

Mixed marriage: A pastor and a skeptic

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [July 14, 2009](#) issue

Karen caught my eye early in our freshman year of college, and no wonder: she was—and is—beautiful. I have since learned that compliments about her looks don't mean much to her. She would much rather be told that she is intelligent or funny. Perhaps as much as her looks, I was taken with her speaking voice, which is surprisingly deep and a bit husky, reminiscent of Lauren Bacall's voice, but without the world-weariness.

Karen and I were friends during those early college years, although we never spent much time together. We went on our first date early in our senior year. Later I learned that when Karen returned to her dorm after that first date and her friends asked her how it went, she replied, "It was great. But the relationship isn't going anywhere. He's going to be a minister."

In the weeks that followed, we took many long walks and talked late into the night. I was reveling in the company of a young woman of warmth, intelligence and substance. I felt completely at ease with her. In truth, she didn't seem to mind that I was going to be a minister. She would have had reason to, however, because her own relationship to religion had been quite complicated. Her mother is Irish and was Catholic. In her early years, Karen attended a Catholic church and had her First Communion there. Then her mother read an exposé on the financial operations of the Vatican that greatly disturbed her. She left the church, taking her five children with her, and none of them ever went back.

When Karen was in high school she began to attend an independent church with a friend and eventually became quite involved. Over time, however, she became disillusioned when she began to learn that many of those who had talked about their faith with such fundamentalist certainty were not nearly so certain after all. At the time, Karen's own faith was still a tender shoot, so she relied on the certainty of others, and even then she insisted on integrity in matters of religious faith. She left

that church before heading off to college, so when I met her she was without any active religious affiliation.

Karen's own unsettling experiences with religion did not prevent her from being drawn to religious people. Her best high school friend had always talked about wanting to be a priest. She loved and greatly admired her aunt, who is a nun. So I think there were ways in which Karen actually was intrigued by me in part because I planned to be a minister. She was not dismissive of religious faith. In fact, she talked about wanting to have a faith that was not inherited or based on the faith of others, but was her own. And I sensed, or perhaps wanted to sense, a strong religious yearning within her. So I think I assumed that her faith would grow over time. I thought she had just had bad experiences in the wrong kinds of churches.

Somewhere along the line, when we talked about the future, we simply assumed that we would be together. We were two years into our graduate studies when we got married and moved to Connecticut. Karen continued in law school and I continued to prepare for the ministry. Karen became quite involved in the church I was serving as an intern and volunteered to teach a Sunday school class. She was horrified, however, when the first lesson in the curriculum was on the stoning of Stephen. She asked, "How am I supposed to teach that terrible story as if it has some meaning for fourth-grade children? Or for anyone?" She decided that it would be better for her to work with younger children, whose classes were much less focused on content and where she was less likely to have to teach things she didn't believe in.

In anticipation of our first New Year's Day as husband and wife, we bought an elegantly bound book with blank pages. We intended to start a new family tradition. Each year we would pause and look back at the year just past and write down our thanksgivings. Then we would look ahead and write down our covenants for the coming year, things that we would resolve to do with the help of God and one another.

For this, our first year, the lists were long. Under thanksgivings, in addition to our marriage, our health and things of that sort, we offered thanks for "our church" and "Karen's growing faith." Under covenants, the first thing on the list was, "Pray and read the Bible more together."

Today I can't remember what it was like to put that list together, so I don't know this: Did I just jump in right away and make this suggestion while Karen simply wrote down my words? These were supposed to be things to which both of us were committed, so perhaps those words actually expressed her own intention at the time. Or perhaps it was more like a wish. Or perhaps she did not think that this was the time to start articulating her hesitations and questions. Anyway, there were other things on the list along the same lines. We covenanted to "Give more time and money to the church," and to "Make decisions in a more composed manner, praying about our decisions."

Today, I read those lists as if they are historical artifacts, almost as if they were written by and about other people. As wistful as it makes me to read them now, I am also grateful that they exist. It reassures me that, no, I hadn't just imagined that these were the kinds of things we talked about at the time.

It may be telling that that was the only year we followed our "new family tradition" of writing thanksgivings and covenants. During the following year or so, Karen began to lean more strongly toward the conclusion that even if she believed in some kind of God, she could not accept basic Christian teachings. The faith claims that Christians make about Jesus—about him being the Son of God, or at least something more than just a wise teacher—seemed quite unbelievable to her. The Bible is just another book, she began to conclude, and so we cannot grant it any particular authority—and in some ways it is dangerous to do so. She wondered whether she could continue to attend church.

Initially this stirred a bit of panic in me. I would tell her to be patient and not to draw too many firm conclusions, that the church is a good place to bring your questions as well as your convictions. I also told her that many people in the church have the same kinds of questions. But she was also clear that her experience was different from other people's. She was not just Karen. She was the minister's wife. She was concerned—and, in some instances, rightly—that people assumed all sorts of things about what she believed or did not believe because she is married to me. This was especially problematic for Karen, because integrity is the characteristic she most admires in other people and most wants to have reflected in her own life. So if she seemed to be affirming something—perhaps just by her presence—that she could not affirm, it was particularly uncomfortable for her.

About a year after that first New Year's Day, I had an interview for a position at a church in Burlington, Vermont. Karen accompanied me as we met the members of the search committee. As the interview was winding down, the president of the congregation turned to Karen and said, "Karen, we probably should ask you one question: What do you see as the role of the minister's wife?" Uh-oh. Not only did this question tread on a delicate matter in our still-young marriage, we were also aware that the wife of the previous senior minister had been extremely active in the life of the congregation, and we thought that there was a good chance that they would expect the same of Karen.

So for the first time in the interview, I was more than a little bit nervous. Karen seemed perfectly calm. I have since learned that when Karen is particularly nervous, she comes across as even more poised than usual. With a smile, she said, "Well, thank you for asking." And then she went on to describe some of the demands of the ministry, which she had seen first hand, and how important it is to have a supportive presence at home. Then she concluded, "So I would say that the role of the minister's wife is to be a good wife to the minister." As she was talking, I was trying unsuccessfully to read the still countenances of the Vermonters around the table. When she finished, the president said, "Well that's good, because we don't have any special expectations, either." Whew. The next day they called and asked if I would become their new minister.

It has been only as the years have unfolded that I have learned from Karen how reluctant she was to make that move. Her response in the interview had been smooth, but there was a lot that was churning underneath. She loved me, but she had real misgivings about how she could inhabit the role of minister's wife. Particularly, she worried that she would let me down, that I would want something or someone she is not, and that she would have to live with my disappointment. She would say, "I think you should have married a good Christian girl." And I would say in response, "I didn't want to marry a good Christian girl. I wanted to marry you."

During the years we were in Burlington, Karen did attend worship, first to be supportive of me, and then, when our children were born, to support our children's participation in the church. But there were some dicey situations along the way. When it came time for our children to be baptized, we faced a problem. Karen was willing to have our children baptized, but she did not feel able to make the public declarations of faith that parents are asked to make as part of our baptism liturgy. Since I was the officiating minister for the baptisms, however, I was able to craft the

service in such a way that, instead of having both of us respond to questions normally asked of parents, I was able to make statements about our commitment to raise our children as Christians. Those statements were worded so carefully that I don't think anyone in the congregation could tell that Karen avoided making any faith statements, spoken or implied, in the liturgy. I think both of us felt a bit compromised by how we handled the situation, but perhaps that is inevitable when what you have to come up with is, indeed, a compromise.

When our children were young, I wanted to find a family grace. The challenge was finding one we could all say together. Our daughter, Alanna, rescued us by coming home with a grace she had learned in preschool: "Blessings on the blossoms, blessings on the fruit, blessings on the leaves and stems, and blessings on the root." Alanna couldn't wait to teach us the grace. "Lovely," I told her, "just perfect." From then on we said that grace every night.

In the kitchen after dinner on the night Alanna first taught us the grace, I said to Karen, "It's a pagan grace, you know."

"Sure," she replied. "But that's fine by me. I am a pagan."

"Yeah, and you're my favorite pagan."

"Should have married a nice Christian girl."

"I'll stick with my pagan."

Neither of us was using the term *pagan* in a technical sense, of course, but it became a lighthearted way for us to talk about something that was difficult to talk about.

After both of our children were confirmed in the church during their mid-teen years, Karen began to find ways to share with them that her beliefs differ from mine. As a parent it is often hard to know how much to share with your children, and when. Karen wanted to wait until they had both made their own faith commitments—or chose not to—before making her own beliefs known more fully. At the time we were not confident that this was the right approach, and I don't know that we are sure about it even now. In retrospect, at least we did avoid the outcomes we most feared. Our children were remarkably accepting of the fact that their parents do not share many of the same religious beliefs. They have said that they did not feel caught in

some kind of bait and switch when they learned more about what their mother believes and does not believe. And both of them, as young adults, continue to have their own positive relationships with the church and with their own budding faith—something for which both Karen and I are grateful.

About the time Karen started sharing with our children more about her own beliefs and disbeliefs, she also stopped going to worship. And she is not involved in other aspects of the church's life. This is so much of an established pattern for us now that I am sometimes startled by other people's reactions to it. Friends of mine who are pastors—and who are devoted to Karen—as well as other pastors who have not even met Karen can have very similar responses. They will say things like, “I don't think I could handle that.” Or “That would be hard for me.”

Indeed, there are ways in which it is hard. The most difficult part for me is not being able to share that part of my life with my life partner. But even putting it that way does not get it right. Being a Christian is not a part of my life. It is my life. Being a pastor is more than my job. It is who I am. How it is that I can feel so close to someone with whom I do not share these profound commitments is something of a mystery. And not having a shared spiritual life does feel like a deep loss, and my own response to that reality is akin to grief.

There are times when I miss having a shared involvement in the church. I will talk with Karen about what is going on at the church, much as she will tell me about her work as an attorney. But Karen is perhaps the most perceptive person I know, so there are times when I would particularly love her firsthand take on things, her reading of people and situations.

I have drawn the difficult conclusion that being married to me may have prevented Karen from developing her own spiritual life. She would not draw that conclusion, but I still wonder. The role of the minister's spouse may be too confining and too public to allow for the kind of generous and gentle space that is required for growth in faith.

It has been hard to experience Karen's anger, sometimes even scorn, toward the church, which surfaces on occasion. When the news carries a story of religious intolerance or abuse of religious authority, her Irish temper, which rarely makes an appearance, can burn hot. Of course, I often share her outrage. In some instances, however, those become opportunities for her to offer more sweeping indictments of

religious faith and religious institutions, which can cut a bit too close to home. Earlier in our marriage, Karen read *Trinity*, Leon Uris's historical novel set in Ireland in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A major theme of that book is the ways in which religious leaders—both Catholic and Protestant—would foment hatred in order to increase their power. Being largely of Irish descent, Karen felt a particular association with the story. Each night she would read that book before going to sleep, and each night it made her angry—and sometimes it seemed like she was angry with me. I couldn't wait for her to finish that book.

I have learned that I can't complain much about anything that may be going on at the church because Karen will be quick to say, "Well then, why don't you just quit?" For her, it is not a rhetorical question. Because it is such a pointed question that I would rather avoid, I think I end up giving her a rosier picture of the church than I would otherwise.

I love the story of the man who works in the circus, spending his day cleaning up after the elephants. At night he comes home and complains about it to his wife. Every day the same old mess, every night the same old complaints, until finally his wife says, "Well, why don't you just quit?" The man, a look of shock on his face, replies, "What, and give up show business?" That is not unlike the conversations Karen and I have sometimes. I have not found ways to talk about why I feel compelled to keep at this crazy work, except to say that I am called to it. But what can the notion of call mean to someone who does not have the religious convictions on which it is based?

Indeed, one can be called to work other than the ministry. Some people are called to be math teachers, or soccer coaches, or full-time mothers or fathers, or singers or social workers. The ministry is different, however, in at least one regard. Certain professions—law and medicine come to mind—are sometimes referred to as a jealous mistress because they demand so much. The ministry is even more than a mistress because when you are ordained you make vows of fealty and faithfulness to God and to the church that are not unlike marriage vows. I have made vows both to my wife and to the church. I am grateful that those vows are seldom in conflict, but sometimes it can feel as if they pull in opposite directions, and that may be even more the case when the minister's spouse does not share a commitment to the church.

I have found, however, that there are ways in which I benefit from Karen's religious skepticism and lack of involvement in the church. For one, I think being married to Karen has made me a better preacher. She keeps me honest. When preparing a sermon, I imagine Karen reading over my shoulder and occasionally pointing to certain passages and asking me questions like, "How do you know that? Aren't you presuming a lot here? That may be your understanding of the truth, but on what basis can you claim that it is the truth?" Imagining Karen's questions has helped me speak to the skeptic that can reside in any listener.

Also, because Karen is not involved in the church, my relationship with her provides some much-needed balance in my life. I have been on the staff of a church since I was 19. Most of my best friends are pastors. If Karen were active in the church, I think I might end up so completely immersed in church life that it would not be healthy. As it is, there are ways in which Karen is what every pastor I know yearns for: a close friend who is not in the church.

In the end, what makes it work for us is something very basic: mutual respect. Karen is the best person I know. She may not be a Christian, but she is more honest, caring and selfless than most Christians I know, including me.

And for her part, Karen lets me know that she has respect for me. One evening, I was telling her about something related to the church and was speaking in overtly religious terms—that is, in language she would never use herself and might even be a bit wary of if used by others. I paused and said, "It's interesting: you hear me talk this way and you don't make me feel like a hypocrite." She replied, "That's because you're not a hypocrite. If I were to talk that way, I would be a hypocrite. But you're not." Coming from her, that meant a lot.

Given her lack of any commitment to the church, sometimes it amazes me to consider all that Karen has been willing to do in support of my ministry. Twice Karen has moved across the country and essentially changed career paths in order for me to respond to a call to another church. Because we have moved a number of times, Karen has had to take bar exams in six states, something that is unheard of in the legal field. She didn't do that because she loves the church, which makes it all the more clear that she did it because she loves me.

A couple of years back, the church I serve started a new weekly worship service, in a space more open than the sanctuary to allow for more innovation. Chris, one of my

pastoral colleagues at the church, aware that Karen has an artistic gift, asked me if she might be willing to make banners to decorate and in some way define the space. Long ago having learned that I dare not speak for Karen, I said, "Well, you're going to have to ask her directly." When Karen got off the phone with Chris, I asked her how she had responded to the request. She said, "Well, you know, I really like Chris, and making banners is something I can do. I just said, 'You've got to promise that there will be no public mention of the fact that I made the banners.'"

Almost immediately, Karen began to develop a vision for what those banners should convey and what they would look like. She spent much of the summer making them. Rather late into the night the Saturday before the first worship service in that new space, she had her sewing machine at the church, making last-minute adjustments and helping others hang the banners. Driving home, I thanked her for all the work she had done. "Well, I love you, babe," is all she said in reply.

The next morning she was not in the congregation for the worship service that was so enhanced by her vision and handiwork. In the intervening years, she has never attended one of those services, and in fact I don't think she ever again entered the space where her banners still hang. When I consider that, as I do on many Sundays as I sit in that space, I find it both remarkable and sad.

I am often at the church late into the evening, either teaching a class or, more likely, attending a meeting. Sometimes Karen will already be in bed when I get home because she has to catch an early train in the morning. It is not one particular night that I remember, because it has happened so many times that the memories overlap:

It is the third evening in a row that I have arrived home rather late after a church meeting. The light is off in our bedroom, so I pour a glass of wine and flip rather mindlessly through a magazine that has just arrived in the mail. Then I tip-toe upstairs, turn off the light in the hallway, and gingerly open our bedroom door. Karen, who has been asleep and even now does not stir, asks, "How did your meeting go?"

"It was fine," I say.

"I'm so glad," she says, and then drifts back to sleep.

And then I crawl into bed and we lie beside one another in the shared darkness.

This essay will be part of a forthcoming book on pastoral ministry.