



LEADER'S GUIDE

Rethinking Women's Ministry

*Many women feel they don't fit into today's women's ministry programs.
How can we help them belong?*

The daughter of a pastor, Amy Simpson grew up in the church. She became a Christian at a young age, attended a Christian university, and now works for a Christian company. Her family and most of her close friends profess Christ. Amy is steeped in Christianity and swaddled in Christian culture. And yet, at women's events in church she's felt like an outsider, that she doesn't fit anywhere. Why? Because she doesn't enjoy crafts, isn't a stay-at-home mom, and simply doesn't square with the assumptions churches have about Christian women. So when a ministry is set up on those stereotypes, she doesn't fit in.

So what's a woman like Amy to do when she feels like she doesn't belong in her own church? What about women who are new Christians or searching for God who don't find a fit in women's ministries in the church? How would God have us respond to this need, this longing for his daughters to feel welcome, to belong, and to be ministered to? We'll explore these issues in this study.

Lesson #4

Scripture:

Joshua 2:1–21; Ruth 1:1–18; Psalm 139; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 10:38–42; John 4:7–26

Based on:

"Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry," by Amy Simpson, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM



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PART 1**Identify the Current Issue**

Note to leader: At the beginning of the meeting, provide each person with the article "Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry," from GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM (included at the end of this study).

Christian blogs buzz with frustration from Christian women who feel lost, alienated, and alone in the midst of their own churches—specifically in their churches' women's ministries. Amy Simpson wrote in her GiftedForLeadership.com post, "I used to think I just didn't fit. Somehow I wasn't like most women, and this probably had something to do with my spiritual life, so I should try harder to fit in."



Simpson also writes, "I don't mean to undermine the importance of women's ministry, or trivialize the effective ministry that's happening in many churches." So, while understanding that these ministries do tremendous things for the women involved, many women long for churches to go further, to see beyond traditional roles and stereotypes of Christian women. Women—and many churches—are exploring how we can best minister to women.

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** In what ways have you felt out of place in the women's ministries at your church?
- [Q]** How have those ministries worked for you?
- [Q]** Do you think non-Christian women would feel put-off by the stereotypes of what a "good Christian woman" should look like according to your church? Why or why not?
- [Q]** What do you think most Christian women are looking for in a women's ministry?

PART 2**Discover the Eternal Principles****Teaching point one: God creates individuals, not stereotypes.**

Read Psalm 139, paying special attention to verses 13 through 16.

In these verses, David writes about how God created him and ordained his life. This beautiful passage doesn't imply a stamping out of a random person, but a loving, purposeful crafting of a man with a specific destiny in God's plan.

And yet, in an attempt to streamline ministry, we often forget that God knits us within our mothers' wombs—each with a specific destiny. When we rush to lump people together and make all kinds of assumptions, we leave many women out in the cold instead of drawing them into the warm embrace of community.



Simpson writes: "In my experience, the people who plan [women's ministry] events make all kinds of assumptions about who I am as a woman. For starters, most assume I'm a full-time stay-at-home mom (and the best time of day for a meeting is, of course, 10:00 in the morning). They also seem to believe I enjoy making refrigerator magnets, spend most of my time thinking about fashion and chocolate, and can think of nothing better than getting away from my husband and kids (even though I've been at work all day) ... This isn't me—at all."

- [Q] What might it mean to women's ministry that each of us is "fearfully and wonderfully made," as Psalm 139:14 says?
- [Q] What's been your best experience with a ministry that really fit you, that squared with the way you were wonderfully made?
- [Q] How might many women's ministries ignore the individuality of women?
- [Q] Do you fit well into women's ministry right now at your church? Why or why not?
- [Q] How much time do you spend thinking about your specific destiny? What do you think yours is?
- [Q] What obligation, if any, do you think churches have to consider individual destinies when forming new or reshaping old ministries?

Teaching point two: Jesus wants us to offer what we've got.

Read Luke 10:38–42.

Mary does the unthinkable: She brazenly steps out of her place and comes crashing through a stereotype. All in the name of Jesus. In her defiance of expectations and the subsequent critique from her sister and defense from Jesus, she ends up getting ministered to by her Lord—and ultimately ministering to thousands of years of believers.

Read Mark 14:3–9.

Mary of Bethany does it again. In this passage, she famously (as Jesus prophesied it would be!) broke her alabaster jar and lavishly anointed Jesus with her expensive perfume. While others attacked her wastefulness, Jesus praised her gift and highlighted its importance and eternal significance.

The trouble with Mary is that she didn't fit—she had been given attributes and longings that didn't square with the cultural expectations of a woman. But Jesus welcomed, rejoiced in, and defended who she was. He encouraged her right to be different, along with the purpose for her difference. He knew why she was the woman she was, and was glad when she offered that to him.

- [Q] *Authenticity* is a buzzword in churches today. How does Jesus' response to Mary's sitting at his feet and her expensive gift shed light on how Jesus feels about women being real?
- [Q] Read about Rahab in Joshua 2:1–21 and Ruth in Ruth 1:1–18. What cultural rules did they break in God's name, and why?



- [Q] What did God honor in all of these women (Mary, Rahab, and Ruth)?
- What might these stories show us about what God desires for women?
- [Q] What do you have to offer that makes you feel left out of certain ministries in your church? What might be the reasons? What are some other ways to offer what you've got?

Teaching point three: Jesus' ministry was "out of the box."

While Jesus certainly did his fair share of preaching to the masses, he ministered most memorably and movingly through his out-of-the box methods—which often meant meeting the needs of individual people. We see this in his miraculous healings and specific teachings. Read John 4:7–26.

In this passage, Jesus does what no self-respecting Jew would've done—he speaks to a "lowly" Samaritan. And a woman no less! But here he shows us not only a powerful image of ministering to women, but that he cares about reaching women who don't fit.

- [Q] In John 4:20, the woman says, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." In what ways can you relate to her confusion and concern about the "right" ways to worship or be ministered to?
- [Q] Can you think of women in your community who may feel left out of your church because their heritage or their tradition of worship doesn't coincide with yours? Is there a way to bridge that gap?
- [Q] Jesus responds to the woman's concern in verses 21–24. He says (in part), "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." How well does your church worship in spirit and truth?
- How well do you personally worship in spirit and truth?
- [Q] What might a women's ministry built on "spirit and truth" look like?
- What might it look like to a woman with a very different personality and gift set?
- [Q] What do Jesus' actions in reaching out to this "misfit" tell you about how we should handle women in our congregation who might not fit traditional molds? Who are some groups or individuals to whom Jesus might be calling you to reach out right now?

Optional Activity: Using a whiteboard or poster board, list all the ways God has used unusual opportunities or events to minister to you. Suggest possible ministry opportunities based on those suggestions.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Clearly, trying to minister to all women in an effective, personal manner is no simple task. Churches often lack the staff, the volunteers, and the funding to make every woman feel



included in ministry, even if they wanted to. But “difficult” isn’t an excuse to stop trying, especially when a relationship with Jesus Christ is on the line!

Simpson concludes her article with a list of ideas for reaching out to a more diverse group of women. She suggests:




- Recognize that not all women are the same
- Respect women’s intellectual abilities
- Recognize that women aren’t just wives and mothers
- Make it safe to talk about real life
- Affirm real women
- Challenge women

Each of her suggestions can be used to either loosen the belt of women’s ministry to make it fit more women or to launch new ministries altogether. The heart of her suggestions—which actually require little more money, staff, or volunteers—is aligned with Jesus’ heart toward women, as he asks that we be real, that we offer what we’ve got, and that we reach out to those who need a home in him.




- [Q] Consider the women’s ministries your church currently offers. What might Simpson’s suggestions bring to those ministries?
- [Q] What can *you* do today or this week to make a difference in women’s ministries?
- [Q] What steps would be necessary to make Simpson’s suggestions a reality in women’s ministry at your church?

—Caryn Rivadeneira is managing editor of GiftedForLeadership.com and author of a book on mothers and their identities due out in March 2009. She lives in the western suburbs of Chicago with her husband, three kids, and one big dog.

Additional Resources

-  ChristianBibleStudies.com
 - [Today's Christian Woman](#)
 - [Women Who Persevered](#)
 - [Seeing Ourselves as God Does](#)
 - [Debunking the Myth of the Ideal Mom](#)
-  www.buildingchurchleaders.com
 - Innovative Ministries
 - Women and the Church
-  www.todayschristianwomanstore.com
 - [Get out of a Spiritual Rut](#)



-  [*Women's Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas*](#) (Group Publishing, 2004; ISBN 978-0764427008)
-  [*Women Mentoring Women: Ways to Start, Maintain, & Expand a Biblical Women's Ministry*](#), Vicki Kraft, Gwynne Johnson (Moody Publishers, 2003; ISBN 978-0802448897)
-  [*Group's Emergency Response Handbook for Women's Ministry*](#), (Group Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0764436536)



ARTICLE

Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry

By Amy Simpson, for the study "Rethinking Women's Ministry."

I really hate those "home parties." You know, the ones where you go to someone's house and hear about the latest gadgets, skin care products, or overpriced home décor. The hostess serves brownies and everyone talks about their kids and how busy they are. Then the sales representative stands up and gives a hyper-peppy presentation punctuated by polite gasps of delight from the women packed in the living room.



A few of the women get really giddy about the whole thing and start ordering everything that catches their eye. Some of them find just a couple of things they like, grab another brownie, and head home. I twitch uncomfortably and look for the least expensive item on the order form. I feel obligated to order something. After all, the hostess cleaned her house and made snacks for us, and if I don't order she might not get her free "hostess gift."

I learned my lesson when I once tried to leave one of those parties without buying anything. I had spent the entire party looking at my watch and thinking about how if I wanted to, I could make those doodads myself with some cardboard, fabric scraps, and magic markers. But I didn't want to. And I certainly couldn't imagine paying for any of them. But as I tried to leave, the sales representative cornered me with a desperate smile and asked me what I was going to buy. Everyone else stared at me as if I had been caught shoplifting. I did manage to escape without lightening my checkbook, but not entirely unscathed.

I don't go to those parties anymore. I've conquered my sense of obligation to attend. I don't even try to come up with excuses anymore. I just picture myself at the party, looking at my watch, wondering why in the world I agreed to spend my evening there. I imagine the feeling of watching the other women and wondering why I seem to be the only one who isn't enjoying myself tremendously. And I politely decline without bothering to explain.

I must confess I've had the same experience with women's ministry events. It's been a long time since I attended a women's Bible study, luncheon (why don't they



just call them *lunch?*), or anything else just for Christian women. I've spent enough of my life feeling bored, self-conscious, and out of place (think junior high gym class).

In my experience, the people who plan these events make all kinds of assumptions about who I am as a woman. For starters, most assume I'm a full-time stay-at-home mom (and the best time of day for a meeting is, of course, 10:00 in the morning). They also seem to believe I enjoy making refrigerator magnets, spend most of my time thinking about fashion and chocolate, and can think of nothing better than getting away from my husband and kids (even though I've been at work all day) and hanging out with my "girlfriends." This isn't me—at all.

I used to think I just didn't fit. Somehow I wasn't like most women, and this probably had something to do with my spiritual life, so I should try harder to fit in. Now I realize that's not true. In fact, the funny thing is, I don't really think I'm a misfit. Most women I know feel the same way I do about women's ministry programming. I know that women's ministries do connect with many women and provide important opportunities for growth. But they seem to be focused on serving a relatively small segment of the population. So I wonder: Why do so many of our women's ministry efforts treat women as if they all have the same lifestyle, schedule, goals, affinity for June Cleaver, and penchant for pink roses? And why are we expected to call ourselves "girlfriends"?

I don't mean to undermine the importance of women's ministry, or trivialize the effective ministry that's happening in many churches. But by and large, I believe our churches are running shallow, one-dimensional programs that miss important opportunities to minister to many women.

And I suspect I'm not the only one who has felt misunderstood and discouraged by the "ministry" we have experienced. We can be and do so much more. Why don't we challenge each other? Why don't we take ourselves seriously? Why do we alienate so many women with our ministries?

I have some ideas for how we might make women's ministries more effective.

1. Recognize that women are not all the same. Those who are called to women's ministry have their work cut out for them. It's not an easy job to minister to such a diverse group of people. But anyone who wants to appeal to women in general must recognize that women come in many different shapes and must create programs that appeal to more than one type. This is the same for any demographic group in the church, but perhaps most of all for women. Our lifestyles, circumstances, and preferences are so diverse. Not everything has to appeal to every woman—but if nothing about a church's women's ministry program appeals to a particular woman, she'll quickly get the message that she's not okay and not wanted.

2. Respect women's intellectual abilities. Too often, we seem to buy into the world's lie that we are purely emotional beings, at the whim of fantasy and hormones,



and not smart enough to go deep. God created us to feel and to think. Our souls hunger not only for the presence of God, but also for knowledge of his truth. Ministries that focus only on women's emotional needs or that stay on a shallow level are doing a disservice to their women and to the larger body of Christ. And they're failing to reach many women, who will never be engaged by a ministry that does not challenge their intellect.

3. Recognize that women are not just wives and mothers. Women aren't required to fill these roles in order to see God's purpose for their lives. I'm both a wife and a mother, but if I were neither, God's calling on my life would not go away. It's pointless to ignore the importance of these roles in the lives of many women, but we must acknowledge that women are unmarried, childless, divorced, single, struggling with infertility, focused on their careers, and everything in between. They're all important to God, and none of them should have the impression that God's plans don't include them.

4. Make it safe to talk about real life. In my experience, most topics are off the "approved" list at women's ministry gatherings. This is a systemic problem in many churches, so I don't think it's fair to blame it on women's ministries. But if a women's ministry program were able to make it safe to talk honestly and biblically about our experiences with spiritual doubt, depression, injustice, loneliness, temptation, abuse, regrets, sex, career success, insecurities, need to achieve, perfectionism, financial worries, sexual harassment, boredom, anxiety, exhaustion, great books, compulsive eating, addictions, and things that keep us awake at night, that ministry would produce some powerful life change.

5. Affirm real women. We should not walk out feeling worse about our potential in Christ than we did when we walked in. Many women feel torn down and devalued by the church—simply because they are women or they are the sort of women God has made them to be. And while some have commented that I seem to be whining about my own experiences, or feeling sorry for myself, I'm actually not too worried about myself. My commitment to Christ and to the church is intact and independent of what I experience in women's ministry. I am truly concerned about those women who have written off the church, and by association Christ, because of what they have heard the church telling them about their own worth. Any women's ministry program must make everyday women feel like they belong.

6. Challenge women. Besides the nursery, women's ministry may be the only place where many of our ministries seem designed only to make us comfortable.

I realize these ideas aren't very specific. So here are some ideas:

- Consider a sports ministry for women.
- Start a book club.



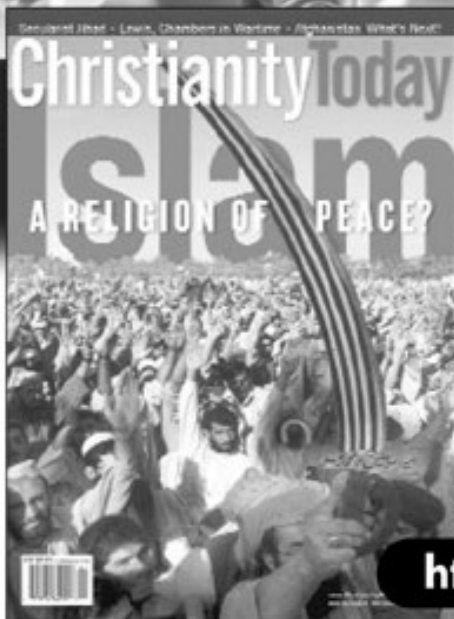
- Plan activities that don't require mothers to leave their children behind. Moms who work outside their homes aren't looking for more time away from their kids, so they might be more likely to attend events that welcome their children.
- Help women to form intentional mentoring relationships with each other.
- Hold a lunchtime Bible study for women who work outside their homes, in a location convenient to their work.
- Ask women to share their stories, or to teach each other about something they're passionate about.
- Get women together to do some powerful service in your community—and welcome families to participate as well.
- Challenge women to run a business together and use the proceeds to help other women get on their feet.

—Amy Simpson is Executive Director of the Leadership Media Group at Christianity Today International.

GiftedforLeadership.com, August 28, 2007



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