

What Pastor's Neglect in Women's Ministry

The Father is kind to me. Because of His rich love and unending grace, I'm not only a Christian but also a pastor. And for reasons that cannot be explained apart from my Savior's sheer grace, I count a great company of other pastors as friends and colleagues.

The pastorate is a fraternity, a brotherhood. When we are together, we do what brothers do. We discuss (or argue about) what pastors discuss (or argue about): preaching, theology, the churches we shepherd and sports. We laugh together, counsel one another, plot and scheme for the advance of the gospel. In some ways these confabs become a kind of 360-degree job review. We hit the major bullets on our job descriptions and reflect together on our progress and struggles.

In nearly all the meetings I've had with my fellow pastors, we come to those areas where we feel ill-equipped, ineffective and perhaps even discouraged. One man mourns his prayer life. Another feels hopeless about evangelism. Still another recounts leadership challenges. Someone wants to improve their preaching. We all share our wisdom, our common struggles and encouragements.

But in all of this talk over the years, I've come to believe that the most neglected aspect of a pastor's job description is the command for pastors to disciple older women in their congregations. It's a massive omission since in nearly every church women make up *at least* half the membership and in many cases much more. And when you consider how many ministries and committees depend upon the genius, generosity and sweat of our sisters, it's almost criminal that most any pastor you meet has no plan for discipling the women of his church apart from outsourcing to a women's ministry staff person or committee.

Consider Paul's instruction to Titus.

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled (Titus 2:1-5, ESV).

Three things stand out to me in these verses. First, an essential part of the pastor's teaching ministry is instructing people in how to live out the faith—"what accords with sound doctrine." With all our emphasis on teaching and preaching we can sometimes slip into emphasizing doctrine alone, forgetting "what accords" with it. Christian doctrine is meant to inform Christian living.

Second, every pastor has a responsibility for teaching Christian doctrine and living to the various demographic groups in the body of Christ. This includes older women (v. 3). Quick: How many pastors have you known or can you name who have an active intentional teaching ministry to the older ladies in his church besides his general pulpit ministry? The pulpit ministry counts. But I suspect Paul has something else in mind in these verses because the emphasis on Christian living is so robust it's difficult to imagine teaching all these things to all these groups via one outlet (the pulpit). But I cannot think of one pastor who regularly meets with the older women of his church, reads with them, talks with them, or instructs them in reverent behavior, bridled speech, sobriety or teaching others. In fact, to our shame, sometimes the most ill-equipped persons in the church are the older women who feel inadequate to carry out their vital ministry to

younger women.

Third, the pastor's ministry to older women is no less a gospel ministry than his prayer, evangelism or regular preaching. In fact, the older women's ministry to younger women—which the pastor should equip them to carry out—protects the gospel. This must be done so “that the word of God may not be reviled” (v. 5).

I fear that far too many of us pastors don't imagine much gospel fruit when we look at the older women in our congregations and imagine spending time with them. We're much too drawn to the younger men who show promise. We're much too attracted to career professionals who seem to be doing something in the world.

We find it easier and more enjoyable to be with the youth group than to have tea with the senior ladies. We pour ourselves into the men of our congregation with hope of fruit while neglecting the older women who would not only bear fruit in their personal lives but in all the homes of our church as they train younger women in sound doctrine and sound living.

The negative effects of neglecting older women show up in our ministries in various ways. In the unending march of marriage counseling sessions with couples who haven't learned the lessons of Titus 2. In the sneaking suspicion that we favor men rather than women. In the continuing concern that there's no place for women in the church. In the feeling of oppression or marginalization many serious and saintly women express. In time, money and energy invested in women's ministries that sometimes veer away from the church's core mission. In the isolation, discouragement and hopelessness that some women experience. In the incalculable loss of wisdom when older saints aren't equipped and organized to share with others. I could go on, but you see the point. A great treasure is lost and much pain multiplied when we pastors neglect this aspect of our job description.

So what to do?

First, repent privately and publicly if you think you've neglected the older women in your church. Turning again to God for help and turning to the saints just might open up a fruitful dialogue and meaningful relationships.

Second, do a lot of listening. If meeting with the women of the church hasn't been a part of your ministry, or if that listening has largely been one-on-one personal conversation rather than a more systemic discussion of ministry to women in the church, then don't assume you know what they think or how they feel. Listen. Ask lots of questions and sit back patiently. Having repented, hopefully we can learn from our sisters without feeling attacked, criticized or rejected. Listen, learn and list out the themes you hear.

Third, identify some older women in the congregation who would be willing to study with you and your wife or perhaps you and a couple of other elders. You can identify them simply by asking who's interested or by specific invitation. Form a small group to read a book like *Spiritual Mothering* or *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*. Start slow and start small. If this hasn't been a part of your church's ministry then it's likely intimidating for some women. Build their confidence with encouragement and patience. Help them see God's great vision for them in places like Titus 2. Help them understand that their ministry is as vital to the gospel and to the lives of fellow members as your own.

Fourth, pair the older ladies up with younger ladies. There are endless ways of doing this. Perhaps it's a one-on-one relationship or maybe starting new small groups. Or maybe there are specific aspects of the faith (say, living faithfully with an unbelieving spouse) with which one or two older members have experience and would love to help others. Help those ladies host special fellowships or perhaps a

tailored small group for a specific period of time. Listen to the ladies as they generate ideas for serving and help them get involved with the younger women of the church.

Fifth, have the entire church pray for these ladies as they study and prepare. While serving at First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman, our women's ministry director, Meg Bodden, suggested we take a few minutes in a Sunday morning to pray for the older women who were becoming our women's disciple-making team. It was a wonderful celebration as 20 or so older women came up front, a little sheepish and shy, and bowed their heads as pastor and congregation committed them to the Lord. Many of these women have been and will continue to serve quietly in the background. But it's good for us to give greater honor to the parts of the body that lack it (1 Cor. 12:23).

The most significant yet unused disciple-making resource we have in our churches is the older, faithful women among us. It's to our shame if as pastors we don't have a strategy for investing in them and seeing them invest in others. But it will be for our joy and for the church's strength if we do.

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