregation who could use a behind-the-scenes peek at the real struggles of their leaders. As a former pastor's kid, I am thankful the authors approach this subject authentically yet humorously. I will recommend this resource to ministry leaders from all walks of life in my counseling practice."

Rachael Gilbert, MMFT, owner of BBC Health, author,
and host of *Real Talk with Rachael*

"If you are looking for a book for pastors' wives that's neatly tied in a bow, is void of struggle, and maybe sounds good but is sanitized of real-life experience, THIS IS NOT THAT BOOK. Between these three women, they've seen it all. If you'd consider yourself anything but a stereotypical pastor's wife, this book will encourage you to keep going, remember where your identity lies, and never seek approval from the opinions of well-intentioned church members. God has called you to an important work, and Stephanie, Jenna, and Jessica will help you stay on mission (oh, and laugh a lot)!"

Rebecca George, author of *Do the Thing* and host
of the *Radical Radiance* podcast

"Authentic and hilarious! This is comprehensive encouragement for every aspect of pastor's wife life. Stephanie, Jessica, and Jenna have woven together a book that's as seamless as their Instagram dance routines. If you're married to a man in ministry, this book will help you feel seen and understood in your unique role."

Heather Creekmore, pastor's wife, host of the *Compared to Who?*
podcast, and author of *The 40-Day Body Image Workbook*

"My family has served in pastoral ministry for over twenty years, and I've witnessed how church leadership and ministry can be a lonely, confusing space to navigate. In *Pastors' Wives Tell All*, Stephanie, Jessica, and Jenna open a welcoming door into their hard-won wisdom and winsome stories. These pages offer a field manual of sorts, promising that none of us is really alone and this ministry road not only is possible to navigate but can be a place of growth, freedom, grace, and hope."

Carrie Stephens, author of *Holy Guacamole*
and *Friendship Can Save the World*

Stephanie Gilbert, Jessica Taylor, and Jenna Allen, *The Pastors' Wives Tell All*
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PASTORS' WIVES TELL ALL

Navigating Real **CHURCH LIFE**
with Honesty and Humor

**STEPHANIE GILBERT, JESSICA
TAYLOR, AND JENNA ALLEN**



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To the pastors who made us pastors' wives:
Isaac Gilbert, Jonathan Taylor, and Ian Allen.

And to the PKs who call us Mom: Bryce, Bentley,
Avery G., Grace, Oliviya, Addie, and Avery A.
You will forever be our first and favorite ministry.



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Foreword

“It’s a beautiful and difficult life.” That is how I most often describe what life as a pastor’s wife is like to those who ask—if I think they can handle the truth. I leave my explanation just that simple, because it’s just that complicated.

How do we explain the lovely and the hard? How do we say that absurdity can occasionally stand beside holiness, and that loneliness and way too much company can both be true in the same house and the same heart at the same time?

In church, we have so many jaw-dropping, eye-rolling, and tear-wiping stories of people being their most unusual selves. A lot of those stories we can tell quietly only to each other, because we *get it*. We get each other. We understand the weird.

Church can be so, so good, and church can turn on a dime. We’re not surprised, because we know our own flickering, inconsistent hearts. But still, we search for and try to cobuild something true and right and noble, through the grace of God and as we walk beside our beloveds who have this rare calling.

Blessed are the lionhearted pastors’ wives, who—yes, a lot of the time—carry the lion’s share of home creating and tucking in, Sunday school leading and committee chairing, floor sweeping and fence building, sermon listening and maybe some gentle

sermon critiquing much later in the afternoon. All of this while trying to love those pastor husbands of ours so well, the ones who work so hard that we must remind them we are also their people, and we need them too.

“Come home soon,” we might have to say, or “I’m driving down to get you.”

Some days this pastor-wife life can feel heavy. On just such a day a few years ago, I came upon three pastors’ wives on Instagram laughing with joy, being a bit loud, teasing each other, and dancing in a way that made me laugh and shake my head. They were so silly and fun, but Stephanie, Jenna, and Jessica were also speaking out loud what most others only whisper about being a pastor’s wife.

They were so honest. I loved them instantly. You will too.

Pastors’ Wives Tell All is a “how-to” book, but it’s also a “why” book that reminds us that this life is special and sacred, and that there is joy. There is advice to be had here on sex, therapy, parenting, clothing, rest, and so much more. Like a good friend would give. “When Grownups Act Like Toddlers,” is a heading in this book, and that should tell you everything you need to know about the light and the weight and depth of what you are about to read.

If you’ve longed for friends who can listen and laugh, and to whom you could say anything and it would be just fine, then be welcome here, strong friend. We need each other. Here is a room filled with light where we can find each other.

Karen Stiller, author of *The Minister’s Wife: A Memoir of Faith, Doubt, Friendship, Loneliness, Forgiveness, and More* and *Holiness Here: Searching for God in the Ordinary Events of Everyday Life*; KarenStiller.com

Introduction

They say getting a tattoo is addictive. Once you've felt the sting of that needle and experienced the pure ecstasy of seeing your body transform into a literal piece of art before your eyes, there's no going back—literally, of course, because what's done is, most assuredly, positively d-o-n-e *done*. But there's also a realization that there is no going back to the person you were before this monumental change. You've officially joined the club, the unofficial tatted-up club. (We're sure there's a T-shirt for that somewhere.) You have stepped into a new phase of life. One where you are simultaneously unafraid of change *and* dedicated to permanence, as you have just experienced one of the most permanent changes of your life. It's a beautiful juxtaposition of sorts.

This is what being a pastor's wife is like—a permanent change in your life that marks you. It leaves a lasting impression, whether completely awkward like a tattoo chosen in an impulsive stupor, or gloriously meaningful like a tattoo that's been wrestled with and prayed over for years before taking the plunge.

Once you've witnessed church and ministry life behind the scenes, there's no unseeing it. Let's get real. Church people are

messy. Pastors' wives are messy. Every person who has ever served the church in any capacity is messy. We are all imperfect, hard to get along with at times, stubborn, and selfish. It's the sad reality of being flawed human beings. Don't believe us? If you are void of all imperfection, you might want to stop here and pack it up, sister, because this book ain't for you (excuse our grammar).

The three of us—Jenna, Jessica, and Stephanie—are women who have been marked in the deepest of ways by the title “pastor's wife.” We know what it's like to walk alongside church people as they step into a new marriage, choose a college to attend, grieve the loss of a loved one, or experience a painful divorce. We journey with them as they make life-altering decisions like choosing to follow Jesus or changing their hairstyle (don't act like you've never seen a hairstyle change a life before) and everything in between. We've been chewed out by our critics about as hard as we've been bear-hugged by those who truly see and appreciate us. We've been used, abused, loved, honored, held, and discarded more times than we can count. And along the way, we've learned a thing or two.

This book is for the pastor's wife, the female pastor, the lady leading a ministry, and the female church member who has been helped (or hindered) by her church leaders and truly wants to understand why church leadership makes the decisions it does.

The ministry leader who has been gutted by the people she desperately wishes to serve and be loved by.

The pastor's wife who feels like a single mom because her husband spends every waking moment counseling, responding to emergency phone calls, studying for sermons, and taking on one more thing because the concept of boundaries is just out of reach.

The church leader who collapses after a week of late nights and proceeds to shovel popcorn by the fistful into her mouth while catching up on *Friends* and *Vampire Diaries* reruns.

The woman who, below her polished, smiling surface, resents her husband for choosing “ministry” over her and their family.

The leader who is surrounded by people almost daily yet feels utterly alone.

The pastor’s wife who has grieved the loss of friendships and struggles to find the kind of friendships that stick, real ones where she can be her *real* self . . . because it’s totally “in” to be authentic, transparent, and vulnerable—unless you’re the pastor’s wife.

If you can relate to any of these scenarios, then, friend, you’ve come to the right place. You’ve cracked open the exact right book. You are our kind of people.

We don’t know about you, but we’re tired of hiding in the shadows, of being a mystery to our church families and being placed on unreachable pedestals. It’s about time we kicked the pedestals out from under ourselves, because some of us could use a bruise behind. We are no better than any of the women beside us in the pews and certainly have not “arrived.”

We strive for holiness even though our jeans are the only “holey” thing about us some days. Our marriages have suffered. Our parenting has been marked by impatience and even selfishness. Our homes have found themselves in utter disarray. And we may have even lost our cool a time or two with the people we are supposed to love and serve. Yes, we sin. And sure, we

are never meant to remain in sin. But that's true for *all* Jesus followers, not just ministers and spouses.

And as we navigate a life surrendered to God's leading, we discover the greatest journey of our lives—a journey that is both brimming with heartache and bubbling over with joy. If you haven't gotten to the joy part yet, hold on to your leggings, girlfriend, because we are about to go for a ride where the destination is a life of ministry marked by hope, even when critics and grief abound. We'll find the path to the kind of ministry that is more like the deliberate, prayed-over tattoo that serves as a permanent reminder of the grace and hope we've found in our Jesus.

Speaking of tats . . .

1



The Pastor's Wife Could Be Tatted-Up Too (Gasp!)

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The three of us have matching tattoos. Yes, sirree, we do. But before we took the plunge into permanent ink, we did what any intelligent millennials would do: we polled Instagram to help us decide between two ideas we were juggling, and like any good millennial who polls Instagram followers, we went with . . . neither. Our finickiness did not deter our social media friends from offering tons of great suggestions, however. And as the creative and sentimental tattoo ideas began flowing from our Instagram friends, so did the criticism.

“Why would you mark your bodies when God is against it?”

“Shouldn’t you be a better example for the people following you?”

Meet Mrs. PPPW

When you are a pastor’s wife, people have numerous opinions about what you should look like. *Lots*. And many of those opinions have no scriptural backing. But don’t most of us already have a preconceived picture of the ideal pastor’s wife? Picture with us Mrs. Perky Perfect Pastor’s Wife. Let’s call her Mrs. PPPW for short. Mrs. PPPW is the very definition of that good ole churchy word, *modest*, while still appearing somewhat (but not too) trendy. Without a hint of unkempt hair, she’s neatly styled and pulled together with her trendy-not-trendy dress flowing down just below her kneecaps (because knees are sexy and should *never* be exposed). Mrs. PPPW quietly accepts demands from her husband and the church while serving with a smile in her meek-and-quiet-spirit way. She’s a pure gem.

So, what happens when you marry a pastor yet you fall two sexy-showing kneecaps short of the role? (Confession time. It’s *us*. We’re the ones with the scandalous kneecaps.)

The three of us have come to terms with the fact that we don’t fit into the stereotypical pastor’s wife mold, and we are perfectly fine with being quirky. Yes, we have tattoos. Yes, we dye our hair. We wear jeans with holes in them (even on Sundays). Of course, none of these outward traits encompass us entirely. God didn’t place us in church ministry because we embody the ideal Mrs. PPPW, and we sure aren’t flying our angel wings around on a higher spiritual plane. He called us because He prefers to use cracked and broken vessels with potential over vessels that have sat on a shelf collecting meta-

phorical dust for the extent of their existence—too perfect to be touched by the observers who stand in awe of their extraordinarily impeccable outsides.

A first-class vessel is great in theory, but what's the point if it never gets used? Sure, the vessels with cracks need sprucing up. But those cracks provide space for the light of Jesus to shine through, while the unblemished version is far too solid to emit even the slightest glimmer. Cracks expose the light, and it is then, when our trials become blatantly obvious, that the people around us find Jesus. If their eyes were too distracted by our fancy, flawless design, they might miss Him. This is the very meaning of a freeing verse in John's Gospel: "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less" (3:30). We decrease. He increases. He doesn't need us and our got-it-all-togetherness. He *wants* us, quirks and all.

Don't get us wrong. Sinful actions should be exposed and extracted from our hearts and lives through obedience to our Savior. But that's not what we're talking about here. Some of us have been told we're too loud, too quiet, too mundane, too much, too not enough, too (fill in the blank). For so long we've believed the lie that our personality and sense of style are mistakes. Surely God didn't mean for us to come out quite this, er, "different."

What we forget is that our God is an artist. His creativity is evident in the way He uniquely designed each of us. You might be a dynamic leader who stands out in bold wardrobe options with sassy hair and makeup. Or maybe you're into dark emo hair and pink tips, with jet black as the only shade on your outfit color wheel, and let's not forget that tatted-up sleeve adorning your entire arm. Or perhaps you love dresses and pearls and play the piano with grace and ease. If those style choices reflect who you indeed are, then rock them. No single pastor's wife mold exists.

The Proverbial Fishbowl

For those of you who can't relate because you are wholeheartedly comfortable in your skin, we applaud you. You know who you are and never shy away from expressing the real you. But it's possible that even with all your confidence, you're still fearful of people responding negatively to your style choices. We understand the hesitation. We live in a proverbial fishbowl, but at the same time, people may not be judging us as harshly as we judge ourselves.

Jenna learned this several years ago when she made the “wild” decision to get a nose ring. (Yep, tats aren't the only strike against us.) As she eased her way through the congregation for the first time after that fateful hole-in-her-nose day, fear crept into her heart and insecurity infiltrated her mind. She'd imagined all the comments and side-eye stares that would inevitably come from the more “spiritual ones” and had braced herself for them. Surely those more seasoned ladies would have a thing or two to say about her apparent pre-midlife crisis, which caused her to have this moment of “holey” weakness. But as quickly as the fearful anticipation had built, it deflated. The comments never came. The awkward stares were only in her head. Nobody thought less of her; or if they did, they kept it to themselves.

Isn't this how we live too often, expecting the other shoe to drop, so to speak, when we change our outward appearance? How can we expect anyone else to drop the stereotypes if we can't nix them ourselves? If we place weighty expectations on our appearance, consciously or subconsciously, we shouldn't hope for anything different from our church family.

Think about the Scripture passage recounting the day the prophet Samuel anointed the boy who would be the next king of Israel. If Samuel had his way, he would have anointed Jesse's first son, Eliab, and called it a day. Eliab was an obvious choice

from the outside, but our God loves to do things backward. He looks from the inside out. And why would we think it'd be any other way? He tells us to *die* (to ourselves) to *live*, after all. It doesn't get more backward than that. God had a different plan than Samuel did for Israel's next leader.

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7)

And we all know who God chose for this high position of honor and leadership: the smelly, dirty shepherd boy named David. God is not as focused on our appearance as we think He is.

Legalism Is the Enemy

Stephanie remembers well growing up in a church culture that thrived on sermons that condemned a plethora of hair and clothing styles. If you were a woman with a short pixie cut or a man with long locks, you must be a follower of Satan himself. Wearing shorts in the summertime—what could have possibly possessed you? It couldn't be the Holy Spirit. Sadly, we're not joking. This church prioritized cleaning up the outside before they addressed the inside. Legalism was a friend to them. But the inside matters most, not our human rules and regulations about how we dress on the outside. You can be the most trendy, modest, cleaned-up Christian woman on the outside and be nothing but a rotting corpse on the inside . . . utterly spiritually dead, like the religious leaders in Matthew:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—

beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. (23:27)

There is a reason it seems like our Westernized churches are filled with members *playing* church instead of truly living out the gospel.

Stephanie will always remember a lesson her friend Brittney unwittingly taught her. One Sunday morning, as Brittney scurried around her home, wrangling three children toward the door and into the car to head to church, her daughter's frustration halted her efforts. Whining escalated into a mini meltdown over what to wear to church. This perceptive little girl had noticed that the other girls her age wore adorable smocked frocks to church (you aren't Southern unless you embrace all the "ocks"). She was in a tizzy over what her friends would think about her not-so-ocked dress and did not look forward to making a church appearance without an outfit as cute as theirs.

Brittney knew church outfits were not at the top of Jesus's priority list, so she immediately changed her own clothes. She tore off her dressy ensemble, pulled on a simple pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and told her daughter to do the same. She ignored all the makeup and threw her hair back into a ponytail. She then bent down, peered into her daughter's eyes, and spoke words of truth to her: what we look like on the outside is *not* what's important. What matters is a heart of worship, focusing on the object of worship, Jesus. God isn't impressed with our outward displays of righteousness. He is concerned with our heart's posture. Period. Stephanie's sweet friend recognized this truth and exemplified it through her actions. We can do the same in the ministry God has given us.

Why Moderation Is the Key

Like an onion, this conversation on outward appearance has layers. We understand that in everything there should be a balance. Just because our outward appearance is not our focus does not mean we should flaunt our freedom. The Bible is clear: “For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love” (Gal. 5:13).

Jessica runs a nonprofit called Come Away Missions that serves the people of Rwanda. Each time she flies overseas to spend time with these people she packs different clothes than she would for travel stateside. Yes, Jessica is fiery and loves a comfy pair of leggings or cute jeans with holes in the knees, but she also knows that Rwandan culture is very different from the culture of South Alabama. So, she alters her outward appearance accordingly, setting aside her graphic T-shirts and holey jeans for flowing skirts with splashes of bright color to honor the culture of the Rwandan people. Humility is key.

We are who we are, and we want our personalities to be reflected on the outside. But we can be who we are while still honoring a few preferences of differing cultures. If you serve people in a lower-income neighborhood than your own, dressing in designer high heels and fancy pantsuits may not be the best choice for a Sunday service. Likewise, if you serve in a church where every woman in the congregation wears dresses to services, leggings aren’t a viable option. Moderation, moderation, moderation in everything.

“You be you, Boo” has become our modern-day war cry. But if we go too far down the rabbit hole of that mantra, we might forget the command to die to ourselves. It’s a tricky balance! Yes, display the real you. Wear what fits the personality God

gave you. Get the cute tattoo. But keep it humble, because pride will erode ministries like cancer. Don't be the church leader who likes to make a point rather than make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, our identity is not tied to how we present ourselves on the outside. The inside will eventually outshine all our veneers. And if we have been made new in Christ, *He* is our identity. We have the head knowledge of this truth, but sometimes we need more heart knowledge.

If your heart has forgotten, let's take a trip down Scripture lane, shall we?

My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (Eph. 2:10)

Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.
(Ps. 139:14)

Our Father created us, died for us, saved us, and sustains us. He is everything we need and always will be.

When Christ is our identity, everything else falls away: the pressure to live up to a false narrative of what a pastor's wife should look like; the suffocating, legalistic guidelines tradition has placed upon us; the lie that our personalities should be under lock and key so as to not draw too much attention to ourselves; the fear of our outward appearance not being good enough for our church people. It's not all about us. In every possible way, it is all about Him. Christ is enough, and He is making us enough.

The Narcissistic Pastor's Wife

As podcasters and pastors' wives, we've heard our fair share of strange stories *from* pastors' wives and *about* pastors' wives. One story a friend on social media shared about her pastor's wife had us bowing our heads in vicarious embarrassment. This pastor's wife had an assistant who stuck to her side on Sundays, keeping her water bottle filled and tissues on hand. And when it came time for the service to begin, the pastor's wife positioned herself on the platform for everyone to see, her attitude and actions totally out of sync with the church's culture. In her eyes, being a pastor's wife equaled royalty.

Narcissism is an epidemic that has run rampant among clergy for years. We don't like to admit it, but it's true. Church hurt, spiritual abuse, and other destructive fruits of narcissism aren't just buzzwords we toss around on social media (and we will talk about that in a later chapter). They are a virus attacking the church from every direction, and pastors' wives aren't immune to the destruction.

We need to check our hearts. Let's not be the ones whose actions shout, "I don't care what you think. I'll wear what I want to wear, do what I want to do, and pierce what I want to pierce, and you can't do a thing about it!" Instead, we can consider the culture of the community God has called us to serve and stay humble in our decisions.

We know it's unhealthy for a church to dictate what a pastor's wife should wear. That should be a decision she and her husband make in the privacy of their own home. But we can choose to open our eyes to our church's atmosphere and be humble enough to make respectful choices. Balance is key. Our outward appearance should never be our primary concern. Our willingness to learn, seek humility, and love our neighbors well is what matters in the long run.

To sum it all up: Love God. Love people. Get the tattoo.