

## **Sustaining the Women's Ministry Leadership Development & Training**

Once you have your ministry up and running, things are going to run smoothly for a while. Everyone will be excited about the new ministry, sharing and promoting the events to their friends and family. Over time, the newness will wear off and there will be a shift in the ministry. It may come in the realization by a team member that this ministry really isn't for them, or it may show up when you begin to make needed changes in the ministry. If we are prepared for these shifts, it will make navigating those waters a lot easier on everyone.

In previous segments of this course, we talked about the different ways we can shift the ministry into new directions. For example, you may find it is time to revisit your mission statement. You can slowly introduce new programs and events into the calendar. You can even slowly begin to transition programs that exist into the new vision of the ministry. If you are constantly evaluating your programs and events, and course correcting, these shifts and changes in the ministry will be the easiest to deal with.

The greatest shifts in the ministry will come as leadership changes. There are several reasons why this can happen. First, we work really hard to develop a team and even put effort in building relationships with them. This creates loyalty, which is a good thing, but can make leaving a ministry hard on everyone. When a person feels called to leave, we (the team) may try to talk them out of it. In most cases it's because we enjoyed working with them. It can also be selfish, because they did such a good job... we don't believe anyone else can do as well. This can even be more difficult if the person is not leaving voluntarily, but has been asked to step down. Loyalty can taint our objective view over decisions like this and create chaos and tension within the team.

Second, if it is the leader who is stepping down, we may have strong opinions about who is stepping up in their place. This is especially true if that person wasn't even on the women's ministry team to begin with. We often expect that the new leaders will come from within, and that's not always possible. And, often, it can be a huge blessing as they bring new ideas and perspectives with them. If there were problems on the team, or the women's ministry was constantly derailing from the vision of the church, the staff may appoint someone who can better manage the ministry. This can cause hurt feelings, and this will manifest itself in the way the team operates.

The third, and in my opinion greatest, reason leadership change is difficult is based in our own lack of preparation. A ministry should have a system in place to purposely identify potential new leaders and develop their leadership skills. I have witnessed this lack of preparation in large corporations and small ministries alike. If you fail to identify and develop new leaders, your organization is going to dry up, as leaders are called away for one reason or another. It might be a move across country, an emergency in their personal life that requires their full attention, God may be calling them into a new ministry, their work schedule might have changed, or they may have simply just burnt out.

Therefore, it is imperative that we anticipate these changes... and we do so from the beginning. If we are training our replacements, then there is never a reason we can't take a temporary leave of absence or a permanent exit from the ministry. When I was working in the corporate world, I was always training someone to take over my job. I didn't want to go on vacation, and return to find all my work had gone unfinished. Then I would have to not only do my current tasks, but catch up on everything that was left undone. If I could find someone to train as a replacement, then when I returned I would have very little to catch up on (if anything at all). The company was better for it, I was better for it, and so was the

person I trained. As I continued to promote from one department up to the next, the management never worried about the department I left. I had already trained the person to take over my job, all the management had to do was offer them the position. Every exit came with a smooth transition.

This is how it should be in ministry service, too. We need to anticipate that at some point we are going to be called away from service, even if just temporarily. When we have someone already in place who can fill that spot in our absence, it benefits everyone. The person, the team, and the ministry as a whole. It is a seamless shift from one leader to another, that has been prepared for and introduced overtime. When we are prepared for a leadership shift, we are prepared to sustain the ministry into the future, with or without us.

But, when you are serving on a team with many women... how do you know who the right person is? How do you identify a new leader? What if they are uncertain, unwilling, or don't feel they are equipped to do the job?

There will be leaders who naturally stand out. You can recognize them by their devotion to the ministry from the start. This is the person who never misses a meeting. There has never been a need to remind her of her tasks. She gets her assignments done early, and volunteers to help the others with her left over time. She is the one who calls you, sends you emails, or stops you after Sunday services with a "great idea". She is reading women's ministry books, researching what other ministries are doing, and has been collecting a folder of ministry ideas. She talks with other women's ministry leaders, attends conferences, and always shares her notes with you. She contributes at ministry meetings, has a great relationship with the team members, and usually has a good rapport with the staff.

When you have a person on the team like this already, consider yourself blessed. Also, consider yourself assigned the mission of making sure you don't lose her! When a person gives of themselves to a ministry, in such a dedicated way, we must recognize them for it. We do so in order to make them aware that we appreciate them as part of our team. This is a person you can have a brief conversation with, sharing your intention of training them to be your replacement should the need arise. You should share this with the church staff, so they are aware, and you may wish to share it with the team. It sets an example for each member of the team to also be thinking about their eventual replacement. If they are leading a committee, chances are the replacement is already there; waiting to be acknowledged and disciplined into this special leadership role. Your team members will recognize their potential leaders in the same way you recognized each of them for the team to begin with.

It's vital that we recognize people as future leaders, and get right on to the task of training them.... if we wait too long, we may lose them. This is probably more common amongst women, to be truthful, but it is not exclusive. A man may leave a ministry if he is feeling under utilized or under appreciated, but he will often just move himself over to a ministry where he feels he is a better fit. He won't take it personally. Women, we tend to react quite differently. Women are more apt to take it personally, and this won't just affect her serving on this ministry... but possibly others. I'm not suggesting that as leaders we stroke the egos of all the women on our team, because we fear losing them or hurting their future in ministry service. I am suggesting that when we do recognize a clear leader, we do not allow this to go unnoticed. Instead, we embrace it and develop it into something greater.

Be forewarned, you will occasionally come across the "retired leader" who may have already put in many years of leading ministry. While they have retired from the position, their leadership skills still stand out. When you ask if they would be interested in stepping into a greater leadership position, they'll turn you down. Clear leaders are easy to identify, but they are not always willing to step up to

the “leader” role. Whether they don't want to commit to leading an entire ministry or due to life circumstances they really can't commit, you may end up having to search a bit harder for those leaders to develop.

How do you find the hidden leaders in your team? Remember that list I gave a few minutes ago, the one that points you right toward that natural leader? Start there. You will have women in your team that exemplify some of those characteristics, but not all. Which are the most important for leading your specific ministry? Who on the team is already inclined toward those most important skills?

Perhaps she is the woman on the team who always gets her tasks done, but at the last minute. It could be the woman that hasn't made EVERY meeting, but she's never missed a meeting where she had an assignment or something to present. Maybe she doesn't speak up at every meeting, but when she does... everyone stops to listen. She is the woman who seems like she might be the right person, but has some rough edges that need to be smoothed out. As leaders we can start steering her in the right direction.

So, before you come to her with your intentions of training her for leadership, you can test the waters a bit. Give her a specific job that requires a bit more of her, or start giving her deadlines when she volunteers for tasks. If you are going to be out of town during your normal meeting week, ask her to lead the meeting for you instead of rescheduling it. It won't take long for you to recognize if she is up to the task or not. She will either excel in these opportunities or, despite your best efforts to steer her in the right direction, it will be evident that she's not cut out for leadership. And, keep in mind, even if she isn't the right person at this exact moment... it doesn't mean that she won't grow into it with time and maturity.

The worst case scenario will be that you might have to look for your replacement outside of the team itself. Perhaps no one fits, or has any interest in leading the ministry (it happens). At that point, you can begin to look in the church for a suitable candidate (ask the staff for suggestions if you need to). She could be sitting there every Sunday, a woman who just joined the church, with a history of women's ministry service. Or, she may be a woman who is currently serving in a ministry but on her way out. I transitioned into women's ministry at my current church, because I was leaving the MOPS leadership team. I no longer had a preschooler, and I wasn't sure where I was going next. It just so happened our women's ministry leader was moving, and she approached me with stepping into the team in her place.

The most difficult part of looking outside the team comes from your lack of relationship with these potential leaders. The women on the team, you know them. You have worked with them long enough to know their character, their passion for women's ministry, and that they have an understanding of the vision of the ministry and church. When you are looking into the church body, you are looking at a group of women whom you may not know on a personal level. This is why it is a good idea to involve church staff at this point, as they can help guide you during this process. Your Pastor may make some recommendations, or he may decline some of the suggestions.

This search process may also take a little more time than you anticipated. You will probably keep an eye on this person for a few weeks or even months, making a point to engage her and get to know her better. At which point, you could then invite her to join the women's ministry team. This would give you an opportunity to see how well she relates to the other women on the team, and evaluate her leadership potential. Having her join the team, first, will also make it easier on the team to accept her as their future leader.

When looking for future leaders, there are some characteristics that are helpful in narrowing the candidates. Some obvious ones include being a member of the church and having a relationship with Christ. There are others you may be able to witness, or will hear people say of her. She may have volunteered for VBS that year, and everyone spoke highly of her. One Sunday, you may have passed by her praying with another woman as you left the sanctuary. A friend of yours may be in a small group or bible study with her, and comments about how knowledgeable she is. Then, after inviting her to serve on the women's ministry team, you can begin filling in the blanks. Is she dependable? Does she get her tasks done on time? Does she get along well with the women's ministry team? Is she an out of the box thinker? Do her eyes light up when she talks about serving women? Is she a regular contributor to the conversation?

Over time, you will begin to learn more about her, and through that knowledge you can determine if she's the right person. Of course, we shouldn't be doing any of this process without prayer. God will show you the right person, you just have to ask. He won't be offended if you test it out first, remember God wants us to discern truth. But, don't allow your personal opinions of ministry to cloud that judgment. God may call her into leadership because she is NOT like you. There may come a point where God is ready to move you on, and the person He needs to come behind you will have something completely different to offer the ministry. We are not trying to mold our future leaders into copies of ourselves, but to identify them and equip them to lead in the way God would have them do so.

When you have found that potential leader, bring her alongside you as you work through the ministry's needs. Sit with her 30 minutes before a meeting (or after) and talk about what is happening and why, let her ask questions and make suggestions. When working on larger projects (like a retreat) walk her through the process and assign her tasks that you would normally handle. When you delegate to her, you are also teaching her how to delegate. Set the example, and lead. Then when you feel the time is right, start letting her take the lead or fill in for you occasionally. This will build her confidence in herself, and the team's confidence in her. Your team will be better prepared for the day she may replace you, as they will become accustomed to her leadership style and personality.

There are a lot of resources available for training leaders, there may be some in your community (like free workshops by the local chamber of commerce on communication skills or publicity) and other resources you can purchase from Christian bookstores (books on leadership development, ministry structure, etc). Any additional training and education will help sustain ministry by bringing in new ideas. A sustained ministry needs to not only have prepared leaders, but an influx of new ideas for events and programs, and fresh eyes that are can bring Christ back into to the focus of the ministry. As we bring in and prepare new leaders, they naturally bring new perspective, opinions, suggestion, and direction with them.

Training events and resources will also provide your team members an opportunity to invite their potential replacements into the fold of the ministry. The whole team will get an opportunity to know these potential leaders better, over time. The best benefit of this process is that as you are finding and building additional leaders, you have created a pool of potential team members to choose from whenever the ministry has a team position open up. If the ministry grows and you need a larger team, these women are waiting for the call. It's a process that should never stop, as new women step into the team, they should begin looking for and training their replacements too.