

EAGER FOR FELLOWSHIP: Mapping Women's Ministries



Women's ministries are becoming more popular every year. We may see the need, but actually starting a ministry can seem overwhelming. Here are some of the answers to your questions from the pen of Women's Ministry Director, Jeanette Stewart.

by Jeanette A. Stewart

Do you plan to implement or improve a ministry to women at your church? Titus 2:3-5 provides a clear biblical mandate for women's ministries: older, more mature believing women shoulder the responsibility for instructing younger women in principles of godly living.

Changes in our society and the make-up of the family have modified the traditional roles of women. Many women hold jobs outside their homes; some supplement family finances while others carry responsibility for earning the income required by the entire household. Some raise children without the help of a mate; others forego luxuries, and even some essentials, to stay at home with their children.

Every woman embodies a unique set of circumstances. Consider Dianne, a divorced mother of two preschoolers. Because she is a nurse, Dianne can staff the evening shift and savor mornings at home. Her schedule allows her to attend Sunday morning church services, but beyond that, she has few opportunities to meet with other believers.

Or imagine Sheila, who has forsaken her career in order to raise her children. Her husband earns a modest income which allows for most necessities but few extras. She involves herself in church activities only when a free nursery is available.

Myrtle, a retired widow whose children and grandchildren live out of state would love to interact with younger women but has not created opportunities to meet with any. She works actively in her church but sometimes feels left out because she is alone.

With so many different backgrounds, how can a congregation achieve united scriptural goals for women? The heterogeneous makeup of the women to whom we minister challenges us to a task of great proportions. And even though some may admit suspicion regarding the relevance of the Bible's teaching to modern women's issues, its message must stand without compromise.

God has not abandoned us to a haphazard search for methods to communicate the biblical message. While Titus 2 provides the particulars

for a women's program, Acts 2:42-47 profiles the parts essential to any healthy ministry: fellowship, teaching, prayer, praise and outreach.

Although some women's groups traditionally have centered around such praiseworthy projects as helping missionaries, learning new crafts, or orchestrating luncheons, a well-balanced women's ministry seeking to answer the distinctive demands of our culture, will focus primarily on the essentials set out above. Indeed, they are foundational to its success. These five elements, when properly applied, will produce in women a maturity which enables them to cope with the challenges of life. Let's look closely at these five guidelines for successful ministry.

First, **fellowship**. Many Christian women feel at cross-purposes with their perception of society's expectations. Some women relish a career and feel God has gifted them for one in some area. Others work out of necessity, leaving little time for "extras" like fellowship. Still other women who choose to stay home and commit their

time to marriage and family often feel unsupported. Churches must provide avenues for female fellowship, in all areas, where women can meet to draw strength and encouragement from each other.

One of the best ways to accomplish this lies in establishing small groups comprised of women committed to Christ and to one another.

While small groups primarily have afforded cohesion in the women's ministry that I direct, they also have been responsible for the almost 100 percent increase in attendance. Each small group has two leaders who share responsibilities such as greeting and welcoming newcomers, contacting absentees, and coordinating activities so group members feel cared for and vitally connected to the women's ministry.

We attempt to link leaders of different ages, preferring to place an older woman with a younger woman. This not only adds balance to our groups, but allows the implementation of Titus 2:3-4: older women encouraging younger women in the faith. Because of the transient nature of our particular geographic area, many young women turn to these older, godly women not only for spiritual guidance, but also for the day-to-day maternal advice that distance may prevent their own mothers from providing.

We establish small groups within the structure of the weekly women's Bible study, the predominant function of the women's ministry. We allow time for small group fellowship in the midst of this weekly gathering, but we also encourage the small groups to interact independently of the large assembly. Women are free to participate in any small group until they find a particular one to which they want to commit. We attempt to limit the group size to eight to ten members to allow for adequate individual participation.

Hebrews 10:24-25 teaches that fellowship goes beyond encouraging one another. Believers should ponder how

to stimulate one another into purposeful, practical Christian living. Our small groups have found that their most stimulating fellowship follows sound biblical teaching. After each lesson,

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one of the small group leaders guides her group in considering questions related to the application of the Scripture that has been taught. Group members not only offer one another sensible suggestions, they also hold one another accountable to implement the improvements demanded by the call to godly Christian living.

While fellowship can provide for some of the perceived needs of today's woman, of equal importance to a sound ministry is **teaching**. We can choose from a plethora of options to accomplish this goal—videotaped lectures, prepackaged lessons, and Christian literature with accompanying study guides. Most importantly, however, we must address the particular needs of the women to whom we minister. Ascertaining the precise nature of these

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needs falls to the leader of the women's ministry.

A wise leader will spend informal time with her students. Sharing conversation over a cup of coffee often gives insight into the real struggles of life. Watching a mother's children to allow her an hour alone may prove to her that the instructor understands her everyday problems. Times such as these are essential to form an accurate assessment of the demands facing the women in your ministry.

Lessons prepared to deal with specific deficits within the group can be

most effective. When an assessment of the lives of some of our group's members revealed a lack of motivation for Christian living, we spent several weeks studying salvation. As women began to comprehend the precise nature of Christ's accomplishment on the cross, a new attitude developed toward the disciplines of the Christian life.

In addition to the weekly lesson in our women's group, we conduct a session called "What does the Bible say about. . . ." The women themselves create the topic list; no subject is off limits. Once an issue is selected, the small group leaders direct their groups in researching a scriptural position. The following week all the groups meet together to compile their results and form a biblical answer. Topics range from the biblical view of the new age movement to fasting to women in church government. Not only does this exercise produce challenging discussions, it also allows women to learn for themselves how to find scriptural answers to the questions they may harbor.

Prayer and praise also stand as integral components of a balanced ministry. Since many believers allow their personal time for prayer and praise to be pinched by a frenzied schedule, group opportunities can promote these forms of worship. Small, intimate groups dedicated to prayer and praise are one viable mechanism for accomplishing these purposes.

PRAYER

PRAISE



Since Matthew 6:30 teaches that even the smallest details of our lives concern God, small prayer groups can gather to pray for requests both critical and trivial. Imagine the praise when a mother reports how God answered her request, allowing her adolescent son to win a position on his school's basketball team. The other women in her small group had understood her maternal concern for her son's self-esteem

and his developing athletic skills. They had prayed earnestly throughout the week for this boy, readily remembering similar incidents in their own lives. God's answer to what may have seemed a trivial request reminded them of His faithfulness and concern.

Small prayer groups also can serve to limit hearsay and rumors. The Scriptures seem to indicate that although all human beings are susceptible (II Timothy 3:3), women face a particular struggle with gossip (I Timothy 3:11; Titus 2:3). Unfortunately, women's prayer chains and circles are often viewed as sources of idle talk. Our group approached this potential problem by writing public praises and requests on a large blackboard for all to see, but revealing more personal items within the confidential confines of the small group setting.

One way of enhancing group prayer and praise lies in learning to pray conversationally. This method eliminates any belabored discussion of needs by encouraging women to pray their requests. The group leader, whether initiating a time of praise or prayer, introduces items topic by topic. Group members who want to pray aloud add short sentence prayers related to the particular subject that has been introduced. When all have finished praying for one request, a new item for prayer is presented, and the method continues. Without praise and prayer, both remarkable privileges of the child of God, your women's ministry will fail to reach its maximum potential.

The final element of a well-rounded ministry is **outreach**. One approach centers around ministering to the needs of believers (both locally and afar), while a second strategy seeks to impact unbelievers with the good news of Christ.

In many churches, members of the women's ministry supply much of the energy required to carry on the supportive efforts of the local body. Women are called upon to provide

meals for the sick, host showers for brides, teach Sunday School classes,

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preside over library procedures, and arrange food for church socials.

Depending on the resources available to them, some women's groups venture even further. One group anonymously donates a week's supply of groceries to a church family experiencing temporary financial difficulties. Another serves those whose circumstances prevent their involvement in the women's ministry by arranging one-on-one meetings to promote fellowship, encouragement, and spiritual development. Creativity matched with appropriate assets can find multiple avenues for ministering to fellow church members.

Church walls should not limit outreach to believers. Some women's groups assemble packages of supplies to send to missionaries serving overseas. Others write letters of encouragement to prison inmates who have come to faith in Christ. Our group has recycled baby and maternity clothes, as well as collecting diapers and formula for our local crisis pregnancy center. Also, since our state legislature has been considering a new law to protect the rights of the unborn, the group has supplied willing hands to help local pro-life organizations with timely mailings.

The second aspect, reaching unbelieving women with the gospel, finds various forms of expression.

One group has “adopted” a grandmother, a resident of a local nursing home whom they visit regularly. Another provides food, clothing and personnel to the homeless shelter in their city. Some women's ministries host

evangelistic luncheons. Other groups monitor current events, writing letters and supporting boycotts which will influence their culture and government to protect traditional Christian and family values. The possibilities seem virtually limitless.

In spite of cultural changes, a women's ministry should hold a place of importance in your church's strategy. As you discover new ways to adapt these biblical methods to reach the women you know, hold fast to the emphasis of Scripture. A woman's greatest need will be met when she accepts Christ as her Savior and incorporates principles of godly living. _____CET

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