



Ministry for Today's Women

What leaders of women's ministries need to know about the women they serve and the ministries they run.

2 INTRODUCTION

Frustrated Women Leaders

Help for this hard job.
by Caryn Rivadeneira

4 PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry

How shallow, one-dimensional ministries fail to reach.
by Amy Simpson

7 PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Invisible Christian Women

Why do I feel like an outsider at many women's ministry functions?
by Camerin Courtney

11 THE ISSUE AT HAND

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

How is she different from women of the past and how can the Church impact her eternity?
by Tamara Rice

22 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Women's Ministry that Works

How to reach women in ways that don't uproot them.
by Tracey Bianchi

25 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Why Women Resist Community

How to overcome obstacles that keep women at bay.
by Nancy Barton

29 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

How We Revitalized Our Women's Group

A fresh approach and open mind made all the difference.
by Denise Farrar with Judie Amen

34 PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Ministries Among Today's Women

Reaching women means aiming at moving and multiple targets.
by Naomi Gaede-Penner

41 LEADERSHIP TOOLS

Ideas for Women's Ministry

Thoughts to get you thinking.
by Amy Simpson

45 Resources

More places for more help.





Frustrated Women Leaders

Help for this hard job.

by Caryn Rivadeneira

Through the years, I've added a bunch of titles to my "Jobs I'm Glad I Don't Have" list. I won't share those jobs now—because one woman's list is another's living, and I don't want to offend—but until a few months ago women's ministry leader would've never appeared on my list. It still doesn't, but after Amy Simpson first wrote her piece, "Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry," the responses that rolled in made me wonder if it should be. While I expected to hear from women frustrated by the stereotypic ministries offered at their churches, I never expected the outpouring from the frustrated women who run them!

Running women's ministries is a tough job, for so many reasons. Not the least of which is that churches today still fail to recognize that women are not all the same, do not all have the same needs, and can't be ministered to in some cookie-cutter approach. Yet churches still staff and approach ministries as if this is the case. Meaning, leaders of women's ministries have a rough go, and their comments to Amy's article spoke to their desperation.

Introduction



Ministry for Today's Women

Frustrated Women Leaders

3

Because we believe in the importance of ministry to women and the good work of women's ministry leaders, we created this booklet. We've designed it to offer you some honest opinions on the way things look today, some ideas of what women would like to see, and some encouragement and wisdom to make it happen.

Blessings,

Caryn Rivadeneira
Managing Editor, GiftedForLeadership
Christianity Today International

Introduction



PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry

How shallow, one-dimensional ministries fail to reach.

by Amy Simpson

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.”



Ministry for Today's Women

Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry

5

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

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Why I Don't Do Women's Ministry

6

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?

Amy Simpson is Executive Director of the Leadership Media Group at Christianity Today International. This article first appeared at GIFTED FOR LEADERSHIP on August 28, 2007.

Thought Provokers

- *What's been your personal experience with women's ministries at your church? How does it compare with your experience in other churches or other organizations?*
- *How does being a leader affect your view of women's ministries?*

Features



PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Invisible Christian Women

Why do I feel like an outsider at many women's ministry functions?

by Dawn Zemke

The evening was supposed to be encouraging. Instead it ended with tears—mine.

My mom and I were attending a women's ministry event—a weekend retreat dubbed an escape. To us busy career women, this sounded like just what we needed—time away from the daily grind. And connecting with one another on this getaway was the biggest draw of all.

So on a Friday afternoon we flew to this national conference anticipating encouragement, togetherness, and a sense of belonging to the larger community of Christian women.

But by Saturday night I simply felt invisible.

The event was certainly well planned and executed. I enjoyed the great worship music, the chit-chat with women from around the country, the chance to hear some top-notch speakers. But the entire



Ministry for Today's Women

Invisible Christian Women

8

weekend seemed geared toward young married moms. And as a single 30something with no kids, I felt like an outsider. Even my mom, an empty-nester nearing retirement, felt a bit out of the loop.

Much of the explanation for why we women needed to get away was couched in terms of us getting away from our husbands and kids. Nearly all the speakers told multiple stories about their families and centered their points on being good wives and moms. I certainly don't begrudge the women in those demographics this needed advice. But if this was an event aimed specifically at wives and moms, it probably should've been advertised that way. Instead, it had been marketed simply as a women's ministry event.

I don't think this evening would've bothered me if its narrow focus had been an isolated instance. But I've been to many women's ministry events over the years—teas, luncheons, weekend retreats, national conferences—and many of them have had a very homogeneous demographic in mind: young married moms.

I know we never-married singles aren't the only ones who feel left out in this equation. In the past couple years I've become friends with a newly widowed 60something and a newly divorced mom of two grade-school-age kids. Given their new status, both these women have talked about the challenge of knowing where they fit into the body of Christ as a whole and women's ministry niches more specifically. When my sister was struggling through a season of infertility and multiple miscarriages years ago, she had to navigate women's ministry events carefully. I've heard similar rumblings from women who are older, disabled, of an ethnic background, or more into tattoos and extreme sports than capris and casseroles.

Of course many women's ministries across the country are wonderfully diverse, innovative, and inclusive. I've attended several, and we've highlighted a few in the pages of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine. But I fear too much of what's done in the name of women's ministry is by and large still exclusive. And hurtful to those of us who feel on the outside. Like the black sheep of God's family.

I completely understand why the church is so traditional-family focused. The roles of wife and mom are all encompassing, and women need constant encouragement and equipping to live these roles well.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Invisible Christian Women

9

And with the family unit taking many hits in society, those serving the God who created family are compelled to act and advocate. But in these years when the church has taken on the cause of the family, society has seen some huge demographic shifts as well. Depending on the statistic consulted, singles now make up anywhere from 44 to 52 percent of the U.S. adult population. According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2004, the proportion of childless women 15 to 44 years old was 44.6 percent, up from 35 percent in 1976.

Some of these numbers represent changing choices for women, and some reflect surprise realities. I never imagined I'd be 36 and still single. Contrary to some common thinking, I never made a conscious choice of career over family. I simply haven't met a man who's a good, godly match for me. For my friends who've wrestled with infertility, their empty arms ache for little ones to call their own. For those of us longing for these "missing people" in our lives, the blanket assumption that all Christian women are wives and moms stings. We already can feel invisible to men, to God, and to women in the demographics we thought we'd occupy by now. Adding the church to this list is painful. Of all the places to feel like an outsider, our communities of faith are probably one of the most difficult.

I love that today's Christian women are wonderfully diverse. My circle of Christian friends includes a doctor of psychology, a business owner, and an area director for World Relief. Among the women I've interviewed for the pages of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN are an amputee, a stand-up comedian, and an Olympic diver. Some are wives and moms, some are divorced with kids, some have never married. They represent different ethnicities, abilities, and ages. All of them are serving God right where they are. I think women's ministries should be celebrating this unique way God crafted each of his daughters and the myriad ways he's writing our life stories. And they should be encouraging us in whatever season of life we're experiencing—whether by design or by surprise—to find strength in our fellow women of faith and hope in our unconditionally loving God.

Camerin Courtney is managing editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine. This article first appeared at TCW's Editors Blog on August 13, 2007.

Features



Thought Provokers

- *When have you felt “invisible” in women’s ministry?*
- *Courtney writes, “Of all the places to feel like an outsider, our communities of faith are probably one of the most difficult.” What are some things your church or organization does to make women feel welcome, not like “outsiders”? What more could you do?*



THE ISSUE AT HAND

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

How is she different from women of the past and how can the Church impact her eternity?

by Tamara Rice

For Laura Cartman*, a stay-at-home mother of two in Orange County, Calif., life took an unexpected turn. Once stable and familiar, her world became a foreign place full of confusion when her seemingly devoted husband of eight years began sharing the bed of a woman living on the same street, just a few houses away. Caught in the undertow of legal separation and inevitable divorce, she suddenly needed her own income and, for the first time, childcare.

But in the weeks and months that followed, Cartman struggled to get out of bed each day. Facing her wounded children, let alone her neighbors, seemed like an insurmountable feat. She was without comfort. Without God.

In our own worlds, all of us are surrounded by women like Laura Cartman. Their circumstances may look different, their hurts may be less shocking, but women like Cartman—struggling and without Christ—are living next door to us. They're the women we see every



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

12

day at Starbucks, on Saturdays at the soccer field or at neighborhood barbecues. And if we don't take time to hear their stories, we could miss them.

More than a decade ago, I completed a women's ministry course as part of my B.A. from a West Coast Christian college, and for years afterward I honestly believed I had learned in that class what it took to minister to women through the local church. Yet in fact all I really knew was how to teach a Bible lesson, plan a tea party and coordinate a weekend retreat—which may have been enough in the mid-20th century, when the Church and the American culture were not so disparate.

What I didn't learn, now vital to 21st century ministry, was how to relate to women who can't play "church" with me—women who don't know how to look up a verse, share a prayer request and come forward when convicted.

What I didn't learn was how to connect or reconnect the Laura Cartmans of this world with their compassionate Creator.

What We Look Like ...

I say "we" because despite my Christian upbringing I am one of these women and have found myself in their statistics. We are an educated bunch—a record one in four has earned her bachelor's degree. We are also, on the surface, a spiritual crowd. Not only do most women provide the spiritual direction for their families, nearly half (46 percent) of American women classify themselves as Christian, and almost as many regularly attend church, reports Barna Research Group. However, despite these statistics, our culture—as author Brian McLaren recently wrote in *The Strategy We Pursue*—shows little effect of the "Christ-like presence" one would envision based on this influence.

The number of church-going women in the United States has dropped in the last 10 years by at least 22 percent. And considering the incongruity between "church attendance" and its seemingly nonexistent impact on culture, one could surmise that many who attend church have never experienced the transforming love of God—therefore simply striving to get women to church may not be enough.

Following in Laura Cartman's difficult path, 10 percent of all American women over age 25 are divorced, and right now 10 million mothers in this country are raising their children virtually alone—4 million of them have, sadly, never done it any other way.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

13

You see, despite more educational and career opportunities at our doorsteps, women's lives are far from perfect. Today it's estimated that one out of every eight American women—myself included—has suffered from clinical depression. And an estimated 7.5 million women are addicted to drugs or alcohol. But before you judge them, consider that 70 percent of those in treatment say they endured childhood physical and sexual abuse (a trauma an astounding four in 10 women have lived with).

These statistics represent real women with a real need for their Savior. And these women—even those like Laura Cartman—are not beyond the reach of the Church.

Remembering to 'Go and Tell'

Jan Wyder of Grace Church in Eden Prairie, Minn., (atgrace.com) felt a little restless recently as she contemplated the large women's ministry she has directed for more than five years. Normally a decisive leader, she found herself torn over the annual women's Christmas outreach event. She grappled with the Holy Spirit over the sinking feeling that their 10-year outreach tradition wasn't reaching out anymore.

"It was painful," she recalls, "like taking off a mask. I felt the Lord telling me, 'It's too much about them'—meaning those individual, Bible-believing women in the chairs of our churches. Church today is too much about them."

To be sure, she says, it doesn't diminish the ministry happening among believers at Grace and those who'd come to Christ through the annual outreach. But she couldn't escape the knowledge that Grace's women were capable of doing so much more "going and telling."

"Jesus said to go into all the world," says Women of Faith speaker Marilyn Meberg, "and it's that world that doesn't know him. It's important for churches to teach their own women, and it isn't wrong to have groups and events for their women. But we are missing it if we don't recognize that we're called to the world. Ingrown is not God's deal," she continues. "Out there is God's deal."

The Womb of the Church

Wyder, whose impassioned voice deepens when she speaks of outreach, frequently tells her women's ministry staff that if everything else in the ministry had to go away, Bible study would remain. Bible studies, she explains, can be intentional in accommodating unsaved guests and girlfriends. It requires structuring studies with sensitivity at every level

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

14

from timeframes that recognize a broad range of lifestyles, to easy integration and registration for newcomers. Such strategic planning is, Wyder notes, not rocket science—like offering an evening study for women who work and providing childcare during the daytime study for stay-at-home mothers or homeschooling moms.

Trinity Church in Redlands, Calif., takes a step further at its large Monday night and Wednesday morning women's studies, reserving several groups during the small group portion of the study for seekers. Dr. Elizabeth Inrig—women's ministry pastor at Trinity (trinityonline.org) and the national director of women's ministries for the Evangelical Free Church of America—believes there's no better place for those she calls "pre-Christians" than the womb of the church, especially in studies which are built with sensitivity to accommodate unchurched women and their unique questions and level of Bible knowledge.

But an awareness of seekers' needs and perspectives can extend beyond Bible studies. At Shadow Mountain Church in El Cajon, Calif., (shadowmountain.org) Women's Ministry Director Darlene Barber has developed "Mountain Blend" quarterly outreach events, with intentionality at every level—from the greeters to servers to speakers. Each church member involved is trained to reach out through words, phone calls, and service to connect with attendees on an emotional and spiritual level. Says Barber: "No woman is left untouched when they come."

Loving Mothers

To date, one of the strongest and most intentionally consistent women's outreaches in local churches is targeted to mothers of small children. Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS; mops.com) is collectively 2.5 million strong, with 40 percent of the women involved reportedly non-Christians. As MOPS CEO Elisa Morgan points out, the ministry is unique in its push to look beyond the congregation to women in the community.

Says Morgan: "We want to reach the woman who is the furthest away from Jesus and have her feel comfortable in MOPS."

MOPS leadership trainer Stacie Maslyn notes how easy it is to invite a friend, a neighbor, even a complete stranger to church through MOPS: "I was at Burger King one day and saw a woman with two babies,"

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

15

Maslyn recalls. “She looked frazzled and exhausted. I just looked at her and said, ‘You need MOPS!’”

When Maslyn gave the woman a card with MOPS information, she not only showed up, she went on to become a leader, planted another MOPS group and currently works for MOPS International.

Spokane Valley Nazarene Church in Spokane, Wash. (SVNC; svnc.org), takes MOPS to a new level, seizing every opportunity to love mothers with no strings attached. At the first meeting of the year, men in the church wash, clean out and vacuum every mother’s car. It is this kind of creative ministry to mothers that earned SVNC the MOPS International 2004 “Love Never Fails” award.

“Every year,” says Morgan, “we give [the award] to a church body itself, not the MOPS group, not the pastor, but a church body that exhibits unusual support [to MOPS moms].”

She credits SVNC with truly understanding the MOPS ministry and assigning its own energy toward the ministry’s success. Morgan believes SVNC, like many other churches with MOPS programs, is reaching beyond their walls in a significant way.

In fact, it’s a MOPS group that turned around Laura Cartman’s life. Invited by a friend, Cartman was skeptical about a program run by Christians, but she needed that hour-and-a-half away from her kids, away from her neighbors and the ugliness with her husband. Cartman, Maslyn remembers, was brokenhearted when she first showed up at MOPS.

“She was hurt and angry, with this wall up around her ... and she’d just cross her arms and glare at the speaker. She’d shut down during the discussion time.”

But the one element of MOPS that seemed to reach Cartman was the creative activity, where moms have a chance to paint, glue, or nail small craft projects together. During that time, she blossomed, working with complete concentration and abandon.

“She’d never had the opportunity to develop that side of herself before,” Maslyn says. Soon, Cartman cracked a smile during the crafts. She uncrossed her arms, and the icy stares turned into a warm openness. Eventually, she even started participating in the discussion time at her table.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

16

“This woman needed community and needed to be loved, and she received that at MOPS,” Maslyn says. By the end of the year, Laura Cartman gave her life to Christ, changing not only her own life and eternity, but her children’s as well.

Building Real Bridges

Reaching women like Cartman who are hardened can be daunting for Christian women—especially when we’re confused about our identity. Many in 21st century Christendom have lost sight of what it means to be a Christ-following woman and have swallowed the lie that “biblical womanhood” takes shape in an intimidating and socially polished, Emily Post/pre-scandal Martha Stewart form.

“We need to know what we’re about,” says Grace Church’s Wyder, “and the best outreach may not look like pretty teas and elegant tables.”

Jim George—author/speaker and husband to author Elizabeth George—calls the best outreach “bridge building” and encourages Christians to build real relationships and trust, so that at the appropriate moment in time, he says, “Christ can walk over that bridge from your heart to an unbeliever’s heart.”

But bridge building must be genuine, Marilyn Meberg cautions, adding that the best evangelism is accomplished through compassion.

“If people think we’re only showing interest to bash them with the Bible, our bridges will crumble,” she says. “Get next to the person’s soul. Hear her heart.”

At Bethel Church in Chehalis, Wash. (bethel-church.com), Associate Pastor Vicki Judd seeks to practically get next to the many single mothers in the area. After circulating posters and registration forms in places like pediatricians’ offices and grocery stores, the entire church launched a day of care and pampering for single mothers that involved car washes, oil changes, child care with a Gospel presentation, as well as a meal and gift bags complete with grocery coupons and even clothing. All of the women who were served that day have returned for worship services. Many now consider Bethel their family’s church home.

Healing Hearts

Also getting next to women’s souls are Beth McKee and Lulie Thomas, who have facilitated the post-abortion ministry Someone Cares. The ministry that has reached many hurting women is the result of two

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

17

Dallas-area churches, Northwest Bible Church (nbctexas.org) and Watermark Community Church (watermarkcommunity.org), working together. McKee, who had an abortion during her college years before she knew Christ, notes that it's typically seven to eight years before a woman feels the full weight of her decision to abort her child. However, she's seen some women who've gone through their 10-week multi-sensory Bible study (based on Linda Cochrane's *Forgiven and Set Free*, Baker) who have waited as long as 30 years to come to terms with their pain.

"The Lord is still in the restoration business," McKee says. "An abortion is performed every 22 seconds in this country, and if the Church isn't ready to open the door to those women when the reality of it hits them, where will they go?"

"We don't have to wrap bandages anymore," Wyder says. "Those days are over. We need to be careful not to be of the world, but we also can't miss the opportunities we have to minister in it."

How will women's ministry change in 2005? Wyder speaks with hurried passion: "We're all the saints, and this is the work of the saints. So we're getting ready to unleash the women in our church. We're gonna hop on that pretty bus in the parking lot, and we're gonna go to a not-so-pretty place, but we're gonna go and tell, and we're gonna do it every month."

Wyder has planned an expansion of Grace's previously sporadic ministries in battered women's shelters, food shelves and women's prisons so that more women can go, and make their involvement consistent and frequent—establishing trust and maintaining bridges.

"We want more women to hear the Gospel, and we're going to build relationships because that's what women long for."

Building Where You Are

Sometimes, however, maintaining our bridges with neighbors and coworkers is more than boarding a bus and traveling to an unfamiliar place. We, as women of the 21st century, struggle to maintain our homes, our jobs, our marriages, our children, even our spirituality in this fast-paced world, and we'll grab onto any organization system, daytimer or PDA that makes life work—even if it means compartmentalizing everything, including outreach.

"It's the speed of culture. Everything is fast—fast food, fast entertainment so that we can get to the next meeting," Meberg observes. "And [that pace] begins in the home."

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

18

But part of our busy lifestyle is also a result of the pushing we do among each other as women. We're constantly comparing and striving for approval from each other, our spouses, our neighbors. The stay-at-home mom vs. the working mom. The singles vs. the marrieds. The older and wiser vs. the younger and stronger.

Community Life Pastor Michelle Pupoh of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Mich. (mhbcmi.org) acknowledges the tensions between busy women at various life stages.

"I think the church needs to start telling women, 'You know what? You're OK.' Stop looking at the women around you and the culture around you and ask the Lord, 'What do you want from me at this time?' Then walk with confidence that you are living in obedience to the God of the universe."

For Meberg, obedience meant giving into the Holy Spirit's relentless nudging as a young mom and inviting her entire cul de sac of 12 women into her home at Christmas.

"I didn't want to do it," she recalls. "I was terrified I'd be rejected by everyone, because I was the only Christian in the neighborhood."

In fact, Meberg says many of the women were alcoholics, but she invited them to her home. And they came.

"It was actually fun," she says, "to get together, and these women smoked—in my house! But I said, 'Lord, that's not going to be an issue with me.' Then I said to them, 'I'd like to talk just for a minute or two about what this season's about.'" The women sighed, preparing themselves to tolerate the little church lady's speech, but when Meberg began a weekly Bible study in January, not only did they all show up, they all prayed to receive Christ by the end of spring.

"If I were a pastor," says author and speaker Kay Arthur, "I would encourage the women in my church to use their homes as a place of nurturing other women and introducing them to Jesus." She goes on to say that the home is perhaps an even more effective forum for the Gospel than the church.

"Women are hungry for relationships with other women, and they need to see their neighborhoods as the place where God has put them. They need to bring other women into their homes and offer them the sweet fragrance of Christ, then offer them the message."

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

19

Trinity Church's Inrig, who sees evangelism as a lifestyle and not an event, encourages women to take every opportunity to "speak well of God" to other women wherever they are.

"It may be the first link in the chain," Inrig says, "or it may be the last—and that's up to God."

Moving Beyond Church Walls

Currently, when it comes to speaking well of God on a national level, the most successful women's ministry is the conference tour Women of Faith (WOF; womenoffaith.com). Founded in 1996 by Steve Arterburn, WOF is now coordinated by Mary Graham and draws 10,000 to 20,000 women to each conference. At least 80 percent of the attendees come in groups, typically local church women bringing unsaved friends and female family members to hear the Gospel, Graham says.

WOF is intentional about reaching its audience of unbelievers.

"We could be speaking to ourselves from the stage and judging the world," says Graham. "Instead, we share our faith and proclaim the goodness of God."

Each Saturday of the conferences, Meberg gives a clear Gospel message, helping connect more than 36,000 women to God's love and forgiveness in 2004 alone.

"I am partnering with God," she says. "So I don't carry the burden. He is kind enough to let me come alongside ... what a privilege."

Transformed and Transparent

Finally, as it turns out, the last frontier of women's ministry may not be our philosophy of outreach, our small groups or our vision, but in fact our own individual pride as women. It may be the masks Christian women choose to wear, which prevent us from truly knowing each other and from truly showing the light of Christ to the unsaved around us.

"One of the biggest problems with [Christian] women," writes Hilary Price, author of *The Life That Changed My Day (Authentic Lifestyle)*, "is that they are not honest with themselves or those around them."

Inrig, Meberg and Graham also share strong words about this duplicity. Says Graham: "Women are not attracted to someone who is pretending to be something she's not. They can see through that. They can see that something's not right."

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

20

“People don’t want to hear about the great things we’ve done and what we’ve accomplished.” She continues, “They want to know who God is and what He’s done for us. One of the best ways we can share that is by letting others know how He’s worked through the pain and struggles in our lives.

“Then we’ll be able to say to the unbelieving woman in difficult circumstances that God can see her through. We may not understand how, but we can know that whatever she’s facing, a relationship with a loving God will ultimately speak to her pain and longings.” How do we know this? Because, as Graham explains, we know He’s spoken to ours.

What better message can Christian women extend than that we are flawed and sinful, but grace, salvation and peace can be found in a restored relationship with the God who made us?

I’ve learned a few things since that women’s ministry class more than a decade ago. But do I understand now how to reconnect a 21st century woman with her Lord?

Well, I’ve learned my own piety has nothing to do with it. In fact my flaws are perhaps the most attractive thing about me.

I’ve learned my busyness—even busyness in the Church—can get in the way.

I’ve learned bridges must be built with authenticity, loving kindness and humility.

I’ve learned that it’s a mystery, and it’s not my work but God’s ... for I am partnering with him.

As Marilyn Meburg would say, isn’t that a privilege?

*Name was changed to protect anonymity.

Tamara Rice, OUTREACH’s media editor, interviewed church women’s ministry directors and nearly half a dozen nationally known speakers and authors for her first cover story on a subject close to her heart. She lives in Yucaipa, Calif., with her husband Nate and their two young children. This content originally appeared in the January/February 2005 issue of OUTREACH magazine, the gathering place for ideas, insights and stories of today’s outreach-oriented church leaders. Used with Permission.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Introducing the 21st Century Woman

21

Thought Provokers

- *How well would you say your women's ministry programs are at going and telling?*
- *Which, if any, of the statistics presented in this article surprised you the most? Why?*
- *In what ways does your church use members' homes for ministry? In what ways could they be used more effectively?*

Features



PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Women's Ministry that Works

How to reach women in ways that don't uproot them.

by Tracey Bianchi

Several years ago, my close friend “Sally” began her journey toward knowing Jesus—on that same well-worn path where so many of us have met God. When she became a Christian, I was thrilled that my brave, sassy friend understood what it meant to be loved by God.

But as Sally began to know Jesus and get more deeply involved at church, I noticed something happening. To make time for all the appropriate Bible studies, small groups, and other ministries she dutifully joined, she had to drop that step class at the gym that she really loved. People from the church kept calling and asking, so she kept joining and volunteering. To make time for these commitments, she quit her extra job—the one she did for “fun money,” the one at the trendy bar and grill where so many people knew and loved her.

One day I called her to see if we could meet for coffee and catch up. Nope. Sally was too busy, and it would be another week before her church schedule opened up for me. I was hurt. I felt robbed, as if the church came and snatched Sally right out of my living room and locked her in the fellowship hall.



Ministry for Today's Women

Women's Ministry that Works

23

Now I know better; I have served in ministry leadership for many years. I get that churches have vibrant fellowship and communities that draw people closer to Jesus. But here is my struggle: When we minister to women, when we reach out to them and share with them the life-changing love of Jesus, what do we do once they decide they want “in”?

Most churches offer programs that invite women to leave their neighborhoods and coffee shops on any given night so they can come to church for a program (or two). So they drop book clubs or after-work social events so that they can make it to a group at church. Of course, this isn't a bad thing, but aren't we robbing other women of the chance to live and walk alongside these followers of Jesus when we constantly pull them to church?

I have limited access to Sally these days; she is up to her eyeballs in elders' meetings and retreats and building committees. I understand this stuff, so I am patient. But are those women not yet on the faith journey as forgiving? Or do they also miss their friend and in frustration raise their fists at the church, hurt because Sally never calls now that she met Jesus?

Effective outreach to women takes place in a context that invites women into both a deeper journey with Jesus and a deeper journey into the relationships they already have. Of course, some places and partnerships are simply incompatible with following Jesus, but choosing to cut negative influences from our lives for the sake of growth is not the issue here. The issue is that many times church life brings with it a slow, seemingly insignificant drift out of the world a woman once knew. At issue here is the often unconscious decision to go one step beyond “in the world but not of it” to “completely out of this world.”

Effective outreach to women will help them recognize the natural rhythms and relationships that already exist in their lives and will provide creative and life-giving ways to walk with Jesus in these settings, rather than completely uprooting them and plopping them into a pew. To be cliché, effective ministry teaches women how to “bloom where they are planted.” It reminds them that the transforming power of Jesus Christ is the key to “new life,” but only when someone impacts our old life can we meet with the new.

Tracey Bianchi is a speaker and writer for a variety of women's ministry events and retreats, for MOPS International, and for student ministry events. This article first appeared at GIFTED FOR LEADERSHIP on February 23, 2007.

Features



Thought Provokers

- *Bianchi describes this as her “struggle”: “When we minister to women, when we reach out to them and share with them the life-changing love of Jesus, what do we do once they decide they want ‘in’?” What does your church do?*
- *How important is it to your ministries to help women “bloom where they’re planted” as Bianchi suggests? What do you or could you do to facilitate this?*



PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Why Women Resist Community

How to overcome obstacles that keep women at bay.

by Nancy Barton

“**B**ut it’s easy to build community in the women’s ministry; women are so relational.”

That comment from a male colleague reflects a pervasive fallacy. While women may generally be more sensitive and verbal than men, we still struggle to develop relationships that foster true community.

Recently our church planned a weekend retreat, but many women didn’t sign up because, we heard later, they didn’t know who their roommates would be. Some of these women had been in the church for more than ten years. I’ve also had women threaten to leave an event simply because their one friend didn’t show up.

Why do women, who seem so good at relationships, not feel at home in community? And how can we overcome those feelings in the church?

Features



1. **“She’s better than me ...”** A group of moms from our church were meeting for tea and conversation. As the afternoon waned, Cass began feeling more and more angry about her place in life. Raising two toddlers left her little free time. As she listened to Wendy talk about her new-found freedom now that her children were all in school, Cass grew frustrated. She didn’t have time to read books. She couldn’t remember the last time she had time away from her children. Cass confessed to me later that she had little desire to meet with the women again.

Women are tempted to compare season of life, children, husbands, hair styles, work, education, homes—you name it—and when we fall into this trap, we always come up short. We then tend to distance ourselves from those with whom we’re comparing.

2. **“I don’t fit in because ...”** As a single woman, I often walk into a group where I am the only one without a mate or children. Whether I enjoy community depends in part on whether I give in to the thought that I am different; therefore I have nothing in common with these people, or whether I allow the Holy Spirit to fill me with his love so I can focus on others.

If we let discontentment rule, we will find something that sets us apart from any group.

3. **“I don’t know if I can trust you ...”** Sue entered our small group with her guard high. Sue’s painful relationship with her mother and with several female friends in the past had convinced her she could not trust other women. Her distant responses stifled the entire group. No one felt free to share beyond surface talk.

Most of us can recall a time our trust was broken. When we hold on to these hurts, we try to protect ourselves, and this fear creates distance.

4. **“I can’t help competing ...”** Linda and Jan participated in the same small group for several years. The group prayed weekly for the Lord to give them children. Linda was 32, and Jan was 40.



Recently Linda found out she was pregnant and couldn't wait to tell the group. But wanting to be sensitive, she told Jan first. Jan was genuinely happy for Linda, but over time she withdrew from the group. The group felt the tension immediately.

When we compete this way, we allow God's blessings of others to devastate us.

5. "I can't share who I really am ..." Julie works hard in numerous areas of women's ministries. She appears to be in charge, a committed Christian. In her small group, however, Julie is more reserved. She requests prayer for others but never for herself. Many know what Julie does, but few know her heart.

Many like Julie have never dealt with soul issues. Many women wonder, If I shared my real struggles, would others still accept me?

How to Overcome These Challenges

Whether speaking in front of a group of peers, doing a new ministry, or giving a personal prayer request, women can cling to their need to remain comfortable. My natural response as a leader is to make them feel "okay and comfortable."

But that may only fuel their insecurities and shield them from true community.

I asked Karen to speak at a Bible study group about her infertility and how she saw God working in her life.

Karen questioned my judgment: "How can I share something so personal with so many women? How will I be received? What if I start crying?"

I asked Karen to pray about it and reminded her of all the women facing similar struggles who needed her encouraging words. I also reminded her that the Holy Spirit would give her the words to say. Karen pushed through her fears, and today, a year later, many women still comment about how her testimony affected them.

In addition to challenging women, I try to assist them in finding their true identity in Jesus Christ. Women often feel as if they need to have it all together.



Ministry for Today's Women

Why Women Resist Community

28

Sandy, a success in the business world, told me she wanted to grow in Christ. "I'm a pretty good person," she said in our first time together for discipleship. Hidden behind her words was a belief system that equated her identity with achievement.

As we met regularly, I began to probe Sandy's self-identity: What would you do if you lost your job tomorrow? How would you feel about yourself? Would Jesus be enough?

Sandy slowly began to let go of her false security. Today she is moving toward loving Jesus more out of devotion than duty. She is still outwardly successful, but that doesn't hold the same power over her as before. She is recognizing how special she is to God. No longer needing to mask her weaknesses, she has truly found her identity in Christ.

Women establish community as we set aside our pretenses, identities, and prestige, and extend God's "needless" love to each other.

Nancy Barton is director of women's ministries at Wheaton Bible Church. This article first appeared in the Winter 1999 issue of LEADERSHIP journal.

Thought Provokers

- *What challenges have you faced trying to build community with diverse groups of women?*
- *Barton says she tries to help women find their "true identity in Christ." What does that mean to you?*

Features



PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

How We Revitalized Our Women's Group

A fresh approach and open mind made all the difference.

by Denise Farrar with Judie Amen

The yearning to send and support missionaries had for decades been the glue that held together the women's ministry at Galilee Baptist Church in Denver. But by the time I came to the church, only a faithful few attended meetings and the weekly Bible study.

As I analyzed my new ministry, I remembered something I once read: "The greatest obstacle to growth and evangelization is a ministry preoccupied with its own existence. What is needed is a fresh approach and a little sanctified ingenuity." I concluded it was time for a fresh approach.

Getting the Picture

A fresh approach, however, demanded a fresh perspective on what exactly was going on with our women.

We began by surveying the congregation. We discovered that of those who attended our church, 58 percent were women, 56 percent of whom worked outside the home, and many of these were divorced, widowed, or single



Ministry for Today's Women

How We Revitalized Our Women's Group

30

parents. Young mothers, we learned, felt isolated, and singles felt ignored.

Next we studied the social currents that influence today's women. Like many churches, we recognized that many "baby boomers" who rejected organized religion in the 1970s have returned to church with their children in tow. We discovered that these adults are not loyal to denominational and theological distinctives as much as they are interested in hearing about practical faith: they want to know how it works in real life.

On the other hand, a significant portion of the U.S. population was born before 1945—before credit cards, ballpoint pens, and panty hose. Many of these "pre-boomers" think baby boomers a restless, high-tech generation with a shopping mall mentality.

Our diverse population also includes 48 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 29, whom *Time* magazine calls "baby busters." This group questions the habits and values of the baby boomers, and even more so those of the pre-boomers.

For example, years ago, a quarter of the senior class at Wellesley Women's College spurned pre-boomer First Lady Barbara Bush as their commencement speaker. "These baby busters were graduates who aspired to be president, not the president's wife; to run the country, not the house," says Rolf Zettersten, senior vice-president at Focus on the Family.

No longer, then, are women a seemingly solid block whose lifestyle and interests can be assumed. Women have changed; therefore our ministry to women needed to change as well.

Targeting Your Group

In spite of the furor, Barbara Bush addressed the senior class at Wellesley. And when she did, she demonstrated the first step in successful ministry to women. She talked about the exhilaration of facing and adjusting to change. Then, showing she understood her audience, she closed by saying: "Who knows? Somewhere out in this audience may even be someone who will one day follow in my footsteps and preside over the White House as the President's spouse, and I wish him well."

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

How We Revitalized Our Women's Group

31

They loved her! She had targeted her group and hit the bull's eye.

When it came to women's ministry, our church used to have a one-size-fits-all mentality. That meant we probably didn't fit anyone well. Our challenge, as I saw it, was to target the subgroups of women in our church. However, I also wanted to build rapport between the subgroups.

Initially, we targeted the easiest group: women at home.

As I mentioned, our survey revealed that the young mom at home felt alone. She wanted to become involved in something meaningful and stimulating. She didn't want to be entertained; she was eager to learn. She also wanted her children to learn and grow spiritually.

In many cases, our nonworking pre-boomers, who no longer had children at home, were also looking to grow spiritually as well as use their gifts and years of experience. All the women, regardless of age, were looking for a place where they would be known, affirmed, and accepted.

The women surveyed said they wanted biblical perspectives on relationships, child rearing, integrity, and time management. Therefore, we planned the ministry around continuing Bible studies, using retreats and a yearly luncheon as supporting activities.

In her book, *Life Is Worth Living*, Betty Carlson tells of a wise, elderly nun giving a group of graduating girls some farewell advice. With a wave of her hand she challenged them, "Never die of ordinariness."

We didn't want to be ordinary, so we began by giving women a choice of two daytime Bible studies. One was taught by a dynamic, humorous teacher from our church. The other was an in-depth video Bible study called "Precepts" by Kay Arthur.

Along with the Bible studies, electives such as craft projects and time-management seminars were offered, and they often attracted non-Christians, too. With a variety of choices, we not only targeted the nonworking women, we've also been able to blend at-home women of different generations.

Caring for Children

It has been said, "If you pat a child's head, you have their mother's heart." When women attend Bible study, they want to be confident their children are cared for and learning something valuable. Therefore, offering a quality children's program has been a priority of women's ministry at Galilee.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

How We Revitalized Our Women's Group

32

However, this has been one of the most difficult parts of our ministry. It has taken four years to develop a children's program with a quality curriculum and trained teachers. After much prayer and research, we decided not to use volunteers. We wanted consistency in the children's program, so we chose to hire a teaching staff and charge mothers a quarterly fee. (A special fund provides for mothers who cannot pay the fee.) Consequently, our children's program has the quality we feel is vital to attract and hold younger women.

Expanding to the Working Woman

As our morning women's group grew, we saw a tremendous opportunity to begin an evening study for working women and single parents. When we designed our evening program, our biggest mistake was to pattern it after our morning group. Working women's needs are different. They have little free time, and most of their needs to socialize are met on the job. They are not looking for fellowship so much as a few close friends and solid content. So we chose to focus on instruction rather than fellowship.

After trial and error, we finally developed a program that works. Now we offer an evening Bible study with a choice of two teachers. One mines those little nuggets of truth that new believers and non-Christians find especially helpful. The other teacher appeals to women who want in-depth biblical perspectives on their life and work.

Expanding to the Workplace

Not all working women are interested in an evening activity, even a dynamic women's program. Statistics reveal the fastest growing segment entering the marketplace is women with children under six. For many such women and their spouses, balancing work and parenting presents logistical challenges worthy of an air-traffic controller. This balancing act is further complicated for the single parent and the woman married to an unbeliever (who may feel uncomfortable leaving her husband at home while she attends Bible study). For such women, a study integrated into their workday schedule is a much better fit.

A year ago we began taking 20-minute video tapes of our evening Bible studies into the marketplace. We meet at noon once a week in conference rooms located within ten minutes from most downtown locations. We design each lesson to fit into a tight lunch-hour schedule. Discussion time is brief, but we allow for sufficient interaction to create an atmosphere where relationships can develop.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

How We Revitalized Our Women's Group

33

We find this downtown ministry especially effective for women who want to spend evenings at home with their spouse and children.

With the cooperation of their congregations, we've invited women from other churches in the Denver area to these studies. Women tell us they love meeting other Christians in the workplace. They also appreciate the opportunity to invite their non-Christian co-workers to the group.

Tapping our Resources

As in any ministry, the key to success is prayer. A handful of women prayed faithfully for eight years before this new women's ministry was born. God removed obstacles and changed hearts to pave the way.

In addition, God has helped us see today's woman for what she is. That insight encourages us to continue trying creative approaches as we minister to the variety of women within the church's sphere of influence.

Denise Farrar is director of women's ministry at Galilee Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado. Julie Amen is a conference speaker and writer. This article first appeared in the Winter 1991 issue of LEADERSHIP journal.

Thought Provokers

- *What could a "fresh approach and a little sanctified ingenuity" do for your women's ministries?*
- *Farrar considers prayer a resource you need to tap. What role does prayer have in launching ministries?*



PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Ministries Among Today's Women

Reaching women means aiming at moving
and multiple targets.

by Naomi Gaede-Penner

Like other aspects of church life, ministries among women have become more diverse in recent years. What's working? What are the obstacles? In this three-part special section, LEADERSHIP offers an overview of ministry options, focuses on one continuing challenge, and presents the story of one church that has revitalized its women's ministry.

"I thought planning women's programs would be easier," sighs the leader of women's ministries as she sits down in the pastor's office.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asks.

"Well, the women in our church are so different. There's Barb, who runs her own company. We designed an evening Bible study for her and some others, but since she is away from her family all day, she'd be more interested in attending a couples' Bible study with her husband.

"Then there is Mary, who is home with children all day, every day. She wants to get together with other mothers—anytime, anywhere, as long as she can get a break from her kids.



Ministry for Today's Women

Ministries Among Today's Women

35

“Beth has a part-time, home-based business and doesn't know if she fits better with the career women's breakfast or the mothers of preschoolers.

“Nancy is a single mother who works full-time, and childcare is always a concern. Plus, she doesn't feel comfortable with any group in the church.

“Ellen is retired but works as a volunteer tutor-when she isn't taking care of her mother. So she doesn't have time to invest in a weekly program.”

“And don't forget,” adds the pastor, “our single women can hardly be lumped together: Lois is a widow; Betty is 40 and never married; Christy is 22 ...”

“Our church isn't large enough to have separate ministries for each of these women,” concludes the women's leader. “So, how do we minister to them all?”

Given the opportunities, choices, and stresses of today's woman, it's no wonder churches have begun to approach women's ministries creatively.

Tracking the Trends

A look at current social trends bears out the experience of churches: today's women are complex. Studying these trends also provides information that can help churches design effective women's ministries.

Consider just two trends that affect most church ministries:

1. Women working outside the home. Because women working outside the home have less time to participate, they often opt to attend events that include family members rather than participate in activities strictly for women.
2. Women's quest for content and spirituality. Sherry Stahly, coordinator of women's ministries for the Rocky Mountain Conservative Baptist Association, developed a Needs Assessment Survey to identify churched women's concerns. Initial results show an increased interest in spirituality. She comments, “The survey assesses needs in areas such as self-esteem, emotions, parenting skills, and relationships. The responses we've collected thus far show the greatest interest lies in personal spiritual growth.”

Pat Wilson verifies this: “I'm finding that whether the woman works outside or inside the home, she wants something challenging to ponder. She doesn't want something ‘just for fun’ or entertainment; she wants programs that offer something meaningful.”

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Ministries Among Today's Women

36

What Is Working?

What are we to do with these challenges and changes? Some churches continue with traditional sewing circles and bake sales, while others experiment, offering ministries such as video-style Bible studies in the marketplace. Some churches try a general-interest approach, inviting all women to quarterly Saturday brunches. Others slice the pie more thinly and attempt to promote programs and activities for specific women in a variety of situations.

A number of strategies transcending differences in church size, available resources, or types of women are working.

Remember your mothers. Women's ministry leaders are nearly unanimous: mothers' groups work. Some ministries target mothers of teens, employing a variety of formats in doing so. "Ours is mostly a support group," says one leader. "We don't have speakers, since our purpose is primarily relational. So far, we find it to be effective." Another says, "The mother of a teenager has very little discretionary time since she is often working outside the home or going to school or volunteering in ministry. Ministries for this stage of a woman's life must have a strong purpose."

"I need prayer for my kids and support for myself," said still another.

Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), another ministry to mothers, intends "to provide a Christ-centered, caring ministry for mothers of preschoolers that develops friendships, creativity, and personal relationships with Jesus Christ." When asked about the success of this international ministry, CEO Elisa Morgan says, "It works. It's an outreach ministry that is practical and need oriented. We've identified ten needs of preschool mothers and created a program to match."

In a typical bimonthly morning meeting, women socialize over coffee, complete a craft, hear a speaker, and meet in discussion groups. In addition, MOPS ministers to the children, not merely baby sitting the preschoolers, but offering a Bible lesson as well.

Moms in Touch, a nationwide organization connected with Campus Crusade for Christ, offers another model of ministry to mothers. Their emphasis is spiritual: the weekly format includes ten minutes of prayer requests for children, followed by forty-five minutes of prayer.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Ministries Among Today's Women

37

“This is an intergenerational women’s group,” says Vanessa Bondar, who organized a group nearly two years ago at Centennial Community Church in Littleton, Colorado. “We have mothers of all ages, some praying for their adult children and others for their grandchildren.” Each week, during the school year, the mothers meet, using a different Bible verse to guide their prayers. Some weeks they might pray for their children’s early salvation, other weeks that they might grow in wisdom.

Offer meat-and-potatoes spirituality. Leaders of women’s ministries continue to see Bible studies flourishing. “Although Bible studies build relationships and provide opportunities for caring, that’s not the only reason they work,” says Janie Miller, a women’s ministry leader. “Women want content and application, and a Bible study accomplishes both purposes.”

Another lay leader tells about the dual focus of their Bible studies: “Our women’s Bible study is a winner because, among other reasons, we offer concurrently a Bible lesson for the preschool children. The women can do something for themselves without feeling guilty about leaving their children.”

A multi-track structure also works. “Our Women’s Break-Away Bible Studies meet many needs,” says Lee McDowell, women’s ministry director at Mission Hills Baptist Church in Littleton, Colorado. On Thursday mornings they gather for worship and devotion, but then women can choose to attend any of the four elective Bible studies.

Topical studies can also be effective. One church tried to reach working women by offering, during a weeknight, a four-week seminar on “The Christian Woman and Her Finances.” Since more than half the women attending worked outside the home, they considered the program a success.

Integrate. “Although many tend to think of women’s ministries as activities only for women, we’ve seen a lot of enthusiasm about our groups designed for both men and women, and partly because they meet women’s needs,” says Pat Wilson. “Our koinonia groups include men and women, singles, retired persons, homemakers, and women working outside the home.” These groups of twelve to seventeen people mix Bible study and fellowship.

Features



Ministry for Today's Women

Ministries Among Today's Women

38

"In fact," Pat adds, "we have a number of divorced women who find they fit best in these groups. Having come from troubled marriages, they like being with healthy families."

An integrated group works at another church where nearly all the adult Sunday school classes are organized according to stages of marriage or family. "Our class is the exception," says one participant. "We bill it as 'The Challengers.' It's a collect-all for people who don't seem to fit the other categories. This is where the women come whose husbands don't attend church. They're joined by single and divorced women, along with some married couples."

Help women evangelize women. Whether church women are at home or in the marketplace, many are extending their hands to unchurched women. It is not uncommon to find that in ministries to mothers of preschoolers, one-third of the women who attend are unchurched.

"This ministry to mothers becomes a natural way to get women through the church doors. It meets their needs, and I feel comfortable inviting my neighbor," says one young mother.

Women's sports is another evangelistic ministry. "It's not threatening to invite my non-Christian friend to join our women's softball team," says another woman. "Besides, softball is fun, although it's not the usual way I think about evangelism."

Another church uses its annual women's Christmas Candlelight Dinner to help women reach other women. The dinner is held off the church site, at the community college, for instance. A beautifully decorated room creates a festive spirit for a carefully planned program that includes music, an evangelistic speaker, and a presentation on local missions.

Last year, a leader from an inner-city women's ministry spoke, and the participants were extended an opportunity to contribute to the inner-city program. One corner of the room contained handicrafts made by women in the church. The craftswomen kept 90 percent of the sales price, and the remaining 10 percent went toward underwriting the evening.

"We've done this for six years, and last year our tickets were sold out the first Sunday they were offered," says the women's ministry leader. "Not only is this a success with our church's women, but about one-third of the women attending are guests, who learn about our women's ministry."

Features



Options for Smaller Churches

Church size obviously affects what a church can realistically accomplish. While a larger church may have more money and volunteers, the diversity of women and their consequent needs may be greater.

“There are more places for women to get lost or hide in a large church,” says a woman from a smaller church. “Our church may be smaller, but the women are more homogeneous, and we know their individual needs.”

A couple of strategies have been used effectively in small-church women's ministry:

Specialize. “In a small church, we don't want to try to hit all needs and reach none well,” says one director of women's ministries. To avoid that, churches often select one or two specific groups—mothers of preschoolers, women working outside the home, women in a retirement center—and target their outreach to them.

Cross generational lines. “In many small churches, the dynamics of congregational life naturally tend to bring people together in repeated face-to-face contacts across generational lines,” says Lyle Schaller.

Clint Seibel, pastor of Belleview Acres Mennonite Brethren Church in Littleton, Colorado, supports Schaller's observation: “In our small church, people can be run to death by participating in too many church programs.” Women's activities can easily be seen as just one more program that takes time out of a busy schedule. “So we try to meet needs in the Friendship Groups,” Seibel continues, “which are small, intergenerational groups that include a mix of young and old families, singles, men, and women.”

Diane, a young working mother in the congregation, agrees, but qualifies her agreement by affirming the need for programs that help bond the church women: “Our Secret Sisters pulls women together—the older with the younger, those working inside and those working outside the home. At the beginning of the year, each woman draws the name of another women. Once a month she anonymously sends a card, gives a baked item or small gift, and prays for her secret sister.”

Through this program, the women become increasingly close to one another, while having many of their other needs met through the integrated Friendship Groups.



Ministry for Today's Women

Ministries Among Today's Women

40

Having the willingness to try something, giving it enough time to gain momentum, and then evaluating its strengths and weaknesses may be keys to making women's ministries work. "We just haven't given up," says one ministry leader.

In one way or another, women's ministries find they must work to keep up with the American woman, who is no longer found in one place. Among the cacophony of change and challenge, however, bright sparks of enthusiasm and quiet inner growth are found as churches find creative ways to minister to women.

This article first appeared in the Winter 1991 issue of LEADERSHIP journal.

Thought Provokers

- *Penner suggests a couple of options for smaller churches, namely specializing and crossing generational lines. How would these tips work for your church, no matter what the size?*
- *What are the ministries that are working well at your church right now? What about them could you apply to the other ministries?*

Features



LEADERSHIP TOOLS

Ideas for Women's Ministry

Thoughts to get you thinking.

by Amy Simpson

When I wrote an article called “Why I Don’t Do Women’s Ministry” for the Gifted for Leadership blog, it sparked quite a conversation. Obviously, women have some strong feelings and opinions on how to do women’s ministry—and about their experiences in women’s ministry programs.

This conversation was so lively and challenging, I knew I had to write a follow-up post in the hope that it would generate some ideas for how we might make women’s ministries more effective. The purpose for the blog was to get the conversation started, but now I’ll share a few ideas of my own:

- 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 OK 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 a couple more specific thoughts:

- I belonged to one church that had a sports ministry for women.
- In a response to an earlier comment, someone mentioned a book club.
- How about get-togethers 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.
- How about helping women to form intentional mentoring relationships with each other? Many women are looking for mentors but don't know how to ask for one, get started, or keep it going.
- 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.



Ministry for Today's Women

Ideas for Women's Ministry

44

- Get women together to do some powerful service in your community—and welcome families to participate as well.
- What if interested women ran a business together and used the proceeds to help other women get on their feet?

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Thought Provokers

- *How can we do women's ministry differently to appeal to a wider audience of women? What have you seen work well?*
- *What do you wish more churches would do in their ministries to women?*

Features



Resources

Additional books to help you further

Innovative Ministries, from *Gifted For Leadership*. This downloadable resource offers inspiring stories of women and men who've seen a ministry need and met it—often in creative, God-inspired ways. Along with inspiration and ideas, these stories offer some practical insight into the logistics of how the ministries were launched.

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RESOURCES



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