

# PASTORS RETREAT NETWORK

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## The Female Cardinal Syndrome

Published by: Ingrid Lawrenz, MSW

date: 8/23/2003

At a garden party one crisp, sunny spring day, my guests were commenting on the numerous active birds in the yard. They know I was an amateur naturalist so they were seeking me out to make identifications. There were playful warblers, chickadees and finches, the calm mourning doves, the noisy grackles and proud woodpeckers. However, suddenly, with a knowing cheer of delight, all saw and recognized a brilliant red cardinal alight on the cedar tree. This popular bird has often adorned greeting cards, calendars and paintings. He needed no introduction. Someone then casually queried if that brownish bird feeding on the ground was a large sparrow. Actually, the bright male had taken all the attention away from his lovely bride, the female cardinal. God did not make all birds this way. The sexes of the robins, bluejays and even parakeets are indistinguishable by color; but for some species the ornate males lure the attention of predators away from the nests. That color also serves to enhance their courtship rituals!

Later that summer a fellow ministry wife and I were ministering together at a large family camp. We were using our various gifts effectively - serving, loving, socializing, and all-around working hard. We blended into the routine inconspicuously but with expectations of being productive without the need for shepherding. We both noticed and started to joke about the change in demeanor and fanfare people would shift into whenever our pastor-husbands would come around. We female cardinals were passed by as people were en route to them. They were greeted cheerfully, sought after for conversations and their stories were always laughed at. Some ministry wives are also "flashy" colorful birds like their mates; but I believe many are the lovely, gifted, better camouflaged and therefore lesser acknowledged species. This dynamic can be true for any spouse of a highly visible person.

On the one hand it's nice to be the female cardinal; the attention and pressure aren't all on you. You're freer to do your nesting and go about your business unnoticed, with some, but fewer, expectations. However, blending into the bushes can get old too: waiting in line to talk to him at church, doing the "single-parent thing" on Sundays and going to any public place and waiting while he chats and laughs with parishioners. If your own church is large, it is especially embarrassing when you're greeted in coffee fellowship and asked if you're a first-time visitor. This can be an almost humorous reality to accept and relax in, or it can become a bitter point of jealousy and resentment.

The public side can be painful, but the private side has its own pain as well. Your husband is the need-meeter, taking time to help all the hurting families. He is the good listener; the compassionate, empathetic, wise counselor; the gifted communicator. He may even be the dream husband other women in the congregation wish they had. You are proud of him, but you find yourself wondering where the dream husband is when he enters his own home. It is his job, his role, his calling to be those things for his flock, but when he comes home to you he is just an ordinary man. He is exhausted and he needs down time. A man of real integrity is the same intrinsic person at the church or in the home; but in reality, he is just a flawed needy guy like the rest of us. Yet, an illusion can exist in our female cardinal brains, that he should be all those wonderful things in an extra special "making up" way to us. We don't want the ordinary man; we want the pastor to pastor us. We want the knight in shining armor to rescue us. We've bought into the fairy tale.

This attitude contributes to the bitterness and dissatisfaction many ministry wives feel. It's no wonder 80 percent of ministry wives are unhappy in their role resulting in the exit of so many families from ministry. I've spoken with many wives who feel neglected. They expect his job skills to be his home skills too. They are jealous of the church and almost consider her his mistress. (Granted, some pastors do almost completely neglect their own families. They wrongly prefer the role and the attention to the hard work of intimacy.)

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Could it be that we sometimes put all our "eggs" in one basket? Is he really supposed to be husband, pastor, daddy, lover, teacher and counselor? Are you looking to him to fill your emotional tank instead of being responsible for yourself before God? You may be the only person he can be out of "role" with; his equal, his mutual helpmate and friend. It is with you he can let his feathers down, be insecure, vulnerable, tired, silly, confused, sad, and relaxed. He can't be your pastor and your friend and soul mate. Personally, I'd rather have my husband as my soul mate, and together we can look to our Heavenly Father (the lover of sparrows) for our care.

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