The Transformation of Women’s Ministry in 21st Century Culture

by Meagan Taylor

Article Summary
Women’s ministry is on the verge of massive cultural shift as younger generations of women reject traditional programming in favor of more purposeful spiritual interaction. Innovative church leaders are adapting to this rapid change by experimenting with new ways to equip women to exercise their gifts and passions through relationships, spiritual development and outreach.
A group of four women, ranging from 20 to 40-something, stare pensively into the space of a small, makeshift conference room, plastered with motivational posters. Three sit around a rectangular laminate table at the center of the room with their elbows on the table, hands holding up their heads. The other stands in front of the large windows with a green dry-erase marker at the ready.

Scrawled on one window, under the title “OLD” is a list of current programs in their church’s women’s ministry; on the other window there is a title that reads “NEW” with the phrase “Future Vision Plan” written just below it. The team of four—Julie Pierce, Jodie Niznik, Jackie Roese and Aubrey Chavez—must come up with an action plan to implement their future vision. There’s just one catch:

“That big, hairy dream out there is way beyond women’s ministry,” Julie says of the team’s future vision, with an allusion to the BHAG idea popularized by author Jim Collins – big, hairy, audacious goal. The Irving team envisions a global movement of women—a grassroots network of women (and men) working together in their own communities and internationally to address issues that directly affect women and, consequently, everyone.

The problem is, no one agrees on exactly what the global movement of women should look like, since it’s never been done before. “If we don’t know where we are going, we can’t pull a plan together,” Jackie says. So, they start with what everyone can agree it doesn’t look like.

Most of the items written on the window of the conference room are remnants of the ministry’s previous iteration. They include much of the “engaging” portion of the ministry—activities such as a Christmas dinner, retreat, and book discussion cafe. While the team plans to continue Bible study as a staple of the ministry and change other programs incrementally, they believe that realizing the movement of women will require destroying paradigms that keep women inside church walls.

Three years ago, the staff at Irving Bible rebranded their ministry “WE” with the goals of engaging, encouraging, equipping, and empowering all women to be who God made them to be, according to Julie Pierce, who serves as directional leader for women. Despite rebranding the ministry, the team agrees that they have not reached those four goals yet; i.e. all women have not been empowered to be who God made them in a world where sex trafficking, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, rape, abortion, eating disorders and countless other issues oppress them.

“We don’t know what the future reality is going to look like,” says Jackie Roese, teaching pastor to women at Irving Bible Church in Irving, TX (www.irvingbible.org). “What we do know is that it is not going to be what it is now.”
“Let’s blow it up,” Jackie says. The rest of the team agrees with a resounding “Blow it up!”

Aubrey Chavez, the ministry intern, writes the instruction in big letters on the “OLD” window.

A BRAVE NEW WORLD
Many church leaders are finding that ladies’ teas, luncheons and socially-focused retreats no longer solidly fit the needs and desires of their core constituencies. The ministry constructs of years past are increasingly tedious, time-consuming and irrelevant to new generations seeking to discover and live out their gifts and passions through meaningful expression.

“What we sense is that there is a shift happening in the evangelical community, and an earthquake happening in the culture at large,” Jackie says, explaining that she believes God is at the center of the changes as a force of deconstruction and reconstruction. “As that happens, we want to be looking forward.”

What, then, is the future of women’s ministry as churches navigate 21st-century, postmodern culture?

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Whatever we are headed toward has not been created yet,” Jackie says. “But it will probably look radically different than it looks right now.”

Leaders in women’s ministry across the country are experimenting with new ways to equip women to exercise their gifts and passions, rather than simply recycling programs to entertain participants. Many churches are finding ways to encourage organic development: women creating their own expressions of spiritual growth and outreach, rather than being handed a menu of predetermined activities.

“Churches everywhere are critically examining the purpose and mission of their women’s ministries,” says Sherry Surratt, Director of Women’s Initiatives in Leadership at Dallas-based Leadership Network. Sherry recently spent a year researching new trends in women’s ministry at churches across the country. Her findings indicate that women’s ministry is on the verge of a massive cultural shift. “Younger women are speaking loudly with their declining participation in traditional women’s ministry events, citing such reasons as busy schedules and hectic lifestyles,” she says. Despite this trend, she notes that churches have found that this key age group is increasingly involved in community service events outside the church walls.

Sherry explains that these developments are prompting ministry leaders to ask such questions as:

- Are we paying attention to the changing needs of women?
- Are we engaging their gifts, talents and passions or offering irrelevant programming?
- Has our women’s ministry become irrelevant and obsolete?

It’s the honest answers to these questions that will determine the future course of women’s ministries in the 21st century church, she says.

Connecting individuals in small groups on social networking websites, holding Bible studies at popular bookstores, bringing important conversations out to the streets via “Diva Bus,” and cross-continental partnerships are only a few innovations that are transforming the face of ministry by, for and to women.

LOST IN TRADITION
For more than 20 years, Whittier Area Community Church in Whittier, CA (www.wacc.net) had a substantial, well-structured women’s ministry replete with an annual women’s retreat and fashion show at Disneyland, a hierarchy of handpicked lay leaders, and a matriarchal women’s pastor who orchestrated it all.

“There was a tremendous amount of tradition,” says Sherry Mortensen, current lead pastor of spiritual formation at Whittier. The annual event
drew more than a thousand women, organized by a team of energetic leaders who were all connected by their personal relationship with the women’s pastor, Sherry explains.

Two years ago, that pastor retired and the ministry came grinding to a halt – ready to turn in a new direction. Enter Sherry, who has a PhD in spiritual formation and a sign on her office door that reads “Give me a hundred men and women who hate nothing but sin, who love nothing but God and who are ready to change the world.”

According to her cohorts, Sherry rocked the foundations of the ministry. “There was tension with me being the replacement,” she says. “I’m not a women’s pastor. I do spiritual formation, work with college students, teach and preach.”

Despite the tension, a reckoning began. Women who had never been involved in the ministry, or who had left it years ago, spoke up. “I had women coming out of the woodwork saying ‘we aren’t valued. We aren’t a part of this ministry.’” Many of these women were small group Bible study leaders who had been left outside the core leadership circle.

Women in leadership at churches around the country say that women’s ministry, which arose predominantly out of the need to support missionaries and plant churches, has become inwardly focused and cliquish. New leadership has been a primary catalyst to reengage ministries that have grown complacent or disconnected from their church’s priorities.

When a new lead pastor with a heart for outreach joined Chase Oaks Church in Richardson, TX (www.chaseoaks.org), the church ministries were reorganized around his vision. “We blew up the dinners and the flings and the teas, things that served no purpose beyond the events themselves,” says Claudia McGuire, women’s ministry pastor at Chase Oaks. “I saw this as an opportunity to take the next step with women in ministry.”

Before the transition, the women’s ministry never saw newcomers, and regular participants rarely brought friends. “We were a church with a lot of women’s Bible studies, several events, a very big pool of resources and a lot of money,” Claudia says. “But we had become very ingrown because all we loved was being together.”

Sherry began to assess the situation with the women at Whittier by visiting what she learned was the most powerful influence within the ministry – a morning Bible study group. They had been studying scripture for years, with very little benefit to the church around them, Sherry says. “It was all about gaining knowledge with no application,” she says. “They were just filling in the blanks.” Women in the church needed life transformation but were met with legalism and judgment. “There was a disconnect between what the Bible study knew and what they were doing.”

Sherry overhauled the study, writing her own curriculum, making it available online and training leaders to use it. She taught leaders that their goal was not to answer the study questions correctly, but to help women apply the scriptural principles in their lives.

In remodeling the women’s ministry at Whittier, Sherry noticed women were preoccupied with their perceived social status. “I had people saying to me ‘what do I need to do to be in this group’” Sherry says, explaining that women thought there were prerequisites to involvement with the ministry. “The women didn’t know what their spiritual gifts or passions were; they only knew they needed to be in the group.”

She began dismantling the women’s retreat and other extraneous programs, hoping to base the ministry on individuals. “I want to use every woman’s gift in this church,” Sherry says. They
need to learn that all of them are gifted for service and can fill a role in the ministry. “I want to build on the shoulders of the women who are this ministry’s foundation.”

FLUFF IS OUT, DEPTH IS IN
Denise Foxx, director of women’s ministry at Concord Church in Dallas, TX (www.concorddallas.org) says many women at her church avoided women’s ministry because they didn’t feel it was welcoming or relevant to their everyday concerns. “They want to know, ‘how can I be a better mother or a better employee? How do I walk with Christ in the workplace?’” she says. Under Denise’s leadership, the ministry began more in-depth scriptural study geared specifically for spiritual growth and equipping women for service.

In recent years, women’s leaders have seen women’s retreats, luncheons, and formulaic Bible studies begin to repel the very audience they were created to attract.

Over the past 10 years, the women’s ministry team at Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, AR (www.fellowshiponline.com) has seen women gravitate away from “fluff”— superficial, socially-oriented activities— and toward serving together and studying scripture. “Women aren’t just going to give up their time for anything,” says Stacey Hammons, women’s ministries pastor. “We hear they want to connect, but that connection has to have a purpose.”

Trish Monnahan, also a women’s ministries pastor at Fellowship, says she came into her position not even liking women’s ministry. “I don’t want tea parties and I hate retreats,” she says. “So all the stuff we hate, we don’t do.” Her concern with casual social events is that they tend to inhibit women from pursuing further spiritual growth. Women were wilting rather than flourishing because they were not being challenged or guided by strong spiritual leaders, she says.

At Mariners Church in Irvine, CA (www.marinerschurch.org), women’s attendance and interest in fluffy activities also dwindled. “We killed retreats five years ago,” says Shelly Juskiewicz, pastor to women. “We kept losing money having to pay expensive, fluffy speakers.” Leaders responded by cutting more superficial programs and social activities. “There is a greater desire of women for deeper teaching,” Shelly says. “Their heart’s desire is looking for something more real. Some of them know it’s Jesus. Some of them don’t.”

In response to their retreat conundrum, Mariners’ leaders tried a radically different approach, designing a retreat focused on practicing the spiritual disciplines and growing to spiritual maturity. Instead of being herded through activities, participants were encouraged to explore real change in their lives by spending personal time with God and learning to hear his voice. “It sold out and we had a waiting list,” Shelly says.

“Women aren’t interested in big name speakers,” says Michelle Rauscher, director of women’s ministry at Cornerstone Christian Fellowship in Chandler, AZ (www.cornerstonechandler.com). “They want to hear from someone like themselves, not fancy speakers who have it all figured out.” A growing awareness that life is messy business has created a new desire for transparency and approachability among women at the church, who are longing to connect with others like themselves.

“What we all want is to see people for who they really are,” says Lisa Royce, administrative assistant at Cornerstone. Too many women are used to church being a
place where they have to appear to be perfect, and make it look easy. Michelle envisions an environment where women can share their raw testimonies with one another, to create meaningful connections. “We want to hear stories of real women and see life transformation,” she says.

While the relational foundation of women’s ministry remains the same, its modus operandi is changing, according to Michelle. “Each generation gave their tweaks to it,” she says of classic women’s ministry icons like the retreat, luncheons and Bible studies. “I don’t want my mother’s ministry, I want something more natural, more relevant to me,” she says.

NO SIZE FITS ALL
Finding the seeds of genuine community, learning how it grows, and adapting within a rapidly changing culture are critical to success in building an effective and sustainable ministry, contends Denise Ristenpart, ministry director at Mariners. She believes that women’s ministry is changing because younger generations are experiencing womanhood differently than their older counterparts. “They no longer just get married, have kids and sing kum ba yah” Denise says jokingly. “The question is how do we minister to all of the generations?”

Shelly estimates that more than half of the women involved at Mariners are single professionals, while the other half is comprised of working mothers, stay-at-home moms, and women with no children. “Their needs are so diverse,” she says, noting that the church has both daytime and evening women’s activities as well as on-site
care. “Twenty years ago you would have never had a ministry in the evening for women because there wouldn’t be any participation.” Currently, over 600 women meet off campus in a variety of evening small groups and after-work social activities.

“One of our biggest challenges is time,” Michelle says of women’s ministry at Cornerstone. In the church’s 25-45 demographic a majority of the women are busy raising children, working full-time or both. “They are stressed and overcommitted.” But not necessarily committed to their spiritual growth, she adds.

Michelle estimates that nearly half of Cornerstone’s attendees are relatively new believers, having come to know Christ since the church opened 13 years ago. The staff is working to move young believers, who have many demands on their time and attention, toward regularly pursuing their spiritual growth. “Church is not always going to be high on their commitment list,” Michelle says.

To address this concern, lay leaders use goal-setting to enrich the ministry and help individuals stay connected and growing. “We are always pushing leaders toward a growth opportunity,” Michelle says. For instance, the leader of a group for mothers is celebrating how many of her group members she can get to attend new groups by directing and guiding them toward the next steps on their spiritual journey. “If there is an area where they are not growing, they can see where they are, and where they could be,” she says.

When Concord began to attract people without church backgrounds, the women’s ministry took on a new discipleship role, teaching them faith basics such as how to pray and how to study the Bible. Women’s leaders have found that teaching fundamentals serves another vital purpose that strengthens their ministry. “Women learn that
they are important individuals, that God created them with intentionality and they understand why,” Denise says. “Now we are into empowerment instead of just a program.”

Once they had established a spiritual foundation, women’s desire to use their gifts and talents to serve their church and community took off. “What we are figuring out now is what to do with them,” Denise says of the women’s ministry staff. “They are ahead of us and we are not serving them effectively yet.” Concord’s staff is working to help women identify their gifts and passions, and find outlets to use them. The staff plans to explore online social networking to develop common-interest groups.

REDEFINING “WOMEN”
The traditional paradigms and modes of women’s ministry are not the only thing up for debate. Leaders are finding they must re-explore and redefine the concepts of gender and womanhood both from biblical and contemporary cultural perspectives.

Kim Songer, of Whittier, says that the difference in role models for younger women and older women creates a relational gap. “Growing up, we didn’t have a lot of examples of women in the workplace or in ministry leadership, so the difference between a 20-year-old and a 40-year-old is a major difference,” Songer says. “Younger generations are almost genderless and don’t define the gender lines the way that we do.”

At Grace Church in Akron, Ohio (www.graceohio.org), which has a large population of new believers and young professionals, peer leadership has taken on a new dimension that challenges traditional roles. “In church culture, there are unwritten rules about what is acceptable for women and what is not acceptable,” says Kadi Cole, director of advancement. “We have a lot of professionals in the church who are not used to gender limitations and have a lot of talent.” Church leaders are outlining a plan to articulate gender concepts biblically while still empowering members in their gifts and talents.

For instance, younger generations who are new to Christianity and church grew up with school textbooks and other media that use gender-sensitive terminology such as “all people” instead of “all mankind.” Helping seekers and new believers understand the intent of words such as “men” and “brothers,” commonly used in the New Testament to refer to both genders, presents a new challenge for Grace’s staff. “How we say what we say has great value,” Kadi says.

“I think there’s a lot of confusion about what it means to be a woman in the church,” says Jackie, pointing out that the church tends to communicate that women who choose not to get married or have kids are less valuable than mothers and wives.

Grace leaders aim to be more intentional about celebrating womanhood in the church on occasions other than just mother’s day. “We need to understand women as more than only moms,” Kadi says. Asking questions such as “did that sermon feel condescending?” when approaching a topic with gender roles can be critical to embracing the diversity of people in the church.

“Women tend to stereotype themselves according to predefined roles such as wife, mother, and working woman, which limits them and creates catty comparisons,” says Heidi Bogue, a member of women’s leadership at Grace. “We need to be able to celebrate one without putting down the other.”

Women’s leaders have found that teaching fundamentals such as how to pray and study the bible helps women learn that they are important individuals.
ONE BODY
A current church trend is seeking cohesiveness in all ministry areas by focusing on a fundamental principle or teaching sometimes called “the big idea.” For instance, leaders at Mariners Church are focusing on community and global outreach, explains Shelly Juskiewicz. As church leaders adopt and teach the vision, it is established as a primary objective throughout the church’s ministries. “Our purpose is to align with the bigger vision of the church,” she says.

Mariners recently began the process of adding new church locations, which makes unity a paramount concern. “We are expecting five sites in the next two years,” Shelly says. Having women, among other ministry leaders, on the church’s executive staff is one strategy Mariners uses to facilitate unity with its mission, though this approach can be controversial. “There is tension with women in leadership—churches are frightened by it,” Shelly says. Yet the strategy helps Mariners’ women’s ministry maintain consistency with the vision of the church. “If an idea is not consistent, we won’t go there – the idea may be good, but if it will splinter the church, we won’t go there.”

At multi-site Grace Church, leaders are working to draw all ministries within the church vision, especially their highly successful women’s ministry, which has grown to become a largely self-supporting entity.

Due to the church’s 300 percent growth over its 9-year history, Grace’s staff has struggled to provide adequate outlets for the gifts and talents of its membership. “We have lawyers and doctors passing the basket or being door greeters, and we have nothing for them to move into,” Kadi says. Meanwhile, lay leaders in the women’s ministry have actively poured their energy into creating opportunities to bring in and minister to new women. For example, they have formed several small communities called “G-Clubs” where women can get to know each other in an informal setting based on their common interests. The groups serve as a portal for new women to plug in to the church. Kadi credits the women’s ministry for much of the church’s success. “If they weren’t where they were, we wouldn’t be where we are.”

Using the talent of lay leaders and volunteers, the church staff hopes to find ways to expand women’s impact for the benefit of the whole church, while unifying the two to grow together within the church’s mission and vision. They hope to accomplish this by connecting women to other church ministries, such as life groups, through common interests. “We want to pull life group leaders and women together, and ask them about topics that they are dealing with or maybe even that make them uncomfortable,” Kadi says. The challenge here is not to upset the stability of each ministry, but broaden their focus to unify under the direction of the church. “That’s a big transition,” Kadi says.

OUTSIDE THE WALLS
The big idea permeating ministries at Mariners and hundreds of other churches is outreach both
in the community and on the global level. Young women in particular are passionate about social justice and have a global perspective, Shelly says. “We want to draw new women into that.”

Decades ago, outreach meant inviting a friend to church, she explains. Most people in suburban communities like Irvine were Christians and went to church anyway, but in recent years the complexion of the neighborhood has changed. “You have to be willing to have a relationship with people who aren’t like you, and love them no matter what,” Shelly says. “That is a big shift for churches in the way we do ministry.”

Outreach isn’t simply feeding the homeless, she adds. “It means being willing to be in messy relationships with people who believe differently than you do.” With that in mind, the ministry adjourned many of its programs until the fall. “The point is not to be here all summer,” Shelly says of the church campus. “Go meet someone in your community and bring them back in the fall, have a barbecue and clean up trash on the beach. Be so bold as to live this faith you have.”

This summer, women at Mariners headed out into the community on a service tour via the “Diva Bus.” Meant to bring needed supplies and support for underprivileged people in the Irvine area, as well as spark important conversations among people of different backgrounds, the project was meant to be a living example of Christ’s love. “I believe the younger generation will find us as we step out into the community,” she says. She also recruited a new volunteer leader to head up the women’s Summer Diva Ministry. “She is in her 20’s and passionate about serving, which is the heart of this next generation.”

The challenge for women’s ministry staff at many churches is persuading long-time members that shifting the focus to outreach is important. “They don’t see the need,” Shelly says. “But if that means we leave behind women who won’t go, we’re OK with that because their needs will be met inside the church.” If leaders don’t advance the church-wide vision to reach outside the walls, they risk alienating the generation that is the ministry’s future.

Leaders see these elements as vital to maintaining relevancy and impact in women’s ministry:

- **Spiritual Formation** Women’s ministry develops communities in which women experience life transformation and produce spiritual fruit
- **Empowerment** Instead of passively participating in prescribed programs, women are encouraged to pursue their gifts and passions through a variety of opportunities
- **Lateral Hierarchy** Lay leaders are effectively trained and equipped by staff to empower all women to be ministers in their church and community
- **Creativity** Leaders are not bound by old paradigms but support new ideas and outlets for accomplishing the goals of the ministry
- **Unity** The women’s ministry is not only aligned with the mission and vision of the church but integrates with the church culture and direction
- **Diversity** Women of different ages and backgrounds benefit from participating together in the ministry activities
- **Influence** Women use their collective voice in the church, the larger body of Christ, and the surrounding community to address issues that matter to them
“You have to figure out the why first,” says Julie Pierce, from Irving. “You have to make people uncomfortable with the present; otherwise, they don’t know why they should change.”

At Chase Oaks, outreach meant picking up and moving out, literally. The church changed its pastor, its building, its neighborhood, everything except for its values and doctrine. “We are reaching people in a way we haven’t ever done before,” says women’s pastor Claudia McGuire. “Now we have people who are actually living out the gospel.”

Claudia saw an opportunity to take a new direction for women in the church by changing the way they see their purpose. “We don’t need a buffet of programs to come to the church for,” Claudia says. Her goal is to steward the gifts of its people and their time. Rather than pushing lay leaders to enter the internal church hierarchy, the hope is to disseminate women as mature Christians in their neighborhoods and workplaces. “We want you to be out in your world and be Jesus in your community.”

As many churches shift toward missional models, women’s leaders are looking to support more community development at the grassroots level. At Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, the lack of a church building necessitated organic development in the women’s ministry, explains Trish Monnahan. The church was unable to remain in its old building during the transition to a new campus, causing all of the church ministries to move into homes. “That’s how ‘To The Streets’ developed,” Trish says of a new support network for women hosting small groups at home.

Women connected to Fellowship form groups with their neighbors, coworkers and friends, similar to the development of house churches. Each woman has her own goals and mission for her small group. Initially the church had no mechanism designed to support the growth of the small groups, and

### Challenges

Women’s ministry leaders say they struggle with:

**Change**

Whether the church is breaking ground in a new neighborhood, hiring a new pastor, or redrafting the mission statement, leaders are faced with guiding women through the transition while maintaining the impact of the ministry.

**Disconnection**

Large and influential women’s ministries can become the sole driving force of the church, or branch off in their own direction. Leaders question how to tactfully re-integrate the ministry without losing the power and enthusiasm of women.

**Traditions**

Ministries that have long-standing practices or leaders want to attract new generations of women while retaining the values of elder members.

**Relevance**

Church activities compete for space in women’s increasingly busier schedules. Women’s ministry leaders want to offer them opportunities such as spiritual formation and community that they find essential for life.

**Resources**

The dreams of many leaders stretch far beyond their limited budgets and capabilities of staff members. Reaching their goals requires both creativity and the support of church decision-makers.

**Accessibility**

“Women love to be together and build community,” says Kadi Cole of Grace Church. “That breeds ministry.” Leaders want to foster inclusive communities of women while eliminating ministry constructs that lead to insularity and cliquishness.
home group leaders were skeptical about collaboration with the larger church. Women’s ministry staff responded by creating a new DVD rental library for group leaders, facilitating childcare and connecting groups via e-mail. “Once they realized we didn’t want to control it, but to support them in it, women came out of the cracks,” Trish says. To The Streets leaders meet once a month with women’s staff to discuss their needs and provide encouragement to each other.

The women’s ministry staff at Concord Church in Dallas is considering a similar model for organizing groups, since providing outlets for their women’s countless gifts and passions is basically impossible. “Where we are faltering is putting women to work in service,” says Karen Clark, Bible study experience coordinator at Concord. The staff hopes a digital community formed via social networking sites such as Facebook will stimulate the process. “They can find opportunities to serve that are posted there, as well as create their own,” Clark says. “That way they won’t have to wait on us any longer.”

**BACK TO THE FUTURE**

The afternoon sun is glaring through the windows of the conference room where the Irving team is meeting. The words “movement of women” remain written on the window, but the women have reached a stalemate in their discussion.

While Jackie has attempted to get the team to envision a global, grassroots campaign for women’s issues, they have not been able to agree on the first steps to create it.

Jodie Niznik, director of programs and partnership at Irving, hasn’t adopted Jackie’s vision yet, though she likes it. “I haven’t processed it yet,” she says. “It isn’t my dream right now. Will it become my dream? I don’t know.”

Despite having researched multiple women’s ministries across the country and attended various evangelical conferences in the hopes of finding a church that has experimented with the expansive idea, they have not seen anything like it in the Christian sphere, Jackie explains. In secular comparisons, it might be organized like the Susan G. Komen Foundation for breast cancer research or the 2008 Obama presidential campaign.

Aubrey Chavez, the women’s ministry intern at Irving, throws a foam football across the room. “To imagine that I could make an impact on a global scale and eradicate a major women’s problem is beyond my thinking,” she says. “I’m just discovering that I’m gifted.”

During their research process, the team has been reading up on the megachurch and emerging church principles, globalization, and trends in the culture relating to religion, according to Julie. “People are leaving the church and they are leaving big time,” she says. People don’t want to be forced into a building to experience God, or be judged as not good enough for church.

Julie points to the popular Local Food Movement as an example. As a reaction to globalization and high energy consumption, more people are seeking out minimally-processed and raw foods grown in their own state or community. “We don’t want processed people either,” Julie says. “We all want to learn and engage together, and speak into the culture.”

Such cultural change has created social awareness that has brought many churches and their women’s ministries full circle, toward an outward focus on caring for the poor, loving their neighbors and reaching those who don’t know Jesus yet. To equip workers in the field, ministries are teaching deeper spiritual principles, encouraging stronger and multi-generational relationships, and adapting for change.

**A Foundation to Stand On**

For women at The Chapel at CrossPoint in Getzville, NY (www.thechapel.com), discipleship is serious business. Women who sign up for “Soul Purpose” are assigned to a group of six, where they spend two years studying different modules meant to develop their faith. The groups are made up of women of different ages, which fosters multi-generational relationships.
Linda Penn, director of Crosspoint’s women’s ministry, recalls a pair of best friends who signed up for Soul Purpose together, only to find out later that they were assigned to different groups. “They stuck with it and found out it wasn’t so bad,” she says.

While this type of formal commitment may be unheard of in some megachurches, Crosspoint is uniquely situated for its ministry. “In NY, they have never had spiritual formation, retreats and mentoring,” Linda explains. Coming from a predominantly Catholic or non-religious background, most women in the church had little experience in a faith community. “It’s not just catechism, it’s a relationship.”

Kim Holet, who serves as an intern at Crosspoint, says the groups work because the women’s commitment to their faith serves to connect them. “It’s who they are in Christ, not money or status or age,” she says. “We need to give them a foundation to stand on, and continue to press them toward the call so when hard times come they’ll stand.”

She adds that with women comprising at least half or more of the church population, giving them a solid doctrinal foundation is vital. “If you don’t have women moving in that direction, the church suffers,” she says.

**CROSSING LINES**

Like many women’s ministries, Crosspoint struggles with cross-generational communication and relationships. “We have to change the mindset of what ministry is,” says executive coordinator Charity Demko. “We have to get out of the mindset of certain ministries being for certain groups and separating them. They have to understand that they need each other.”

The challenge on that front is fighting rigidity, says Stacey Hammons of Fellowship’s longtime members. “The old-school says ‘it’s always been this way’ and they can’t think of any way to do anything new,” she says. In exploring where leaders will take the ministry, she doesn’t want to lose the elder members, but she doesn’t want younger women to become disillusioned because they feel their ideas are not valued.

“Different generations have so much to offer each other.” Hammons remembers the mature Christian women who spoke into her life and set her up for a future in ministry. “We need that younger generation, but they need the older generation too.”

By setting up a leadership team that represents each generation of women in the church, Hammons hopes to get each group to work together and respect the other’s needs and values. “We have to be willing to use their ideas,” she says. “They know what their peer group does and what will turn them away or draw them in.”

Irving’s women’s leaders hope to create a more inviting space for younger women by keeping things simple. “The 20-somethings are in the church, but they aren’t in the women’s ministry because they don’t want it to look the same way as it’s looking right now” says Julie Pierce. “It’s too organized.” Rather than launching a big, new program at their demographic, Julie believes a simple Bible study might suffice to draw them in.

One strategy the leaders at Fellowship are working on is creating groups with co-leaders of different ages. They tried this model with the church’s moms group, which has an older leader but serves mostly younger mothers. With two
leaders, the younger can relate to the moms in the group while the older leader trains and mentors them. “Right now I am picking women that have a heart to invest in each other that way,” Hammons says of finding multi-generational co-leaders. “It’s hard. There are different issues with different generations.” She says some empty-nesters may be more interested in decorating their homes, for instance, than investing in teenage or college-age women. Meanwhile, younger women struggle to find time for investing in ministry, much less home decorating.

Shelley Juskiewicz of Mariners says fostering a servant’s attitude is necessary to encourage multi-generational relationships. “You have to give up something in yourself to be with that person,” she says. “Part of that is serving.”

Still, each generation requires a different amount and type of support, according to Shelly. While Mariners ministers to older women with Bible studies and activities in the church, “We have to do stuff differently for the under-30 crowd.” For instance, in the Irvine community, there are more Asian and Hispanic women in the under-30 demographic than ever before. “We have to raise up diverse, multi-cultural leaders to grab younger people,” Shelly says.

ADAPTING, BORROWING AND REINVENTING
“You don’t rip out the old pillars to build the new pier,” Shelly says, noting that successful Bible studies and other women’s programs don’t necessarily need to be demolished in order to reinvent the ministry. “You go places where women are. If they are at Barnes and Noble, why not have a Bible study at Barnes and Noble?”

Rather than completely blowing up their ministries, which would be impossible for some women’s leaders within their church structure, they are approaching the future by adapting to each new challenge as it comes. “We are always evaluating, always asking questions and being willing to look at what women are hearing, seeing and believing,” says Cornerstone’s Michelle Rauscher. She emphasizes that being flexible enough to address new issues or opportunities is vital to reaching the next generation. “We aren’t attached to anything except our Bible studies – those are a non-negotiable,” she says.

Like many women’s ministries, Cornerstone’s staff meets weekly. They consider good communication one of their ministry’s strengths. “We are able to stay open minded,” says administrative assistant Lisa Royce. “We don’t assume what someone is thinking but we are constantly communicating about it.”

Trish Monnahan of Fellowship says straightforward communication between women in the church and ministry leaders is a no-brainer. “Take the time to sit down and let women debrief with you about why they don’t like women’s ministry,” she says. “Go beyond your comfort zone.”

When they held a frank discussion about past issues in the ministry, women’s leaders at Fellowship had a breakthrough with many women who were uninvolved. “We had women at a retreat who had not attended any women’s ministry events in years,” Monnahan says. This retreat was a turning point in ministry for us because we saw all ages (from 18 to 80) attend and really enjoy being with each other.

Linda Penn and the women’s leadership at Crosspoint stepped far outside their comfort zone to create dialogue in the ministry. “We started inviting other women’s ministries to visit with us,” she says. At first, the other churches thought Crosspoint was out to steal their members. “If I take off my mask, and we can share what works in our ministries, and what doesn’t, we can be real,” Penn says. “We had authentic concern for each church.” The local churches have been meeting together to pray, share ideas and encourage each other regularly.

CONFRONTING THE CHANGE MONSTER
Chase Oaks went through a six-year process in changing its ministry, and members are just beginning to grasp the leaders’ vision. “We lost a
lot of people who wanted the traditional stuff,” Claudia says. “We had hard conversations on every team in every ministry.” Though it didn’t feel good at the time and the path was long and difficult, she adds, “There’s a desire to keep going and see what God can do.”

Whether a ministry is on the cusp of change or a whole system is on the verge of revolution, dealing with the human element of the change process may be the number one challenge in realizing future plans.

“Having the fallout helps you create the model you are about to create,” says Whittier’s Sherry Mortensen. “You are going to lose some people and some tough decisions have to be made.” Seeing the collapse and reinvention of Whittier’s women’s ministry showed her the emptiness within the church as well as the power and resilience of the church, she says.

Back in the conference room, the Irving team has agreed that they must find external sources to clarify and solidify the vision of their movement of women. “We want people from the outside to look at things we can’t see and to ask questions we can’t ask because we are so in the rote of it,” Jackie says. The team has been sitting on dreams for the ministry for about three years, but hasn’t been able to move forward. Their first goal is to find an external team to inform the process.

“The other part of this is getting people on the bus,” Jackie says. The team hopes to come up with a game plan to move both the women’s staff and the church body slowly over three to five years.

Julie sighs, and sits back in her chair at the conference table. The other women ask her what she’s thinking. “We are always the oddballs,” she says of their incongruous but determined team. “It just feels very lonely.”

Jodie speaks up hoping to spread some inspiration in the room. “But if you look at beginning movements, it was lonely,” she says. “Look at the women’s suffrage movement. Those girls were totally ostracized.”

She isn’t trying to attract pity or reduce the group to martyrdom, but instead point out the magnitude of their vision. “I think we are being realistic about the level of energy it takes to go through this,” she says of radical change.

As the women gather up their notes, push in their chairs and begin to file out of the conference room, Julie replies that the team better start reorganizing their work and family schedules. “We are going to have to figure out how to make space in our lives to do this, because this is a worthwhile process.”
Meagan Taylor is a former newspaper journalist aspiring to use her skill to advance God’s kingdom. She lives with her husband near Boulder, CO, where the pair love to seek out new adventures in the wild and hang out with their friends.

Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is Meagan Taylor. Editorial advisors were Sherry Surratt, Director of Women’s Initiatives in Leadership for Leadership Network and Warren Bird, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support Leadership Network. Contact them via Cindi.Haworth@leadnet.org

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* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

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