

Sustaining the Women's Ministry **When the Ministry is in Crisis**

As we are building a team, we are looking for several things to happen within that team structure. We are looking for friendships to be formed, as a team that is bonded is a very strong tool in the forward movement of the ministry. We should be fostering relationships where we are building each other up, praying for one another, and holding each other accountable. We should be avoiding gossip, critical spirits, and creating an atmosphere where we get along with each other and forgive when we have offended one another. We instruct one another, help one other, and extend hospitality. We serve one another as we are serving the ministry, refilling each others cups as we pour out to the women in our care.

While this may sound wonderful, a beautiful picture of ministry, it might be a really high expectation. An expectation that we, as humans, tend to fail miserably at. While I hate to admit it, it seems to be something women are especially prone to lose sight of. As emotional creatures, the very way God created us to be, we are often more self conscious than we need to be. We may take offense to things that were said, even though it was never intended that way. We may read too much into a decision or action, and take it as a personal slight, when that wasn't the case at all. We are more apt to react and then think it through later, because our emotions can get the better of us. We like to talk out our problems and thus can become more inclined to gossip and criticize.

Over the course of my life, I have worked in teams that were predominantly male, equally mixed and all female. The greatest difficulties I have ever faced have always fallen in the groups that had a larger percentage of women. It happened enough for me to consider this as a valid concern in sustaining a women's ministry. Things can get out of hand quickly and we may not even see it coming... until it is too late.

In my experience I've noticed that when trouble strikes a women's ministry, it usually begins with personality conflicts. Personality conflicts can be difficult to navigate through because there wasn't anything that set the relationship off on a bad course. One person didn't offend the other, or do any harm toward them. Their personalities just didn't mesh, then over time serving together it would become more apparent. It would start as simply not getting along on a personal level, and then manifest itself as they would work on projects together. Things would be said between friends on the team, and you end up with an "us vs. them" situation that has grown out of control.

I have learned over time that when you have personality conflicts on the team, it can't be kept under wraps for long. You might start to notice that the two women never speak to each other during the meeting, they are always sitting as far from each other as possible, and if you need a committee to handle something ... you can bet the two women won't be raising their hands together. That's the subtle part of the personality conflict

It starts getting more obvious when there are side conversations during the meetings, eye rolls when someone presents an idea, and when you start noticing some of the group is socializing outside of the meetings while the rest are being left out. Because, in personality conflicts, there always seems to be a comfortability in numbers. It's almost as if a person can recognize that if they are the only one who has a problem with you, then maybe the problem isn't you at all. Maybe, the real problem is with them. But, if they can get another person to agree with them, they feel justified in their feelings toward you. The more people who agree with them, the better they feel, and they have successfully convinced themselves that the problem is in fact you. This is when the "us vs. them" issue begins to visibly show

up in the meetings.

What is interesting to me, is that when you begin to mediate a situation like this, almost no one realizes it is happening. In my personal experiences, I have never witnessed a case where someone was trying to intentionally take down a ministry or a leader. (Although, I believe that does happen occasionally). But, in my experiences, everyone involved doesn't see what they are doing as destructive or divisive. They see it as just friends talking about the ministry they serve on, they don't recognize it being gossip. They are just sharing their opinions, they don't see it as criticizing. They will share their goal is just to make the ministry better, without recognizing the manner in which they are going about it is completely wrong.

When they get called on their behaviors, they are then defensive because they have been casting themselves in an innocent light. Which makes recovery and reconciliation feel like an impossibility. Your personality conflicts between single people will eventually escalate into groups of people, and then you will have a disgruntled ministry.

I once spoke with a ministry leader who knew there was something going on within the team, she recognized tension. However, she didn't know what it was. No one was talking to her, but she could sense there was a problem. And she was right, boy was she right. There were a lot of private conversations going on in the background. In this case it became a situation of "them vs. her". The problem was with the ministry leader, but she didn't have a clue that it was happening. The more she was doing to try the ministry, the more fuel she was adding to the fire. This lack of communication created a division within the team, that would take a long time to heal. It all started with a personality clash that escalated over time.

Personality conflicts are not the only way you can end up with a disgruntled ministry. It can happen when the main leader of the ministry pulls away from "teamwork" and pushes forward their own agenda and ideas. The team feels unnecessary, and under valued. It can happen if the team feels that the church staff doesn't support their ministry goals. It can also develop when certain members of team seem to have more influence than others. If a ministry doesn't have a clear goal or vision, a team can become disgruntled as they each try to influence the planning with their own ideas of what the "women want" out of the women's ministry.

The more disgruntled a ministry becomes, the deeper the divide that can be created. This will impact the ministry as a whole, because a divided ministry no longer shares the same united goal. This is why having structure and a clear vision is so important to a ministry from the very beginning. If everyone has a designated role, they have a voice. If the team has a clear vision or mission statement they serve a unified purpose. A structured team creates less room for conflict to breed, and when it does arise it will be noticed by leadership faster. It can then be address it before it gets out of control.

As the leader of the ministry, this might mean having a sit down with each person individually or together in order to mediate the conflict. As a result, you may determine a little restructuring of the team is in order, or clear up some miscommunication that has occurred between them. Bring the behaviors and conflict into light, and try to help the women involved overcome their differences. You can strategize better ways to interact with each other as team members. In the worst case scenario, you may have to ask someone to leave the ministry team. Of course, we would want this to be the last possible action. It can be done in a way though that doesn't cause further dissension. It begins with gentle conversation that addresses the problem, not from an accusatory perspective but from a genuine desire to resolve the conflict. If you find yourself unable to resolve the conflict, or unfortunately as the

leader you are part of that conflict, you may need to involve someone from the staff to help mediate. This might be a Pastor, or even an elder.

We can have a positive attitude toward conflict, because through it we grow. Once, I was in conflict with another ministry leader. I called on my mentor to help me through the situation, I needed wise counsel. She said to me: *“I know this is a really difficult time for you. I am truly sorry you are having to deal with this. But, I am so excited to see what God is going to use this for. You are being refined. I know it hurts, but God is going to be glorified through this.”* She was right! Not only were we able to get past the conflict, but our relationship improved beyond anything I could have imagined at the time!

It is really easy to blame conflict on Satan, the “world”, and on others. We can allow those beliefs to cloud us from the fact that God may be using the conflict to strengthen us as individual people, as a team, and as a ministry. The conflict may be the push we need to move forward in a new ministry, because we've been ignoring His gentle nudging. The conflict may be the lesson we need to prepare us for a greater calling.

Finally, we need to consider the impact that change can have on a ministry. As your team evaluates and course corrects the ministry, you may end up changing your mission statement. This may come from the church, as God changes or grows the vision through the Pastor. Change can come in small stages, over time, which can be a lot easier to manage. However, sometimes there is a big change.... and that can create uncertainty and uncertainty can breed chaos.

What if your ministry has been moving in a certain direction for a long time, you might even feel like you are heading toward that final goal.... and then the church takes a new direction. You are left to start over from scratch, redefining your ministry. This might upset some of the team, who feel like all of the work was for nothing.

What if you are serving on the ministry team and the leader suddenly steps down or leaves the church, and no one seems eager to fill her spot? Or, what if a new leader steps up and immediately starts making big changes?

Women's Ministry can find itself in a crisis situation even when things appear to be working out well. But when major upheaval occurs, there is often a lot of confusion and a high probability of inaction as the team tries to process through what is happening.

A women's ministry went through this very scenario, and they were not prepared. There was a main leader, and everyone worked together on each project. There were no positions or designated roles. One evening, the team showed up for the next planning meeting and the leader wasn't there. Instead, the Pastor's wife told the team the leader had stepped down from leadership. No one had a clue, and clearly they were caught off guard. There were so many events that were in progress, the team didn't really have time to process the loss. The decision had to be made! Would they move forward with the plans? And, who was going to step up to coordinate these events? Over the next several months, the team went through the motions, but there was never time to even discuss what happened. This created a fracture that was not properly dealt with. Once the team got over that hurdle, they couldn't seem to move forward. There was no clarity of who was in charge, there was no support from the church on how to deal with this huge shift, there had never been any future leaders identified and trained to take over. No one knew who was in charge, what was going on, or how to proceed.

In the wake of this major change, a lot of holes in the ministry were revealed. The leader had been doing so much herself, that the team lacked information and direction. They kept trying to move forward, without ever repairing those holes. Over time the holes got bigger, and the ministry was crumbling. In the wake of these shifts, personality conflicts arose that were never there before, the ministry became disgruntled. There were complaints, and unanswered questions. There was confusion and hurt. Some of the women left the team, as they were loyal to this previous leader. As new women were brought into the team, there was a lack of cohesion. Due to the lack of structure, it became even more confusing as time passed.

When a ministry doesn't start with structure, it is in no way prepared for when crisis strikes. Little things can grow into big things. Big things can wipe out a ministry. This is why it is also vital that ministries have the support of the church staff. When major crisis occurs, there are people who have more experience that can walk us through a difficult season like this.

No matter how much you prepare for technical problems, we can never be prepared for the emotional ones. After serving with your team for a length of time, your relationship becomes close.... and then tragedy strikes. An illness. A death.

Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything. A time to weep and to mourn. A time laugh and dance. A time to tear down and rebuild. To be silent or to speak. There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven.

Which means there is a time to stop, and to be a team together with an empty calendar. We can cancel and reschedule, so that we can come together and heal. We can mourn loss, or rally around our friend who is ill. We can even put a stop the team, tear it down to the basics and rebuild it back up.... in time. Never be afraid in crisis to STOP. Never be afraid to be still and to reevaluate as a team.

Embrace each other. Pray. Love. Grow. Then you can regroup and start fresh.