

Is Your Church Building Authentic Community for Women?

There is an obvious void in the Baptist church when it comes to issues regarding sex and sexuality, which affects most directly women and acknowledgement of women's issues.

These include infertility, infant mortality, pre-term labor, prolonged bed rest, high-risk pregnancies, abnormalities of the fetus, lactation issues and post-partum depression (to name a few).

Broader issues like rape, abortion, sexual assault, adoption, teenage pregnancy, same-sex parenting, menopause, safety of transwomen and birth control are almost never discussed.

If the former issues are brought to light, it is usually through a women's circle group or prayer list. These issues, however, are not for women to face alone, feel shame or secrecy about. They are certainly not "just women's issues."

While it can be extremely difficult to navigate the privacy and openness of each woman, it is important to support women in more tangible and public ways.

There is no "one size fits all" model for this type of support or ministry, especially because each woman and her experience with these issues are different and occur at varying ages and stages in a woman's life.

One thing is certain, women and mothers need more support.

I have heard congregants make statements about speaking about such issues only in private or not in "mixed company," but it's this antiquated view of sexuality perpetuating this myth that women's issues are "icky," "gross" and "TMI," especially for men.

Yet, too often men in leadership are comfortable making or supporting rules and regulations that make choices for women concerning their bodies.

These are not political issues, these are ethical issues, spiritual issues and extremely personal decisions women should be supported in making. A woman's

church should be her greatest support, affirming for her God loves and values her.

For decades, churches have had men's and women's groups, but it is my fear that these groups' main focus will be social (which there is a healthy space for) rather than taking the time, energy and thoughtfulness to address difficult issues going on in the lives of the women and men attending.

Many churches in Atlanta have Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous groups that meet weekly in their facilities.

These groups are doing messy, honest and transformative work - often meeting the needs of our community in more tangible and authentic ways.

Church folk usually struggle to admit the adversity they are facing. This denial means churches are silent on major issues afflicting our communities, and women and men must seek solace and support elsewhere.

Churches have made positive steps in addressing issues related to divorce, death, and aging and palliative care, and these ministries are usually well attended and accepted (dare I say popular). This popularity proves these ministries have an audience that longs to listen and be heard.

In this new political climate, where labels come before names and Christians so often use the Bible as a tool to punish and judge women and the issues they face, it is my hope churches can open not only their doors but their minds to women who need more support, care, love, understanding and community.

Turning these ideas into a practical ministry takes time and small steps. Here are a few ideas:

1. Do you have women on your staff or in leadership roles?

If not, that will be your first hurdle. Women want to hear from other women when it comes to these issues.

If you do have women on staff, what care and support does the church offer them in regard to parental leave, counseling, childcare, mental health days, support groups and so on?

2. Male pastors and associate pastors should have an honest conversation with their spouses concerning the issues listed above.

Maybe you know your spouse's viewpoint on these issues, but after speaking with her you will gain a new perspective.

This exercise helps develop true compassion and empathy, which pastors need to begin to understand the struggles in which they have not and never will have first-hand experience.

3. Build support for women in your congregation with an open, safe dialogue in your church or community where women of all ages can come together to express their needs and what support would look like.

Women may come forward who are passionate about this ministry and desire to lead. This also ensures the ministry will be tailored for your community.

4. Holistic worship planning will only take place if men and women plan services together.

Find ways to incorporate the struggles of women in your church through pastoral prayers, litanies or more creative ways. This public recognition gives value and merit to our pain. It also affirms speaking about such topics in public.

5. Find a local nonprofit that supports women and gather a group from your church to visit their organization and learn more about partnering and volunteering.

6. Encourage a layperson to start a small group.

She can invite other women or mothers to gather once a week or twice a month to socialize and designate a length of time for authentic conversation addressing issues brought before the group.

Guests can speak on specific topics or concerns. While some issues are more common for women at certain ages/stages of life, there are great benefits from having a wide range of ages.

If churches want to make a difference in their communities, they cannot shy away from the difficult conversations and most delicate issues affecting their people.

In my experience, women, more specifically mothers, are looking for support and authentic community to share their experiences with.

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Editor's note: This article is part of a series for Mothers' Day 2017 (May 14):

The previous article in the series is:

[A Mother's Day Prayer to Relieve Church-Service Angst](#)