

Every time I read this letter I'm deeply touched. I believe that any church leader who reads this would feel the ring of truth it has. They would know that this sister is touching very sensitive nerves in the realities of life for pastors and their wives. Of course, there are nuances, variations and a few exceptions -- but the fact remains, she has accurately portrayed the contours of how life goes among religious leaders. Most strikingly, she has been vulnerable and honest. -- J.Z.

LETTER FROM A PASTOR'S WIFE

Austin Miles: "Go to church for a blessing and get slaughtered. This theme is all too prevalent in the letters you are about to read. The first one is an open, very personal letter from the wife of a former Assemblies of God minister who now lives in Colorado."

Sunday, August 13, 1989
5:00 P.M.

Dear Mr. Miles:

I started reading your book *Don't Call Me Brother* at 7:45 this morning and finished it about half an hour ago. Although I had work to do today at my bookkeeping business, and laundry besides, there is no way I could put your book down. You told the story of my life experience with the Assemblies of God.

I don't want to bore you with more horror stories, but I want to share this with you and to say thank you. Until now, I had the recurring thought in the back of my head that maybe they were right – maybe there's something wrong with me.

I was raised A.G. My mom was converted shortly after she married my dad, whose father was an A.G. pastor for years – he saved souls on Sunday and verbally and physically abused his wife and seven children the rest of the week, all who are dysfunctional to this day.

My mom's salvation put a big gulf between her and my dad. They're still married, but both are extremely unhappy. My dad thinks he's been cheated because mom is no fun – mom has been cheated out of having a happy Christian home. They've raised six children in this atmosphere, who are also dysfunctional.

I grew up a rebel, mostly inside, but I did my share of beer parties and sex with boys I didn't even know. I lost my virginity before I was nine to an uncle 6 years older than me. I enjoyed the attention (my dad basically ignored me) until it became a pretty big burden. So I told my parents – my mom blamed me.

I spent the next years of my life trying to redeem myself with my mom, without succeeding, until I got saved. As far as she's concerned, you aren't acceptable if you aren't saved. My dad was good to us, but mom let us know that no matter how good he was, he was unacceptable because he wasn't saved.

I went to church quite a bit during junior high and high school, and was fed full of the “don'ts” – don't date, don't wear make-up, don't dance, don't go to movies, don't wear jeans or shorts, don't play cards, don't cut your hair, don't drink, don't smoke, don't kiss – and you'll end up in hell for sure if you have sex before you're married.

According to them I was already doomed – so I tried all the harder. Every time there was an altar call, I went down – and repented – and repented – and repented.

Somewhere about sixteen I decided there was no point and quit going to church. I lived with my mother's disapproval until May 1, 1970 – eight days before my 21st birthday.

On that evening the new pastor of the A.G. church in town and his wife came to see me. I had been dating a black baseball player, and was falling in love with him. Our small town was extremely prejudiced and I wondered what God had to say about it. I never found out – the pastor got onto salvation and wouldn't leave until I got down on my knees and named every sin I could think of and repented of it. It was after midnight, I didn't feel wonderful, or great, or relieved, or holy – only tired.

I tried very hard in the next three years to play the game. I did what they told me, dressed like they told me, talked like they told me. I went to church every time the doors opened, I tithed and gave, I clapped and sang and cried and prayed, but I didn't know God – or Jesus Christ. So – I clapped and prayed all the harder, still repenting every chance I got.

I met my future husband around Thanksgiving 1972, where else but church? I fell hard, but never felt worthy of him. He had not done all the horrible things I had done; he was gentle and everyone liked him. And – most of all – he had a *call* on his life, God had called him into *the ministry*! This did not particularly bother me until I realized that in order for this to happen, I would have to go through a total transformation – I was totally unacceptable as a pastor's wife.

So the “transformation” began. I attended weekly counseling sessions with the pastor, went to pastors' retreats and meeting with Matthew (my fiancé) and attended more religious services than I could count. I could only associate with Christians, so I dropped my other friends, one by one. The church became my whole life – but I was dead inside. I had no assurance that God even knew who I was; if He did, I was sure He didn't like me – I was unacceptable.

The biggest problem I had with the A.G. leadership was my unwillingness to accept whatever they put out just because they said so. I asked questions, and I expected answers, real ones, not just A.G. doctrine or rules. My goal was to know God, not climb the A.G. ladder to success.

Matthew and I got married anyway, even if I wasn't exactly a model pastor's wife, and moved to Minneapolis so Matthew could go to Bible school.

Until that time, Matthew was inclined to go along with the A.G. pastor's wife definition – you know what I'm talking about, you've seen plenty of them. He couldn't understand why I was so set on rocking the boat. He had a pretty low self-esteem and he had visions of grandeur fueled by the A.G. leadership's assurance of a “high” call of God on his life.

To be frank, life in Minneapolis was hell! Here I was, a newlywed, away from home for the first time, with a husband who could only think of the church, the church. I had a very clear distinction between God and the

church – Matthew and almost every preacher (and preacher’s wife) I’ve met saw them as the same thing. That gave them license to neglect their families in order to build churches “for God.” And do you know, most of their wives accepted, no, they *encouraged* this behavior, and became martyrs themselves, “for God.”

When Matthew started doing this as a youth pastor in a small Iowa church, I came unglued. At the time we had our two children, a one-year old girl, and a newborn son, and I needed help. But Matthew was off saving souls and counseling. To make it worse, everyone assured me he was doing the right thing and I had better get used to it. One pastor, hearing me complain, went so far as to tell Matthew he’d better get me under control or I’d ruin his ministry.

Those were the loneliest and most unhappy years of my life. I went through the motions as best I could, but inside I felt hurt, mad, and most of all betrayed by a God and a man, who both were supposed to love me. It finally got to the point where I sat down in my chair and vowed not to get up until I knew God was real. I sat there two days and got no answers, so I got up – I had kids to take care of. But something died inside – if there was a God, He didn’t care about me. I was just handy; Matthew needed a wife and I was available – the sacrifice for his ministry – his church.

Then a couple came into our lives, sent to us directly by God, who loved us – both of us, not just Matthew. They recognized my value as a person in my own right. For the first time I saw the love of God shine through a person in the form of total acceptance and total approval – just as I was. They were *not* A.G.

We left the Assemblies of God and submitted ourselves to the ministry of this couple for the next four years. A lot of healing took place in me and Matthew learned a lot, about priorities and about the difference between God and the church. I credit that couple with saving our marriage.

At the end of three years we went back to the Assemblies of God, and sat in a very large church for two years, before the pastor admitted to adultery and left the church in October 1983. It was hard for the church, but somehow we were personally spared. We loved him and still do, but we weren’t looking to any man for that heavy degree of leadership we had before.

Two years later we submitted to the interrogation that A.G. puts its ministers through. I felt that it was degrading, but did it for Matthew. After all, he had his “call,” and I was still intimidated by it.

Because our former pastor was Assistant District Superintendent, and I wasn't on very good terms with him (I was not “submissive”), we applied for and got a small church in the Colorado mountains.

In this beautiful setting I was forced to personally start cutting through the garbage and come face to face with God.

I had come to Colorado as – once again – a martyr *and* as a submissive wife. Back in Des Moines I had been going to college – to get a degree in accounting and become a CPA, a lifelong dream. We moved August 1985, just after I had been awarded an \$8,000/year scholarship to Drake University. Knowing how badly Matthew wanted to pastor, and assured that God would reward my sacrifice, I turned it down.

I was rewarded all right. I moved from a fair-sized city, with all its shopping conveniences, to a town of 1800 (during hunting season), over a mountain and 120 miles from anywhere. Everyone wore cowboy boots and carried a gun in their pickup. There were no sidewalks and all we could find to live in was a trailer with a roof that vibrated in the wind. Everyone was either a rancher, a logger or worked for the railroad. College was out, and neither of us could find work. The forty families who were supposed to be supporting us turned out to be three or four, and the pastor in the next town, who had brought us there did just that – brought us there and left us on our own.

I came unglued – I was furious – with Matthew, with the town, with the pastor in the next town, with the Assemblies of God, and with God Himself. I screamed and bawled and broke things and threatened lives – here I was being sacrificed again for a stupid church.

I have to relate one incident to you – it was the only satisfaction I had for over a year. The pastor from the next town (the one who brought us out there) and his wife stopped by one day. I was not in a particularly good mood, but I felt obligated to invite them in and at least be cordial. The four of us made small talk for a while, and then they asked me how I was doing. I told them – directly and to the point. In there somewhere I mentioned that I was mad at God. The pastor's wife, good little Christian that she was,

assured me that this was not possible – no one who loved God could be mad at Him; it just wasn't done. I assured her that that was indeed the situation, and she just wouldn't let it drop. I had several months of anger, rejection and betrayal stored up, so I let her have it – verbally. At that point her husband felt obligated to step in, since Matthew hadn't made any attempt to get his wife under control. He got up and started toward me, saying something about praying for me (when all else fails, pastors resort to prayer). I told him to stay away from me, not to touch me, and he's better not dare pray for me. By this time his wife was on her way to the car – she probably thought I was demon-possessed.

I felt wonderful. Right or wrong, I had been honest and had stood up for myself – and to a preacher. They never came to our house again.

Matthew did eventually get a job in November and I got one 1 ½ years later, and we pastured our church.

One thing we picked up right away. No one in the district headquarters in Denver cared about us and our twenty-five people – unless we played the game. First of all, in spite of severe financial circumstances, we were expected to attend all pastor's conferences, fellowships, and district meetings. Matthew did, once in a while when his work schedule permitted, but I wouldn't go at all. Those people are about as real as stone statues in a museum. Then we were expected to have evangelists and missionaries in to speak. Our church couldn't even pay rent on a building – there was no way it could pay a special speaker; no one came for free. And – most of all – they wanted us to put up a building. The only regular tithers we had were ourselves, and we couldn't afford to make payments on a building.

When the district saw that we wouldn't play, they left us alone – totally. We received no support, no fellowship, no encouragement. But – we were offered a bigger church after two years. I guess we had proved ourselves somehow by sticking it out that long in a little cow town, so they gave us the opportunity to start our own climb to the top.

We said “no, thank you” and stayed another year. In that time our people started going to another “full gospel” church in town, and we felt released to move on. In that time we had also bought a bookkeeping business about forty miles away, so we moved there. The pastor who hired us took a bigger church, with a Christian school, the next step on his ladder.

And we got off. When it came time to renew Matthew's license, they wrote us and told us that we "owed" the district some money in unpaid tithes and they wouldn't renew his license until we paid. We decided that if we had to pay to do God's will, there was something definitely wrong – so we once again said "no, thank you."

We haven't been to church since January 1988, and haven't missed it. We were pursued for a while, but I'm sure we've been written off by now, and I'm glad.

What's encouraging to me is that I have a better relationship with God, the *person*, than ever. How it began was I heard someone talking about standing naked before God. My first reaction to that was, "Puke! No way!" But the thought wouldn't leave. As I mulled it over, it occurred to me that God saw me that way anyway, and more. He knew my thoughts and He knew what was in my heart. So I decided to try it. As I was alone one day I sat in my favorite chair and came to God – naked. I told Him I wasn't sure about the Bible. I knew He wrote it, but I also knew stupid ego-centered men had interpreted it, and I felt they had screwed up its meaning horribly and had used it to manipulate people and build empires for themselves.

I told Him I didn't mind talking to Him, but that I had no idea how to pray. Most of what I had learned about praying was used to try to manipulate Him – as if anyone could.

So I wasn't going to read or pray anymore, but I would do my best to come before Him naked and be honest. In return I expected Him to be honest with me.

Then I did something else. I told Him I knew there were places in my life that needed to be healed – places I didn't want to look at, and some that I was unable to look at. But I wanted Him to look at them. I wanted Him to see all of me – inside and out – to see if He could still love and accept and even approve of me if He saw it all.

He did! Not right then, and I didn't get any tingles or see lights, nor was I slain in the Spirit. I didn't see or hear anything. In fact, I sort of forgot I'd even said it. But every once in a while, I'd think of something I'd done that made me feel unacceptable, and it didn't hurt. I felt no shame. I didn't feel

the need to repent again. I wasn't happy about it, but I didn't feel degraded or second-class.

That's where I am. My mom and some of my brothers and sisters still go to the A.G. church in their town, but I won't go. That man is evil, building himself an empire in God's name. He's destined to fall, and hard. I tell my family that every chance I get. So far, they haven't listened. Like 90% of the "Christians," they equate God with the church and feel they must go to be saved. Anyway why wouldn't they? They're told that from the time they get there until they leave. They also look at the pastor as only slightly lower than God and a lot more accessible. This boosts the pastor's ego, so he's careful to maintain and encourage that concept.

I love God so much, and it breaks my heart to see what's happening. There's going to be a lot of surprised people left after Jesus comes back, whenever that happens. And I'm sorry for them. But – we all make choices. If it's church we want, we can have it. If it's recognition we want, we can find it. But if it's God we want, He'll see to it that we find Him. He looks at our heart and sees what our real desires are. In spite of the garbage, He was, and is, there for me. He will be for you, too.

Thank you again for having the courage to write your book. I'm sure it will be explained away to a lot of devout A.G. people, but there are those of us out there who dare to think for themselves, who are very grateful for some confirmation that perhaps they've been right all along.

As soon as I finished your book, my husband Matthew read it; it took him longer than one day, but not much. I'm happy to say that it has changed his life.

The result of your book and our discussion was that he took eleven days off and went back and confronted some people about how they affected his marriage and his life. He finally cut the strings binding him to his parents, especially his mother, and headed on to Iowa and the pastor who was the most influential in our lives, and started the whole mess rolling.

I give you permission to use my letter and my experience in any way that will help others who are going or have gone through the same thing. I remember how alone and lonely I felt, and how that feeling made me doubt myself and almost accept what they were feeding me as God and truth. If I

can be a part of keeping others from doing that and make their hurt and confusion somewhat less, then let's do it.

-- M.P., former pastor's wife, current lover of God

[The opening remarks by the author and the letter from M.P. are taken from *Setting the Captives Free: Victims of the Church Tell Their Stories* by Austin Miles (Prometheus Books, 1990), pp. 17-26. Used with permission.]