

Question being addressed: What does women's ministry look like in a church context when there is no specific women's minister?

In this essay I have chosen to discuss the importance and place of ministry to women in a church context. This topic has arisen as a result of observations from my own church context where, for over ten years there has not been a specific women's worker on the staff team. Over this time numerous attempts have been made to develop a structured women's ministry. In the past these structures have consisted of a variety of formats, some of which have been; prayer groups, participation in external conferences and women's events. Some initiatives have run for a relatively short period of time, approximately one year at the longest, however most have not been sustained. So it is in this context that I am thinking about ministry to women, and in particular, to understand how churches without a specific women's worker can be intentionally growing and maturing women.

It must be noted that the scope of this topic is broad and therefore the focus will be upon the essential elements of ministry to women and the role of the minister in caring for the women in his congregation. Specific examples of what a women's ministry program may look like will be touched on, but not explored in depth.

In discussing the topic of ministry to women in a church context, it is important to establish the foundation of what church is about. From this foundation, discussion will move to core elements of a women's ministry and the role of the minister in caring for the women in his congregation.

In Matthew 5-7, we see Jesus teaching the crowds about his kingdom and what it looks like to be someone who lives in light of this kingdom. He provides an illustration for the life he is outlining, saying that 'the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life' (Matt 7:14, ESV). Jesus is clear that this route is not easy, but for those who take it, it will lead to life. However travelling this road isn't to be done in isolation. Jesus promises that he will send the Holy Spirit, first to the apostles (John 14:15-16, 25; 16:13-14, ESV) then to 'all who heard the word' including the Gentiles (Acts 10:44, ESV). Here we see the key elements of the Word and the Spirit in the life of the believer, resulting in new life (Rom 8:9, ESV) as well as the reshaping of our lives to bear fruit (Gal 5:22-23, ESV). Along with this work of the Word and the Spirit, followers of Jesus walk the road set before them in community with other followers as shown throughout the book of Acts. We see this today in our church contexts, that as communities of people, we are to be filled with the knowledge and wisdom of God to be able to live a life that bears fruit and is pleasing to God (Col 1:9-13, ESV).

This principle can be applied specifically to the context of women. Titus 2:3-5 points to the practical example of older women training younger women to love their families, be self controlled, holy and productive at home. It is clear from this passage that Paul sees the benefit of older women mentoring younger women in these

practical ways, but also for the purpose of continuing to teach sound doctrine to all who belong in the church (Titus 2:1, ESV). While Paul outlines some practical areas that should be discussed, it must be noted that instruction for women is not exclusively commented on in Titus. Matters that are worthy of reflection and teaching particularly for women include; fearing the Lord (Prov 31:30, ESV), being ‘full of good works’ (Acts 9:36, 1 Tim 2:10, ESV) and developing a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Pet 3:4-6, ESV).

So from a Biblical perspective there is precedent in support of women sharing life and ministering to other women, with the premise being that of an older woman training a younger woman. It is also clear that Paul encourages discussion to be based around God’s word in relation to growing in godliness and character, and not exclusively in what might be perceived as feminine skills.

Colin Marshall and Tony Payne also pick up this idea of mutual encouragement in their book *The Trellis and the Vine*. Throughout the book there is a strong encouragement to have all members of a church body involved in Word ministry, that is, speaking the Word of God into each other’s lives and not necessarily relying on formal structures for this to occur.¹ Growth in people is achieved through the growth of the gospel.

Some would say, however, that the reason to have a ministry specifically to women is primarily because of the unique physical, social and cultural challenges that women

¹ C. Marshall and T. Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009).

face, which are distinct from those faced by men.^{2,3} Another point that is raised in support of a specific ministry to women is that it provides an opportunity to explore the ‘creative side.’⁴ While these points may be valid and true, they do not identify that the key business of gospel growth in people’s lives is the main aim of Christian ministry, just as it is applied specifically in a ministry to women; which is to encourage growth by and through the Word of God.

Therefore a ministry to women should include the elements of community and relationship,⁵ which are directed by God’s word. In its shape it may revolve around event-type meetings, however there is a place to advocate for a simple structure of establishing a one-to-one platform; connecting older women with younger women to allow them to share life and delve into the Bible together, discussing practical issues like marriage, motherhood and singleness.⁶

In saying this, it should be noted that many older women feel ill-equipped to be mentoring a younger woman, and many feel that they do not have the capacity to lead others in a Bible based discussion or teach.⁷ As a result there can be a tendency for content to revolve around helpful, but non-Bible based ideas that appear less intimidating and more manageable for the women who are planning these events.

² L. Mabery-Foster, *Women and the Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Word Publishing, 1999).

³ J. Martin and T. Stovall, *Women Leading Women: The Biblical Model for the Church*. (Nashville, Tennessee: B&G Publishing Group, 2008)

⁴ J. Briscoe, L. K. McIntyre, and B. Seversen, *Designing Effective Women’s Ministries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530: Zondervan, 1995).

⁵ Mabery-Foster, *Women and the Church*.

⁶ J. Williams, ‘An Appeal to Women and Their Pastors’, *The Briefing*, Cited 2 Jun. 2014, Online: <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2008/10/an-appeal-to-women-and-their-pastors/>.

⁷ Williams, ‘An Appeal to Women and Their Pastors’.

In this context a formal talk-based format may be too threatening. Therefore facilitation of smaller Bible study groups and one-to-one meetings might be more achievable and realistic⁸ and as people grow in confidence move to a more formal teaching format.

This feeling of lack of capacity to lead or teach also presents an opportunity for women to be trained in these skills. This could be done as a specific activity for women, however it can also be influenced and taught on a corporate level by the minister of the church.

In a church context that does not have a specific women's worker that is also without a formal ministry targeting women in operation, the role of the senior minister, or any minister, is still very important and key for the growth and maturity of the women in the church.

The senior minister's role can be categorised into two elements, that of teacher and that of pastor.⁹ The role of teacher is fundamental to how he cares for the flock as a whole, including the women, who may not have a ministry that is tailored to them. The minister's duty is to 'feed the flock by teaching the word of God.'¹⁰ It is by the word that the flock is sustained, and as the main responsibility of teaching generally falls to the minister, this is the primary way that he can care for the women in his congregation.

⁸ Briscoe, McIntyre, and Seversen, *Designing Effective Women's Ministries*.

⁹ J. E. Adams, *The Pastoral Life* (2nd ed.; Ann Arbor, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 1980).

¹⁰ Adams, *The Pastoral Life*.

He can do this in the best possible way by being aware of the congregational ‘needs and trends’ as well as the cultural climate.¹¹ This is not to say that he should be teaching in a reactionary way, rather, by being aware of the current issues in his congregation and in society, he can shape application and teaching to address these when they naturally arise in the Bible.

By teaching and highlighting issues as they arise in Scripture, the minister can also take opportunity to teach on commands particular to women. Understanding that women desire to keep shaping their lives in light of God’s word, should encourage the minister to continue teaching, training and rebuking the women in his congregation as he speaks week to week¹². Utilising the platform that is his on a weekly basis to explain a Biblical perspective on woman-hood and godly female-specific character when the opportunity presents itself in Scripture, is a practical way to continue serving and teaching the women of his congregation.¹³

From a different perspective, the minister can care for the women in his congregation by training and teaching the men in his flock what it is to be a godly when relating to the women in their lives, whether as fathers, husbands or brothers. Similar to the women, taking opportunity to teach on instructions to men as they arise in Scripture, will not only address the men, but also show women the Bible’s picture of man-hood.¹⁴

¹¹ Adams, *The Pastoral Life*.

¹² D. George, *What Women Wish Pastors Knew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530: Zondervan, 2007).

¹³ B. Johnson, ‘How Pastors Can Equip Women for Ministry’, *9Marks Journal* (August 2010), Cited 28 May 2014, Online: <http://www.9marks.org/journal/how-pastors-can-equip-women-ministry>.

¹⁴ George, *What Women Wish Pastors Knew*.

The minister can also care for the women in his church by working at living an appropriately transparent life, which models godly living, and if he has a family, including this as part of his work as a pastor.¹⁵ Inviting people into his home, creating opportunity for people to see his life in action, particularly if he has a family, can all assist in the shepherding of women.¹⁶ For whatever reason, the minister's wife may not be able to sustain or be involved in ministry to women at church, therefore opportunities such as this allow women to build relationship with her and inevitably learn from her experience and wisdom as well.

Another way that the minister can care for the women in his congregation is to look for and provide opportunities for women to be equipped to serve and lead others.¹⁷ He can do this by praying for them, providing settings conducive to training, welcoming deeper theological thought and questions, and for those women who are initiating deeper theological discussions and are passionate about the Bible, encouraging them to use this to serve others.¹⁸ This training may take the shape of suggesting books for women to read, encouraging them to write articles, running seminars and engaging in theological discussion with them.

By caring for his flock in these ways, the minister not only feeds the flock by God's word, but also, particularly for the women in his congregations, impacts their families, marriages, workplaces, neighbourhoods and the many other social contexts that women find themselves in during the week. By being committed to teaching the Bible, he not only affects the individual life of each woman present, but also the many

¹⁵ Adams, *The Pastoral Life*.

¹⁶ Adams, *The Pastoral Life*.

¹⁷ J. L. Duncan and S. Hunt, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church* (Wheaton, Illinois 60187: Crossway Books, 2006).

¹⁸ Johnson, 'How Pastors Can Equip Women for Ministry'.

contexts that they are a part of, and as a consequence, positively affects the life of the church as a whole.¹⁹

Growth centred on God's word is central for Jesus' followers to stay on the road He has laid before them. Knowing that this road is not easy, Jesus provides the Holy Spirit and the support of community and fellowship to assist in this walk. The key element here is the Word of God that teaches, trains, rebukes and sustains. It's the word of God that needs to be central in any ministry, and this includes ministry to women.

While ministry to women without a specialised women's worker may be more challenging, the centrality and foundation of God's Word does not change. There is still a place for women to minister to other women, even though the format of this might look different without a women's minister available, to study the Bible and apply it into the unique contexts that present themselves because they are women.

It must also be noted that ministry to women does not exclusively occur between women, however there are strengths in this, but is also addressed by the minister as he shepherd's his flock. By being committed to faithful, expository teaching from the Bible, he cares for the women in his congregation as he feeds them with the Word of God. The minister also serves the women in his congregation by modelling an honest, godly life along with his family and seeking to take opportunity to encourage deeper thought and training in competence and skills so as to be able to serve other women. By engaging in these things, the minister not only speaks the Word of God into

¹⁹ Johnson, 'How Pastors Can Equip Women for Ministry'.

women's lives, but also impacts all of the social contexts they are a part of, resulting in widespread growth and positive effect throughout the church community.

Therefore it can be seen that ministry to women should not be limited to the time that a women's worker is available, but can occur amongst the women of the church, around God's word at any time. The key element here is that whatever the shape of the ministry, it is essential that it is oriented by and around the Word of God. This is complemented by the guidance and shepherd-ship of the minister as he cares for his flock by teaching the Word faithfully, modelling godly living and training and equipping those in the church to be able to grow others.

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