



By Felicia Hopkins

In 2003, I was deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Trauma Chaplain in the Army. While I worked daily receiving and counseling wounded warriors from Iraq, Africa, and Afghanistan in the 94th General Hospital, I also tried to write a sermon to help heal the emotional and spiritual wounds of those who were serving the sick. I never missed a Sunday, and weekly at 7 p.m. we would gather in the old Army chapel to sing the praise of God and refresh our hearts, mind, and souls with His word.

I was preaching to over one hundred soldiers and airman who were tirelessly ministering to others. God was using me as a foun-

tain of His love and grace. The truth is it never occurred to me before that there were plenty of “worker bees” in the church back home who, because they were dedicated to serving others, really missed hearing the word and worshipping God on Sundays. So I decided that when I returned to my church home we would provide a monthly service for women who already go to church and are committed to God but who, due to their tireless efforts preparing coffee and keeping the nursery, rarely have the luxury of sitting like Mary did at the feet of Jesus.

Quickly, upon my arrival home, I grabbed our Director of

Women's Ministry, Janice Banister, and told her my idea. She was ecstatic. The church already had in place several Beth Moore Bible study groups and our Naomi Circle. But after meeting, we decided to set aside the first Friday night of every month for an open, ecumenical Women's Night Out with Christ. We planned the service to mimic our 9 a.m. Praise and Worship service, but with a very casual feel. Come as you are, we told everyone. Make it a night to go with your girlfriends to church and maybe a meal.

The first night in attendance we had over 150 women—mostly from our own church. But we pressed on and asked God to show us the way. We added a wonderful after-service fellowship time with refreshments ranging from homemade cobbler and ice cream to beautiful fruit trays and nuts. We also host a special meal three times a year to serve the wonderful women who rarely have the luxury of someone else preparing dinner for them.

Unity in Diversity

Music is an integral part of what we do. The Bible teaches us to "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord," so we use whatever musical talent we can find. Even though we have excellent worship singers here at St. Mark's, in 2005, we began to ask other churches to come and sing, as our motive was to be as inclusive as possible. We asked the Baptist Barbershop Quartet, members from the Episcopal Church praise band, a Fort Bliss Gospel soloist and choir, and we used bells at Christmastime. We have learned from all of this inclusivity that there is power and beauty in differences. We have learned that when we fail to see our Catholic, Presbyterian, Disciples, Baptist, Lutheran, Jewish, non-denominational, and unchurched sisters as partners in ministry, we fail to see the entire face and many facets of God. We fail to embrace all that He is in us. In opening our eyes to see differences, God has enabled the women's ministry to rebuild bridges and relationships with those who are different from us. Our worship services are now made up of about 70 percent women from other congregations, and there is a passion to serve together that never existed before.

As a new ministry we felt a need to incorporate our own United Methodist Women's group. The UMW was a small, loving group that needed to be infused with new life, so one Friday night we had a unity service and brought together our Young Adult Women, our Naomi Circle, our Beth Moore study groups, and this new cohort of Friday worshipers. We asked God to make us one and he answered our prayers.

Worship Transforms Ministry

Starting with this monthly worship service, we have created a new model for women's ministry in our area. We have hosted a Praise and Worship cruise to the Cayman Islands with fifty women, baptized more than thirty women in a local pond, held communion for those who have left the church, sponsored Liz Curtis Higgs to come speak, and birthed over seventy-five small

groups. Just this month we were told that we were the second largest venue to host the Priscilla Shirer Simulcast live in all of Texas. We have done retreats where women can enjoy spiritual food, and physical refreshment through manicures, pedicures, massages, and rest at a local hotel. Our biggest campaign last year was our Biggest Winner Show, a spinoff on the Biggest Loser show, in which we emphasized individual health and had over seventy-five women sign up and lose over four hundred lbs.

Constantly we are asking the question, how we can reach others for Christ. What can we do better? How can we go outside our walls and help? So not only do we focus on what we do on Friday nights, we have made it a practice to become generous givers in our community—to serve with a spirit of hospitality and love. Last month, we

collected shoes for Tom's Day without Shoes that went to a local charity, and on the first Friday of every month we send a bus down to the Opportunity Center to pick up any women who want to come. The local Opportunity Center has had a steady presence of women from St. Mark's who bring Bible studies and personal support. At Christmastime, we become secret angels by giving gifts from our own Christmas tree. In August, you can find us filling backpacks for children who need school supplies.

In all of this, we remember Christ as we preach the gospel in an intimate way to touch hearts and change minds. In the worship services we deal with all of the issues women struggle with: menopause, marriage, parenting, broken relationships, singleness, single parenting, finance, caregiving, and health, so that women can see His love and His desire for them to be all they can be. We try to infuse every woman with passion and a purpose by remembering all of the women who have gone before them and made it—a great cloud of witnesses who have taught us about discipleship, love, perseverance, character, values, and integrity. We say if God did it for them, He can surely do it for you.

Serving in this women's ministry has been a dream come true. It has allowed us to see what it's like for others to catch on fire for Christ. Some days, we just think about the fact that all it took was one step—in faith—to do something for someone else. I believe there are many folks out there who have fabulous ideas to build the kingdom of God, so whether you focus on women or some other demographic, know that one small step can lead to great things. □

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