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MORE Fresh Ideas for Women's Ministry

Practical suggestions
for bringing our
ministries into the
21st century





MORE Fresh Ideas for Women's Ministry

Practical suggestions for bringing our ministries into the 21st century

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Introduction

There Is a Change Afoot

By JoHannah Reardon

What comes to your mind when you think of women's ministries? Is it mostly women's teas and mother/daughter luncheons? If so, it's not surprising, since this has defined women's ministry in many of our churches. Not that there is anything wrong with these events, but too often the women's ministry has been a Christianized version of the middle-class country club. However, many involved in women's ministry see a new wind blowing. It's moving away from being event-driven to being people-driven.





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What that means is that instead of spending an enormous amount of time planning events that require huge logistics, many ministries are focusing on relationships within a group, including Bible studies, service projects, and mentoring opportunities. So we have put together this download to help you think through what practical changes you can make to your church's women's ministry.

Amy Jackson gives us a glimpse of what women's ministry can be by showing us how these relationships have been meaningful to her. Sharon Hodde Miller challenges us to move away from cutesy to a new model of discipleship. Sarah Flashing demonstrates the need to give women a richer theological framework. Nicole Unice suggests learning from Alcoholics Anonymous (hear her out—it makes sense!). Keri Wyatt Kent demonstrates how service projects can enhance your women's ministry. And finally, we look at how social media can connect the women in your church.

Blessings,

JoHannah Reardon

Contributing Editor, *TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN* downloads
Christianity Today



Leader's Guide

How to use “MORE Fresh Ideas for Women's Ministry” for a group study

“**M**ORE Fresh Ideas for Women's Ministry” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**



What Women's Ministry Can Be

I finally learned about identity,
mission, and worth.

By Amy Jackson

Recently I joined an intergenerational women's group. Five of us are in four different generations. We have different backgrounds, hometowns, and church experiences. Some have children; others don't. One woman has grandchildren. Despite our differences, we gather every Thursday night to grow together.



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A few years ago this group would have been a nightmare for me. Not because this particular group is strange or the women are scary, but because I hated women's ministry. Or at least I thought I did. I'd been part of women's groups before that reeked of shallowness and gossip and high-pitched voices offering Sunday school answers for real life issues. These groups were cliques and used cattiness with pride. I continually felt as though I was in a competition for best outfit with everyone else in the room.

And then there were the stereotypes of women that they lumped everyone in. They assumed I love girly-girl things just because I'm a woman. (I actually went to a retreat once where the speaker wore a bright pink feather boa and had her hair in a ponytail that stuck straight up out of the crown of her head. She demanded we do the same—to tap into our feminine side—if we wanted to get anything out of her message.)

I hated women's ministry because I'd had poor women's ministry experiences—sorry excuses for the deep, relational, and supportive thing women's ministry can—and should—be.

So I quit women's ministry.

But when I got married, I began to cherish my female friendships more. While my husband is an amazing listener and cares about what I'm going through, he'll never understand some things in the way another woman can. As I grabbed lunch or coffee with my girlfriends, I started to catch a vision for what true relationships with Christian women look like: loving, supportive, challenging, and encouraging.

Then I started to catch a vision for all that women's ministry can be: an intentional gathering of women who love the Lord, who want to celebrate life together, hold one another accountable, and pray for one another. (Oh yeah, and pink feather boas are never mandatory.)



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So I decided to give women's ministry another try.

As I've sat at my women's small group the last several weeks, we've talked and encouraged one another and had more than a few good laughs. We're still developing trust and relationships, so I'm hopeful we'll go even deeper in the future. But one conversation has encouraged me the most. At our meeting last week, the leader asked: "What would you want to tell young women if you had them together for a day?"

One woman promptly responded, "Know who you are and whose you are." Another chimed in, "You can do great things for God. Find your dream and do it, and don't let anyone stop you." A third woman pointed to the importance of instilling worth in girls from an early age so they don't doubt it when they're older.

I sunk into the overly loved sectional couch, silently beaming, tears creeping into the corners of my eyes. What these women said was not so profound as it was simply perfect. No one mentioned telling young women that they're goal in life was to wait for Mr. Right. No one said anything that assumed women can only fulfill certain roles. No one used verses that have almost become cliché like Philippians 4:13: "I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." They talked about identity, mission, and worth. It was beautiful. It was hopeful. And it was wisdom that came from women who have been following hard after Jesus for many years. I was experiencing a holy moment, a small piece of God-honoring women's ministry.

When you experience true, God-honoring women's ministry, you want more of it. And while I might still have some negative experiences with women or women's ministry, I can choose to embody God-honoring women's ministry each day with whomever I'm with—celebrating life and love, encouraging and inspiring others, and lifting up my sisters in Christ in prayer.

God has definitely been working on my heart. I'm so thankful for the women in my life who love the Lord and want more



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from their relationships with him than clichés and Sunday school answers. My prayer is that together we can raise a new generation of young women who also hunger and thirst for more.

Amy Jackson is the associate editor of SmallGroups.com. This article first appeared on TodaysChristianWoman.com.

Reflect

- *What has not worked for you in women's ministry in the past and why?*
- *What is your very best moment in women's ministry and why?*
- *If you could remold your current women's ministry, what would you most want it to represent?*



Why It's Your Job to Break the Women's Ministry Stereotype

Sure, some of us are choking on cutesy things, but many of us are working toward a new model of discipleship.

By Sharon Hodde Miller

I remember the day I parted ways with the old model of women's ministry. I was sitting in a hotel ballroom full of women. The speaker shared a gut-wrenching testimony that elicited a few sniffles from the crowd, which gradually grew into sobs, which snowballed into full-on emotional meltdown. It was exactly the kind of thing men imagine happening when women get together. I didn't like it at all.



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In retrospect, my younger self was arrogant and naïve in that moment. Women need healing from the Lord, and sometimes a good cry in a safe space is spiritually restorative. That aspect of ministry is necessary and valuable. Even so, I couldn't ignore the part of my spirit that wanted more. That yearning has persisted ever since, and it is present in the hearts of many women I know today. Emotional forms of ministry have their place, but women in the church are eager to move beyond emotion, and beyond the surface.

Blogger Emerging Mummy recently captured this sentiment in her impassioned post **"In Which I Write a Letter to Women's Ministry"**:

But I'm here with you tonight because I want what the world cannot give me. We're choking on cutesy things and crafty bits, safe lady topics and if one more person says that modest is hottest with a straight face, I may throw up. **We are hungry for authenticity and vulnerability, not churchified life hacks from lady magazines.** Some of us are drowning, suffocating, dying of thirst for want of the cold water of real community. We're trying really hard—after all, we keep showing up to your lady events and we leave feeling just a bit empty. It's just more of the same every time.

But she is not the first to express such concerns with women's ministry. Several years ago author Wendy Horger Alsup wrote a post titled **"Pink Fluffy Bunny Women's Bible Studies"** in which she criticized the "emotional fluff out there masquerading as Bible study." Alsup, I should add, works hard at demonstrating an alternative to spiritual milk. She writes in a manner that is consistently theological, thoughtful, and faithful. She is a wonderful example of the change she would like to see.



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Undoubtedly, the younger generations of women want a different kind of women's ministry, one that is Christ-centered, biblically based, and kingdom oriented. However, Alsup's example also highlights a tension in the very term *women's ministry*. On the one hand, Emerging Mummy has consistently encountered a model of women's ministry that is deeply troubling when she would like to see something else. Here is what she writes:

You know what I would have liked tonight instead of decorating tips or a new recipe? I would have liked to pray together. I would have liked for the women of the church to share their stories or wisdom with one another, no more celebrity speakers, please just hand the microphone to that lady over there that brought the apples. I would love to wrestle with some questions that don't have a one-paragraph answer in your study guide. I would like to do a Bible study that does not have pink or flowers on the cover. I would have liked to sign up to bring a meal for our elderly or drop off some clothes for a new baby or be informed about issues in our city where we can make space for God. I would like to organize and prioritize, to rabble-rouse and disturb the peace of the rest of the world on behalf of justice, truth, beauty and love. I'd love to hear the prophetic voice of women in our church.

On the other hand, women like Alsup are working hard for change. In addition to serving in her local context, Alsup helps women go deeper with her book **Practical Theology for Women**. The ministry of Southern Baptist Seminary professor Mary Kassian challenges women to love God with both their hearts and minds. And while Beth Moore is often associated with the old-school model, she must also be credited as a real trail-blazer in the field, assembling Bible studies that are consistently in-depth.



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The tension, then, is in the diversity of women's ministry models. In spite of the criticism frequently leveled at "women's ministry" as a generic whole, women's ministry isn't generic at all. On the contrary, women's ministries vary from church to church.

Women's ministry, as a form, is in the midst of a massive shift. Many women's ministries have responded to the outcry and evolved, but the stereotypes have not always changed accordingly. Rather than doing justice to the change, broad stereotypes have remained, further stigmatizing women's ministry in the minds of female churchgoers.

Nowhere has this stigma been more apparent to me than in my efforts to involve young women. In most of the churches where I have served, the 20somethings have been all but absent from women's ministry events. This younger generation has grown up hearing about "fluffy" women's ministries, and the stereotype has become entrenched. Even when change is happening in their churches, many young women persist in the belief that all women's ministries are inherently superficial.

An additional tension raised by these stereotypes is the attitude that often accompanies them. In the interest of improving women's ministry, there is a tendency to belittle women who have done it differently. I am guilty of this. In the past, my critiques of women's ministry were not only unfair but often condescending. I painted in broad strokes and I was ungrateful for the contributions of the women who had gone before me. I did not distinguish form from function, ignoring the reality that in some parts of the country, a tea party is *exactly* the kind of outreach event that a non-Christian, middle-aged woman might attend.

Women's ministry is not a monolithic movement. As some women's ministries begin to change, it is important that our language reflects the complexity of this shift. Old stereotypes and blanket condemnations can be just as detrimental to the growth of a women's ministry as its own frivolous methods. Prophetic



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correction is indeed necessary at times, but the line between constructive criticism and destructive cynicism is a fine one. Too often our conversations about women's ministry have fallen on the wrong side of that divide, so we might consider hope as a categorical alternative. After all, women discipling women is certainly worth getting excited about.

Sharon Hodde Miller is a writer and a doctoral student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. This **article** was first published on **Her.Meneutics.com**.

Reflect

- *Does your church have trouble getting younger women involved in your women's ministry? If so, what may be contributing to that?*
- *Does your women's ministry satisfy those who are "hungry for authenticity and vulnerability, not churchified life hacks from lady magazines"? If so, how?*
- *What small changes can you make in your women's ministry to begin moving to a deeper spiritual experience for your participants?*



Life, Doctrine, and Women's Ministry

We need to give women a richer
theological framework.

By Sarah Flashing

Whether through books, Bible studies, retreats, or conferences, a central focus of women's ministry has been on the practical dimensions of Christian living, either presupposing the theological understanding of the audience—which isn't always wrong to do—or simply neglecting to ground the practical in a richer theological framework.



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Of course, I'm not suggesting we aren't teaching women Scripture, but in the rush to fill in the blanks, we aren't teaching women to handle the Word as theologians. Some women's ministry leaders have made statements that undermine the process of doing theology, suggesting that because knowing theology is not provisional for salvation that somehow it lacks practical value. We are good at teaching principles and precepts from the Word, but are we communicating interdependence between life and doctrine? Is there a place of theological education in the context of women's ministry?

"Life and doctrine are interdependent." These are the words of John Frame who serves as the chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando. From his book, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, he argues for a more integrated understanding of the practical and the theoretical, suggesting that one cannot exist without the other. He writes: "The Greek terms based on *didasko* typically refer in the Pastoral Epistles to a teaching of the word of God that leads to spiritual health. This is 'sound' or 'healthy' teaching. So doctrine, defined as this kind of teaching, also has an ethical goal. It is not given to us merely for intellectual contemplation."

Life and doctrine were never intended to be separated and any attempt to teach about the day to day Christian life without Christian doctrine provides for a limited or empty experience. By ethical, Frame is referencing the ongoing process of sanctification of becoming more conformed to the image of God.

Granted, the "ivory towers" of academia have given at least the perception that the theoretical has no real relationship with the daily struggles of everyday people, but the content and tapestry of our worldview plays an extremely relevant



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role to how we live. This means that what we believe (or don't believe) directly impacts our daily lives. As Christian women who are able to spend time together in small groups, Bible studies, retreats, and conferences, a more concentrated focus needs to be devoted to teach women to own the content of their faith so that they are equipped to apply the eternal truths of Scripture to their lives on their own.

*Sarah Flashing is the director of The Center for Women in Faith and Culture. This **article** first appeared on **GiftedForLeadership.com**.*

Reflect

- *Does our women's ministry value deeper theological understanding?*
- *Read **2 Timothy 2:15**. Does our women's ministry help women know how to do this?*
- *How can we better equip women to apply Scripture to their lives?*

Women's Ministry the AA Way



Develop a ministry that is characterized by honesty.

By Nicole Unice

I used to think Alcoholics Anonymous was all stale prayers and smoky church basements. I considered myself a distant admirer of the program, but even as a counselor, I didn't want to get too close. AA was a good idea for some people, but surely it wasn't relevant to my busy life of "making a difference" in women's ministry.

My stereotypes were shattered through a course called "Substance Abuse and Society," which gave me a firsthand glimpse into the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Like the church, AA encourages people to seek healing and growth. But sometimes unlike church, AA prizes authenticity—in a Jesus kind of way. I was surprised at how much I gleaned in those church basements.



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Women's Ministry the AA Way

If your women's ministry seems stuck, perhaps it lacks authenticity. Take a journey through a few of the Twelve Steps below and after each step, take time to evaluate your own honesty.

Adding Authenticity

During a thunderous summer storm, a slim and attractive woman in her forties stepped behind the podium at an AA meeting. Her chunky pearl bracelet slid up her arm as she pulled the microphone toward her.

"Hi, I'm Christy, and I'm an alcoholic." During the next 30 minutes, Christy shared her journey to a sober life.

Her appraisal of herself, both in addiction and recovery, was gut-level honest. Yet she possessed strength that gave her an almost regal air. A huge thunderclap punctuated her closing words, "Surrendering saved my life."

Christy reminded me of the woman Jesus spoke to at the well in Samaria (John 4). When Jesus confronted the woman with an honest appraisal of herself, she ran back to tell anyone who would listen that "he told me everything I ever did!" (John 4:39). The story goes on to say that many believed in Jesus as Savior because of her testimony. Christy and the woman at the well both recognized their need for a Savior after an honest appraisal of themselves. Honesty didn't cripple them with self-condemnation. It transformed them into powerful witnesses of grace.

Women's ministry is not just about what I want to do for fun. It's about what God is doing in me to transform me into a witness of his grace and love. As a women's ministry team, ask yourselves:

- Do I strive to present myself authentically?



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- Do I resist the urge to "have it all together" for other women?
- Am I willing to examine my own failings so that God might testify to his grace?

Shedding the put-together image shifts the glory-spotlight back to where it belongs—on God's power, not our own—and opens the door for transformation in our women's ministry.

The Confession Factor

Anyone who has walked through the Twelve Steps of AA anticipates step 4 with wide-eyed trembling. Step 4 says I have made a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself. There are many ways to complete this step, but most agree that writing down one's moral failures in the areas of fear, resentment, relationships with others, material possessions, and sexual integrity are important.

Jesus warned the Pharisees, some strict religious leaders of his day, that they were like "whitewashed tombs," appearing beautiful on the outside while full of hypocrisy on the inside (Matthew 23:27–28). The temptation to point others to clarity while avoiding it ourselves is strong. Recognizing the true landscape of our hearts is a step, like Jesus said, in cleaning out our insides.

- What are my moral failures in the areas of:
 - fear
 - resentment
 - relationships with others
 - material possessions
 - sexual integrity



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Searching and Fearless?

We must be willing to face our own issues with both a "searching" and a "fearless" heart. Richard Foster shares his own journey of self-examination in *Celebration of Discipline*: "I did not take the difficult step of laying bare my inner life to another out of any deep burden or sense of sin. I did not feel there was anything wrong in the least—except one thing. I longed for more power to do the work of God. I felt inadequate to deal with many of the desperate needs that confronted me."

Before my AA transformation, I was happy to keep my sins between God and me. As I began to share my true heart with my mentors and teammates, I was shocked by the grace and compassion I received—much more than I was giving myself. I discovered that my own self-driven perceptions and expectations were misdirected. When I openly shared my weaknesses, my team understood that I lead out of my own brokenness, and that I can't do it alone. Confession provided much-needed correction.

We cannot teach about the power in God's forgiveness if we haven't first subjected ourselves to its work.

- Do I have at least two people in my life who know where I'm tempted to sin?
- Do I allow others into my life to help me pursue spiritual health?

The result of such fearless soul-searching is a release of God's power to work in and through you in all areas of life.

The Humility Step

AA describes humility as "another great dividend we may expect from confiding our defects to another human being." A man in



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his sixties told me, "I'm just a selfish guy. By helping others in the program I keep myself sober." His gruff demeanor couldn't hide his sincere and humble heart. He had a clear understanding of who he was—a recovering alcoholic equipped to help, and be helped by, others on the journey.

We should seek to understand who we are outside of Christ. Another mentor once said, "I thought about the trajectory my life would be on without Jesus working on my heart. I know I would be a self-obsessed person set on greed and ambition." When we understand who we really are, we appreciate our influence and power with humility. We are willing to allow God to control the outcomes of our sincere attempts to reach out to others.

Talking about our past ways and current "drunken" areas—however large or small they are—keeps us from stumbling in pride. First Timothy 1:16 reminds us, "God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners." Accepting grace requires understanding need. Reminding ourselves of our own brokenness and sin removes the "us and them" mentality that can creep into ministry leadership. It keeps us as desperate for Jesus as the people we desire to serve.

As in the AA way, we should seek clarity on who we are apart from Christ, and make sincere attempt to move toward who he wants us to be in him.

- Do I have a grasp on my strengths and weaknesses?
- Do I encourage others around me to recognize their strengths and accept their weaknesses?

The Devotion Quotient

AA members know that devotion is critical for success in recovery. Day or night, a recovery group is probably meeting



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near your home. "It only works if you work it" is the mantra of every AA meeting, and newbies are encouraged to attend meetings daily. In a particularly busy season of ministry, I found myself struggling to keep up with the demands of leadership, motherhood, and counseling. I met with a trusted mentor who gently asked me, "Are you more in love with your Creator—or his creation?" The tyranny of the ministry to-do list makes it easy to forget that I must hear from God in order to follow his direction. Above all else, my heart must be devoted to God—who he is as my father and Lord.

- Do I ruthlessly prioritize personal devotion?
- Do I spend time each day creating space for God?

Unity Dividends

"AA leaders at one point considered removing the name of God from the 12 steps," explained my class instructor. "In a vote, the majority chose to change the language, but many disagreed. In the spirit of unity, they decided to keep it the way it was." *In the spirit of unity*, I mused in class, twiddling my pencil. I wrote in my notebook, "*How often do I sacrifice my own agenda in the 'spirit of unity'?*" Over the coming months, I began to listen to the way I asserted myself in my team.

- Am I willing to listen with an open heart, allowing the possibility that my mind could be changed?
- Am I willing to sacrifice my own ideas for the greater good of the ministry or the church?

Unity in ministry sets us apart as Christians. It speaks to our desire to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). A group of leaders who listen to one another's



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burdens, love each other in their weaknesses, and submit to one another is a powerful testimony of what it means to be like Jesus.

The Tissue Variable

I stepped up to teach a large-group Bible study last week in a full sob. My heart was heavy. The burdens of those I love and counsel seemed much bigger than I could handle. Special music at the beginning of class evoked surprising emotion, and I didn't suppress my tears. My introduction question went from a smooth tie-in to the biblical narrative to "does anyone have a tissue?"

I felt exposed and raw. And it felt right. Leadership doesn't always look like strength. But if it's real, it is powerful.

The Authenticity Quotient Quiz:

1. I can readily name a couple of areas of temptation to sin.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

2. I maintain the same sense of self at home, at work, and in ministry.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

3. I regularly take time to take a "searching and fearless moral inventory" with God and with myself.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

4. I have confessed my sins, fears, and/or insecurities with a trusted friend.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

5. I have sacrificed my own agenda for the sake of my team.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

6. I consistently seek ways to promote unity within my ministry team and the church as a whole.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

7. People who know me well would consider me humble.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never



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The Authenticity Quotient Quiz:

8. My devotion to Jesus comes before anything else in ministry.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

9. I can name several of my strengths and weaknesses.

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

Give 3 points for Always, 2 for Sometimes, 1 for Rarely, 0 for Never.

23–27 points: Your example is a model for others to experience the freedom of authentic relationship with God and others.

17–23 points: You have areas of authenticity, but also some growth opportunities. Consider how you can take the next step in authenticity.

10–17 points: Genuineness seems to be an issue for you. Perhaps past difficulties have created some patterns of relating where you feel you have to "act" a certain way. Consider asking a trusted friend if he/she agrees with your assessment, then act on incorporating some of these areas into your life.

0–10 points: Red Alert! You are headed for ministry injury—to yourself or others. Read **this Gifted for Leadership article** or **this issue** of the TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN digital magazine to find ways of relating more authentically. Or consider visiting an AA meeting as a guest to experience an environment of humility, confession, and devotion that can inspire you to make some much-needed changes.

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Take the Next Step



Consider service projects for
your women's ministry.

By Keri Wyatt Kent

Just before dawn on Saturday morning, a few neighbors gather in my driveway bearing dozens of eggs, gallons of orange juice, fruit, bagels, and cheese. We drive to a women's shelter in the city, then cook and serve breakfast to the 30 or so women who live there. Two hours later, we head back to the suburbs in time to get our kids to their various activities. It's the perfect service project for a group of busy suburban moms.

We've been doing this for more than two years. At least ten different women have gone with us, usually three or four at a time—which we've discovered is optimal in the shelter's kitchen. Some people go nearly every month, others just go once in a while. It's been a way for our group to rally around a cause, to share an adventure, and to begin living out the biblical love and compassion we've been studying.



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Doing service projects together builds camaraderie within the group. In a way, service projects are the "lab" to a ministry's "lecture." If you are studying the Bible, they allow you to live out what you are learning. They provide some space to show the love and compassion of God to those in need.

The Bible says that faith without works is dead. And it has plenty to say about the poor. For example, Proverbs 22:9 says: "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." And Proverbs 19:17 says, "Those who are kind to the poor lend to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done."

Serving those in need is part of what it means to be a Christian. Performing that service together with your small group can be a life-changing experience—if you approach it the right way. Here are some tips for adding this important element to your group life.

Start With Prayer

Henry Blackaby famously observed that prayer is noticing where God is at work, and then joining him in that work. This is precisely the kind of listening prayer that must precede any small-group service project. Ask yourself:

- Where is there a need?
- What are group members passionate about?
- Where is there, perhaps, an organization that is working to meet that need and could use a little help?
- Where is God calling your group to serve?
- What passions has he placed on the group members' hearts? Are there some needs right in your own neighborhood?



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Take the Next Step

Pray together as a group, and ask God to lead you. Hashing it out is part of listening to God in community. Listen to each other as you listen to God.

Start Slowly

Give the group time to process the idea of doing a serving project, and make sure everyone has input. You may want to start by selecting a one-time project. Check with your church or another local charity to research possibilities. Our church, for example, packs meals once a year to send to Africa through an organization called **Feed My Starving Children**. Our church also runs a food pantry where they need volunteers on a regular basis. Going once to a soup kitchen, Habitat for Humanity build, or some other one-time project can be a good way to start.

Our group first went to the shelter to serve a meal during the holidays. A year later, we went again, and after that, we decided we wanted to go on a regular basis.

Designate a Point Person

As you pray about where to serve, you may notice that some people in the group have a lot of passion about serving, or about a particular need. Ask one of them to be the organizer of your service project. In our group that person is me, but I have another woman who will organize things if I happen to be out of town. In our case, that person confirms with the shelter that we will be there, coordinates who's coming and what each will bring, and figures out transportation.

Go With Humility

Your group should expect not only to serve, but to learn. Remind them to be open, to notice how helping others can minister to them. Our group has learned so much from the women at the



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shelter. Often they are escaping abusive situations, and despite their trials, they are women of great faith.

Every person you meet matters to God, and they have something to teach you, if you are open and humble. Treat them with respect. See the value of the people you're serving—and expect God to speak to you through them.

Serve Regularly

While one-time projects can be great, real life-change happens when you serve consistently. Not everyone in the group may be able to make it to a one-time project. If you do something monthly or quarterly, more group members will have opportunities to serve. Perhaps you want to adopt a school in a needy area and volunteer to tutor there on a regular basis, or help out at a food pantry once a month.

Understand the Purpose

Serving others, whether through a one-time project or ongoing involvement, is not a way to earn points with God. Rather, it is a way to open ourselves and allow God to form us. It is obedience to Scripture. By serving others, we allow God to develop our compassion. Serving helps others, but also forms us spiritually. By imitating Christ, who came to serve, we grow in Christ-likeness. It is not about impressing God or others.

Talk about these ideas with your group. You may want to discuss some of the countless verses in the Bible that talk about the poor.

Be Flexible

We serve in a pretty rough neighborhood in the city. Some of our suburban group members simply don't want to go. That's okay. For those who go, it's an act of faith—we trust that God



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will protect us on our "urban adventures." The group members know they are always invited to the service project, but we don't force it. Sometimes I look for another way to include them, such as asking them to donate food. Ask group members to suggest projects they have a passion for—you'll see participation increase.

Invite Others

I have found that non-Christians are often more open to doing a service project than they are to coming to church or small group. Inviting non-group members to come along on a service project can often be a first step toward inviting them into the group itself. One of my neighbors, who was not yet a Christian, was always glad to come to the shelter. She was very comfortable talking to the women there, unlike some of the others from our group, who preferred to stay in the kitchen rather than come out and interact with the guests in the dining room.

I noticed, out loud, how loving and accepting she was. I affirmed her for what she was doing. She heard the women who lived in the shelter talking about their faith. She saw their struggles. Her heart was moved with compassion. She's now in our Bible study, earnestly seeking God, reading the Bible for the first time in her life. For her, the service project was an "on-ramp" into the group.

Take Time to Debrief

Ask group members to talk about what they're learning from serving. Are they feeling guilt or gratitude for their own privilege? Let them process. Then push them to go deeper. How does their affluence isolate them, for example? How do the poor have to trust God more than the well-off? Allow the group to wrestle with the feelings and questions that come up.



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Service projects, especially ongoing ones, will help your group bond and help individual members to grow in their faith. Perhaps this is the next step your women's ministry needs to take.

Keri Wyatt Kent is a speaker and the author of seven books, including Simple Compassion (Zondervan). Learn more at www.keriyattkent.com. This article originally appeared on SmallGroups.com.

Reflect

- *What was my most recent experience with someone who could be considered "poor"?*
- *When would be a good time for our group to pray about serving together? What steps can I take to make that happen?*
- *Who are some people outside of our group that might like to join us in a service project?*

The (Digitally) Connected Women's Ministry



Connect the women in your church
through social media.

By Nicole Unice and Jenni Catron

It's 2 P.M. on a Thursday, and several people are sharing words of encouragement during our efforts to raise funds for hunger relief.

A young professional asks, "Anyone feeling more satisfied and optimistic today?" A stay-at-home mom talks about her children's "beans and rice" song. Another person is "humbled" and has a new perspective on materialism. It's the kind of interaction that every ministry leader hopes for—a community that transcends age and stage, with the work of the gospel at the center.

And it's all happening on Twitter.

The five-day challenge was our first "full-court press" experience using Facebook, Twitter, and blogging to unite a diverse community throughout the week. And the impact on the group convinced us that social media must be taken seriously.



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Many church leaders are waking up to the fact that social media is a force to be reckoned with. The numbers don't lie: there are 500 million Facebook users—and 50 percent use it every day. Twitter, a micro-blogging tool that allows users to post 140-character messages, also boasts millions of active users with thousands joining daily. With numbers like these, it's only natural to wonder how you might use social media to help your ministry.

Let's explore three significant ways to leverage social media to multiply a ministry's effectiveness. We'll weave in lessons we've learned experimenting with blogging, texting, Facebook, and Twitter in our own churches. We've chosen three specific ways social media multiplies the effectiveness of ministry: for information, innovation, and mobilization.

Inform

Nothing is more frustrating than devoting weeks or even months of planning to an event only to have it fail because you didn't get the word out. We can't force people to come to our events, but we can make sure they know about them. Using Facebook and Twitter is a quick way to reach people, with the added bonus of enabling people to easily pass along invites and information to others.

When transitioning to electronic communication, more work up front pays off in the end. For instance, when we started a blog to post announcements for our women's ministry, we let women consent to receiving blog updates via e-mail on a pen-and-paper sign-up sheet. A volunteer then entered all the e-mails into the blog so that the women in the group could receive announcements quickly and easily.



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Innovate

Last month I (Nicole) wrote a blog post asking readers to write a definition of idolatry. Using Facebook and Twitter, I asked for specific help from other ministry leaders. The end result was a much richer definition of modern-day idolatry than what I would have found using only my circle of friends and commentaries. Dozens of responses helped me shape a lesson that wasn't limited to my own experiences. Defining and exposing modern-day idols became a community effort. The blog post took me 30 minutes to write, but the resulting information highlights one of the strengths of social media: the ability to innovate in ministry.

Jesus was masterful at communicating spiritual truths in settings and with language that connected with listeners. Likewise, Paul strived to be fluent in the language of his culture (1 Corinthians 9:22). When used wisely, social media is a powerful tool for church leaders serious about this rich legacy of contextualized communication.

Here are just a few examples of how social media can generate new ministry methods and ideas:

- Use Facebook/Twitter to ask questions or generate conversation around sermon topics.
- Connect with other leaders and get quick access to quality resources that they share through their own tweets, blogs, or Facebook.
- Use Twitter or text messages to answer some (screened) questions at the end of a talk.

Mobilize

Do you need volunteers right away for an emergency? Using social media can be a way to let people know of a need right



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away. It can come in handy with natural disasters, funeral arrangements, and set-up help for events. Social media can be the platform to keep the need alive and to rally volunteers as opportunities to serve continue to surface.

Leader Objections

There is little argument anymore that social media has tremendous power. From charity organizations raising money for humanitarian aid to politicians campaigning for support, social media has become a powerhouse for getting attention and getting it fast.

But social media doesn't come without its host of challenges, especially for leaders. The three main obstacles we've encountered from leaders in using social media involve concerns regarding privacy, time, and managing other leaders' usage.

Challenge #1: "I don't want my life on display."

Ministry leaders already live very public lives. The idea of opening up another avenue, by which every move they make is exposed, can seem overwhelming.

But in today's culture, choosing to ignore social media comes with its own risks. You're choosing to close a potentially important line of communication between yourself and those you lead. And you might be sending the message that you're not really interested in hearing from your followers. You could liken this to a leader who works in an office with an entire team but stays behind a closed door the majority of the time. You may be present, but you're not accessible and engaged.

Using social media as a leader is a delicate balancing act. You want to be transparent and available while also protecting yourself and your family from over-exposure. And remember: you are still in control of what you share. You make the choice about personal information you put on Facebook, Twitter, or a blog.



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When I (Jenni) first started blogging and tweeting, I made a choice to use these avenues to help our congregation get to know me better. Being part of a fast-growing church, I realized that people saw my face, knew that I was a leader, but really didn't have many opportunities to get to know me and learn what I'm most passionate about. My blog became a vehicle for me to share the things on my mind and interesting happenings from my everyday life.

Challenge #2: "I don't have time to add another thing that I have to keep up with."

Ah, the precious commodity of time! You never have enough of it and you're pretty sure you never will. We get it. The idea of adding another medium to your arsenal of communication tools is exhausting. There's your home, work, and cell phones (and messages), work and personal e-mail. Should you really add a blog, Twitter, and Facebook to all of that?

Call us crazy, but we say, "Yes." Our world is changing rapidly, arguably faster than at any point in history. Keeping up with changing technology is simply a part of our world. And if your leadership involves influencing a younger generation, you will have to embrace these new media. Not necessarily all of them, but the ones that have the most impact for the people you feel called to reach.

Make your decision on which media to use based on the demographics, geography, and lifestyle of your community. For example, one of Cross Point's campuses is in a smaller, more rural community. The large majority of our congregation at that campus doesn't use Twitter. However the vast majority is on Facebook. As a leader in that community, Facebook makes sense.

For the Cross Point campus that reaches primarily college students, we have totally given up on any e-mail communication. They just don't read e-mail. That seems crazy to us Gen-Xers who



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thought e-mail was revolutionary when it first invaded our lives, but e-mail is very ineffective for this demographic. With this group, we focus our communication efforts on texting and Twitter.

Time constraints are real, but often they arise because of ineffectiveness. This is especially true when it comes to using social media. It may be that adopting a new mode of communicating with your followers will save you time in the long run. By trading the time I used to spend in meetings or e-mail for time spent replying to Twitter responses or direct messages, I wasn't spending more time and expending more energy, I was merely using both in more effective ways.

Challenge #3: "How do I manage a team that is using social media?"

There is no shortage of social media stories gone wrong. We put our feet in our mouths more often than we'd care to confess in the first place. With social media, the opportunity for missteps multiplies. That one misspoken word is quickly broadcast to hundreds and possibly thousands. The messages are immediate and unmediated. Instead of some minor damage control with one or two people, you now have an entire tribe of followers to whom you are accountable for what you say.

At a Catalyst conference, Bible teacher Beth Moore spoke to 11,000 young leaders, reminding them that they are "all authors." Once you enter the world of social media, every word you say is "published." But unfortunately, no one has a social media "editor" on their team. You must serve as your own filter.

There are other possible pitfalls as well. David Dwight cautions against the temptation social media provides to fabricate an attractive persona rather than seeking integrity in every aspect of our lives: "Jesus had strong words for people who manage their lives for appearances. Social media as an entity tempts us to do so," he said. Mark Driscoll, after a Facebook comment that



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generated truckloads of criticism, addressed his gaffe by deciding that there are issues that are "too big, tough and far-reaching for things like Facebook and Twitter."

While many churches and organizations will create social media guidelines for their staff, it is nearly impossible to write policy that heads off every conceivable problem that may arise. It may be the employee who shared an inappropriate picture on Facebook or a direct message that inadvertently went public. It could be an internal staff announcement that was mistakenly shared before the proper time. It could be any number of things that call for follow-up conversation. And having these conversations is the key.

We have found that some of the most honest, life-changing, relationship-deepening conversations come from social media moments gone wrong. As a leader, you can use these moments with your staff to speak into their lives and help them grow spiritually, personally and professionally. These conversations can be times for you to teach your teams to use greater discernment and wisdom.

Leadership is messy and complicated without the addition of constantly changing methods and media, but the best thing we can do as leaders is to step into the mess and help direct the use of these culturally dominant tools for propelling forward the hope of the gospel.

Fostering Spiritual Growth

One evening after a teaching on the importance of ordering our lives around God's Word, someone created a Facebook group challenging members to read a chapter from Proverbs each day and post their reflections on their own blogs or through a note on Facebook.

Over the next month, I watched as people shared community and encouragement through the "Proverbs Project" Facebook



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group. The accountability gave them motivation to stay the course and complete the Book of Proverbs in one month. As a leader, I was able to provide encouragement as well as read their own reflections and interpretations of Scripture. The best part was that this experience was lay-created and led—with no extra burden on staff.

Facilitating Service

Every Tuesday the Twitter chatter begins. It's usually mid-afternoon and my @crosspoint_tv stream in Hootsuite (my Twitter management software of choice) begins to be pinged with volunteers who are rallying to serve at @TheBridgeTN. The Bridge Ministries is an organization that feeds the homeless every Tuesday night in Nashville. This isn't an overly organized effort on the part of Cross Point leadership. It simply started from a few passionate attendees who felt like this was a great opportunity to love and serve the most destitute members of our community. It doesn't take much but an afternoon of Twitter chatter and 30+ people are assembled every Tuesday night to go serve together under The Jefferson Street Bridge, rain or shine.

*Nicole Unice and Jenni Catron are contributing editors for Christianity Today's **GiftedForLeadership.com**. This **article** first appeared in LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*



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Reflect

- *Which of the ideas listed above sound most promising to you?*
- *What fears or drawbacks do you see to implementing social media in your women's ministry?*
- *Who in your women's group is most able to get this ministry off the ground?*
- *What first steps can you take to begin using social media?*

Additional Resources



Articles, books, and Bible studies
to help you further

Articles

Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry—*Insight into the woman you can't talk into coming to your event.*

By Amy Simpson, available on GiftedForLeadership.com

Ideas for Women's Ministry—*Offers some practical ideas to implement in your women's ministry.*

By Amy Simpson, available on GiftedForLeadership.com

Women Telling the Story—*Emphasizes the importance of women teaching in the local church.*

By Sarah Flashing, available on GiftedForLeadership.com

Time to Get Back to Basics?—*Considers discipleship-oriented women's ministry.*

By Sarah Flashing, available on GiftedForLeadership.com



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Additional Resources

Women's Ministry That Works—*Effective outreach to women will help them recognize the natural rhythms and relationships that already exist in their lives.*

By Tracey Bianchi, available on GiftedForLeadership.com

Books

Women's Ministry in the Local Church by Susan Hunt, J. Ligon Duncan (Crossway, 2006). The purpose of this book is to strengthen Christ's church by presenting a practical theology of women's ministry in the local church. The book answers five fundamental questions: Why should a church have a women's ministry—what is the biblical apologetic? Who is responsible for the women's ministry in a church? What are the tasks of a women's ministry? How does a church implement a biblical approach to women's ministry?

Building an Effective Women's Ministry by Sharon Jaynes (Harvest House, 2005). Want to develop a dynamic women's ministry, but don't know where to start? Jaynes answers your questions and offers the planning tools and confidence builders you need to succeed. Learn how to identify your mission, develop a team, plan a budget, avoid burnout, achieve balance, and create programs that nurture, reach out, and revive.

Women's Ministry in the 21st Century (Group Publishing, 2011). Your go-to-guide for fun and practical ways to connect, engage, and inspire women. This fun-packed, easy-to-follow collection of ideas is just what you need by your side for reaching women of today. Every idea is designed to bring women into a closer relationship with God and each other.



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Additional Resources

Bible Studies

Women's Ministry Downloads—Check out the many tools to help you in your women's ministry. Available from TodaysChristianWoman.com.

"Fresh Ideas for Women's Ministry"— The handouts in this resource give you short and succinct snapshots of the issues surrounding women's ministry. You may use these handouts at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, hand them out as brief primers for someone new to this particular ministry, or give individually to key leaders who work on outreach and events for women. This study is available from TodaysChristianWoman.com.

"Rethinking Women's Ministry"— The daughter of a pastor, Amy Simpson grew up in the church, is steeped in Christianity, and swaddled in Christian culture. And yet, at women's events in church she's felt like an outsider. 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? Available from ChristianBibleStudies.com.

"One Year of Women's Bible Studies"— This one-year curriculum of downloadable Bible studies for women can help give your women's group variety, depth, and interest. We've assembled a nice mix of studies that includes topics such as finding balance in our lives, managing our emotions, improving our relationships, handling stress, and overcoming



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Additional Resources

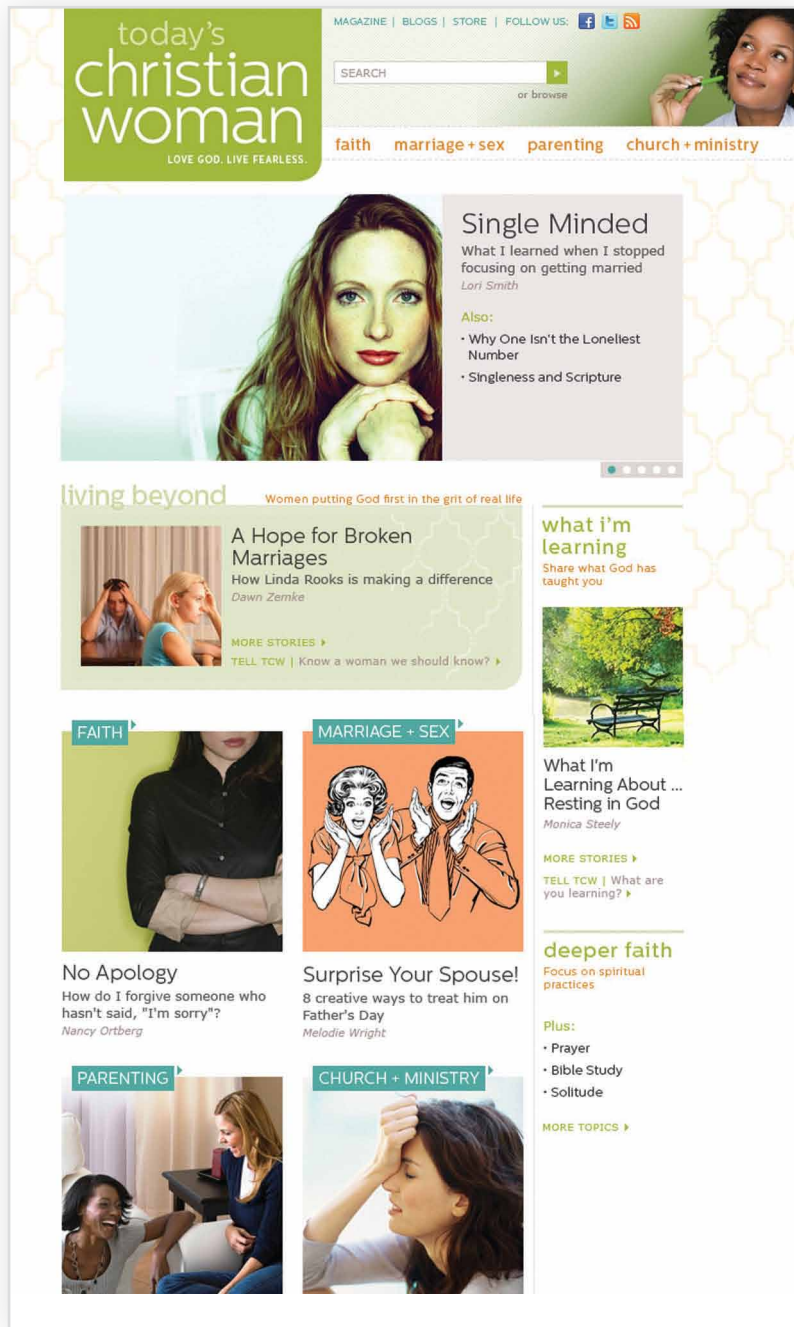
fear. Plus, we've thrown in some movie discussion guides that will add variety and keep things fun. Download this once and then make as many copies as you need. Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

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