

HELP[H]ER

A Churchwide Response for Women in Crisis

BERNIE LAWRENCE
ANN MAREE GOUDZWAARD



Presbyterian Church in America

DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

1700 North Brown Road | Suite 102 | Lawrenceville, Georgia 30043
www.pcabookstore.com | 1.800.283.1357

HELPER

verb

help • [h]er

Definition of *helper*

: to give assistance or support

... that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

Romans 16:1-2

SHEPHERDESS

verb

shep • [her] • dess | \ ' -she-pər-dəs \

Definition of *shepherdess*

: a woman who tends sheep

Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess.

Genesis 29:9

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INTRODUCTION

It seems that we can't be Christians for long without experiencing some measure of discomfort and distress—amen? In fact, sometimes suffering is the very tool God uses to get our attention in the first place. At other times He uses it to refine us—just as the silversmith uses the fire of the furnace to strip away impurities and reveal the beauty of the precious metal (Mal. 3:3). Have you ever been in the midst of God's refining process and cried, "When is enough?" The answer is when God can look into what He has made and see His own image reflected back. And what can be true of individual Christians can be true of His Church.

In God's providence, my church, Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, grew rapidly. If you are a parent, perhaps you will know something of the rapid growth of a child outpacing his or her ability to handle the difficulties and disappointments of life. That happens to

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churches also. Churches, like the people who worship in them, exist in a fallen world. For that reason, churches that have been around for any length of time have experienced a season (or seasons) of distress during which people and ministries suffer. Like many other churches, both large and small, Christ Covenant has experienced such seasons.

In September 1999, our senior pastor of sixteen years accepted a call to another church and Christ Covenant entered into a difficult chapter. During this season of distress, the leadership lost the trust of the congregation, and, at times, it looked as though the church would suffer shipwreck. Not unlike the apostle Paul's experience in the book of Acts, much of value was thrown overboard as we donned our lifejackets and strove to keep our heads above water—always seeking ways to care well for our people. In the aftermath, like many survivors of trauma, our church was on spiritual life support. We had to discontinue doing many good things as we focused our resources toward recovery. While our new senior pastor worked with the session to stabilize the church, we had lost ground in many significant ministries. Unfortunately, our effort to craft enhanced avenues for ministry by and to women was among the casualties.

But God was at work, honing and refining His church. In His perfect timing and with His blessing, our new senior pastor gently but firmly led us, and we gradually recovered trust in our leaders. With a collective exhale, we began to think beyond our life-preservers. As we regained our health and stamina, we saw many women and marriages in distress. And in God's refining goodness, He used what we had learned through our struggle to help them. This was the birth of a meaningful ministry that partnered our ordained male leadership with seasoned, godly lay women (shepherdesses) to minister to women in crisis. This ministry is one that I am delighted to introduce to you; however, before I recount

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the structure and workings of the Shepherdess Ministry, I want to be clear on this important point: large churches are not the only ones with women in crises, nor are they the only churches who can effectively minister to those women. The ministry will necessarily look different in churches that are smaller or that do not have a director of women's ministry, but it will not be less vibrant and effective.

In our case, we formed a women's ministry leadership team made up of godly women who were invited to serve on corresponding teams of elders, deacons, and staff as liaisons. The two-way task of each liaison was to promote the welfare, vision, and values of the session while also respectfully representing the interests and perspectives of women to those men in leadership. I was invited to serve as the liaison to the shepherding and discipleship leadership team and began to meet monthly with that group of godly men as they discussed cases they were handling. I was prayed for in those meetings, sometimes invited to pray, and my input was sought on matters that pertained to the women in the shepherding cases of elders or the ministry of deacons to women in need.

As an outcome of the new structure, the pastor who gave leadership to these men invited our director of women's ministry, another seasoned woman from the congregation, and me to craft and submit a plan for a ministry to women in crisis. Under the umbrella of authority provided by the ordained leadership, it was to be designed to partner experienced, godly lay women with elders and deacons to come alongside women in distress—particularly in situations in which the absence of a woman proved awkward (for the elders as well as the women seeking help) or that could benefit from a woman's perspective.

The women's ministry leadership team rolled up their sleeves and got to work. We divided and vetted the church

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membership role for women of experience with a reputation for wisdom and godliness. After a final vetting by the senior associate pastor of shepherding and discipleship and the director of women's ministry (the two who had the most extensive knowledge about women in our congregation), the list was sent to the session for approval. All were approved and invited to an informational dessert to hear about the new ministry and consider whether or not they wanted to participate. The women who agreed to participate were required to read two books and then attend two days of training by the pastors. Afterward, those who wished to continue were introduced, prayed for, and publicly commissioned by our senior pastor before a Sunday morning worship service. They committed to a four-year term and immediately began investing their spiritual gifts in service to their session and their sisters. The intent was for them to complement and support the ministry of the elders and deacons. The elders made specific requests for help, and I assigned the ladies most appropriate for each task based on the ministry profiles we retained for each woman.

Our season of distress had been arduous, but we emerged from God's refining process with a women's ministry that embraced a clear path and mandate to honor Christ by joyfully honoring the welfare, vision, and values of our session. God has blessed this partnership over the past eleven years and helped us develop it into a ministry that our presbytery and others have asked us to share.

This book tells the story of this complementary partnership in ministry—warts and all. Inside, you will find stories of real people in crisis who have been helped. Their names have been changed along with some identifying details, but the ministry to them is real. Some stories are told from the perspective of the woman in crisis. Others are recounted by the woman who came alongside her. Still others are told by

INTRODUCTION

the pastor or elder who gave oversight and leadership. Some stories relate happy outcomes, but not all do—such is real life. Where we have made mistakes, we have admitted them, asked forgiveness, repented, and learned. What we have learned, we humbly pass on to you. The stories serve to illustrate ministry in action, but they are followed in each case by a section that explains the important how, why, and wherefore of the ministry—the theology that undergirds it. Also included is an appendix of helpful resources we used and continue to find helpful.

The struggles of the women in our congregation are the same as those in yours—whether your church is large or small, located in an urban or a rural area, is fairly new or has a long history. The ministry described is adaptable to a church of any size and in any setting. It requires neither a director of women’s ministry nor a large church staff. What it does require is a biblical respect for the ordained male leadership of the church and a heart to support them as they strive to care well for the souls of women. It is our prayer that God will bless the reading and reach of this book, that men and women will find new joy in service together in His churches, and that the church will be strengthened as a result. May God see His own beautiful image with increasing clarity—purified and polished—in us and in those we serve for Him.

- Teresa Gillis

Shepherdess Ministry Coordinator 2008-2009

Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, NC

PART I – PURPOSE

A few years ago, I was matched as a shepherdess with a mom coping with marital separation. I met with her weekly to encourage her with biblical truth, practical helps, and prayer. Pastors and elders from our church also provided support as did those from another church. The two faith communities collaborated and communicated while the husband and wife worshiped in the two different communities. For a brief time, church discipline became necessary for one of the partners. The one who had rejected their life role and vows eventually came to a place of deep remorse and repented. The couple reconciled, much to everyone's relief and delight. As someone who had been through an unexpected and unwanted divorce many years earlier, I continue to marvel at how the Lord has used it for good. He has placed many young moms going through similar crises in my path.

ELIZABETH

COMING ALONGSIDE

Leslie's Story

A Care Recipient's Perspective

I remember sitting in the conference room at our church staring into the faces of five different men. My husband Mike was one of them. The group of elders and pastors gathered together were dear friends. These strong Christian men represented a visible expression of our church. They embodied the godly character that pervaded our community. Each man had committed to Mike and me that they would walk beside us while we navigated our most recent marital crisis. Our problems did not include addiction or adultery, but the difficulties felt every bit as serious. Our church leaders took our problem seriously as well.

As we sat there, I searched for words to communicate the struggles in my marriage. None came to mind. Despite living day-to-day in a home filled with ugly words, I found it difficult to articulate the experience. I looked at the faces of the compassionate men around me. They were there to

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support me, but the thought of communicating with them was intimidating. The fact that I was the only woman in the room made it even more stressful.

Mike and I had struggled with our relationship from day one. The fights began soon after our wedding day, continuing and escalating over thirteen years. I grew up in a chaotic and sometimes violent home, which shaped a fierce self-sufficiency in me. Mike worked long hours and often traveled for his job. That left me independent but bitter about being so. I didn't know how to ask Mike for support, and he didn't know how to give it. As the years unfolded, children added to the busyness of life. Our interaction deteriorated. It got to the point where I didn't have a clue how to communicate. Most days we simply endured long periods of silence.

It took every ounce of courage I had to contact our church for a meeting. Sitting in that room that day, I felt myself shaking from the inside out. I couldn't even formulate my thoughts with Mike about our problems, so I was certain this opportunity would be no different. I opened my mouth to speak and struggled to form simple sentences. I tried to share one particularly hurtful experience, but I could see that I wasn't making sense. I saw in their eyes that these men desired to help, but they appeared every bit as discouraged as I was. Eventually I decided it was best to just keep quiet. I sat in silence while Mike did all the talking.

I left that meeting feeling more hopeless than ever. I had no intentions of subjecting myself to that type of frustration again.

Soon after, a friend encouraged me to connect with Susan, the Director of Women's Ministry at our church. Susan and I had worked together previously, so I knew she was someone I could trust. She met with me on her porch one sunny afternoon, and I instantly felt at peace. Susan lis-

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tened while I (again) struggled to articulate what was happening between Mike and me. She too had compassion in her eyes—just as the elders had had—but in Susan’s eyes I saw a glimmer of understanding. It was as if she had put herself into my situation and felt it firsthand. When I finished talking, she helped me put more precise language to the experiences. Susan then committed to walk alongside me and help me communicate when I met with our team. She suggested that another friend join us as well, and over time, they both helped me express the circumstances which I had found so difficult to convey.

Susan connected with our team and kept them updated. When she sensed I was ready, she scheduled another meeting. This time, Susan and Cindy came with me. When I faltered, Susan interpreted for me. Together, she and Cindy advocated on my behalf. Mike and the elders finally heard what was so distressing in my marriage.

Somewhere in the process, Susan began to think about the need for a specific ministry by women for women in crisis. The church had a successful mentoring ministry which involved intentional relationships of older and younger women, but there was nothing that specifically addressed the needs of women in crisis. Together we considered the benefits of women’s advocacy and what that would look like. Susan asked me to take part in an effort to launch that ministry, and I was thrilled to help. Our church has trained many women to employ their varied gifts, abilities, and life experiences since those early days. We now have a strong base of shepherdeses available to help other women in times of difficulty.

Mike and I are very grateful to our church for surrounding

Men and women think and communicate differently. We need both perspectives in the church in order to help one another toward health and maturity.

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us as our covenant family. They gently and firmly shepherded us toward the restoration of our marriage. I'm specifically grateful to the women who did that for me personally. They ministered God's grace to me, woman to woman. It was through this experience that I came to understand and truly appreciate the strength and value of complementarianism. Men and women think and communicate differently. We need both perspectives in the church in order to help one another toward health and maturity.

A Ministry Is Born

Bernie's Perspective

It has been a decade since I was drawn into Leslie's complicated story. Her marital estrangement came as quite a surprise. Leslie, Mike, and their children were heavily involved in our church, all gifted and loved by the entire congregation.

What we didn't know was that behind the Sunday morning smiles and light conversations, devastation invaded their home. A destructive hostility had gained momentum between this husband and wife, and it was spiraling downward fast. Adultery was not a factor, but the routine of lives too busy with jobs and raising children had brought their already troubled marriage to a sad impasse. The result was severe. Leslie was bitter and angry, and healthy communication had been exchanged for angry, harsh words and attitudes. Disdain for one another was frequently displayed before the children and the Lord. Leslie was contemplating leaving her marriage.

No one really wants to be the first to intervene in these difficult situations, but pastors and elders are called to shepherd and restore wayward souls. So, our leadership team committed to get involved. Leslie was so depleted she could not even find the right words to share her hurt. I could see that she felt intimidated by the group of men assembled to

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help her and Mike. She told me later she wasn't even sure she could trust us to understand or believe what she had to say. It was challenging for any of us to see a way forward.

Fortunately, a friend in whom Leslie confided suggested she seek out an older, mature woman to accompany her to our meetings. The idea was that another woman might serve Leslie as an additional voice. Leslie approached Susan, the Director of Women's Ministry at our church, and asked her to walk alongside. Together with another friend, Susan helped Leslie communicate the information necessary in order for our elders to understand what was going on in the home. Consequently, Mike was quick to request a subsequent meeting. Having finally heard and understood Leslie's hurt, he wanted to confess to the elders what he saw as his great sin in the marriage. For a time, Mike was brought under the loving accountability of church discipline. That began a lengthy and sometimes dicey process of restoration, requiring both Leslie and Mike to repent of many sinful behaviors. Leslie's friends stayed on the journey with her and helped her face her own sinful responsibility in the marriage. She repented of the ways in which her responses to Mike over the years displeased the Lord.

Today, this couple is flourishing. Their marriage is fully restored, and their family remains a blessing to our church. Mike is an officer now, and both he and Leslie are stewarding the difficult lessons learned in their early years of marriage to help other couples who are struggling.

Through this difficult situation, our church's ministry to women in crisis was born. You might say we stumbled our way

As we walked this path together, our pastors and elders discovered that partnering with godly and mature women is a powerful resource for serving distressed women in our congregations.

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into it. If Susan and Cindy had not come alongside a hurting wife, Mike and Leslie's marriage would likely have ended in divorce. As we walked this path together, our pastors and elders discovered that partnering with godly and mature women is a powerful resource for serving distressed women in our congregations.