

The Reach of Women's Ministry **Reaching In: Reaching Women in the Church**

In the early church, there was not a single mega church that the whole town attended. Instead, it was a made up of many small local churches. These churches met in homes, on river banks, shores and anywhere a group could gather. These local churches would serve each other, their communities, and ultimately God through the spiritual gifts that God bestows on each of us.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7),

“letting all things be done for building up” (1 Cor 14:26b).

In Marcia Ford's book *Essentials for Life for Women*, she points out that the modern definition of church is the physical building where we do “church like things”. In the scriptures, the church was the body of the believers. To reach the church, means to reach people; it would be the same thing as trying to reach your family.

Have you ever called a parent, sibling or child and they didn't answer? You call again a few hours later, still no answer. Now, you start to get a little concerned. You may continue making those phone calls over the course of the next few hours. The time span between each call shortens. Then you find yourself grabbing your coat and heading over their house, or calling a neighbor to check in on them. What is your goal at this point? You are trying to reach your family member. I love this analogy because of the truths it reveals. Our church is our family, in Christ, and we don't get to choose them any more than the ones we are related to by blood. We have a role in that family, and so do others. We worry about them when they seem to be making poor choices. Their absence is missed and should cause us great concern. No one else can fill the void their absence leaves behind.

A very good friend of mine had to move to another state for the next few years, due to her husband's job. I miss her terribly. Despite that I have made another great friend, it isn't the same and I treasure our time together when she is back in town visiting. She is part of my church family.

“You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” Ephesians 2:19-20

When we gather together for women's events, we are at a family gathering. Which allows Women's Ministry, when working at it's best, to become a place where God's word can be proclaimed with power, fellowship events can be organized and well run, and challenging questions through bible studies and mentorship programs are handled with wisdom. Needs will be eagerly met, and relationships are strengthened within the body. This is how we treat our family. We invest in them, we help them back onto the narrow path when they stray, we celebrate with them and we mourn with them.

And, just as we would do anything for the blood relatives that we love, we must be willing to serve our sisters (and brothers) in Christ as well. We serve them best when we guide them toward Christ. Our fellowship events point women to our discipleship plan, which then points women into our church, and eventually they too are part of the church's over all vision.

But family life can be hard. In the book *Word-filled Women's Ministry*, contributor Cindy Cochrum points out: *“It is often a messy business to live week in and week out with the brothers and sisters in*

the church, fellow sinners who are growing their love for Jesus and for each other. It can be tempting to avoid the more complicated connections that involve the physical presence of needy people. Our world overflows with theological books, expert online sermons, and bloggers with widely celebrated authority. It can become 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”

It is not good for us to isolate ourselves from our church family. God has given us each a gift, to use within the body of believers. Just as we shouldn't isolate ourselves from our church family, we need to be careful that the Women's Ministry doesn't become insulated, only using our gifts amongst each other, because then the body suffers and our gifts are not used to their fullest. These gifts are perfectly suited for to the individual who receive them, and perfectly suited to meet the needs of the body of Christ. As we use our spiritual gifts and point women into the church, we become a connected body of believers working together for the same greater purpose.

The result of a great Women's Ministry is when we disciple women into a greater understanding of their beliefs, and why they believe them, as well as helping them to identify & put into practice their spiritual gifts. Then, we give them a place to use those gifts not just within the ministry, but the church and community as well. When we focus on spiritual growth, bible literacy, and application of spiritual gifts the ministry is helping to change lives. Chris Adams states that *“programs look for numbers, ministry sees changed lives”*. This becomes a litmus for our success of women's ministry: *Are we seeing seats filled at our events or are we seeing changes in the women attending?*

When we serve, or serve along side our sisters in Christ, some of the things that maybe drove us crazy about them begin to fade. We work toward common goals, relationships steeped in God's word, and ultimately we find these are the people we call treasured friends. We change in how we relate to others as leaders & servants of God. As we change, that impacts others and we see their lives being changed. It is a ripple effect, that starts with God in the center. The leadership team will then lead the way in setting the example of investing in and working with each our sisters for the greater good of the ministry and the church.

We encourage accountability, as we model it amongst each other. We encourage bible literacy through our leading or attending study groups and small groups. We encourage authentic ministry, as we serve along side each other using our gifts and sharing our testimonies. We encourage evangelism by giving women discipleship training, but also providing safe events and programs for them to invite others to. We affirm their value and illustrate how much we care about them when we put so much effort into reaching them, and providing a solid ministry that is catered to their unique identity as women.

“The early church was characterized by learning from God's Word together, praying together, sharing their means, and doing life with one another.” (Cindy Cochrum)

The Great Commission calls us to go out and share the Gospel, but no where in the scriptures does it say to do so at the cost of our church family. As Paul would travel, he would organize collections for the poor and widows, he wrote letters and encouraged those in the cities he had already traveled through. Paul never forgot about the places he had been just because he entered a new city. He didn't forget those who supported him, those whom he worked with, just because he was surrounded by new fresh minds to mold. He loved his growing church family and made a point to keep in touch with them, checking in on their spiritual health, even when he was imprisoned!

We begin reaching women in our church by recognizing them as our family, caring about their lives,

their families, and their struggles. We invest in them, guiding them, teaching them and helping them along the road we have already traveled.

We do this by offering studies that meet women where they are, without expectation, but also without underestimating their ability to understand the materials. I often remind people that just because someone is new to something (no matter what it is) doesn't mean that we don't expect them to be able to understand it. Instead, we have patience as they walk through it. A woman who may ask the same question over and over again is not lacking in the ability to understand, but she is trying to clarify it and possibly wrestling with a truth she wasn't ready to hear. The reality of the gospel becomes the essential grounding for all of our lives in the church, united through the grace and mercy of Jesus.

We reach women in the church by being honest about our troubles and trustworthy over what they confide in us. This happens when we share our authentic ourselves, and our own testimony of God's hand in shaping our lives. Four years ago, my husband was home for nine months as he progressed through a series of surgeries. His doctors wouldn't allow him to return to work until the entire process was completed. It was a financially and emotionally burdensome time in our marriage. In one of my less than finer moments, I wasn't a very compassionate wife. Overcome by the situation, I snapped. I immediately asked for forgiveness, and prayed that God would soften my heart, and I set everything aside that day. If I wasn't tending to my husband, I was reading my bible. I needed to reset my spirit. I shared this one evening during our bible study on the "fruits of the spirit" in Galatians. Clearly, I was a few apples short of my fruit basket that day. About a week later, a woman from the study approached me. She thanked me for sharing it, and told me: *"I didn't think there were godly women who were making mistakes like I do. Thanks for letting me know I am not alone, and it's ok to be sorry and need to reset ourselves."* I smiled at her, thanked her for the kind words and reminded her that none of us are perfect, especially not leaders. Many of us are teaching from the lessons we learned the hard way, so others will be spared.

Isn't that how the older generations in our families respond? They share with us their sage wisdom, so that we don't repeat the mistakes they made. They caution us about going down wrong paths. They guide us toward better decisions. They share their strengths and their weaknesses with us. They love us so much, they only want the best for us. We should feel the same about our sisters in Christ, loving them enough to share our life with them. The good and the bad.

There are several avenues where we can share our testimony, such as: at a women's brunch (which is more impacting than the local popular motivational speaker), as a guest speaker at a women's bible study, speaking to the youth at the church, or even on a Sunday morning during service. The Samaritan Woman, who encountered Jesus at the well, is a testimony sharer. She had a divine encounter with Jesus, and after she ran back into the city to share with her community about what had happened. They believed her, and went to see him for themselves. Testimony is powerful.

We all have many testimonies that we may not even realize. It is easy to think of our testimony as a grand moment in our life, when God revealed himself to us in awesome splendor, and on bent knee we accepted Christ as our Savior as He washed away our sins. And, that is a GREAT testimony. Yet, there are a million other testimonies about the every day lives we live, where God is revealed. It is those smaller, everyday testimonies that we encounter, where we connect to each other in a deeper more meaningful way.

My sister is 12 years older than I am, and so for most of my memorable childhood it was like being an only child. She was so much older than I, we didn't have much in common and I was more of a pest

than a friend. By the time I reached middle school my sister was married. By the time I entered ninth grade I was an aunt. Our lives were so far apart that we struggled to connect. Even when we both became Christians it was different, because she was a mom and I wasn't. Our experiences were different. When I got married, and then we had our first child, finally my sister and I began to connect. Finding those day to day connections, even as blood relatives... SISTERS, was the exact thing we needed to form a bond. My sister and I grew, and continued to grow closer and closer. Now, she is entering a new stage in motherhood; her children are getting married. Our relationship hasn't changed, because this time I see the value in her experiences right now. I know that when the time comes, and I have to navigate those waters, she is going to be the life boat I will cling to.

We have women in our churches who are navigating dark and stormy waters on their own. They may not have any family locally, or at all, that can help them through these times. As church family, we stand in the gap. We grab their hands like big sisters or mothers, and we whisper to them.... I know what you are going through. We share cups of coffee, words of wisdom, boxes of kleenex, and sobbing prayers. This is why we can't have a strong women's ministry with discipleship training and mentoring alone, we need that family relationship with our entire church.

At the time of my husband's surgery, I was entrenched in our mom's group. However, because I was still connected to the greater body, the older women were the ones who responded first when I went through that difficult time. They were women who had gone down that road already, with an ill spouse. Even though our relationship wasn't as close, not like my relationship with my fellow moms group members, they were still keeping tabs on what was happening in my life at that time & stepping in when they knew they should. I treasure everything they did for me, and even so many years later, they still ask how he is doing and if we need anything.

This is the beauty of women's ministry, the way God created us to relate to one another in his household. Not sibling rivalry, but solidarity. As we strengthen the bonds of our relationships, we build trust and credibility in our knowledge, we creating a safe place to be authentic by our own transparency. This creates a ripple effect into the community as they will become comfortable inviting their friends, family, coworkers and neighbors to attend the women's ministry events. Eventually, we would hope this would lead to their attendance of church (ours, or another local church). We need to be patient for these results, but never stop praying that Jesus will be working in their hearts. As we reach into these women, we are reaching out to the larger community.

The opportunities to serve in our communities are only limited by the population itself. We begin by asking God to show us the need in our community.