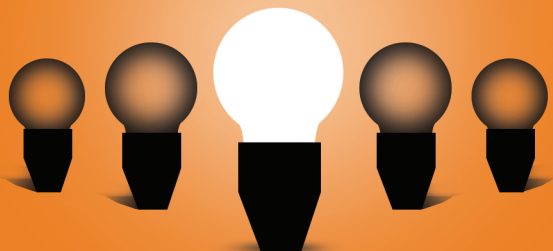




MADE — TO LEAD —

EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR MINISTRY



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Sacred Space

“It’s lonely at the top” describes the reality that greater leadership responsibilities often mean fewer friends. The same is true in ministry. You may have started your journey with a large circle of friends, but once you accept the call to serve God in ministry, your circle becomes a little smaller. Then, when God begins to elevate you into positions of leadership, that small circle is reduced even more. Some women may even tell you that once you start serving as a pastor, director, chaplain, or executive leader, what started as a circle can turn into a short line of one or two people.

This can be a disturbing experience for those who are unprepared. In this regard, ministry can leave you feeling extremely isolated and alone. The situation can be exacerbated by the fact that ministry work often calls you to be surrounded by people who know and love you for what you do. Very few people will know and love you for who you are. Because of these and other unique challenges facing women in ministry, it can feel as if no one understands what you are going through. But, there is a solution: I call it sacred space.

Sacred Space Defined

When I was younger, my sister and I were obsessed with tents. We made them out of anything: blankets, towels, sheets, and even tree branches. The rules for a good tent were simple: only sisters and friends could come in, parents had to stay out, and there must be something sweet to eat inside. Our tents became places of escape, either together or by ourselves. We could create them at any time, in any place, and when we did, we could transform our environments into places of refuge and retreat. I guess one could say we were in the early stages of designing sacred spaces.

Sacred spaces are necessities for anyone called to serve God in ministry. They are the precious times and spaces in our lives that we designate to be “holy ground.” Simply put, sacred spaces are the tents we make to encounter the holy. Like rivers of living water in desert lands, God intends sacred spaces to fill and replenish the parched souls of those who serve. With all that we give and all that we pour out, there has to be space for God to restore and revitalize us.

In ministry, there are three areas of sacred spaces that must be defined for good leadership: sacred space with God, sacred space with others, and sacred space with yourself. Like tents, these

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spaces can be protected based on who can come in, who is kept out, and what sweets can be enjoyed while there.

Sacred Space with God

Sacred space with God is critical for any believer. It is intentional space to be still with the Lord and to enjoy authentic communion with God. Traditionally, we would call this “quiet time.” When I was in college, I was taught that the formula for a good quiet time usually involved a song, a passage of scripture or a devotional book, a reflection journal, prayer and more singing,

usually in that order. It was a great way to start and allowed me to connect with God in an intentional way. The problem is I began to believe that this was the only way to encounter God's holiness. I became ritualistic about it, and after a few years my quiet time became a task instead of an act of love.

Sacred space with God should not be static, robotic, or formulaic. There is no magic length of time that must be observed or a specific book that must be followed in order for the Holy Spirit to enter. It is simply about creating a space to cultivate intimacy with God and to bring your whole, unfiltered self to the One who loves you most. Sometimes sacred space with God involves cursing, crying, screaming or shouting. Other times, this space is marked by silence and contemplation, making space for God to show up however God desires. No matter what this space looks or feels like, the key is to make sure it becomes part of your daily life.

It is not uncommon for people to serve God without actually taking time to be with God. The pace of life and ministry does not always permit us to stop and be still in God's presence. On top of that, taking time to be with God will always cost us something. It may cost us missing a call or text, turning down an opportunity to be with others, or a chance to get a few other things done. Yes, spending time with God will always be a sacrifice. By turning down other really good things in order to be with God, we offer the sacrifice of our time. In the discipline of sacred space with God, we reaffirm the Lordship of Jesus and allow everything else to fall in line. In this way, ministry and leadership can flow out of loving relationship with God instead of boring obligation. Without this refreshing daily practice, we can miss the voice of the One who called us in the first place.

Sacred Space with Others

In addition to spending time with God, sacred space can be created when we spend time with people who really "get" you and understand what God is doing through you. Every woman

leader can feel isolated, but having at least one or two friends who love you for *you* can make all the difference in the world. Unlike regular friendships, sacred spaces with others allow you to share, vent, and confess some of the unique situations of ministry without feeling judged or fixed. These are confidential connections with people who understand the sensitivity of the work to which you are called. They allow you to laugh about awkward moments and cry about challenging times, and they can keep you in check when your faith goes astray. These are probably not the people who always want something from you. You'll have plenty of those connections in ministry and, if you're not careful, relationships like those will leave you feeling empty and dry. Instead, sacred spaces with others should leave you feeling full and whole. They are most often created with lifelong friends, colleagues in ministry, loved ones who understand God's calling, and prayer partners who help to carry you through. While you may not see your sacred community right now, you can believe that it is there. Ask God to reveal the people ordained for this space in your life.

The important thing about sacred spaces with others is to remember that they are necessary for your well-being. Too often, the calling of ministry causes leaders to put relationships on the back burner. Women who serve the church, particularly those with children, can feel as if they don't have time to make or keep friendships. Yet, being real with God requires that we cultivate space to be real with others who genuinely care for who we are. This kind of authentic, trusted community with others requires the same intentionality, effort, and time that we give to ministry. While it may not happen every day or even every week, good leaders will make time for sacred community as a regular part of devotional life.

Sacred Space with Self

Every leader needs time for herself. I'm certain that introverts will wholeheartedly agree while extroverts, like myself, may

wonder if this is really necessary at all. Sacred space with self is not indulgent or reclusive. Like other aspects of the sacred life, it is an intentional tent created for you to be you and to care for yourself before caring for others. It is the act of putting on your own oxygen mask before attempting to assist others. For some people, time for yourself involves manicures and pedicures. For others, it may be a walk in the park or a stroll through the mall. Sacred space for self allows you to affirm who you are, with all your weaknesses and strengths, without being swayed by the thoughts of others. It allows you to declare your own worth and care for your own soul with the same care you would give to others.

For women in ministry, it is easy to put everyone before yourself. It's easy to think that we should take care of the needs of others before we tend to our own needs. But good leaders create regular time and space to be by themselves and care for themselves as a witness of their own value. I've heard it said that you teach people how to treat you by how you treat yourself. If we believe the fact that we are made in God's image, then taking care of ourselves should become like any other discipline of the Spirit. This can take on many forms, depending on the level of care we need. For some, self-care means scheduling time to talk to a counselor as an act of caring for our hearts and minds. For others, it means sleeping in or making time to enjoy a favorite treat. No matter what we choose, we can view such care as an act of worship to God. We honor God when we take care of ourselves. This is the intentional act of thanking God for who we are and dedicating time to be a good stewards over our lives.

The Search for Sacred Space

My own search for sacred space is an ongoing journey. So often, I struggled to maintain the regular discipline of settling down to be with God, cultivating sacred community, or taking time for myself. With all of the roles I played as wife, mother, daughter, sister, niece, granddaughter, friend, writer, minister, and so much more, it seemed there was never enough margin

in my life to do anything that feels sacred. When I did have moments to commune with God, they often started strong and ended about five minutes later with me falling asleep on my Bible or nodding off in my prayers. Knowing the importance of sacred space, I constantly felt like a failure, incapable of creating space in my life to encounter God in a meaningful way. And then the revelation came: maybe God was not waiting for me to create a special space. Perhaps God would take the mundane spaces in my life and make them sacred for my good.

With this revelation, I began to understand that sacred space was not always about me doing something for God. By God's grace, these spaces were all about God doing something for me. I began to see this truth manifested in my life in some pretty unexpected ways. Once, while giving my toddler a bath, the washing away of dirt made me think about the depth of God's love in washing away my sins. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and began to sing to God as my daughter and I played in the water. It happens frequently in the kitchen. Whether washing dishes or making dinner, God usually finds a way to take my thoughts captive and make them prisoners of Love. Before I know it, God transforms the mundane into holy ground.

I now have countless examples of God transforming common spaces of my life into sacred encounters. By God's grace, I've seen text message conversations with friends transform into foundations for authentic community. I've witnessed my morning coffee runs turn into sacred space just for me. I've even seen how God can take the common task of taking a shower and turn it into sacred worship and praise. While I am nowhere near where I would like to be in this journey to create regular sacred time and space, I am a witness to the fact that God can work with what we have until we get to where we want to be.

Biblical Observations

Elijah was one serious prophet. Through him, God spoke truth that no one else could and demonstrated power that no

one else had. With God's strength, he opposed the king and openly challenged false prophets to a game of testing the real God. In one of the most dramatic Biblical showdowns ever, Elijah encouraged 450 prophets of Baal to call on their god while he called on his God to send fire to consume a sacrifice.¹ He watched and waited while they jumped and shouted and cut themselves, hoping that Baal would show up. After giving them an entire day, he then straightened up his altar, laid out the sacrificial bull on the wood and stone, and poured water on it three times! Once it was time, he prayed a two-sentence prayer and God sent fire that not only consumed the offering, but the altar, the stones, the water, and the dust around it. As if that wasn't enough, he then slaughtered all of the false prophets by his own hand, all 450 of them!

But, after all God had done for him and through him, Elijah desperately needed sacred space. His triumphant acts led to death threats and the prophet was afraid. He ran for his life, hoping that God would just allow him to die. He had no one around him, no one to support him, and he probably felt like nothing was sacred anymore. After doing great things for God, Elijah needed God to do something great for him.

Life Application

Sometimes, it takes a monumental moment to make us realize the importance of sacred space. Elijah's story shows us that desperate times call for sacred spaces. In ministry, victorious mountaintop moments are often followed by the sorrow and emptiness of a valley experience. These valleys can come when we are tired or weak or lonely or sad. They can catch us off guard and leave us longing for something sacred when everything around us seems secular. Yet, as God designed spaces of replenishment and perspective for Elijah, God will do the same for all who are chosen to seek and to serve.

In 1 Kings 19, God created sacred space for Elijah by providing food for him to eat. Elijah was tired. He was frustrated.

He wanted to give up and die. But, just when he reached the end of his rope, God gave him food to eat that would strengthen him for the journey ahead. Just as God provided nourishment for Elijah, I believe *God provides sacred space as nourishment for every Christian leader*. Think of sacred space as God's soul food. By designing sacred moments of divine encounters with the Holy Spirit, others, and ourselves, God is indeed feeding our souls. This also means that a life without sacred spaces is a life that is starved of godly nutrition. Live without eating and you'll die a slow and painful death. Choose to make space for the sacred and you'll thrive and be healthy.

Think of sacred space as
God's soul food.

After feeding Elijah, God then created space to speak to him in the silence or in a still, small voice. The Lord had something to say and needed a space to ensure that Elijah would hear it. The good news is that God has something to say to you too! Therefore, *God designs sacred spaces so that we can hear God's voice*. As a leader, there will be times when the only voice you need to hear is God's. At times isolation and loneliness give you the space to hear. Just as God drew Elijah to a cave to speak, God still draws us (sometimes kicking and screaming) into secluded caves just so that we can hear God speak and have space in which to respond. The sacred space becomes the place for God to minister to our unique needs. God wants to meet the needs of those who meet the needs of others.

Once Elijah was fed and ministered to, God gave him something else sacred: sacred relationships with people to help do the work to which he was called. The prophet was instructed to anoint Hazael as king over Syria, Jehu as king over Israel, and Elisha as the prophet who would succeed him. Although Elijah may have felt as if he was alone, God gave clear direction that this mission would no longer be solo. There would be others with

the same passion and zeal to make an impact on the nations.

In this journey, *God ordains sacred space to show us our allies*. When people and their needs constantly surround us, it's hard to discern those who are sincerely for us. But, in the sacred moments, God reveals relationships to strengthen us by extending our purpose and mission. These relationships, appointed by God, have the ability to sharpen us “as iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17 NRSV). They are people who fight the same fight, carry the same values, and share the same pain. When the burdens of ministry seem too much to bear, God will reveal and send allies who will bear them with you. These allies are so sacred and so critical that God must reveal them. Trying to cultivate this kind of community on our own will only lead to frustration and disappointment. Although no relationship is perfect, sacred connections with others draw us closer to God and keep us from short-circuiting our purpose.

In your sacred space with God, take some time to reflect on the following questions:

1. Why do you think finding sacred space is such a challenge for women in leadership?
2. What will it take for you to enjoy sacred space on a regular basis?
3. What relationships has God revealed to form your sacred community?
4. Name two or three things that you can do to take better care of yourself this week.

Summary

The demands of life and ministry can be overwhelming and isolating. You can easily feel as if you're on this journey by yourself. But God has designed sacred spaces to rejuvenate and strengthen every believer, especially leaders. Sacred spaces with God, sacred community with others, and sacred time for yourself all play a role in developing God's purpose and plan for your

life. This space does not come easy and will often require that you sacrifice something in order to enjoy it. Learn to prioritize and enjoy these spaces and you'll find yourself ministering from the abundance of God's love and grace.

God, thank you for designing sacred tents and places of refuge in the craziness of life. I admit that I don't always feel like being with you, with others, or even with myself. But, your grace compels me to draw closer to you, and when I do, I am always blessed. So, teach me to embrace and enjoy every sacred space that you have ordained. Replenish my soul and prepare me for the great things you have in store. In Jesus' name. Amen.