

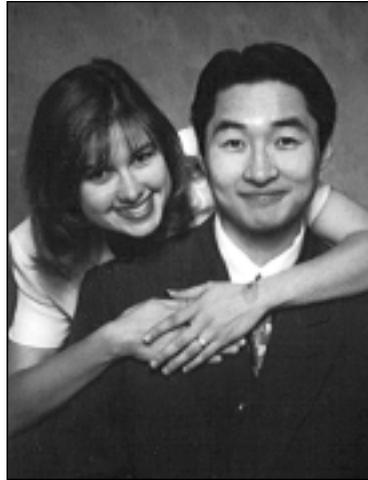
## **B**UILDING AN EQUAL MARRIAGE: HOW ONE COUPLE'S BELIEFS ARE SHAPING THEIR MARRIAGE

By Debbie Menagh

Jennifer and Tony Kang have found through experience that people don't always know how to treat a couple when the wife is in a formal ministry role and the husband is not.

"I appreciate the opportunity to gently blow their perception," says Jennifer, who is ordained as a deacon in the Anglican Mission in America (AMiA). Tony works as a software engineer.

In the two years they've been married, the Kangs have encountered challenges and delights unique to a marriage where both are committed to an equal partnership. As they grow together, they continue to prove that marriages based on shared authority can be successful.



**Jennifer and Tony Kang's engagement photo.**

### **Finding Equality in Christ**

Honoring each other as equals has become the norm for Tony and Jennifer, but they didn't always have a clear vision of God's design for marriage.

Raised Catholic, Jennifer began attending an evangelical fellowship in college where she gained a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a follower of Christ. However, the church sent mixed messages about women. The leaders spoke highly of a woman's responsibility to use her gifts, but Jennifer noticed there were no women on the deacon board, elder board or pastoral team.

"I began to realize that the church would restrict what someone could do because she was a woman," she says.

Jennifer came to understand the scope of this debate in the Christian church, and she soon found support for her beliefs in CBE.

Tony's upbringing wasn't particularly religious. Shortly after he graduated from college, he accepted Christ at a volleyball outreach at Willow Creek Community Church — a large, egalitarian church in South Barrington, Ill. He became a member there,

where he appreciated the gifted teaching of both men and women.

"I never realized that keeping women out of ministry and leadership was such a huge issue until I met Jennifer and learned of her struggles," he says.

### **Called to Ministry**

While both Tony and Jennifer had come to affirm women in ministry, they didn't realize how close to home the issue would become. After they married, they attended an Anglican church, and even though Jennifer had attended seminary, she hadn't planned on ordination.

One weekend at a church leadership event, someone asked Jennifer if she was considering ordination. She simply said no. "You should pray about it" was the reply. Another asked if she was in the ordination process. Again, Jennifer said no. But she was seeing a trend, so she prayed, "Lord, I'm not really sure about this, but if one more person asks me if I'm getting ordained, I will at least pray about it."

Five minutes after this hesitant prayer, another person asked, "Are you thinking of pursuing ordination?" Jennifer began praying earnestly about it, and after much counsel, discernment and encouragement, she decided to pursue ordination.

Last November, Jennifer was ordained as a deacon by AMiA. In the Anglican Church, deacons are ordained clergy members who have specific liturgical roles at worship services and pastoral roles in the church.

Their church was supportive of Jennifer's calling. She has, however, faced many challenges as a woman, since the AMiA has not set an official policy on women in ministry.

"My ordination became politically charged because I am a woman, and I found myself being discussed at very high levels that would normally not concern themselves with the ordination of a deacon!" Jennifer says. "Unfortunately, this

prolonged the process much longer than had I been male. It was frustrating at times, but I felt the Lord called me to this time and place for a purpose larger than myself."

### Subtle Expectations

Because Jennifer is in a formal ministry role, the Kangs have noticed that they are treated differently as a couple. When people find out Jennifer is ordained, they often assume Tony is ordained or involved in vocational ministry.

The Kangs also sense an expectation that Tony be involved in ministry to the same extent as Jennifer. Before they were married, no one seemed to have a problem with Jennifer leading classes and Bible studies. Now she feels that some people would prefer co-leadership. During the ordination process Jennifer also noticed that people seemed relieved that she was not pursuing the priesthood.

Someone seeking ordination will generally spend some time discerning if they are called to the diaconate or the priesthood, Jennifer says. Her bishop, someone she describes as "a godly, evangelical and somewhat egalitarian-minded man," encouraged Jennifer to do this, because he saw that her gifts could be used in either capacity.

"However, I noticed with other people — both clergy and lay — that there was often a subtle sigh of relief when I said I was not pursuing the priesthood," Jennifer says. "I almost wanted to go into the priesthood just to make a point!"

Jennifer pursued the diaconate, however, because the priesthood is generally a full-time role,

and she didn't want to work full-time once she had children.

### Getting Ready for Baby

In anticipation of the birth of their first child, Jennifer recently quit her full-time position as ministry director of The Greenhouse, an organization that plants churches and trains leaders for AMiA. (Jennifer's ordination is separate from the paid job she had, and she will be able to continue serving as a deacon.)

Jennifer plans to be a full-time mom, while Tony continues to support the family. Even though this arrangement seems traditional, the couple's egalitarian beliefs give them a great sense of freedom in their choice.

The decision to stay home wasn't hard at all, Jennifer says. "I always planned on staying home when I had kids," she says, "because I believe it is best for the mother to stay with the baby as much as possible."

Jennifer doesn't think this view makes her a traditionalist. "I do not hold to strict role interpretations for men and

women," she says. While there are some undeniable differences between men and women, she says it is an illogical leap to say that differences equal hierarchy.

When they first discussed the issue, Tony was surprised that Jennifer wanted to stay home. He thought they'd both keep working, and he was concerned that Jennifer might get bored staying at home. However, quitting her job doesn't mean Jennifer has abandoned all aspects of career life. She keeps close ties to her past



**In the above photo, the couple steers a swan paddleboat at Walt Disney World and the photo at right shows Tony driving a boat there.**

**The Kangs also enjoy many outdoor activities. Below, Jen gets ready for a bike tour in Banff, Canada.**



### Equal Marriage - *continued from page 7*

ministry and does free-lance writing. Staying in touch with those people and contributing to the ongoing ministry is important to her.

Tony is also determined to be actively involved with their children. His career choices and work schedule allow him to spend about 40-45 hours on the job, while using much of the remaining time to be with his family.

"Jen and I have prioritized," he says. "And, I really want to be with my kids — to get to know them, to build into who they are and not regret when I'm older that I've missed their growing up."

### Mutual Respect and Shared Authority

So what is it about an equal partnership that makes Jennifer and Tony consider it an empowering living arrangement? How will their household differ from other Christian households where mom stays home with the kids?

"I can do this so gladly because it is a free choice that I have made and not one that I have felt pressured to make by the church, our Christian subculture, my family, or even my husband," Jennifer says. "Being a stay-at-home mom does not mean I am in a subservient position. It means I am doing something different from what Tony does. We are still fully equal, even though he is the one making the money."

Tony is thankful to have a strong partner in Jennifer. "My wife is a capable and intelligent woman," he says, "and a huge benefit I see in egalitarian marriages is equal input and responsibility for the family." An equal partnership marriage is hallmarked by respect for each other's opinions and confidence in a spouse's ability to make family decisions, he says.

Tony still has primary responsibility for providing an income. But that is far different from having sole responsibility for the overall direction of their family. Tony is convinced "that is a burden best shared by two adults committed to each other and to God."

As they look at their future together, Tony and Jennifer share a common goal to serve God through their marriage. As they put it: "We hope to model what a godly marriage can be like, how it is uniquely capable of allowing both partners to grow as persons and develop their gifts to the fullest extent."



The newlyweds walk down the aisle following the wedding ceremony.



The Kangs at Jennifer's ordination.

*Debbie Menagh is a corporate communications professional and free-lance writer. She lives in the Chicago suburbs with her husband, David.*