



Photo by Caroline Kittle

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# The heart cries of women in our pews

By Liza Kittle

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“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

—1 Peter 5:2-4

**M**arie sits alone at home staring into the eyes of her firstborn child. At a time when she should feel her greatest joy, she is gripped with an overwhelming sense of despair. Her mind continues to replay memories from years ago when as college student she found herself pregnant—the result of an alcohol-induced lapse in judgment. A long repressed experience of going to the abortion clinic and “taking care of her problem” becomes crystal clear in her mind and plays itself over and over again in her thoughts. “What had I done?” “How could I ever deserve this precious gift before me?” These haunting questions continue to paralyze her, so she goes to church hoping to find some solace for her misery. Ashamed, isolated, and desperate—she sits in the pew suffering in silence.

Janice is also sitting alone. With two young children, her husband has recently decided that he “doesn’t want to be married anymore,” confesses that he is in love with a co-worker, and wants a divorce. Married for eight years, their life seemed wonderfully complete. Her husband had a promising career. She devoted herself to her home and family and they had a close group of friends through their church. Her picture-perfect life had been shattered into a million broken pieces. People seem to look at her with either extreme pity or cautious indifference, not knowing what to say—so she sits in the pew feeling lonely, afraid, and lost.

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Left: Women praying with one another at the altar of the Trinity on the Hill United Methodist Church during The Women of the Vine conference. Right: Worship leader Pam Fryer.

Susan has just lost her husband of thirty years to a long, debilitating battle with cancer. Her children all live far away and she has recently taken in her aging mother who has the beginning stages of Alzheimer’s disease. She feels like the last ten years of her life have gone by in a blur as the daily demands of caregiving have depleted her physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Her future seems bleak as she struggles to find any sense of joy and peace in her life. The happy memories of her past with family and friends have become increasingly hard to remember. She sits in her once full church pew—alone and despondent.

The heart cries of these three women sitting in the pews of our churches are just a few examples of some of the pain many are experiencing. A recent book about understanding the hopes, hurts, and needs of women in the church today, entitled *What Women Wish Pastors Knew* by Denise George, reveals some startling findings. Based on surveys of hundreds of Christian women of all ages and stages of life, these women convey heart cries that many would never tell their pastors face to face. Understanding and addressing these realities are not only biblically mandated, but also critical to the growth and health of the Christian church.

According to a study by George Barna, he believes that “women are the backbone of the Christian congregations in



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Attendance at the Women of the Vine conference is fully interdenominational and ecumenical, with ten local churches sponsoring the event.

In her book, George also pointed out that many of the women sitting near us on Sunday mornings are hurting from traumatic emotional wounds and stressful situations in their lives. They face pain stemming from issues such as infertility, suicide, teenage pregnancy, caring for aging parents, emotional and physical abuse, divorce, widowhood, single motherhood, sexual sin, marital problems, financial pressures, and the list goes on and on. The statistical research surrounding each of these issues is simply overwhelming. For the women suffering any one of these issues, the church must be prepared to offer help, comfort, healing, and spiritual direction.

America,” making up 60 percent of most congregations and providing more than 60 percent of what keeps it going. He found that women are more likely to be involved in discipleship, small groups, volunteer work, prayer, evangelism, and financial giving. Ministering to women and utilizing their gifts are crucial to the spiritual health of our churches and the evangelistic witness of our world. As cultural dynamics change, ministry to women must also change.

Denise George’s surveys reveal two startling areas that can hinder a woman’s walk with Christ. Her research pointed out that many women are experiencing extreme exhaustion—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And it’s not the “take a nap” kind of exhaustion, but the chronic, debilitating kind of fatigue that leads to physical illness. They will push themselves daily in order to fulfill the needs of family and friends. With all the choices and opportunities available today, women feel a tremendous sense of guilt if they don’t keep up the pace with kids’ activities, social events, and service to the church. Many women erroneously equate their level of spirituality and success with their level of physical activity.

George discovered that many women crave both physical and spiritual rest. They desire to spend more quiet time with God in prayer and Bible study, experience frustration when unable to achieve these spiritual disciplines, and feel selfish when they complain about it. The desire for rest is anything but selfish—it is biblical! Jesus was constantly going off for solitude, prayer, and quiet reflection and he encouraged his disciples to do likewise. God instructed Elijah to rest when he was exhausted and felt defeated. Elijah laid down under a broom tree and slept—God’s angel woke him with bread and water, and then he went back to sleep and rested again! The provision of physical and spiritual rest was essential for these great servants to hear from God and perform the purposes laid out for them. Women are no different.

How heartbreaking it is for women who are sitting in our pews, suffering in silence, when they desperately need someone to guide them into the arms of Jesus Christ! Women’s ministry in our churches is so important, especially because many women feel embarrassed to share such personal issues with their pastors—who, most often, are male. Women are uniquely equipped to minister to other women in the same way that men are uniquely equipped to minister to other men. By offering a multi-faceted women’s ministry program, churches create an environment where they feel comfortable and safe as members of the Christian family.

Today’s women represent a wide range of generational and situational experiences. Even so, surveys show a commonality about what women in the church yearn for.

They yearn to know the truth of God’s Word through personal and group Bible study. We live in a time of great

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spiritual hunger but little absolute truth and women are looking for theological answers to life’s deeper questions. Unfortunately, many are searching in the wrong places and are being influenced by aberrant spiritualities such as earth and goddess worship, Wicca, far-eastern mysticism, paganism, and the “gospel according to Oprah.” If the world is a spiritual battleground, the women of the church need sharp swords to fight the war, not slingshots of superficiality.

Women yearn to find their identity in Christ and fulfill God’s purposes for their lives. When they discover that honoring and pleasing God is more important than pleasing the world—this is a freeing, life-changing experience. The fruitfulness that results in a life spent devoted to God, using

her unique gifts and graces brings a woman's sense of self-worth to completion. By knowing who she is in Christ, she is able to evangelize and minister to others with a renewed passion and purpose. Hardships, traumas, and obstacles no longer hinder her faith journey as she experiences wholeness of heart and life. A truly effective women's ministry will help women achieve this life perspective.

Women yearn to have Christ-centered marriages and raise godly children. Biblical preaching and Bible studies that focus on building healthy marriages and families are critical in churches today. Societal influences and temptations have taken many Christian believers away from God's core biblical teachings on family relationships and values. Next to her relationship with Christ, a married woman's closest, most intimate relationship is with her husband. When this relationship is upset, a woman's entire world turns upside down. She yearns for her husband to love her as Christ loves the church and needs help to make Christ the center of her marriage and home. Her children's relationship to Christ is also a primary concern and goal. Often women are solely responsible for their children's physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Women's ministry plays a significant role in helping women raise godly children.

Women yearn for Christ-centered friendships and godly

role models to nurture and teach them on their faith journeys. Women are wired for relational intimacy. They desire authentic relationships where they can take off their masks and be real. A good Christian friend or spiritual mentor can change a woman's life. Younger women need spiritually mature women willing to shepherd them as they navigate life's way and encourage them when they face hardships. There are many ways a comprehensive women's ministry can help develop this kind of intimacy between sisters in Christ.

Women yearn to serve the kingdom of God with wholehearted passion. Having their emotional and spiritual needs meet through an effective women's ministry program will greatly enhance their natural inclination to be in ministry to others. Freedom in Christ liberates women to fulfill God's great commission to the world. A women's ministry program should be as varied and creative as the women it serves. The results will be the same—women will be transformed, families will be transformed, the church will be transformed, and the world will be transformed.

Liza Kittle is the President of the Renew Network. In addition to checking out their website ([www.renewnetwork.org](http://www.renewnetwork.org)), you can write to the Renew Network at 3540 Wheeler Rd., Suite 410, Augusta, GA 30909, or call them 706-306-2851.

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*RENEW is here to encourage and equip women in the United Methodist Church to:*

- grow in their faith
- build life-changing ministries
- serve Christ in mission

*The time is now. Won't you join us in ministry?*

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