

## **Reflections on Leadership: from a former MSA Sponsor**

By Angela Jackson

I attended my first General Conference (GC) Session in Toronto, Canada in 2000. It was there that I was introduced to 'Shepherdess' meetings. Instantly, I was inspired and encouraged by women with a shared purpose: to support their spouse, each other, and those they served in ministry.

Just the year before, my husband had entered a master's program at Newbold College in England, majoring in Theology. Our two young children and I went with him, leaving our familiar hometown to support his call to ministry. What lay ahead was uncertainty and the unknown life of a minister's spouse. Shepherdess meetings gave me a glimpse of the possibilities of a life in service for Christ. I left the GC Session energized, with a longing to join this amazing sisterhood and hopeful for the future.

Fast forward just over twenty years to 2022. As I reflect on my experience, it has been an absolute joy and honor to be a Ministerial Spouse Association (formerly Shepherdess) leader. I served for 10 years as the MSA sponsor for the North England Conference first while my husband was ministerial secretary, then when he became president.

I pause to remember the story of Jacob as he worked for his wife Rachel, "and they (the years) seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had for her" (Gen. 29:20, clarification supplied). I can declare these sentiments for myself! Because of my love for the Lord, my work with the MSA has been as the "twinkling of an eye."

### **Keys to Success**

In this article, I will share leadership nuggets which have contributed to the NEC MSA success story. I hope MSA Sponsors and spouses around the world will resonate with some of the themes. After reading this article, some of you may become an active participant in your own area!

## **Standing on the Shoulders of Giants**

When I took up my appointment, I recognized that I stood on the shoulders of giants who had previously served as MSA leaders. I owed them immense gratitude for paving the way.

I was the “new kid on the block” with just ten years in ministry when I took up my MSA Sponsor’s sacred appointment. Networking with those who had walked the path before was invaluable. I gained perspectives of tried and tested models of working from a national and international context. This triggered cross-fertilization of ideas and insight and these stalwarts of faith became my mentors.

## **Small Beginnings**

As with any program, defining the MSA purpose was key. However, when looking at the territory I was responsible for, I was overwhelmed. I thought of Moses when his father-in-law Jethro saw that the work was too great, and the children of Israel were divided into companies. I divided my region into geographical areas and worked with spouses who were willing to lead out in their own locale. The operative word is ‘willingness.’ The Lord, through His Holy Spirit, will lay on others the desire to serve in this work. I also worked with the spouses to establish specialist MSA roles such as a chaplain for current spouses, retirees, and those in the seminary.

## **Developing Lasting Relationships**

Relationships are built over time on trust, mutual respect, and love for fellow spouses. We come to the ministry having been socialized in different contexts, belief systems and cultures. Some of us carry heavy baggage from life’s hard knocks.

I had to build relationships with diverse people, pastors, conference staff, secretaries, administrators, directors, retirees, members, spouses, and more. The role of the sponsor is to provide wholistic support. Ministerial spouses do not exist in a cocoon but in the context of the church and wider society.

A breadth of knowledge and appreciation of life and societal issues are needed to give timely and non-judgmental support when needed. Conversely, the ability to

develop intuition and step back when you are not needed will help maintain an equilibrium in relationships.

Sponsors come with their own gifts and talents. Many will have professional careers. Sometimes there will be circumstances beyond your own competence. Knowing when get specialized help for spouses or oneself is imperative.

I have found the most effective way to build relationships is through coming together, whether at a retreat, day program, fellowship meal or other event. Over the years I have witnessed friendships grow, comradery and concern for each other's welfare expressed through prayer, and encouraging words shared personally and virtually.

### **Teamwork**

'No man is an island, and no man stands alone.' A successful MSA requires teamwork. When I first started as sponsor, I had no idea who would join me in this venture, but our Lord knew. I could not do this alone, so I had to allow the Holy Spirit to lead. Other spouses, to whom I am deeply indebted, came forward to lead in various roles.

### **Acceptance**

During my tenure, I came to accept that not all spouses will engage in the MSA. We are all at different stages of life's journey. My mantra has always been "Where two or more are gathered together, the Lord is present," so I have gone ahead with plans for a few or the masses. Leave who attends your events to the Lord; He has never failed.

I have also accepted that you will not please everyone. There will be critics. This can be your own inner critic or criticism from others. In such times remember our Lord and Saviour who knew no sin but was despised and rejected. A servant is no greater than his Master.

### **Overcoming Personal Challenges**

Let's be straight. This work is voluntary and will take your time. Personal time in prayer and devotion will keep you grounded. Time set aside to pray and fast for MSA

families will reap spiritual rewards and direct your every move. Don't forget your own family life. Your spouse and children still need to feel wanted.

Do not over commit and learn to say 'No.' There were times where I had conflict between demands from my professional career and demands for MSA. Time management and organization was the key to managing competing demands. Working smarter also helped by applying the 80/20 rule—putting my energy in 20% of the work. I also looked for low hanging fruit and quick wins. For example, using scheduled conference events as an opportunity to run MSA events.

### **Think Outside the Box**

I remember when my husband was leading an elder's retreat, and spouses were invited to come along. The Holy Spirit impressed me that these elders' spouses were also in ministry. So, I delivered a workshop about the challenges of being married to an elder. There was so much synergy and the spouses resonated with some of the same challenges as a pastor's spouse. Interestingly, these lay persons often hold down full-time paid employment, then devote many voluntary hours to the work of the church. Their spouse and family's well-being are integral to their success in ministry.

### **The Curve Ball**

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world with a thunderous cry and our world and ministry will never be the same again. As the MSA sponsor, I quickly realized that the virtual world was going to be a significant mode of communication. Knowing that spouses had different levels of competency, I arranged virtual training sessions.

It almost seems laughable now that in Spring 2020, Zoom and Microsoft Teams were not the norm. Now, two years later, communicating in the virtual space is standard practice. I have led in the planning and delivery of virtual meetings and retreats online. Initiatives have had a particular emphasis on psychological and mental health and well-being of spouses. Consecrating the virtual space before, during, and after convocations has proved invaluable.

I implore MSA sponsors to develop the key leadership skill of responding appropriately in times of crisis. Without dialogue, MSA ministry will suffer and wither away.

### **Legacy**

I may never know the legacy from the work my team and I have done over the past ten years. It has been recorded in heaven. As a leader, I strive not to make 'followers.' Followers often betray or try to usurp (case in point, Lucifer). I seek to make 'leaders' like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and Peter.

Leaders carry on the work. They will not shy away from coming forward. My appeal to MSA sponsors around the world is to lead, equip, train, educate, and be a role model. When it is time to pass on the baton, a leader will emerge, quickened by the Holy Spirit.

My legacy is my personal fulfilment and connection with God. He called, and I answered. Thank you, Lord, for bestowing such favor on me.

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