

The Reach of Women's Ministry

Reaching Out: Reaching Women in the Local Community

As we invite women, and they invite women, this ripple effects gives us the opportunity to not only grow in Christ together, but to learn from each other. We will meet women from different countries, speaking different languages, different histories, different family dynamics, but all unified in the desire to know Jesus better. When these women attend the studies, they will start asking questions, many times they will ask more questions than they will share about themselves. They are testing the waters to ensure we are a safe environment. This is when we reveal Christ most to the women, in our behavior and actions. We provide support, guidance and prayerful encouragement. They see compassion, sympathy and empathy. They benefit when we step up to the plate and put our faith into action. When they feel safe, when we have established trust, our guests will begin to open up to us.

How do we do this? We recognize that our gifts extend beyond changing diapers and making meals. We embrace that women in our church have a diversity of gifts, perspectives, life experiences, and wisdom to share with not just those in the church, but the women in our communities. Whether they are believers or not, our experiences and wisdom can be beneficial to those in a dry and weary land. Our testimony become a diving rod to Christ, showing the lost how to find the living waters in Christ Jesus.

There is a woman, one whom I consider one of my closest friends. She believes in God, however she doesn't attend church or bible studies. She is very liberal in her beliefs, which means we disagree a lot. However, she stays my friend. Why? She sees something in me that is different from the world, she knows she can trust me, and that despite the areas we disagree on that I am someone worthy of spending time with. We talk religion sometimes, politics other times. I invite her family to events at our church, and she will come to some of them. She once told me, *"If I ever decided to go to church, I think I would come here."* She recognized the community we had in our church, and she was drawn to it. She has begun coming to more events over the years. I'm still praying for that day she shows up on a Sunday morning. She even had her daughter join a local Christian club for kids. I had invited her to a few women's ministry events that I felt would interest her, and unfortunately she wasn't able to attend. When she declined the invitation, though, she said *"I am really sorry I can't come. I enjoy spending time with you so much, and I know if you think these women are worth spending time with... so would I. Please keep inviting me."*

You see, when we are different and we are apart of a church community, others will naturally expect others from our church to be similar to us. We represent our church in our community with every interaction we have in the public. Is this a church known for love, charity, community service, or known for picketing and hate filled speech? Even though my friend knows that we don't agree on some of the big controversial topics where the media likes to paint Christians in a negative light, she has never considered myself of my church hate filled. We don't avoid those controversial subjects, or water down the scripture, but we are church that is known so much for our love, that no one speaks against us. We are not the "fun church" or the "fancy church" or the "church with the brand new building". We are the "church that feeds the homeless". We are the church that renovated an abandoned building in a poorer area of the town, when we out grew our existing building. We are a the "church that has the clubs in the elementary schools". We are known for our love and our commitment to our community and the needs that are within it.

For the Women's Ministry to reach out to the community, first we start in our own church. As we build trust with the women in our own church, they will feel comfortable inviting other women to events.

But, we can also reach directly out into the community as well. We can look to the needs of the community we live in, evaluate what is happening in the lives of women, and then come together as team (and church) to address the pressing need. A few years back, a major company in our town made the decision to move. This put a lot of people out of work. The economy was already bad in our area and to top it off the housing market had collapsed and no one could sell their home. This made leaving our area for a job in another city nearly impossible. During this time period we had record numbers of homeless, hungry people. Men, women and children.

This was an opportunity for the churches in our town to rise to the occasion and meet the needs of our community. It was the Christian dentists who banded together to provide a free monthly dental health day. There were churches that stocked up food pantries, and provided meals for families during the holidays. An entire new church emerged, and still meets to this day, under a bridge in our community. A retired Pastor leads several services a week there, and volunteers prepare meals. Christian organizations came through with housing assistance, clothing, and even jobs. The response in the community was felt everywhere. The community knew that they were important to the churches, even if they never stepped foot in one.

We can also reach the community in every day ways, through parachurch organizations for mothers. When we moved into our city, we knew absolutely no one. A mother at a local park and I began talking. She told me about the MOPS (Mother's of Preschoolers) group that was starting at her church. I jumped at an opportunity to not only meet fellow moms in the community, but make some Christian friends too. We were still trying to find a church in our new city, and ultimately because of the MOPS group, we ended up attending the church. We are still there, 10 years later. I have served on the MOPS leadership team, Vacation Bible School team, and the Women's Ministry team; in addition to leading bible studies over the years. I didn't just end up attending the church, but I became invested in it. A few years ago, our Pastor mentioned the MOPS group in a Sunday morning service. He asked all of the families who started attending the church because we were at the MOPS group first to stand. In each service there were dozens of families standing up. Our Pastor wanted to illustrate to our church body that when we reach the moms in our community, we are bringing families into the church. He then asked the families to sit down, but for the moms to remain standing if you volunteered in the church in some capacity. Not a single woman sat down. Our Pastor recognized that the MOPS group wasn't just impacting women, or filling up seats on Sunday, but that the women were investing back into our church. From that service women who do not have children of their own, those who have grown children, etc. began volunteering in various ways to help support the MOPS group during meetings, and they also have a financial benefactor from the church.

There are international organizations out there, like MOPS, that have done all the hard work for you. Or, you can start you own program from scratch. Keep in mind, just like in the Study Groups and Small Groups, the focus of any ministry should be Christ. It's not just about serving these women, it's about pointing them to Christ; then directing the mothers toward godly parenting, and being godly wives. Some of the greatest examples of godly wives, I met in my life, came out of our MOPS group. As someone who didn't grow up with an example of a godly marriage or even godly parenting, these women became invaluable to my growth.

Another place we can serve the community, is when we look at ministering to the working women in our community. Working women are trying to balance home life, work life, and church life. They may not have time to join a bible study group, especially ones with load of homework. When we look at their unique needs, we can minister accordingly. Some options include: lunch hour bible studies, one session topical studies (if you miss a week, you are not behind), book club style book/bible studies,

once a month bible study vs. weekly, and with technology now we can have skype/web based studies where we can log in from our computers as work. There are many cities that have Christian and Christian Women's Business Networking Groups, where they not only get a chance to mingle with fellow business owners, they will have speakers who speak to running your business with Christian ethics and integrity.

You can't consider Women's Ministry in the community with out addressing the need of single moms. These women may be struggling financially, needing emotional and spiritual support. Many are working hard to provide for their children. They may want to come to church, but they can't because they are working their second job. They usually can't plug into bible studies on the nights and weekends, because they don't have a spouse to watch the children and babysitters are just another expense they cannot afford. When we as a church offer studies and events that have free childcare, we are opening up the door to these women and saying, *You are important to us. We want you here. We are making a way possible.*

There are also situational ways to serve our communities, when the need arises. Many years ago a hurricane devastated the northern part of our state. Men, women, and families were displaced while the area recovered from the storm damage. A local business happened to have some living accommodations on their property used by seasonal workers, that were currently empty, and they offered them to one of the relief organizations. The organization bussed twenty women into our city, to stay in these dormitory style accommodations. These were women who lost everything, many were coming with just the clothes on their back. When we learned they were heading our way, our church rallied. We reached out to several local stores and were able to get 20 backpacks donated. Then we filled them. We put together a list of basic necessities and distributed them amongst the women in the church. By the following Sunday, we had not only shampoo, soap, toothbrushes, deodorant and other toiletries donated... but also devotion books, lipsticks, and new tubes of mascara. Our women went above and beyond, they wanted to ensure these women had not only the basic necessities but also some luxuries. The church included a New Testament Bible in each bag. It really was a small gesture on our part, but to women who had nothing, it was enormous. Need based ministries, long or short term, leave a lasting impact.

Some women have successfully reached out into their community by starting a Bible Study group in their own neighborhood. While there may be a few women from your church who want to attend, the focus is getting out into your neighborhood. Meet your neighbors, share the Gospel with them, or if they are already believers build a local community of sisters in Christ that can fellowship together. It is a great way to build community in a time where the feeling of close knit community is fading. We can help rebuild that in our neighborhoods and it generally starts with neighborly conversation.

When we moved into our home, we were an hour or more away from any of our family. Across the street from us, there lived a retired couple. We fell in love with them, as they became adopted grandparents to my children. I can't tell you the number of times we would come to each others rescue. They had a very bad experience in their previous church (they had been nearly life long attenders). As they got to know us, their hearts toward church softened. They would ask us questions about our church, and I could tell they were considering coming by one Sunday. Several years into our friendship, her husband passed away. I knew he was a God fearing man, and I have no question about his eternal destination. I worried though, as she was now a widow, I worried about her heart. I knew she loved God, but I also knew she was more in need of community than ever. I was pleased when she showed up one Sunday morning at our church. She didn't even tell us she was coming! Eventually she found her way to a church that was more suited for her. It took time, but many investments do.

Another way you can connect into your community is through shared interests, like gardening, art, hiking, or kayaking. An activity that is commonly shared in the community. Grab a few friends and head out to the beach, the botanical garden, or even your local bowling alley. Pick something you and your friends already enjoy doing. Then, as you are out, you will meet others who share your interest. As you get to know people, you can start your own “club” where you meet once a week or month, share in the activity and read an devotion, piece of scripture to meditate on, or just have a gospel centered conversation. Many times we bond with non-believers over our shared interests, which then positions them to be more likely to listen and ask questions about the Gospel, God or the Bible as a whole. Engage with people as you are going about the activity, striking up conversation or giving an extra hand. Warm and welcoming can go a long way with getting to know people in the community.

There are also a few bolder ways you can go about making your presence known in the city. You will need to see what is available in your own community, and get creative too.

There is a man, in our city, that goes by the name of Smokey, and he is an interesting character. Most of our town knows him, even if not by name. Almost every day, at some point, you'll find him set up in a particular intersection off of one of our main streets. He's been there well over a decade. There is a giant wooden cross, that he made by hand, and it leans on the center median on it's side. There is an amplifier that he rigged up to work off a car battery, attached to the amplifier... a megaphone. Every day, Smokey will be found there ... reading the Word of God and sharing a message of grace. If God would save Smokey, God will save you. You rarely see him speaking directly with someone, as the cars are whizzing by. But every now and again, someone pulls over into the parking lot and motions or him to come over. I have no clue what they are saying, but if you sit at the light long enough... you'll see Smokey's hand raise to the person's shoulder, his head bows.

In a nearby city, there is an amphitheater that is open for public use for a nominal fee. Every year a group of churches pays the fee to reserve the amphitheater for the weekend. Starting on a Friday afternoon and going through Sunday evening, there is a non-stop live reading of the Scriptures. They have volunteers there who are available to pray with those who come to listen, or happen to be walking by and stop to see what is going on. Genesis to Revelation. It reminds me of the Old Testament days, when they would listen to the public reading of the scrolls.

In a down town area, that happens to be on the waterfront, there is a small public dock with a grassy hillside facing it. No one every uses this dock for anything, to be honest. Even the fishermen have better spots to cast from. A few local Christian musicians got together and started performing there, just acoustic guitars and a a simple mic set up. It grew into what became known as “Tuesday Night Live”, and every Tuesday night you could walk through the downtown area.... the sounds of worship music flooding the streets. From gentle hymns to contemporary worship music, it had become something larger than life. They started bringing in sound equipment, more bands showing up, sharing their technical resources, and the last time I was there... it was packed full of people. The grassy hill covered in blankets and folding beach chairs. Crowds circling the top of the hill.

Because I live in a coastal state, there are many churches that hold beach baptisms. When you arrive at the beach, there is an opening message and prayer, then they begin baptizing the members of their church who signed up in advance. There are always people who stop, watch and listen. Then, the Pastors address those who witnessed the baptisms, they shares the gospel message with them, and offers to baptize anyone who wants it. Many have taken up on this offer. Then most of the church members in attendance eat dinner together on the beach, while the kids play, striking up conversations

with those who stopped to watch, offering them a plate and a seat.

Several Women's Ministries in our area have begun having public bible study groups, they meet at local coffee houses and cafes. It has been a great way to be visible within the community, and each one has reports of people engaging them after the fact. They ask about the church, the study they are using or even ask for prayer. Our Women's Ministry met at a local botanical garden that was struggling, the news paper reported that it might shut down. We brought packed picnic lunches, and paid the admission to enter. It was a beautiful day for our group, we were publicly sharing a devotional message (anyone could have come by and joined us), and at the same time we supported a local treasure. The garden sent us a thank you card! And, since several of the women in the ministry didn't even know the garden existed, there were many repeat visits after that.

Not every gesture has to be grand. There are also many smaller ways we can impact individuals in our community on a personal level. Small gestures that take little investment or time, yet are steeped in love and concern for those around us. Women are particularly adept at recognizing the small needs that women have, whether it's a shoulder to cry on, someone who can see their value, and to believe in them.

A local Christian radio station started a campaign, the idea was if you were going through a drive-thru at a restaurant, you would pay for (or towards) the bill of the person behind you. It was such a success, it became something they encouraged weekly. The radio station even created cards you could print of their website and hand to the cashier to give to the person when they were told their bill was covered. All day you would have people calling in the radio station thanking the anonymous person who paid their bill, and you would hear heart wrenching stories from people and how that small gesture restored their faith in humanity, or came right at the time they just needed to know someone cared.

An author that I follow on Social Media, Trillia Newbell, shared that she keeps a stack of \$5 gift cards in her purse. When she is out and about, if she sees a mom who is struggling with her kids, stress levels are rising, the kids are getting out of hand, she stops the mom and hands her a gift card. Our community interactions don't always have to be grand gestures, but can also be smaller ones. Small gestures are personal and tell the person, *I see you and your struggle. It's going to be ok, you are going to get through this. You are not alone. God sees you, he hears your cries. It gets better. God loves you.*

So many of those who hurt and struggle in our communities, just want someone to acknowledge their existence. We never know the long term impact of small gestures.

Reaching out to our community, begins by opening our eyes and ears to the heartbeat of our community. Where is the need? Where is the hurt? Where can we help? Where can we simply be present? And then, doing something about it.