the Minister's Wife

a memoir of faith
doubt
friendship
loneliness
forgiveness
and more

Karen Stiller

Karen Stiller has written exquisitely and powerfully about life; it just so happens that her window on the world is that of a clergy spouse. Here is a memoir about the joys and sorrows, the pathos and the delights of giving and receiving, of knowing and being known and walking the Christian journey with grace and integrity. Karen's honesty will both surprise and encourage you. You will be refreshed by her lack of platitude, cliché, and religious jargon.

GORDON T. SMITH, PhD, professor of systematic and spiritual theology and president, Ambrose University, Calgary, Alberta

Pastors' wives are people too! Mark and I laughed, sighed, and sometimes cringed as we, through Karen's vivid stories, relived many of our own experiences in pastoral ministry. Who wants a pastoral couple at their Grey Cup party? And who wants you tagging along on their vacation? Karen's been there, done that. Yet she also beautifully evokes the sacred privilege of pastoral work, of the times we get to walk with others in their most difficult or joyous seasons. "Church hurts. Church heals." This is the wisdom at the heart of this book.

CHERYL BUCHANAN, spiritual director and speaker

MARK BUCHANAN, author, speaker, professor at Ambrose Seminary, and former pastor

We love Karen's bold and beautiful memoir! Transparent and vulnerable, funny and wise, uplifting and moving, it is a joy to read. If you're a minister's wife or a minister, you will see yourself in the pages of this book. If not, you'll get a rare and privileged look at what life is really like *inside* the fishbowl.

KEN SHIGEMATSU, senior pastor of Tenth Church, Vancouver, British Columbia, and author of *God in My Everything*

SAKIKO SHIGEMATSU, minister's wife and translator of *God in My Everything* (Japanese edition)

In *The Minister's Wife*, Karen Stiller skillfully and wholeheartedly draws readers into her day-to-day experiences, allowing us to see and feel the joys and struggles of being a minister's wife, pointing us always to trust God to lead and carry us.

ALLISON BEACH, wife of the archbishop of the Anglican Church in North America

Ministry can be described as both brutal and beautiful—"brutiful." Karen Stiller knows. With openness, honesty, and delightful reflection, Karen writes her story of living out her calling as a minister's wife. It's a story that will be understood by all who have fallen in love, obeyed that divine tug toward ministry, and entered into an adventure that was downright challenging, yet amazingly transforming. As a former minister's wife, I recalled my own journey while reading with captured attention. It's strange how reading through Karen's journey helped me make more sense of mine. Well-written and captivating, *The Minister's Wife* is hard to put down. Karen answers many questions that will help others see ministry as more beautiful than brutal.

MARGARET GIBB, founder and executive director of Women Together, Canada

Karen has perfectly captured the unique challenges facing clergy spouses. I commend her bravery for sharing her personal journey. This book is a tonic for those of us who feel inadequate and insecure in this role. It will also provide insight to church members who may not understand the expectations and pressures felt by pastoral partners. Karen's self-deprecating and humorous style makes this a very enjoyable read. I could hear her laughter throughout the book!

CATHY PARKER, clergy spouse

Honest. Realistic. Heartwarming and encouraging. You will laugh and cry and identify with Karen Stiller in her walk with Jesus as the minister's wife.

CHARLEEN ANDERSON, clergy spouse

In this winsome memoir, Karen Stiller hospitably welcomes us into her life as a minister's wife, courageously revealing struggles and challenges all of us will recognize, even if we don't live in similar fishbowls of scrutiny. With humor and transparency, Karen names aloud the kinds of thoughts, doubts, and failures we're often reluctant to confess, and she gently reminds us that we share this ordinary and rare, messy and grace-filled life together. What a gift.

SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN, author of the Sensible Shoes and Shades of Light series

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The Minister's Wife: A Memoir of Faith, Doubt, Friendship, Loneliness, Forgiveness, and More

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To Brent

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PROLOGUE

My husband, Brent, and I were on a weeklong vacation away from our three young kids, our busy work lives, and the dark, cold days of a Canadian winter. We had snatched up the last-minute deal online, taking advantage of visiting grandparents willing to be live-in babysitters. Soon after arriving, we met two other couples who became our fast friends at the Cuban resort. I don't remember now how we met, but I do remember the instant connection. I think we united around a shared aversion to walking on stilts or joining in on the Hula-Hoop competitions or any other group activities led by earnest resort staff. We had simply gotten along, and quickly.

We sat with them around the pool, reading those thick

paperback mysteries you take with you on vacation. We rented rickety bicycles from the resort and forced them up rutted dirt roads in the steaming heat, in search of yet another beach. Who knew the bikes would barely make it up a gentle hill? But on a rare tropical vacation in the company of lighthearted people, this just added to the fun.

A few evenings in, we shared a table for dinner at the resort restaurant, and as I excused myself to orbit the buffet yet again, I left everyone gabbing and laughing. When I returned just a few minutes later, plate piled high, they sat in silence, as if the lights had gone out in the conversation.

One look at Brent and I knew what had happened. "They finally asked what I do for a living," he said, attempting to break the awkwardness by naming the elephant that had lumbered into the room and now lounged at our table, huge and uncomfortable.

In previous conversations, the subject of work had never come up. But now they knew Brent was a pastor. At a church. And silence fell over the table. We had been having such a good time. I probably tried to say something funny, but nothing could have saved that dinner. We wrapped it up and called it a night.

The next day, one of the couples had grown colder than the January chill we were there to escape. All our laughter and banter screeched to a halt. The other couple broke open and leaned in close, as if they had just been waiting for a minister and his wife to show up on their vacation. Maybe they thought Brent had answers to some of their big questions

about life and pain and God, some explanation for all that had befallen them. They trusted he would listen and care. He did, of course.

Our vacation time was drawing to a close by then, and we had only a couple more awkward days where we let the others set the tone while we mostly kept to ourselves. Not everyone wants to hang out with a pastor while on vacation.

The reactions of the two couples—one freezing over, the other warming up—are not unusual. Being a pastor, and being married to one, is a complicated life and vocation. People may put you on a pedestal: They assume you are better, nicer, kinder, and more holy than you are. Or they may skedaddle: They assume you are unkind and judgmental, or just weird.

Two of our new (now previous) friends must have thought we were there to judge them. They were married—but not to each other, as the old country song goes. We had just listened when they told us that early in the week. Maybe that was the moment when Brent should have told them he was a minister, but it would have felt so awkward, like we were either condoning or condemning when all we really wanted to do was snorkel and enjoy the beach, like everybody else.

* * *

"Is your life really like a fishbowl?" a friend once asked. He had heard this about ministers and their families, that people tap on the glass and peer in, hoping to see some stuff—maybe piles of laundry or two people yelling at each other.

And I guess they think we are watching them, too, and it makes them uncomfortable.

So yes, I told my friend that I do think some people watch us to see how very good or how very bad we are, and they make assumptions about us—what we are really like or how we will act. But even as some people watch us, I know that God watches *over* us. That is what I have learned. It's a very different kind of watching, and it is lovely.

CHAPTER 1

Identity

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-3

I THOUGHT we were going to Africa. That was our simple and beautiful plan. We dreamed of living and serving in a place where we could be useful and the good to be done felt huge, right there at your feet and at your fingertips. We longed to live somewhere vast, where love would be pulled and poured out of us and we could do as Jesus said, comforting widows and orphans and feeding hungry people and sheltering them with love and solid ceilings that would never leak. The last thing we wanted was a typical middle-class North American existence. We both loved to travel, and we were attracted to the simplicity of living where you

didn't drown in plenty and where plenty didn't tempt you every single day.

We had both tasted that leaner life, just a nibble around the edges, before we met in university in 1988. Brent had been living wild and free in Burkina Faso, building fences around animals at a sanctuary and cataloging elephant dung for the scientists who lived at the wildlife preserve where he volunteered. I had just returned from the mountains of Colombia, where I had lived for a few months as part of a youth exchange program that helped me understand how large and gorgeous and painful the world really was—and that there was so much more of it beckoning me to explore. My life would forever stretch beyond North America, or so I hoped. I did not want my world to snap back to a size small.

As a newly married couple, we began to dream together about a future overseas, living simple, serving lives. When Brent completed his master of divinity degree in 1994 from a seminary in Vancouver, heading off to East Africa was a tender dream that seemed to be coming true.

Brent was going to help start a Bible college in Tanzania at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro. In our minds, we were floating down a warm tropical river in the exact right direction. We met regularly with the man who had the vision for the college and dreamed about what was to come. Our undergraduate degrees in international development studies were still shiny and new, like our marriage certificate, and would be so useful—or so we thought. *We* were going to be so useful.

* * *

When you pursue an MDiv, you intern at a local church. It's the hands-on, practical side of the training. At the church where he was assigned, Brent helped the minister with various duties, like visiting the sick and elderly, running the Sunday school, preaching occasionally, and learning how churches work behind the scenes. He was also thrown headfirst into the drama that besieged this particular congregation, which involved a group of people who had grown discontented with their priest. It was a mutiny, like we were on a pirate ship.

My daydream of our little house in a land far away grew even more appealing because here was church gone wrong, right in front of my face. The minister and his wife confided in us over coffee breaks and dinners, and I could see how painful it all was for them.

A deep and deadly wound to their marriage began then, and they would eventually divorce. There was nothing appealing about what we were seeing. Africa still beckoned with her warm and welcoming hand.

But one Sunday during Brent's final year of study, I sat alone in my pew and observed him move around up front, doing liturgical and lovely things behind the altar as he helped set up for Communion. There is movement and order and precision in these visible parts of worship. This sacred art is passed on from priest to priest, and I was watching my husband's new friend, the minister so weary of his church's infighting, mentor Brent in these movements.

Just as he was receiving an education in church division,

Brent was being schooled in the objects of worship: things like fair white linen, with sharp creases ironed in by members of the chancel guild (a fierce army of older women you do not mess with), and the delicate silver cruet, polished to a high shine and slid into a purple velvet bag that is tied with a satin ribbon between Sunday appearances. It contains the water that is poured over the minister's hands just before he raises up a chunk of torn bread and says, "This is the body of Christ, broken for you."

Brent was learning that the burse goes on the veil goes on the pall goes on the paten goes on the purificator that drapes over the chalice that holds the wine brought to the people who are on their knees, hands held out to receive. And the minister is called to be right there in that black shirt and white collar, with his own past and future, and with how silly he can be and how loud he plays his music and how quickly he honks his horn in traffic, and with his own gigantic questions and unknowing, and yes, with his startled wife sitting there. Ministers know they have been asked to do this work, and all that comes with it. They have said yes to this call.

I watched. I could see that this leading of people into worship, and the provision of Communion itself, were beautiful and necessary to our lives in Christ. This beauty I was seeing was church, and it offered life. And just as clearly as if Jesus had slid into the pew beside me (late to arrive, but able to get away with that because people are just so relieved he showed up) and tugged me close and whispered with kindness in my ear, I knew Brent belonged in this exact kind of place, and

that because we belonged together, so did I. We were not going to Africa. We were going to church.

As it turned out, Jesus whispered in Brent's ear, too, so my husband reached out to bishops who might take him on as a postulant—someone headed to the priesthood, on the track to ordination in the Holy Orders in the Anglican Church. Naturally, we were doing all this backward. You're supposed to have a bishop cheering you on before you enroll in seminary, not in your last year when God says, "No, sweethearts" to Tanzania.

Brent crafted his emails to the bishops, and I remained sad over losing my African dream. "I can live anywhere in Canada," I said to Brent, "but not Saskatchewan." I was young. I didn't know how beautiful that quiet, gentle province could be.

Three weeks later, we sold our last shred of cool—the beloved cherry-red Volkswagen camper van that had putt-putted into our hearts, up mountains, down into valleys, and through weekend camping trips filled with games of Scrabble in its musty old interior. We miss it still.

We crammed our belongings into an old gray Volvo station wagon that ultimately wouldn't handle the deep cold we were heading to any better than our old van could have. We spent our last minutes in Vancouver shoving dirty laundry into all the available crevices of our wagon and saying tearful goodbyes. The bishop who had tentatively decided to sponsor Brent in the ordained parish ministry wanted him immediately in the far reaches of, yes, Saskatchewan.

Brent became a minister. I became a minister's wife.

* * *

There was a funeral early on, Brent's first. It was for a tiny baby, a bloom of a girl who had barely lived. Her mother, a teenager, had selected a coffin covered in white faux fur, not much bigger than a shoebox. The coffin was on a small table at the front of the funeral home chapel. The baby's father, a teenage boy, stood outside behind a tree, and that is where he stayed.

When I walked into the chapel beside Brent, who wore his clerical collar for one of the first times, the funeral director bowed his head toward me and inquired as to whether I would play the organ. I said no. I didn't play the organ or any other instrument, but clearly there had been a minister's wife in the past who had.

But what was I doing there on that sad day, in that tragic room where it felt as if there were no air? It's not like I had to attend; it's not like ministers' spouses were required to show up at every wedding or funeral or come-and-go tea for Hank and Heather, fifty years married. I would have preferred to bolt and roam around town on that ugly day. But I wanted to support Brent. It was his job to keep it all together, to create and maintain a prayerful atmosphere, to move the family through this important ritual of goodbye and also to lead them in worship—because that also happens at funerals.

It is difficult to lead people in worship in the presence of a dead baby in a teeny coffin that is right beside you on a small table. I thought that this first funeral of Brent's might

be one of the most difficult ones he would ever have, so I wanted to help him by being present with a calm assurance. I wanted him to be able to glance down when he needed to and see a loving, nodding face encouraging and reassuring him. I would be strong for him.

I sobbed through the entire funeral. I burst into tears with the first strains of the slow, sad country ballad about a dream being just like a river, and from there I could not stop, not even for a minute. Brent avoided looking at me.

When I thought it could not get any worse, we went to a small reception at the home of the teenage mom and her parents and brothers and sisters, the place where her bedroom was just down the hall, with all her teenage stuff and maybe even a crib she and her dad had already assembled. I did not want to go. Sitting through the saddest funeral in Saskatchewan was bad enough, but to voluntarily sit down at the same round table as grief, eat a sandwich across from sorrow, and drink tea from great-grandmother's dainty cups full of anguish would all be too much. I preferred to forget—or maybe never learn—that babies' lives can end so quickly. And I was terrified of the stupid things I might say. What if I accidentally asked about the boy behind the tree?

But I went anyway. I had to. Brent had to. It wasn't about us. It was about showing up and walking straight in the door, even though I was full of fear. I took my lead from Brent and said safe things only—"I'm so sorry. And yes, please, I will have more tea. This is a beautiful cup."

* * *

I notice other ministers' wives. I'm curious about how they carry out their roles, how front-and-center they are, even what they are wearing. Almost always, I think they are doing it better than I am. Some women seem to have a knack. I visited a church in Florida where the minister's wife sat in the very first row, where it seemed to me you couldn't get away with any twitching, sneaking a look at your phone, or refereeing wars between your children, who are the worst-behaved children in church. That's why I never sit that close to the front.

When this woman's husband wrapped things up and was about to recess out—in that church and in ours, the clergy file in during the processional and file out during the recessional, like a parade—the minister paused as he passed his wife's pew and offered her his hand. She stood, and they marched out together, arms pumping. Jaunty. Maybe they just couldn't wait to get to lunch, but it seemed like more than that to me. It seemed like an announcement: "She's with me! I'm with him!" The congregation beamed at them as they walked by and seemed proud of their couple.

It struck me that this is not something Brent and I would ever do. I could not pull that off, and Brent would never pull me out of my seat. That is one way of doing things, but it is not our way. He has always told whatever church he serves that I am his wife but also simply another member of the congregation—we are not a "buy one get one free" deal. I would be myself and figure out my place in the community like everybody else.

In some ways, this approach has not worked at all. People still think you are a little more together than normal, or I guess they hope you are because your husband is up there preaching all the time about good and holy things, about surviving the world and how to love it well. They think you know how to turn the church photocopier on and why kids get cancer, and that you want to say grace at the annual spaghetti dinner when your husband is home with a fever. They haven't seen your closet or inside your cupboards, although if you leave certain people alone in your kitchen, they will look. They haven't heard you yell, and they don't know what you did when you were seventeen and then again at twenty-two because you cannot learn your lesson the first time, but only the hard way. They haven't seen inside your heart, which is as confused as anyone else's. If anything, the expectation people have that a minister's wife might be more on the spiritual ball than the average bear has made me even more aware of my flaws—and my claws.

But not all expectations are bad. Some save you. For me, one is the expectation that I will be there and belong. That I will show up and be part of this faith and of this or that church—big or small, east or west, city or country—year after year, hardly missing a beat and rarely a Sunday, and never a good rummage sale. Showing up and choosing to belong have been ways I have loved my husband well and learned to love God better, and certainly the people who bug me. To belong is a discipline that helps me to believe. The conviction I have that I need to appear at church—and

probably not every minister's spouse feels this way—has tethered me when I might have otherwise floated away, as the best-hearted people sometimes do.

I have seen enough people drift away from their faith to know that holding on to mine is what is best for me. And church, with all its imperfections, is faith's incubator. Church is faith's hospital and its picnic grounds, its sheltering tree and also the rich soil from which it grows. Church embraces faith and holds it tenderly with strong arms. It embraces me. And so I love the church, even when it expects more of me than I think it should.

But there are some expectations that make you sit up straighter and occasionally iron your shirt—which makes you feel neat and tidy. These are expectations that help you attend to your soul and abide. Abiding is big. Jesus tells his fickle, frightened followers to abide in him, and he promises that he will abide in them. It is that simple and that hard. This is the deal Jesus and I have struck together: I will stay put. I abide.

* * *

Jessie is a mom in our church. One day she asked whether I could help her by picking up her son Max from school and keeping him company for a few hours while she went to an appointment. Jessie is in her twenties and crochets shawls in sky blues and deep grassy greens. She is our church's unofficial dancer, swaying and lifting her bare arms into the air and twirling her hands as if she were a ballerina, but better. Max's little brother, Nico, is attached to Jessie with

a beautiful woven cloth knotted to her waist in a way that makes me inwardly cluck with worry. He never falls out, though. Jessie knows what she is doing.

I say yes to lending a hand with Max, who is a first-grade stick of dynamite. He is all yells and bluster, charging from spot to spot. I hold my breath whenever he gallops up the side aisle of the church at full speed, ducking and darting around ladies; one time he ran straight into a pillar in a Sunday school room, which did slow him down for a second.

On Friday I arrived at the school's side gate on Lockhart Road with my dog, Dewey, a large and playful goldendoodle. It had been years since I picked up someone else's young child at school, and I was nervous. The last time I was supposed to do it, I forgot. First the principal's office called me, then Ben's mother. But on this day I was on time, and with my happy dog. I had brought Dewey because I thought Max would like him. I wanted Max to enjoy the celebrity-level attention that routinely happens when accompanying my dog in public places.

Before Max came out, head bobbing along in the river of kids flowing from the school, the teacher at the side gate grilled me as we stood beside the big red sign that said, "No Dogs Allowed." I told her I was there to pick up Max, the son of a friend.

"Do you have a note from his mother?" she asked me.

"No, I don't," I answered.

"Will Max have a note from his mother?"

"I have no idea," I replied. "I hope so."

She told me I couldn't take Max without a note.

"Well, let's wait and see," I said, and prayed that Max would have a note.

Then he was there at my side, wearing his giant backpack like a turtle in his shell. He clutched a soccer ball and hopped from one foot to the other. One skinny arm squeezed Dewey's head in a side hug. Max had a note.

Then, "This is my priest's wife!" he bellowed. "This is my priest's wife!"

People swiveled to look. A hush seemed to fall on the entire surrounding neighborhood. The teacher who asked for the note looked sheepish and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," I said. "It's good you have that rule."

Why is she apologizing?

I thought I knew. I am a minister's wife, so I must be more reliable and honest than the average complete stranger. And wasn't it silly, and didn't she feel awkward requiring documentation from a *minister's wife* to take a child who was not her own from the schoolyard?

"It's a miracle I even remembered to come. I'm no more reliable or better than you are," I wanted to say. This was the lonely, set-apart place of ministry that I found confusing. It is Jesus who is good and reliable and never late and always shows up. The rest of us are just stumbling behind together.

I was right to bring Dewey. We walked to my car with Max calling out, "Look! Look at this dog! He's my friend! Look!" to the kids boarding buses or crying or getting in trouble with their mothers already.

At my house, Max was too busy to have the snack I offered, and he jumped quickly into a chat about Catholicism, because why not?

"Is Brent our pope?" Max asked me.

"Nope," I answered. It was Brent's day off, and he spent much of Max's visit collapsed on the red couch in our living room. I was glad he wasn't our pope, because what would Max think then?

Max, in fact, seemed quite comfortable in our house and not at all thrown by Brent and all his loafing—more comfortable than I would have been as a kid entering the mysterious realm of the minister's home.

Our family attended church almost every Sunday when I was a child. It seemed everyone went to church back then. It was weird if you didn't go. Now it's weird if you do.

One day I was in the white clapboard house, the manse that had housed so many ministers and their families. The house stood alone on the edge of the church parking lot, set apart, across from the graveyard where my older sister Miriam and I would sometimes wander, diligent not to step on the grass where we thought the bodies were buried.

I always lingered for a chilling moment at the grave site of the children called the Babes in the Woods, two sisters who had died in 1842, lost in the forest that was now subdivisions and schools, the bowling alley and the Kmart. Their deaths puzzled me. How had this safe suburbia, so known and predictable to me, been a place of such peril? And it was impossible to imagine my sister—who, as part of

her weekly routine, would pin me down and drool on my glasses—holding me tenderly in the cold as the two of us curled up together under a tree, dying. But then we would tear out through the narrow metal gates together, lighter on our feet than before, simply from realizing we were still alive and breathing.

The ministers' families lived a stone's throw from that graveyard until they started buying their own houses to avoid the poverty that always seemed to come with retirement. It fascinated me to wander around that house, now used for church meetings and Sunday school activities—which must have been the reason I was there. There was a kitchen, proof that ministers' families ate like other people. There was a washroom, of course, and it shocked me there would be a gleaming white porcelain toilet in a house built for ministers. Somehow I had not realized that our minister used the bathroom. It jolted me. How could someone holy be so bodily? Did the minister bellow for more toilet paper like my dad did?

Somewhere around that time, I started to become friends with Marian, our minister's daughter. I remember kind and quiet Mrs. Dempsey, Marian's mother and the only minister's wife from my childhood that I can recall. I couldn't imagine her playing bridge in our living room with my mother, holding court at her card table. My mom smoked cigarettes and owned a glittery jumpsuit that made her look exotic for our town. My mom drank rye whiskey and 7UP and yakked on the phone that hung on one of the bright orange walls in the kitchen she

cursed daily for being so small. She sang old camp songs when we drove long distances, cajoling my sister and me to sing along, which we did. My mother led sing-alongs on our class trips, a reliable chaperone who came along whenever she could and always brought the fun, like it was packed in her big purse.

Now I know that Mrs. Dempsey must have been as full of mystery, beauty, and battle as any other mother. But I didn't know that then. Maybe she and my mom would have been great friends, if they had allowed themselves.

At our house, on the day of Max's visit, I gave him the run of the place. I think he liked being there, rattling through our saved LEGOs, pulling out this and that and piecing them together. He exploded through closed doors, peeked in drawers, and grilled me about anything that crossed his mind.

Downstairs, Max ripped open the Star Wars Risk game I had spent too much money on one Christmas. No one here will ever touch it. "Go ahead, Max," I said.

The next Sunday at church, Max was down front receiving Communion. I watched him. He was a little bird trembling at the rail, ready to fly off and get back to busy. Max raised his right arm and crossed himself, left to right and back again, with a vigor and energy rarely seen in that simple, holy action. I was glad I was a witness.