

## **Logistics and Legalities** **Shepherding Women in Crisis**

At the time, I was an inexperienced women's ministry leader. The team had announced a women's event, which meant I was getting a lot of phone calls that week. There were questions that various women had about the logistics of the event. One phone call was quite unlike the others, although it began in such a routine way. Three hours later, I was in shock. A woman who was new to our church, I had not had the opportunity to even meet her yet, called to find out when was the latest she could RSVP. Simple question. Very quickly, it spiraled out of control. In that three hours, I learned everything about her. She was a woman in crisis, who had no one to turn to, emotionally distraught, mentally unstable, and physically broken in addiction. This addiction destroyed her family, job, and her life.

When I got off the phone with her, I immediately reached out to our Pastor's wife, to get counsel. I didn't know how to handle a woman in this type of crisis. As a women's ministry leader, the woman expected a level of "counseling" out of me that I was ill-equipped to give. It was something that no one had prepared me for, in regards to stepping up into leadership. It really doesn't matter if that leadership role is a Pastor, or even a Bible Study leader. The moment you don that leadership title, there is an expectation from those you lead. They expect that you are a woman seasoned in the word, that you have some sort of experience (life or education) that put you in that position, and that you will provide them with wise counsel.

Until this one evening, the sum of my "counseling" was more akin to "consoling". I was able to be a shoulder for a grieving mom to cry on. I could share some wisdom about being a godly wife, or getting through the toddler years. I could even "counsel" women on carving out time for a healthy spiritual life. I was not prepared for dealing with serious issues like addiction or abuse. I also didn't understand how to employ safe guarding boundaries for myself (and my family) when I encounter people in crisis. Empathy for the person who was in crisis, would turn into guilt if I was unavailable to talk to them at the moment. I was also not brought into the loop about the legal concerns, when someone comes to you in crisis, where you may be required by the law to report it to the authorities. Ministry leaders may not be afforded the same confidentiality protection as Pastors, Reverends, and Ministers.

This is an area where many churches may be dropping the ball in training their leaders, resulting in a lack of preparation when these types of things happen. My Pastor's wife was able to reassure me that the church was aware of her issue, caution me on how much more involved I allowed myself to get, but also released me as she reminded me: "*Gena, you are not a counselor. This isn't your job, you need to let professionals take care of her issues.*". Through this situation, we recognized the position that ministry leaders were being put in, and began to put together resource lists of local counselors, substance abuse programs, etc. that the church recommended.

In recent years, it is even becoming more prevalent that Pastors are only offering limited counseling. It's a protective measure that they are taking with their flock to ensure safe boundaries for everyone involved. After an initial counseling session, Pastors are learning to spot the need for long term professional counseling earlier. With the rise in professional Christian counselors available, this is a positive option for everyone involved.

When we are leaders of a ministry, we step in the role of shepherding. To be a good shepherd means that we care for our sheep, but do so correctly. A good shepherd knows when to tend to their wounds himself, and when to see the help of someone with greater knowledge. It is his love for his sheep, that

causes him to seek out someone better equipped.

For the remainder of this segment, I am going to be quoting directly from the book “Shepherding a Woman's Heart” by Beverly White Hislop.

When we are poor shepherds with the hearts of the women we minister too, we can do damage that is long lasting and devastating. In Ezekiel 34:2, 4, we read:

*“Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.”*

When a shepherd isn't present, and has more concern about their own wants, desires, and agenda the sheep are left unprepared. They are:

- scattered
- plundered, becoming food for wild animals
- victims of famine
- afraid
- objects of scorn
- without hope of rescue

Hislop states that, *“Women are in pain, wandering over all the mountains and on every hill (Ez34:6). They are scattered on a day of clouds and darkness (Ez 34:12) and no one is looking for them (Ez34:6). They are victims of famine, afraid, and often ashamed. They have been used, abused, refused. They are thirsty for spiritual life, searching in unsafe places for a drink of water. The contaminated water they find increases their pain and extends their illness. The ones who should be leading them to the Living Waters have abandoned them.”*

If women's ministry objectives were parallel to that which the Lord describes in Ezekiel 34:14-16, we would:

- feed the healthy
- strengthen the young and the weak
- heal and bind up the injured
- search and care for the lost

We have a responsibility to shepherd the healthy, wealthy and wise; as well as the poor in health, finances, and in spirit. We must be intentional in our ministry to reach out to all of the women in our church, it is then their choice to accept our offer.

We feed our healthy women's spirits through bible studies, mentoring, prayer life, and modeling a Christ-like life for them. For the young or weak in spirit, we walk them through those same things, but with patience, grace, and possibly a slower pace. Women seasoned in faith, marriage, child rearing, and careers can serve as models and mentors, advisers and counselors. For the wounded, we can bind their hearts, help them get the health care they need, or lift them up out of circumstances outside their control. And, we can intentionally seek out the new women who come into our church, the ones sitting alone in the pews, who slide in and out, hoping no one noticed them... or the ones longing to be seen. When we know our flock, we recognize the women who haven't been around lately, and we seek them out to return them to the fold. We reach out into our community and look for the lost, and welcome

them into our family.

We do not forget one for another, but we serve them all. We can begin this work in our women's ministries by assessing the spiritual gifts of those who are not just on our women's ministry team, but the women in the church. Build a crisis team and connect to the people who need them. We can not afford to do this haphazardly, we must prepare these women for the tasks ahead of them and potential scenarios they may encounter. We must teach them how to set boundaries, know the legalities, and provide them with information on how and when to refer a woman for professional help. We must also make sure we are not leaving those women on their own, but checking in on those leaders...

- What are they dealing?
- How are they handling it?
- Do they need support?
- Do they need encouragement?
- Do they need someone to intervene?
- What resources may help the leader (or the women in crisis) better?

*The Good Shepherd:*

- *searches for and rescues sheep*
- *cares for sheep, leading them to rest*
- *feeds the sheep in rich pasture lands*
- *searches for the lost, brings back strays, binds up the injured and strengthens the weak*
- *gives peace and protects the sheep so they can live and sleep in safety*
- *blesses the sheep and provides fruit, and security*
- *rescues the sheep from enslavement, protecting the sheep from predators*
- *provides for their needs (health, food, etc)*

Women in crisis are hurting. They want to stop the pain, but they don't always know how to do so in the right ways. They may even seek out more damaging methods to stop the pain, even if just temporarily. Crisis is uncertainty. They not only are incapable of stopping the pain on their own, they also have no idea how long it will be until life is normal again. Crisis challenges hope. They are in such mental and physical dispair, they may be unable to even comprehend what healing could look like. Crisis clouds vision and perspective. They may also be confused (at minimum) or angry (at maximum) at God during this crisis. Crisis is not always a consequence. Crisis is often unexpected.

What is the Crisis?

- Depression, Suicide
- Infertility, Death of a Child
- Terminal Illness (self, family member, close friend)
- Physical Disability, Chronic Illness, Age Related Disability
- Addictions, Addiction Recovery
- Abortion Recovery
- Eating Disorders, Weight Issues
- Incarceration,
- Homelessness, Unemployment, Financial Crisis
- Abuse (Domestic, Sexual, Mental)
- Death of a Parent, Spouse, Divorce
- Pornography, Sexual Dysfunction, Sexual Sin

- Spiritual Abuse, Spiritual Abandonment
- Faith Struggles, Spiritual Attack
- And we also have PTSD for our women who serve in military or other civil service.

Leaders need to have a clear plan of action in dealing with crisis, from a practical standpoint, there are some things to consider:

1) Does this woman really want to grow or change? *Not everyone who comes to you in crisis is wanting to grow or change. She may be seeking for you (or the church) to solve her problem for her. Which, without a willingness of growth or change, will become a repetitive process. She may be looking for someone to vent to, a listening ear; or she may be seeking someone to sympathize with and validate her actions as being permissible.*

In a situation like this you can usually discover her intentions by asking a lot of questions, figure out where her head is at. Do her answers indicate that she is listening to you, has a teachable spirit, and is she open to accountability?

Does she make a lot of excuses for why your suggestions won't work? Is she unwilling to commit to taking action to change? Does she not follow your suggestions or guidance? Does she seem to always have a reason to delay taking any action? When you speak to her, do you feel your words are falling on deaf ears?

If after a first meeting, you are uncertain, it is acceptable to meet with her a second time (and possibly a third). If she is still unwilling to do the work, do not meet again with her until she has accomplished something from the options she was given. You can also give her a scripture or appropriate book to read, and upon the completion of the reading, you can meet again. This will expose willingness to change.

2) You must know what you CAN and CAN'T do when shepherding a woman in crisis. *Each different situation may have a different list of can and can't points, but establish them none the less. You should also share this list with the woman, so that she understands upfront what your boundaries in the relationship are. If this is a person you are already friends with, or could potentially be friends with, that is great. However, if you are already friends, you do need to evaluate if you are the appropriate person to fulfill this role. If you are not friends, but the potential is there, you need to set that aside while in this process of shepherding her through the crisis. Otherwise, you may be tempted to relax your boundaries and your objectivity can become biased.*

Can Do List (example):

1. Be a listener.
2. Designate specific time to be available.
3. Get more help from someone with experience.
4. Pray for her.
5. Suggest professional help.

Can't Do List (example):

1. Change her.
2. Go without regular sleep. (ie: no 2am phone calls)

3. Do it all alone. (she must do the work, you may need help)
4. Cure her hurts or fix her.
5. Erase past pain/choices.

Some situational boundaries might include....

Can't Do: *Speak with her if she is under the influence.*

Can't Do: *Counsel her on fixing her marriage, if she's still engaged in an affair.*

Can't Do: *Spend more than one hour on the phone with her.*

Can't Do: *Give her cash directly, although you may provide her with meals, supplies or pay the bill for her (that is up to your discretion or the church)*

3) Leaders must recognize that the woman's pain or situation may make you feel uncomfortable. *Addressing superficial pain is only a temporary solution to a larger problem, and we must be willing to dig a bit deeper. A woman who has a gambling problem and can't pay her rent, is not going to be healed because you paid her rent for her. If you don't deal with the root issue, gambling, she is just going to find herself in the same position next month. She'll expect the bail out, even while giving all the glory to God for the previous one.*

It is important to understand this, because if you are incapable of handling that feeling, you may need to refer her to someone else. If she is coming to you because her spouse cheated on her, and he happens to also be your husband's best friend... it's not going to be easy on anyone. If a woman is being physically abused, absolutely relieve the immediate pain by getting her out of danger, but also follow up with the appropriate after care.

4) Leaders should know their own limits. *If you do not have any experience with divorce personally, you may not be the right person to counsel a woman in that process. If you have experienced the death of your spouse, then you might be just the right person to shepherd a newly widowed woman. Some women are "do-ers", and rise to the occasion by throwing together meals for a woman going through cancer treatments, or putting together a crew to care for her house (cleaning, lawn work, etc). Other women are gifted in areas of compassion, and can sit with a grieving woman, praying and comforting.*

5) Put together a list for your team of referral resources that your church recommends, or that are well respected in the community. This list can include hotlines for abuse, rehab centers, counselors, other local churches that have recovery programs, etc. *When a woman calls in crisis, especially if she needs immediate help, you do not want to scramble for that information. It should be readily available. Keep in mind that as we refer women to seek professional help, you can still walk along side the woman providing spiritual support in the process.*

6) Everyone on the team should know, and feel free to share with any woman who calls them when in crisis, that they do not have all the answers. *We are not professionals, we don't know everything, and we can't solve every problem. You can be empathetic, encouraging, supportive, coaching and even praying with her, without needing to have all the answers. You are not her Savior, nor her Holy Spirit. You can't save her, you can't convict her. We are merely guides toward healing, and guides toward Christ.*

7) Every woman you counsel will have a choice. *It won't matter how much experience you have, your perspective, amount of wisdom or intuition you have. You can offer numerous Bible verses, statistics, phone numbers to programs, and resources to her. If she chooses to reject those offerings, that is her choice. You can't force her to accept it, or change. She is not obligated to you, no matter how much*

*time you have spent counseling her. We can respect that choice, and continue to pray for her, while we release her from our counsel.*

8) Keep yourself encouraged by remembering that no matter how she responds, your presence counts. *There are times when a woman doesn't want to hear what we have to say. They just need us to be there, present with them in the midst of their crisis, a hand to hold or a shoulder to cry on. A woman who is sitting in the waiting room of the emergency ward, she knows your intentions are good... but....*

*she doesn't want endless questions about what happened*

*she doesn't want to hear your opinion or how things turned out with your brother who had the same emergency*

*she may not even want you to give her the classic bible verses or want to pray with you*

*she might just want to sit in silence, holding your hand, and accepting the coffee you brought her.*

*Presence can speak in a way, words can't ever measure up to.*

9) Put your trust, and faith, in our mighty God.

*He is the Redeemer. He is the Great Physician, the Healer. He is the One who brings life. He is the Provider. He is our Protector. He is the Great Counselor. He is the One who answers prayer.*

*We trust in Him. We set that example for the women we counsel. We remind ourselves over, and over again, that He is the one doing the work. Our job is to turn her gaze toward Him.*

Final Thoughts:

- Don't be quick to give advice. Most women don't want it. Listen, and ask questions that help the woman move toward the right answer on her own. Questions like: *What are you going to do? What are your options?* These questions get their brains engaged in the process, and puts her in charge of making her own decisions.
- Don't make promises you can not keep. Be available when you say you will, within realistic boundaries. It is common for someone to offer a person in crisis the freedom to “call anytime”, but is that true? Will you really answer at any time? Don't promise what you won't keep.
- Don't try and fix her problem. We can guide her toward the right direction, but she needs to do the work herself.
- Don't make assumptions, get your facts. If a woman is expressing that she feels depressed, don't assume she is healthy and the depression is caused by circumstances in her life. The depression could be caused by physical or hormonal issues. Ask when she last saw her doctor, or suggest that she start there.
- Don't assume you are getting the fully story. You may be only getting her perspective, which may be tainted or constructed to get your favor. Ask the Holy Spirit for discernment, don't make premature judgments.
- Don't carry the emotional weight, this isn't your baggage. Don't allow the woman you are counseling to unload her baggage on you so that you carry it for her.

If we are listening to the women (making eye contact, asking questions to clarify things they say,

paying attention to the nonverbal cues, and with a discernment), we are letting any woman we counsel know that they are not alone. Someone cares, is listening, and interested in what is happening to them. It is important that we empathize with their feelings, even when we are keeping ourselves aware that they are only sharing their own point of view. Right, wrong, or indifferent ... what she feels is real. She needs that acknowledged, without judgment. Working through those feelings to the root issue happens gently, and often through self discovery as we ask the right questions.

Leaders play a special role as a cheerleader, to give these women hope that they will be able to move forward from this situation. It may not be soon, but there will be a day they can get beyond it.

*“Hurting people desperately want to be heard, understood, and invited to know God in the midst of their confusion.”*

As a women's ministry, your leadership team may not be comprised of women who are able to shepherd those in crisis. It may only be a select few on the team, and if that is the case, you may wish to build a special group for this cause. It might consist of women from in the church, that are not apart of the leadership team but interested in serving in this capacity. Build a team of diverse women, who have different experiences with crisis of their own. Look for women who over came the crisis with grace, dignity, and faith; as they will be the best examples to others. Make sure that you have some sort of training for these women (even if you must hire someone) to help them understand their role, how to set boundaries, and what to do in a real crisis. You can even bring in experts from the community who can not only share what the laws are regarding counseling, but also speakers from some of the various resources you have available. They can explain to your team about the recovery program they offer, how they counsel women after abortion, or what services are available for homeless women and how to access them.

You can try to develop this aspect of your women's ministry program on your own, and the book referenced here is a great starting point. In addition to “Shepherding a Woman's Heart”, Beverly Hislop wrote a second book entitled “Shepherding Women in Pain” that expands on the various crisis scenarios women may face.

However, there are also programs in place that can equip your ministry. One of these organizations, Stephen Ministries, is a great resource. Stephen Ministries is a charter ministry, where your church pays an annual fee to be apart of their program. Those who your church would like to equip for counseling, take part in a training program that prepares them for this type of role. You learn how to counsel through scripture, when to forward that person to professional care, as well as setting boundaries, learning to let go, and other practical steps for shepherding those who are in crisis. There is regular support and updated training for your team, as well as national resources you can pull from as needed.

In a fallen world, full of fallen people... pain and hurt are very real. Preparation allows us to effectively minister to these women, while protecting our own hearts, minds, emotional, and spiritual health.