

Church Pecking Order

By Jamie Buckingham

Michele Buckingham, my daughter-in-law, has just had her first book published. It's called *Help! I'm a Pastor's Wife* (Creation House). Although listed as "editor," Michele spent months rewriting the 30 stories submitted by wives of some of America's best-known pastors.

In her foreword she tells of chatting with a couple of friends in a swanky cafe outside Washington, D.C., and telling them she was writing a book by and about pastors' wives. One of the women remarked, "What's it about? How to throw the perfect tea party?"

I guess a lot of people think that's what pastors' wives do—play the piano at church and pour tea at the monthly social. In other words, they rank pretty low in kingdom pecking order.

I've not had much experience with pastors' wives. (My own wife has seen to that.) But I have had a great deal of experience with pastors.

Most of us have suspected that, despite their diligent efforts to conceal it, pastors are people just like us. Granted, a lot of them seem to go out of their way to convince us otherwise. But if we dragged them out of their Cadillacs, took off their collars, snatched away their microphones and forbid them to use words such as "brethren," "yonder" and "eschatology," we would discover they're just like the rest of us. Plain old people.

The reason most pastors look and act differently from ordinary folks is they were taught—mostly by other pastors—that there is a certain pecking order in kingdom strata. Obviously, pastors who drive Cadillacs are higher in grade than pastors who drive pickup trucks. And the man who drives a BMW or (sigh!) a Mercedes, ranks even higher. Ultimate status is achieved when the pastor and his wife drive color-matched Jaguars. In the words of Sambo, he's the "grandest tiger in all the jungle"—especially if he polishes his fingernails.

Kingdom ranking has been around since James and John. However, in order to define today's hierarchy I have devised a scale which explains the power structure. It's called the Accepted Liturgical Scale (ALS) and is graded on a scale of 1 (least) to 12 (greatest).

(1) Pastor's wife. (However, if she drives her own Cadillac she ranks equal to district superintendent.)

(2) Plain old ordinary pew-sitting, hymn-singing, money-giving, hard-working church member.

(3) Sunday school teacher. (There are ranks inside the Sunday school teacher category. Nursery workers are at the bottom. Youth workers are next to bottom because they never seem to last very long and most of them wind up fleeing into the desert where they rip their clothes and beat their heads on rocks. Adult teachers are at the top, but they are ranked too, depending on how large a class they teach and how wealthy and famous their class members are. For instance, a class which contains the mayor, an assistant to the governor



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or a wealthy widow ranks higher than a class of yuppies or dump truck drivers.)

(4) Church staff member. (All staff members except church secretaries are included on this level. The church secretary is rated at 1.5. In other words, she can snub the pastor's wife but is treated like dirt by everyone else. However, in churches of more than 3,000 members the pastor's personal secretary is rated equal with archbishop.)

(5) Pastor.

(6) Missionary. (While I prefer to rank missionaries number 12, some don't even recognize them as people—rating them lower than the pastor's wife. I've given them a number 6 to please both camps.)

(7) Priest. (All kinds, even those who drink beverages with little olives and onions in the bottom of the glass. Actually, priests should be ranked on the same level as pastors, but because they wear funny clothes and act mysteriously I had no choice but to put them in the number 7 slot.)

(8) Traveling teacher/Bob Mumford level (traveling teachers who don't get invited to big conferences are rated at the number 4 level); Catholic theologians; evangelists/Jimmy Swaggart level (tent evangelists are ranked with dump truck drivers); Christian psychologists; Christian publishers (this only includes publishers who sell their stuff. Publishers who give their literature away to the poor or the stingy are ranked in the same category with youth directors. Nor does it apply to book editors—especially those who have soup stains all over their neckties. These sloppy and pathetic people deserve no higher rank than plain old church members. Some of them—if we're honest about it—should be rated in the same category as the pastor's wife); seminary professors (unless they teach religious education or music, which drops them down to number 3); and traveling musicians. (Note: Frankly, rock musicians should not be ranked at all, but because of the kind of cars they drive and their flashy wardrobes popular opinion forces inclusion.)

(9) College president. (Chancellors are included if they live in a mansion on the edge of the campus.)

(10) Bishop; television personality/Robert Schuller level.

(11) Archbishop.

(12) Pope. (Some Pentecostal groups may substitute "general superintendent." Nearly all TV evangelists put themselves at this level.)

Now comes Michele's book, which does something extremely important. It proves the ALS ratings are upside down. The least in the kingdom is really the greatest. No one deserves higher honor than the pastor's wife. I know. I married one. ■

Jamie Buckingham's latest book is now available. Titled Let's Talk About Life, copies can be received from Creation House, 190 N. Westmonte Drive, Altamonte Springs, FL 32714. Each copy costs \$6.95 plus \$1 postage and handling.