

Overcoming Obstacles **The Church Body & Community**

Although the purpose of even having a women's ministry is to serve the women of the church and the in the community, that will not come without challenges of it's own.

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he was doing so in response to the bad reports he was receiving. There were divisions within the community, cultural pressures we pressing in on the people, people were following their own agendas, picking and choosing which leader they were following. Paul's letter was specifically to put an end to these agendas.

Do you see parallels to this within the church today? Within the Women's Ministry?

- Working Moms vs. Stay at Home Moms
- Pro Choice vs. Pro Life
- Gay Marriage vs. Traditional Marriage
- Modest Dress vs. Fashion Trends
- Drink Alcohol vs. Never Drink Alcohol
- Breastfed vs. Bottlefed
- Homeschool vs. Public School
- Republican vs. Democrat
- and the list goes on and one.

It's exhausting. And, these are just the SUPERFICIAL divisions.

We have people who are just shy of idol worship when it comes to spiritual leaders they see on TV or read about. They are easy to identify too, because they quote these people more than they do scripture. They know everything that popular author has to say on the subject, and what the author says that the scriptures say. But, they have never looked for themselves, or interpreted for themselves. They take the spiritual celebrities word for it, because of their status or simply because that is what they wanted to hear.

This is what we are up against in the church today. Before you know it a ministry can become "People Pleasing".

We avoid controversial topics.

We only do bible studies written by specific authors.

We water down the word, so it's easier to swallow.

We fill a ministry with fun fellowship events instead of challenging each other.

We have topical group studies, instead of in depth expository bible study.

We address emotional well being over spiritual health.

We've even stopped coming together to corporately worship, fellowship and study... and replaced it with online studies, forums, online sermons, and activism groups.

In the book "Word-filled Women's Ministry", Cindy Cochrum points out that "Our world overflows with theological books, expert online sermons and bloggers who blog with widely celebrated authority. We can easily begin to idealize and identify with virtual voices, and leaders, as opposed to real live and really imperfect ones. It's easier to jump online than to get ourselves (and perhaps others as well) ready

and make our way to a church gathering, especially after a long day or week of work of whatever kind. When our most important communities become something other than the church body in which the Lord has placed us, we miss out on the joy that comes from actually living in fellowship with the very people whom the Lord has gifted us to serve. The type of community that Paul envision cannot occur in online chatrooms, forums or in the comments section at the bottom of a blog; it requires loving and caring followers of Christ who are consistently and personally in touch with one another's lives. It requires members of a healthy and connected body working together for the same purpose."

John Stott describes it as the "paradox" of the local church. It's the painful tension between what the church claims to be and what it seems to be; between the divine, ideal and human reality; between the romantic talk about the bride of Christ and the very unromantic, ugly, unholy, quarrelsome Christian community we know ourselves to be. It is the tension between our final, glorious destiny in heaven and our present, very inglorious performance on earth.

Spiritual Hurdles and Internal Divisions will be the greatest obstacle we will come against in relation to our Church and community.

We are engaging our ministry with women who are in different stages of their walk, different levels of knowledge of the Word, and different life experiences. And the more we press in as a ministry to the pure Word of God, the more uncomfortable it is going to get. This is not to suggest that we don't have activities that are lighter in topic, and fellowship opportunities that are just plain fun. We need these events, because they are less intimidating to the new believer or guest. However, we have a responsibility to ensure that not only that opportunities to dig deeper into the word and knowledge of God are available, but that we are doing more than just encouraging them... we are funneling women toward them, and building future leaders.

When we can get beyond those hurdles and divisions, uniting our women in their common bond as sisters in the Body of Christ, we can continue to speak truth, love each other, and trust the Holy Spirit to do the work of conviction.

We are called to lead and to correct, with the Holy Word of God.

In my encounters with women from across the country, who are in ministry leadership... I assure you God is moving in his daughters. He is calling us to deeper study, to deeper knowledge, to deeper personal relationship with God, and deeper commitment to the spiritual welfare of our heavenly sisters!

Be warned, when you attempt to change your women's ministry to something deeper... you will face criticism, you will be challenged. Some people are just naturally avoid change, they like the comfort of doing the things they way it's always been done. Some are not avoiding change, they are digging their heels in and don't want to change. They don't want to invite conviction and accountability into their life, they don't want to die any more to self, they don't want to devote more time to study, they just don't want to.

In 16 years of women's ministry, I can tell you with full confidence, do NOT let that deter you. I have heard complaints before, and there will be more to come. Even if you changed nothing, someone is complaining. They are complaining because there wasn't enough food at the brunch, or because the Beth Moore study is too long. They complained because women's events are always on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and they are only free on Wednesdays.

I don't know about you, but I would rather the women complain because there was TOO MUCH GOD

than not enough arts and crafts.

And... I like crafts. But I love Jesus.

I'd like to think we are all fired up right now, ready to head to the next women's ministry meeting (or call an appointment with Pastor) and flip your women's ministry on it's head. Before you do, stop and take a few breaths. We identified this obstacle, we know we need to overcome it, but how? And how long will that take?

It's easy to get caught up on emotion. I once heard a Pastor said that the words he does not want to hear are: *"I was at a conference and they had amazing ideas, I'd like to implement them here!"*

You can replace the word "conference" with book, article, training, and any other resource you can think of. It's great to be inspired, but we should not run wild with inspiration. People come back with great ideas from events, trying to implement them all at once, and then watch blow up in their face. Maybe they didn't think it all the way through, or have a clear action plan. Perhaps they didn't really consider if these changes are in the best interest of the church, or decided to implement them without the input of the entire team. It's possible they bit off more than they could chew. But that doesn't mean we don't move forward, but we do so one step at a time.

- 1) Spend some time reflecting on your notes from the conference, book, class or workshop. Pick 3-5 things that you strongly feel would be good changes or benefit the church/ministry.
- 2) If you need to, do some research online. Is there a church near by using this program or material? Is there any supporting data on how these changes benefited various ministries? Is there a book that would have more information and guidance?
- 3) Pray about these changes or ideas, and filter them against your church's vision... do they fit?
- 4) Once you have done all of these things, meet with your team. Share what you learned, where your heart is being led, pray with the team, and ask them to continue to pray about it until you meet again.
- 5) Meet with your team a second time, give every one on the team a chance to share their opinions.
- 6) Put together a written plan of action, set an appointment with your Pastor, if they are changes or ideas that need his approval, support or financial approval.

Not every plan you might want to implement is going to need the Pastor's approval. For example, if your Women's Ministry has been primarily doing topical book studies, and you want to change gears and start up expository bible studies.... that is something you should be able to implement on your own.

If you wanted to purchase some training DVDs for your leadership team, or bible study materials for your small groups, and you have it in the Women's Ministry budget.. that is again something you wouldn't need approval for.

But, if your ministry is self funded or has a small budget, and you want hire someone to come in and teach the entire women's ministry team inductive bible study techniques, and it's out of your budget.... that's going to need approval.

If you wanted to completely dismantle your existing women's program and start over from scratch, that's going to need to be explained & you are going to want your Pastor's support with the church body.

You might also need your Pastor's input, should you find your women's ministry team can't agree.

And don't be surprised if your Pastor asks for some time to pray and consider it, you may be super excited to get the ball rolling... but remember this is brand new information to him. Be patient.

Spiritual Hurdles and Division are going to be a huge obstacle, but there will be smaller ones you face, like engaging certain age groups within your church. You may find that your 20 somethings are not interested in attending, or even your older women. The reasoning can be anything from content to simple timing of events. These obstacles are easily remedied in one of two ways.

- Talk to someone in that group who is a “connector” (a person who connects to others in that group easily, carries influence, and generally if they go to an event others follow suit). Ask the connector why she hasn't not attended any of the events, be ok with critique and criticism. Or, share with her that you really want to reach the women in her age group, and ask for suggestions for future activities.
- Build a diversified team. Make sure your women's ministry team is made up of women of various ages and stages in life. They represent the women's ministry better than a team made of women who are all the same age, same interests, same life path. What makes MOPS groups so successful is that they are aimed for a specific group, they understand each others needs, wants and concerns. But if you want to understand what the 20 year college students, or the 70 year old retirees, want out of women's ministry.... bring them aboard to plan. When they become a part of the planning process, they get excited, when they get excited they share and encourage others to come.

Chris James, of Lifeway Women's Ministries, coined a term related to ministry which is “siloed” which basically means ministries each have their own place and don't overlap. No one is investing in the other, each is doing their own thing. This is a challenge that churches are beginning to move away from. Let the men's ministry and the women's ministry join forces to do a special series on marriage, or parenting. Have your Women's Ministry & Men's Ministry leaders do a co-ed study on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. Adopt the MOPS group under the Women's Ministry banner, and support it through volunteers as mentors moms or child care for MOPS meetings. Building connections within other ministries strengthens the church as a whole. Look to build connections beyond events and bible studies, through mentor programs and discipleship.

Before we move into our last segment, which is going to go into more detail about budgets and fundraising, we need to get a little personal. When you step into ministry leadership, you are going to face some challenges yourself. On this subject, I'm going to refer to parts of a speech that was delivered via Pendergraph Women's Ministry of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, at a summit several years ago. Unfortunately, the source didn't identify the actual speaker. The speech is entitled “Sweet Sacrifices: The Challenges of a Woman in Ministry”.

Risking your Reputation

The first (personal) challenge of a woman in ministry is to choose to risk her reputation. Leaders are talked about. As women in ministry and as daughters of the King, we need to know how to deal with the inevitable rumors, criticism, and gossip that permeate even the Christian world today.

We all know that truth stabilizes relationships. That's why God forbids every kind of falsehood (Exod 20:16; Lev 19:11). He wants us to make truth, dignity, and honor the foundation of all our relationships. But we find this so hard—we are all liars by nature and live in a culture of lies. Paul had to tell the Colossians, "Do not lie to one another, seeing you have put off the old self " (Col 3:9). We all could tell

stories of rumors, lies, half-truths, or even times when the truth was just withheld either about us or by us. And these lies ultimately poisoned relationships in our lives.

Your Own Tongue

Let's consider our own tongues, and then look at how to respond when others use their tongues against us. James 3 speaks of the tongue being such a small part of our body, yet revealing how well we control the rest. "If a man does not stumble in what he says . . . he is able to bridle his whole body . . . but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (Jas 3:2, 8).

We need God's help here as leaders in his work. Francis Schaeffer's wife, Edith, put it this way, "If a report is unnecessary and unkind, and might just be a little exaggerated in the retelling of it the next time, we'd better be silent about it. It is my tongue and your tongue that is likened to a bucking horse that is running away with its rider. It is my tongue and yours that is likened to the ship tossing on the waves with the rudder not properly in the hands of the expert" (Edith Schaeffer, *Lifelines* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1982], 189).

As leaders we must pray as David prayed in Psalm 141:3: "Set a guard over my mouth: keep watch over the door of my lips!" We must do all we can to see that honesty, kindness, and love govern the speech in our spheres of influence—in our cars, bedrooms, breakfast tables, phone conversations, and emails. Proverbs 16:24 says, "Gracious words are sweetness to the soul and health to the body." Do your words bring gracious healing and health to those who hear them?

Live so that when someone says something false about you, others will have no reason to believe it. "Let your light so shine before men that they will see your good works and glorify your father in heaven" (Matt 5:16)

What do you do when others slander you or those you love? Go to others who have endured grievous criticism and evil slander. Instead of wasting emotional energy defending or protecting ourselves, we must turn to God. The Bible says that love covers over an offense (Prov 17:9). And everyone in ministry will, at sometime, be called to love those who have offended them.

As God fulfills his promise of grace in us, we will feel so humbled in his saving love for us that we won't allow slander and criticism to derail us emotionally or spiritually. Humility—true humility—defuses rumors. To be truly humble means that I am shocked at nothing that someone might say about me, because if they knew me better they would have even more to talk about.

Not only will God's grace fill us with humility, but we will become so deeply secure in Christ, that his love and care for us will overrule our need for acceptance and honor this side of heaven. We will be able to withstand evil reports, or relentless scrutiny, or unfair criticism because our souls will learn to find rest in God alone (Ps 62:1). We will be able to embrace and fulfill his call to us in I Pet 3:9: "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing."

Relishing your Redemption

All behavior is rooted in what we believe. Either I believe that *Jesus is enough*, or I believe that *Jesus is not enough* and that I must somehow fill the void.

There is more to being a Christian than asking Jesus into my heart. Belief in his goodness and watch-care and love for me will have its full effect when I feel loved and cared for.

For instance, if I say I believe that God cares about me and is sovereign over my whole life in mercy and love, yet I am held captive by various fears, I don't really believe that God is good! My belief in his sovereign control is only an intellectual concept, not a heart-felt belief.

When I stop trusting God, I start forging my own way, and then I become very dangerous. After all, the devils believe in God (Jas 2:19). But they don't *love* God—and that's the difference. Our hearts need to be thrilled with God's redeeming love. It is this love that redeems our lives from the pit.

So when we're stung, or set back, or even disabled, because of gossip and rumor, we come to the God who redeems all of our lives—not just at the point of conversion—but all along the way, as we stumble toward heaven in our weaknesses. And we find in Jesus a sympathetic high priest who was brutally tortured and murdered because men brought false reports about him to the religious officials. At the cross Jesus absorbed those lies—and every lie or rumor concerning you—and in turn he was gentle and meek and gave back love as he entrusted himself to His Father. And he says, "Follow me—take up your cross and entrust yourself to my Father. It's going to be all right. You serve the God who remembers (Heb 6:10). Your labor for him is never in vain (1 Cor 15:58)."