

Encouraging Women to Joyful Service

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Introduction

Call this radical; go ahead. But I believe the best way to encourage Christian women to joyful service in the Savior's kingdom is to disband every women's group. Call me radical. Or crazy from overwork. Or brain-atrophied from underwork, But think about it. The best way to encourage women to joyful service in the kingdom is to disband every women's group.

I happen to believe the same solution will work for enhancing the ministry of every congregation in our synod. In fact, I believe the ministry of the WELS would be greatly enhanced if it too was disbanded. Every organization in the WELS should be disbanded - at least once each year. At that point, members would ask, "If this organization did not exist and we were to start it today, what would our goals be? How would we organize ourselves? How would we go about the ministry the Lord has laid on our hearts?"

If our women's groups are going to gather and inspire their sisters in Jesus to joyful kingdom service, they need to constantly evaluate their ministry and the way they are approaching it. There are plenty of examples of embarrassment in American industry when that kind of thorough research didn't happen. When Coca Cola broke into the Chinese market, Chinese symbols were used to sound out the product's English name. Unfortunately, the symbols they chose to spell the name "co-ca-co-la" already had a meaning: "Bite the wax tadpole." In Taiwan the Pepsi Cola advertisers were not to be outdone. Their "Come Alive with the Pepsi Generation" billboards reportedly made the claim that "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead." That's not as bad as General Motors, however, when it introduced the Chevrolet Nova in Latin America. Placarded across those Spanish-speaking countries was the name of an automobile that had to have confused everyone. The word "nova" in Spanish means "doesn't go."

We live in a time when technology is changing at a rate beyond anyone's grasp. Research, evaluation and adjustment are more important today than ever. Starting with the title of his book, *The Frog in the Kettle*, George Barna builds a convincing case for the Church's need to be aware of the astounding changes happening in our world and how that impacts our ministry to souls precious to our God. Unfortunately, his assessment is,

For the past two decades, at least, the Church has been generally insensitive to those changes. We have continued to operate as though our environment has remained the same. Like the frog (in a kettle of water gradually getting hotter), we are faced with the very real possibility of dying because of our unresponsiveness to the changing world around us.

Today, particularly, with society's rapid metamorphosis, every organization, including church organizations, must constantly assess its mission and how it is carrying out its mission. It is vital that we in the Lord's Church regularly stop to ask, "If we were to recreate this group today what would it be like?" Without that kind of continuing evaluation, we in the kingdom are likely to get caught saying things about ourselves and our product which are perceived as ridiculous. We will firmly believe we are doing the best advertising possible. But we'll find that society, technology, and/or the Enemy have made fools of us because we didn't do our homework. This is no less true for our women's organizations.

Assumptions

Encouraging Christian women to joyful service in the kingdom is a very broad topic. We could talk about building women in their relationship with Jesus. Obviously, joyful service flows out of that relationship. We could talk about encouraging women to offer joyful service in their homes, in their communities, at their jobs. We could examine misconceptions about God which rob the believing woman of the joy in service. Often those misconceptions can be traced back to transposing the characteristics of one's earthly father on our heavenly Father. I think an especially helpful study would explore the impact of the training program for our WELS pastorate on the women in our synod. Haven't you ever wondered how the WELS "system" has shaped our view of women? After all, going through a college and seminary (and perhaps also a prep school) which was peopled almost without exception by males, was taught by males, was administered by males has to have molded us in some way. Encouraging our believing sisters to joyful service really deserves a book. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), that book awaits another time ... and another author. I have chosen to narrow the scope of this paper to encouraging joyful service within our women's organizations. I will touch on other aspects of kingdom service, but the bulk of my comments deal with ministry through groups.

1. The role of a distinctive purpose

If I were to offer you a loaded hand-gun and ask, "Would you hit the target for me?" what would you say? Let me rephrase that. What would you say after you asked me what in the world I was doing with a loaded hand-gun in a place like this? I've just handed you a hand-gun, asked you to lob a couple of rounds into the target, and you would ask...? I suspect you'd want to know where the target is.

Without knowing where the target is, the odds that you'll hit the bull's eye are astoundingly slim. Yet, in the Church we can often find ourselves in situations where the target has not been defined and/or where everyone has chosen his own target. One segment of the congregation may believe that the church exists to promote and enhance the ministry of the elementary school. Still another insists that "the youth are our future" and that's where the bulk of resources must flow. Still another group believes that outreach is the essential ingredient to a God-pleasing ministry.

Pastor, when there's so many voices trying to direct your shots, how do you hit the target? Which target do you shoot at? Where is the target? Perhaps you agree: by far the greatest amount of frustration I feel as a pastor has to do with being caught between congregational groups with conflicting targets.

When all organization fails to understand and then act on its particular purpose (target) members (not to mention pastors) tend to get shot as factions squabble about where to aim. When the target is not defined and agreed upon in a church, the loudest voices often set the agenda and program direction can change with each voters' meeting. Or relatively insignificant programs can become a church's reason for existing. (Did you hear about the Church of God Grill in Atlanta? According to Charles Paul Conn, *Making It Happen*, this church started selling chicken dinners to cover its expenses and became so successful that somewhere along the line it stopped being a church and became a restaurant.) When a church or church group doesn't understand its mission, decisions tend to be made by default, that is, reactively (responding to an unfortunate problem) rather than proactively (recognizing the potential for a problem and heading it off).

Leadership by deliberate decision, a decision based on a well-researched and communicated purpose, keeps an organization tracking on a relatively straight line toward an agreed upon goal. There are few surprises when new programs are initiated because people understand how those programs keep the organization marching toward its purpose. The decisions are more easily arrived at because everyone comes to the decision-making table with the same agenda and mindset.

The lack of a distinctive purpose in a women's group is courting poor organizational health and wooing a lack of service. As you think about the target your ladies organizations are attempting to hit, remember that a distinctive purpose will have several important characteristics.

a) A distinctive purpose will be well defined.

Ultimately, the target for every aspect of the Lord's Church is the Great Commission. But making disciples of all nations is much too broad a mission for a ladies group to assume. A women's group needs to ask how the Spirit would use it to carry out the Great Commission in view of ministry being done by the entire Christian Church, its synod, and its congregation. For example, chances are none of our women's groups will tackle the Great Commission by sending out its own missionary to fabled "Darkest Africa." But our groups may ask Professor Valleskey to provide members with training in "God's Great Exchange" so evangelism will more easily happen across our backyard fences.

Under the Great Commission women's organizations serve varying purposes in a congregation. Conforming its overall purpose to its congregation's purpose and mission statement, but under that broad purpose, a ladies group may meet primarily

- *for fellowship (young mothers dying for adult contact),
- *for spiritual enrichment (a small group Bible study),
- *for supporting the worship ministry (an altar guild),
- *for mentoring ("I used to struggle with that. Here's what the Lord taught me."), and
- *for outreach (LWMS).

The list could continue.

A healthy ladies' group will develop an easily recognized target, that is, a clear, written statement of purpose which reflects its particular role in its congregation. That statement will take into consideration the number, age, and type of women it is able to attract, the resources at its disposal, and the spiritual levels of its members. Then members will know exactly what their group is attempting to accomplish and how they fit in. Do your ladies' organizations have a written statement of purpose? Is it understood well enough that your ladies can explain what that purpose is?

b) A distinctive purpose will meet personal needs in the group.

If women are staying away from your congregation's ladies' group, that's not necessarily an indication they don't agree with its purpose statement. But it probably means that those women perceive the group as failing to meet their personal needs. They don't understand how that group's purpose will help them enhance their walk with the Lord as Christian wife mother, employee, etc.

To be attractive to the women of its congregation, a ladies' group has two options. Either it will guide women who aren't participating to see how the group will help them meet their needs or it will help the non-participants to see how the group's purpose is more important than their perceived needs.

Here's an example. Our synod has shown embarrassingly low formal Bible study statistics for years. Granted, over the last decade and a half there has been a rise in Bible study attendance (from 7% to 12%). But that still leaves nearly 90% of the WELS who are at least somewhat spiritually anorexic, Christians who sit at the feast of "God's Word in its truth and purity" and don't eat. However, I'd guess we'd find very few WELS people who would say that group Bible study is not a good thing. Nonetheless, our people still are not clamoring to get into Bible study. The reason? It doesn't meet their personal needs right now. Their priorities for time use are focused elsewhere.

Similarly, our WELS women are staying away from ladies' groups because those groups are not meeting their personal needs. Like it or not, meeting personal needs is a high priority for baby boomers (born in the twenty years after 1945) and baby busters (born since 1965). In a few lines we'll talk about frenetic schedules. Because of schedule demands women are asking about every area of their lives, "How important is this to me?" Today's women's groups need to be able to show why their purpose should rate high on their sisters' priority list.

c) A distinctive purpose will provide a meaningful task

When I was growing up, my perception of a ladies group was that it was the group in charge of cleaning the church and cooking fellowship meals. That sounds shockingly sexist in 1992, but I wonder if it wasn't accurate. Worse, I wonder if key church leaders (men and women) continue to look at ladies groups as functioning for those reasons. I know I've heard some of the men in my congregation grouse, "Why doesn't the Mary/Martha Guild cook more?"

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that cooking fellowship meals and cleaning church facilities is inappropriate Christian service. It's not, by any definition of Christian service. But we need to recognize that today's woman is different than the women of a generation ago.

Years back a ladies group could have said to its members, "Mission Festival's coming. We're going to have a big meal for the congregation. Ethel will make her key lime pies; Mildred will be in charge of potato salad. The rest of us will bring whatever we do best. It will be fun getting all that together. But before we do that we need to clean the church basement... and we'll get the rest of the church while we're at it. So let's all get together Thursday. We'll catch up on news and get the place spic and span. You all come." And almost all the ladies turned out.

But today there are barriers to that happening. Most women are working outside the home either part-time or full-time. That probably means they are feeling significant pressure at home to keep up with cooking, cleaning, and washing, not to mention being a mother and wife. These ladies don't want to cook and clean for someone else, not even for their church. After eight hours working outside the home, they are not looking forward to putting a meal on the table at home, tackling those piles of wash, tutoring homework, or digging in to anything else that looks like work. They are tired. I can't blame them. Now when the ladies group says, "Ladies, come on over to church! We're going to clean the place and prepare a big meal. You all come!" today's woman says, "You're being unfair to expect that of me. There's no way I can do that, too."

A ladies group with an appropriate distinctive purpose will find contemporarily meaningful ways to involve women. It will seek service opportunities that provide a sense of importance not only in regard to the kingdom but also in regard to themselves. That's why cooking and cleaning worked decades ago. In the days when few women worked outside of the home, meal preparation and keeping an immaculate house gave many women a sense of importance. That was their job. And cooking and cleaning at church added to that sense of importance.

For a lot of our women today cleaning and cooking are not as important as they were a generation ago. I am not saying whether that is good or bad. That's just the way it is. Women have taken or have been forced into other roles. There are other tasks that have become higher priorities. The ladies organization that successfully encourages its members to serve will tap into those new priorities.

When I was first married, Sharon and I regularly visited with married seminary classmates who had children. We were struck by how messy their homes were. Sharon and I swore we would never let our home get that messy no matter how many kids we had. But let me tell you: having three pre-schoolers shatters those dreams. And it doesn't get much better when those pre-schoolers are teenagers.

How naïve we were "B.C.," before children. I wonder if our expectations for ladies groups are like that. I wonder if our expectations are unrealistic about women's ministries today. Could it be that we expect our ladies to serve in ways in which our society no longer allows them comfortably to serve? Could that lack of a meaningful task be keeping women away from serving in our ladies groups?

d) A distinctive purpose will unify a group.

To date, one of the fondest chapters in my ministry is my association with our metro-Milwaukee WELS Lutherans for Life chapter. During my seven years as president of the chapter, I was surrounded by people who clearly understood the purpose of the organization and were dedicated to seeing the group succeed. The

enthusiasm at the volunteers helped inspire me to work as hard as I could for the defense at the pre-born. Because I knew that hundreds of other WELS believers were behind me, urging and encouraging me, my leadership role became even more of a joy. I trust that my enthusiasm, my urging and encouraging helped make involvement in our chapter a joy for many others.

In any organization when Christians are fully united behind a purpose, achieving that purpose takes on an alluring attractiveness. When believing women in a ladies group know what it is the Lord has called them to accomplish in his kingdom, when they see how that purpose helps them meet their personal goals, when they find fulfillment in serving, a unity develops that not only keeps people involved, but serves as a magnet to draw others in.

Leading an organization is like piloting a sailing ship. When that ship leaves port, the captain knows where he wants to end up and has plotted a course which will get him there as directly as possible. But once he is out to sea and weathers a storm or two, battles contrary currents and whimsical winds, he'll find he's off course. What does he do? He makes a mid-course adjustment and heads again for his goal.

Organizations, like sailing ships, need constant course adjustment. Leaders must ask continually, how are we doing? Where were we when we started; where are we now; and where do we need to go? What adjustments do we need to make? Without evaluation, a group can never realize it has gotten off course. Off-course ships turn where they're shouldn't turn. Off-course organization end up going places they never intended to go and steering the group in directions which only get the organization more lost because they're not where they think they are.

I suggested at the start of this paper that every ladies' group should disband each year. That would be a great start. Encourage your women's organization to stop whatever it's doing and to take a look at why it exists. Read over the group's constitution. What's its stated purpose? How is that purpose being carried out? Judging from the way the group allocates funds and spends its time, has it assumed another purpose? Is it really a fellowship group rather than a Bible study group? Then either the purpose statement needs to change or the group's direction needs to be brought into line with the purpose statement.

Once the group has affirmed its purpose for existence, it needs to look at the way it approaches its purpose. Some time ago my congregation adopted a mission statement that said its purpose is "to disciple and edify all members in order to share the saving gospel of Jesus Christ with the world..." But when we took a look at our budget, we discovered that about three-quarters of our financial resources and seven-eighths of our called workers were dedicated to running our grade school with 120 students in it. Obviously, our operating purpose and our stated purpose did not line up. Does your ladies' group's operating purpose line up with its stated purpose?

2. The challenge of pluralism

Church consultant Lyle Schaller writes in *Assimilating New Members*,

American society is becoming increasingly varied and diverse. This can be seen in the variety of dress, of lifestyle, of vocations, and of housing. This new pluralism can be seen in the move back toward a multilingual society. The growth of pluralism can also be seen in another fundamental change. For generations the dominant pattern was to train people to fit into existing structures, institutions, organizations, traditions, schedules and customs of society. For the past three decades this theme has gradually been reversed to change the existing structures, institutions, organizations, traditions, schedules, and customs of society to accommodate people.

For a women's group to attract Christian women, who will in turn provide joyful service through that group, it must take into account the challenge of pluralism in our culture.

a) Roles open to females

Do you watch many reruns of the television programs from the 50s and 60s? Think about some of those families; the Andersons from *Father Knows Best*, the Cleavers from *Leave it to Beaver*, the Nelsons from *Ozzie and Harriette*. The women were content homemakers, high school graduates with no additional aspirations, clearly dependent on their husbands, and willing to bow to his "greater" wisdom. The message: this is what a real American woman is supposed to be like.

But in this last decade of the twentieth century women are significantly different. The June Cleavers of today may be high school graduates, but they may have a college degree, even a PhD. They may also have dropped out of school at 17. They may have started a career after graduation and are now ready to get married and have kids. They may have children in their teens or they may have pre-schoolers. Or they may be done giving birth to more children. They may work at McDonalds or run a bank. They may never have married; they may have been married for a decade and a half; they may have divorced three or more husbands.

Women today aspire to other roles than that of June Cleaver. They refuse to be looked into a specific role (e.g., nurse, secretary). Granted, this has produced some theological tension as we Christians have been forced to re-examine God's will about the roles of men and women. Nonetheless, in many ways the opportunities which are available to women today are a blessing. Christian women now live in a culture which will permit them to explore more fully who it is that God has made them and a culture that frees them to become the kind of tool in the kingdom God has designed them to be.

b) Employment among females

It's obvious to us all that women in the workplace have grown dramatically in number and influence. Although they are somewhat out of date, consider these statistics. From 1947 until 1977 the number of women in the work force increased by 224%. In 1948, 25% of all mothers with children between ages six and seventeen worked outside home. In 1977 that number had reached 51.2%. Long gone are the days of the typical family consisting of a husband and wife living together with school age children at home and the mother not working outside home. In 1977, only 7% of American families fit that description.

Yet how many of our ladies groups (if not congregations) haven't adjusted their program and schedule to accommodate working mothers? Is it possible that even our ladies groups are designing their ministry for 7% of the families in their congregation?

c) Sensitivity to sexual equality

Sexual equality is much more a factor in the work force, our government, and the Church than it has ever been. A quarter century ago the topic of God's design for the roles of men and women would not have warranted a two-day pastors' conference. Nor would its discussion have generated the light - and *heat* - that it does today.

In spite of the turmoil that we face as a synod regarding our understanding of the relationships God desires between men and women, much good has surfaced. It's forced us to take a closer look at the Scriptures and sort through how much of our theology in this area has to do with cultural comfort and how much is solidly based on the Truth of the Spirit. It has also helped us to recognize that there are additional ways women can serve in the kingdom than they were generally allowed in earlier generations.

Professor John Brug, in his paper *Application of the Scriptural Principles concerning the Service of Women in the Church*, suggests that "women can certainly function as evangelists, teachers, counselors, and visitors of the sick if their service in these areas is in harmony with the scriptural principles of headship and submission... The key questions are "Is she being asked to serve in a way which is in harmony with scriptural

principle?" and "Are we giving a clear testimony concerning our adherence to the scriptural principles?" (p.11-12).

For example, as a synod and district we make fuller use of women on some committees and in some organizations than we have in the past. In many of our congregations, women now regularly serve on non-policy-making groups. In our church we have carefully defined committees as non-leadership groups which assist boards (the leadership group) in their varied ministries. We have had female representation on our self-study committee and currently on our strategic planning committee.

But when women are included more directly in the ministry of a congregation, another barrier to effective ladies groups is erected. Now church committees compete for women's time and talents. In the past, if a woman was going to impact her church she had one choice: the women's group. Now she can plug into her church in a variety of ways. A number of the women in my congregation have to decide, "Will I contribute to the Mary/Martha Guild or will I contribute to the greeters' committee-." I only have so many hours; I need to make a choice."

The rise of pluralism says to us that the days of a one-size-fits-all women's group won't work any more. Women and men today require variety and choice. We need to structure our programs in ways which will recognize the wealth of interests and abilities God has placed into his church and which will make full use of those gifts.

3. The pressure to exclude

Whom does your ladies group exclude? Seriously. Your ladies group, along with your worship services, elementary school, Pioneer program and every other activity in your church excludes people. Whom does your ladies group exclude?

You might argue, "We don't exclude anyone from our groups." But, brother, there is always pressure to exclude people from any group, church group or not. It usually happens without the conscious decision of the group. But it happens - for a number of reasons.

It happens because current members of a group feel comfortable with that group just the way it is. To illustrate let's talk about this group, our pastor's conference. Our level of comfort is determined by the degree to which we get our needs met here. We're comfortable because we're among like-minded individuals. We're comfortable because we share common beliefs, goals and callings. We recognize that pastors' conference is a way to be effective in maintaining our beliefs, achieving our goals and carrying out our callings. We're comfortable because we've earned the right to exert some leadership and consequently can control our environment within this group. On the other hand, one of the reasons not every one of our brothers is here today is because their comfort level with this conference slipped below their threshold of acceptability.

When someone new comes into our group, that pastor begins exploring how comfortable he feels here. He asks, "Are the group members similar to me? Do they think like me? Do they have the same goals and see life as I see it?" At some point, if his comfort levels encourage him to stick around, he will probably attempt to change the group to increase his level of comfort. If the group responds positively, he tends to stay; if not, he tends to leave.

Researchers who study how groups work describe two types of members: pioneers (people who have been with the group a long time, folks who have "paid their dues") and homesteaders (members who have moved into the group more recently). The pioneers tend to control the group and to resist change because "Things are fine just the way they are." Homesteaders have yet to attain an acceptable level of comfort so they try to adjust the things that make them feel ill at ease. That's a situation ready-made for conflict, at least on some level. Usually, it's the homesteaders who either capitulate or leave. But when an existing group takes in a large number of homesteaders, it can be the pioneers who get disgruntled.

Ladies groups can dearly want to grow in size. But a pioneer mentality will exclude everyone who won't buy into "the way we've always done it" and consequently limit growth dramatically. These groups sincerely desire growth, but on their terms. Unfortunately, there will be few takers if that's the case.

Groups also exclude new members with the time they meet. Fairview's Mary/Martha Guild meets on the third Monday of the month at 7:00 p.m. My Mary/Martha Guild probably will not appeal to mothers with young children since pre-schoolers go down for bed about that time. Second shift workers are also excluded.

Potential group members are excluded by the reception a guest receives. If the ladies are used to having their own place at the meeting table and a potential member happens to sit in someone else's place, the results could be disastrous. Even a falsely loving comment like, "That's my place, but I'll let you sit there tonight," produces enough discomfort to discourage new faces from becoming regular faces.

New members tend to be excluded because they upset the group's equilibrium. Relationships, roles, traditions can feel to be up for grabs when new members join an organization. And, in fact, they *are* up for grabs. Think of your families and the transitions they went through when children were added. The relationship between my wife and me is dramatically different today because the Lord placed my oldest daughter into our family. My relationship with my wife and my oldest daughter is dramatically different today because he gave me a second daughter. And all those relationships are dramatically different than what they would have been because he introduced a third daughter into the equation. This kind of upheaval make assimilating members into a group challenging and explain why some groups never grow.

According to *A Shepherd's Guide for Keeping and Caring*, groups tend to be closed to additional members in as little as 18 months. It takes conscious and prayerful effort for a group to stay open to new members. One way to avoid exclusion, then, is to constantly create new groups.

An anticipated objection to that solution is, if we create new groups, the old groups will die - or at least there won't be enough members for any one group. Fortunately, that is usually not the case. Here's what happened at Fairview.

About six years ago one of Fairview's women's groups died - literally. The last member of the Ladies Aid who could drive went home to heaven and the group folded. The Mary/Martha Guild tried to take up the slack by recruiting new members so the one group could do the work of the two. When I arrived at Fairview about a year after that the ladies in the Mary/Martha Guild were quite disappointed with the rest of the women in the congregation. Nobody seemed interested in the Guild. They had invited ladies with bulletin ads, with eyeball-to-eyeball encouragements, with personal notes. There were few results.

Today, however, we have five ladies' groups with close to five times the number of women involved. Three of those additional ladies' groups have been founded mainly for spiritual growth and personal support. Two meet during the day. One meets weekly in the evening on a night different than the Guild. The remaining group meets for fellowship and service around a shared interest: quilting. The additional groups pulled people "out of the woodwork" because they meet different needs and serve different purposes. In addition, the Mary/Martha Guild has been challenged to look at its purpose, has sharpened its focus (dropping some of the peripheral services it had offered) and has begun to attract new faces.

To involve more women in women's groups it is helpful to create new groups. It is also helpful to allow some groups to die. Groups, like people, have life cycles. There can come a point in a group's existence when it no longer serves any purpose but to perpetuate itself.

I'm acquainted with a congregation that has three women's organizations. Two of the three groups have no one under 70 and have no more than five people attending the meetings. Both groups are interested in gaining new members, but primarily to keep their groups alive, not to serve in the kingdom. In terms of pastoral and congregational effort, the best interest of the kingdom would dictate declaring a "no-code" for these failing groups and allowing them to pass on without any extraordinary effort to revive them. The kingdom would benefit more by starting a new women's group.

3. An emphasis on the relational

Groups which are task-oriented rather than people-oriented tend not to attract new members. The impetus to begin a new group is always found in a need. That's what gives new groups their power. By and large, new groups clearly define a cause (target) and are able to attract adherents because of their sharp focus. Over time, however, causes can lose their value and the groups that supported them become outdated. When that happens the group's emphasis shifts from helping people to keeping itself alive, from the relational to the functional, from ministry to maintenance.

When I served as the director of development at WLC, I had a consultant who helped me find my way into the job. At one point he instructed me to write a newsletter. I think I wrote articles on the number of books in the library, on the additional rooms which were being added in the dormitory, on how much money our donors had given, and on the college's new professors. I remember feeling good about articles. But my consultant read them and said, "I'm sorry, Jim, but this isn't what we're looking for. People don't care how many dormitory rooms you have. They do care how those dormitory rooms will help students prepare for their careers. They're not going to be as impressed with the numbers of books WLC has in its library as they will be with how those books train WE LS students for career and kingdom."

Of course, he was right. Organizations within the Lord's Church need to focus on people, not programs. They need to show how their ministry impacts souls, how it nurtures believers in the faith and nudges unbelievers toward the faith. For ladies' groups to attract women for joyful service, they must emphasize what they are doing for people.

I referred to a congregation above that has three ladies' groups, two of which should be allowed to die. Each of those groups is organized for service. And each is distressed about the number of women they attract. But part of the reason they find it hard to attract new members is the way they present themselves to the congregation. In January at the annual meeting, when each of the congregation's groups report on their ministries, the ladies groups emphasize how much money they earned for the church. That's it. They don't talk about the shut-ins they visited, the missionaries they prayed for, the Christmas party they hosted for disabled children. They talk about the money they raised. They placard the functional rather than the relational.

For an organization to be attractive to new members and effective in carrying out its mission, its focus must be on souls, not goals. It needs to be concerned with building relationships between people and their God, and people and each other, not the mechanism (the program) for doing ministry. It needs to understand that the important part of its work is not money, but how that money is used - not on things it has done, but on how the things it has done have helped people.

Healthy ministry within the body of Christ means helping body parts discover who they are and what their function is. Paul told the Ephesians that Jesus had given them "pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature" (4:11-13). Our women's organizations, too, must be in the business of nurturing the discipleship commitment of the saints.

The "nurture" part of making disciples is based on contact with the means of grace. Christian women's organizations cannot be healthy without commitment to grow in the Word. But there's "growth" and there's growth. Solid spiritual growth must go beyond intellectual exercises. Our ladies need to learn not only that Gideon defeated the Midianites with 300 men but what that means for them as they battle overwhelming odds in their walk with Christ. Contact with the Word needs to be hands-on. Our sisters in the Lord need to open their Bibles together, talk about what they learned there, share their insights, and lovingly assist each other in applying the truths to their lives.

For example, Stu or I prepare a topic each month for our Mary/Martha Guild. I enjoy meeting with the ladies. It provides a valuable shepherding contact. But I have also suggested to the Guild that it doesn't need a pastor to present an opening spiritual topic. There would be advantages, at least on occasion, if the members would prepare and present their own material.

Deepened discipleship also takes place as sisters in the Lord realize they can depend on each other for love, acceptance, and support no matter what they are going through. Isn't that what the communion of saints is all about? Deepened discipleship means the women in a ladies group will love each other enough to pay attention to the frequency of each other's worship and communion. If a deficiency appears, they will approach their sister to encourage her. They will spend time together in open prayer. They will listen to each other. They will urge each other to stay in the Word and be in the Word with each other.

But to get to the point where our service builds up the body of Christ and we become mature, relationships cannot stay on a "Hi, how are you" level. The saints must get to know each other, to learn what the deep down hurts and concerns are. They must be open with each other enough so they can share things like, "Tell me about your son, Joey. You said he was sick and you had to take him to the doctor. How's he doing? Is there anything I can do? How are you feeling? What do you think the Lord is doing with Joey's situation? I thought about you this morning when I was reading in Romans. Here's what struck me... Do you want to pray about Joey?"

One more thought about emphasizing the "relational" in a women's organization. Discipling will not happen effectively in a women's group unless leaders are elected who fit the criteria the Spirit offers for leadership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The Lord of the Church has been rather exacting in his description of what a leader in his church should be like. 1 Timothy and Titus offer not so much a job description for a leader as a character description. I find it quite revealing that the Lord doesn't insist that kingdom leaders need to be intelligent, nor good at what he/she does in the workplace, nor impressive at mathematics or in handling money. Rather he insists that congregations find leaders who, above all, are spiritual; leaders who are in love with Jesus and are living out that love. The Savior would abide no "warm body" syndrome where a congregation's nomination committee puts anyone's name on the ballot just to have a full slate of candidates. The rationale is plain. A congregation usually will not progress in faith beyond the spiritual levels of its leadership.

5. Frenetic schedules

Friday, 7 a.m.: Dylan wakes up. I give him a bottle, change him and move the crib into the living room so he can watch *Sesame Street*. That's the opening line to one of a series of article entitled "M is for the multiple roles a mother plays" which appeared in the January 5, 1992 issue of *Wisconsin Magazine*. This article was written by a single mother about her exhausting, high pressure schedule. In addition to caring for her infant son and working full-time at a drugstore, she teaches voice and piano, and serves as cantor at her church.

We've recognized for some time the heavy scheduling demands single parents endure. They are the chief cook and bottle washers, the ones responsible for bringing in the paycheck, buying the groceries, doing the wash, keeping the house, fixing the broken bicycles and replacing the blown light bulbs. To the kids they serve as both mom and dad, as chauffeur, coach, friend, and disciplinarian. At least in two parent families many of those duties are shared.

But two-parent family schedules can get hectic, too. In fact, as the general pace of life picks up in business and society, family schedules also get sucked into the race. I've found that true in my family, especially as my children have gotten older. My three girls attend two schools. My wife works full-time during the school year and I manage to fill my day (and night) with projects. On any given night, one or more of my daughters may be home late after school because of play practice, forensics, an Inspiration rehearsal, or cheerleading. We find the supper hour becomes a quarter hour or less because I've got an early meeting at church or there's choir practice or a basketball game. Somewhere in there comes several hours for grocery or clothes shopping, homework, housecleaning and washing. None of my kids drive yet, so there can be three places to taxi them off to or pick them up from. There are a many times when it's nice - if not necessary - to say: "We're not going to do anything tonight." Frankly, if that happens on a Mary/Martha Guild night, I can't blame my wife for opting out of going.

The frenetic pace of life we have become accustomed to needs to be factored in when we schedule meeting times, not to mention how often we meet and what we do at those meetings. George Barna (*The Frog in the Kettle*) believes that, more and more, society will define success not in terms of money, but in terms of autonomy over one's time. He advises: "We also need to be extremely sensitive to the value of the time we are asking people to surrender. It is imperative that any programs or projects or services we engage in optimize the time of people - whether they are observers or participants. Because adults will guard their time so jealously, ministries that do not optimize that resource will lose people's interest and future involvement" (page 47).

Our ladies today must be convinced that there will be something worthwhile at their gatherings. They need assurance that they won't just sit for an hour at a meeting that doesn't get anywhere. Leaders must be on top of the agenda, moving it along, allowing no one to stand up and talk on and on. Women need to know they are accomplishing something worthwhile with their time investment – in fact, at least as worthwhile as the things they gave up to come to the meeting.

Conclusion

"Why aren't more of our women attending our meetings? This group is for them. We've gone to all this trouble preparing a nice luncheon and nobody comes. What's wrong with women today?"

Blaming the women who don't come to women's group only turns the women who do come into Negative Nellies and does nothing to improve a group's attractiveness. As long as we hide behind the excuse that others are to blame for our group's failure to attract new members, we won't look at ourselves for ways to improve.

The fact is that we can't make other people do anything. The wife of an alcoholic can't make him stop drinking. The parents of a lazy child can't make her an achiever. But the wife of an alcoholic can change herself so she doesn't feed into the system that enables her husband's drinking. The parents of a sluggard offspring can change themselves so their child will be robbed of reasons to be lazy. A women's group cannot change the rest of the ladies of the congregation so they will join the group. But the current group members can change themselves. They can look at what they are doing or not doing which gets in the way of others becoming part of them.

Women's groups need to accept responsibility for the fact that their target audience is not finding them attractive. It's only then that the things that can be improved will be.

So go back to your congregations and close down your ladies' groups. Blame it on me, if that will help you. But encourage your women's organizations to look at themselves, to evaluate their ministries, to improve whatever role it is the Lord has given them in his kingdom.

Women's groups are extremely important parts of the ministry the Lord of the Church has called us to. They are positioned to tap into some of the spectacular talents God has placed in each of the women of our congregations. That will take some thought, prayer and listening to the Spirit's directing. It will take work. But doing the best job possible carrying out the Great Commission is worth it. Especially since the One who commissioned us loves us with a love we can't measure.

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