

SHARON DICKENS

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A practical guide

C O N

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to women's ministry

V E N

in the local church

T I O

N A L

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# Foreword

*Why a Woman Should Be Your First Hire*

Mez McConnell

(Niddrie Community Church, Edinburgh, Scotland)<sup>1</sup>

When I first moved to Niddrie Community Church over 15 years ago, I spent the first six months or so getting to know the then-small congregation. I wanted to find out who was who and who was good at what. I quickly discovered some of the women in the church felt somewhat marginalised and disenfranchised. It appeared they had been left to take a back seat in the life and ministry of the church and in the local community they were trying to reach with the gospel. They were on the usual rotas (tea, coffee and the flowers), but that was about it.

As I began to get to know the community of Niddrie, it became clear to me early on that we needed to hire a community worker, and it needed to be a woman. At that time, complementarianism wasn't as visible as it is now and it was much less common to employ women in churches. Hiring one was a risky move for a new pastor. I had read many articles and blogs by pastors and church planters talking about growing their

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1. An earlier version of this foreword appeared in Mez McConnell, *The Least, the Last and the Lost*, part IV, chapter 3 (EP, 2021), pp. 375–380.

leadership teams. Very few of them talked about hiring a woman in the early stages of their ministry. Even those that did tended to leave hiring a woman as one of their later appointments and, even then, only if the money came in. I have seen many a planter's development plans, and often women are just not in them. They will talk about hiring a youth worker, an executive pastor or a worship leader before they would even consider a woman.

Churches need to sort out their priorities and make hiring a woman a must. In fact, in our church planting ministry, 20schemes, we insist all our church planters employ a mature woman *from the off* as they embark on their church planting and/or revitalisation venture. Here are some of the reasons why we do that, and why you should do it too.

### **Women Make Up a Large Proportion of the Communities We Reach**

Whatever church situation you're in, there are going to be a lot of women. Lone parent families make up approximately one quarter of all families living in Scotland in 2019. Unsurprisingly, nine out of ten of these lone parents are women. In the poorest communities in Scotland, 52 per cent of all the residents are women. That is a lot of vulnerable women with multifaceted problems (over half of them suffer from a long-term health problem or a disability). And it'd be a mistake to think that our Scottish context is unique and not mirrored across the western world.

## **Women Often Face Multiple Issues Which Complicate Discipleship**

Tragically, 45 per cent of women in the UK have experienced at least one incident of interpersonal violence in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> One in four women have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult, and five out of every six of those rapes are carried out by someone they know.<sup>3</sup> Other issues like drug abuse and mental health problems affect many women.<sup>4</sup> Many of these vulnerable women with complex physical, psychological, and spiritual problems are in our congregations and are in our communities. Those who have been most hurt often crave love and attention and require a lot of time as we counsel and disciple them in the Word. As their emotional needs are often so great, it's simply wise and prudent for a woman, rather than a man, to invest serious amounts of time into their lives.

## **Pastors Are More Likely to Fail Morally If They Get Deeply Involved in Counselling Women**

Whilst the statement above is a broad generalisation, a survey of the 15 men who have preceded me at Niddrie Community

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2. Walby, S. and Allen, J., "Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey", Home Office Research Study 276, March 2004, [https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21697/1/Domesticviolencefindings\\_2004\\_5BritishCrimeSurvey276.pdf](https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21697/1/Domesticviolencefindings_2004_5BritishCrimeSurvey276.pdf).

3. <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>

4. Over a quarter of young women aged 16–24 report a common mental health issue in any given week; 40 per cent of people in England who have overlapping problems including homelessness, substance misuse and contact with the criminal justice system have a mental health problem. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/>

Church revealed one in three of them were removed for offences of sexual immorality. One hundred per cent of these men ran into difficulties through intense counselling with the opposite sex. Sadly, our church leaders are not immune to sexual sin. Many pastors have fallen in this area with a church member they have been counselling or with somebody they have been evangelising. In the schemes where I pastor, counselling and evangelising vulnerable women is a minefield where tenderness or a willingness to listen from a male is almost always misunderstood sexually. Women in deprived areas aren't used to men listening to their problems. They are used to men *being* the problem. But temptation can, for some, be hard to resist in any situation – underprivileged or not. Don't go there.

### **Only Women Should Disciple Women**

I realise there are many ways pastors can disciple members of their congregation safely, but I suggest having a gifted, trained and mature woman on staff is one of the most helpful ways. In many churches, this type of thing is left to the pastor's wife or maybe the wife of an elder. Almost invariably, this is not because of giftedness but is due to the position her husband holds within the fellowship. It is fine if she is trained, but could be damaging if she is not. Regardless, the point remains that in crisis situations – a daily occurrence here in Niddrie – a mature, godly woman can continue the relationship on into deeper, long-lasting friendship in a way a pastor cannot and should not. When we talk of discipleship, we do not mean the odd monthly pastoral meeting but the intense, daily walk with God as women do life together.

But what is the place for men in this context?



## **We Need Godly Men to Teach Women to Train Godly Women**

Of course, women need the influence of godly men in their lives. The church is to be led by men after all. That much is clear from Scripture. These men have a responsibility to teach the whole congregation sound doctrine and to model godliness as per Titus 2. But they have a responsibility to teach women too. These are Paul's instructions to Titus:

*Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. (Titus 2:3–5)*

Everything we do at Niddrie Community Church is overseen by the elders and has the approval of the whole congregation. We are clearly involved in the lives of women in our church. Women can see us teach and model godliness in the home and as we preach the Word and lead the meetings. We still counsel couples and single women in certain situations. If I am meeting with a couple, it is with my wife. If meeting with a single woman, it can be with my wife or with one of our women's workers or a friend she trusts. Also, our women's pastoral worker reports to the elders regularly so we can pray intelligently for those with specific needs and difficulties. But, at the heart of it all, we, as the male leaders, are ensuring our women's pastoral workers are being supported and trained to do their job well.

Now, we realise some feel that, by equipping women to pastor and train other women, we are not fulfilling the distinctive male-only role of pastor as we should. Some feel we are confusing people by having women in pastoral positions within the church. When we say our women's worker 'pastors' our women, we don't mean she is a *pastor*; rather, she assists the pastors by providing day-to-day pastoral care to our women. I am often asked by other pastors how we can trust what is being taught and said if we are not present. A few things to say here.

We trust our women because, as with the male leaders, we trained them well in the doctrines of the church before we released them into ministry. It is remarkably offensive to suggest that by giving women responsibility at this level we are opening the church up to serious error. Far more men have led churches astray than women.

The church is not confused but rather is built up as women, and men, are involved in 'one-anothering'. The pastor is not seen as the only one who is qualified to minister among the flock he shepherds. That is a good thing, as one man cannot adequately take on this role. Even with a small church and multiple elders we would struggle under the weight of pastoral issues in our congregation. Women are encouraged that they have a serious part to play in the kingdom of God and that they are not just bystanders or there to cook the meals.

The local church needs women's workers. Most of the women living in our communities are suffering without the hope of the gospel. They have not heard the good news that can set them truly free from their burdens. They need more than someone parachuted in to deal with social problems. They need Christian women to get stuck in to their lives. Women in churches need

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more than polite small talk and drinks rotas. They need women who will do life with them every single day. The harvest is great, the workers are few, and women are being left on the shelf. They shouldn't be. Employing more women for ministry should be our highest priority.

**Mez McConnell**

Pastor, Niddrie Community Church & Director of 20schemes

# Introduction

I'm standing on the stage talking about my ministry and my experiences as a women's worker from a working-class background. I've done this many times before and I'm always nervous, but this time it's worse. Faces are staring at me, especially from the front row. My eye catches one guy who sits cross-armed, glaring at me with a face that looks like it's been slapped with a wet fish. He's not helping. The clock of doom looms. I'm counting down the minutes left in my talk. I'm intimidated, nervous, fluffing my words. I want to do this important topic justice but I'm dive-bombing. Oh and it's over. Perfect. Straight off the stage, I'm desperate to get out of here. A polite man reminds me I have to stay as I'm part of the panel answering the audience's questions.

Eventually the ordeal is over. I have a one-hour lunch break before the afternoon sessions. As I head off the stage, a queue of people want to ask me questions about women's ministry, training or how to do women's ministry. The queue remains steady for 45 minutes, and, with only 15 minutes of lunch left, the last guy feels sorry for me and says he will email me. I'm high-fiving him in my head; I'm hungry and desperate for a cup of tea.

This isn't something unusual; it happens every time I speak about women's ministry. I would like to tell you it's because

I'm some sort of eloquent and fabulous speaker, but I'm not remotely deluded: it's definitely not me the questioners are interested in but the topic. Church leaders recognise the need for women's ministry but aren't exactly sure how to do it well or even where to start. They have questions about structure, leadership and training. They want to know how to handle specific scenarios or discuss a complex issue with me. In some cases they have tried before to have a women's worker, and it went catastrophically wrong. They have had their fingers burnt, and even though they want to try again, they aren't sure how their elders and congregations would feel a second time around.

It's not just the church leaders who have questions. I come across women who are serving in their communities who feel alone and ill-equipped to deal with the complexity of ministry in poor and deprived areas. The truth is, even though I am writing this book on women's ministry – I can tell you, hand on heart – I feel ill-equipped almost daily. When I see the queue of people after a talk, I always feel out of my depth. I'm usually praying, 'Please. Don't let them ask me a hard question!'

The hardest questions I'm asked are usually from someone who is in terrible pain. The mother of a daughter who is suffering at the hands of an abuser; the woman who is struggling with addiction and afraid to ask for help; the lady who has been hiding a secret for years, afraid the truth will come out. It's heartbreaking. There is little I can do but listen and pray, but it doesn't feel enough. I want to be able to keep in touch and encourage them along the way. I'm always struck by the same thought: *Why aren't they sharing this with someone in their own churches?*

This book is for these very people and their questions: the questions from the church leaders who want to do women's ministry well in a complementarian context; the church member who has been tirelessly serving in a hard area feeling ill-equipped, isolated and unprepared for the task at hand; and the many women who are suffering in silence in our congregations because they feel they can't confide in anyone without judgment or being asked to leave the congregation. This is the reason I agreed to write this book.

### **Do We Really Need Another Book About Women's Ministry?**

Many of the books about women's ministry give a solid biblical perspective but just stop there – all theory and no application. A biblical description is important, and anyone building a women's ministry needs a solid foundation to build on. But more than this is needed. If the endless books were telling the whole story, then maybe there would not be pastors, church members and women queueing to ask me the same questions over and over again.

When I started over a decade ago, I was, of course, asking the big picture questions, but I also wanted to know how to actually put that into practice on the ground. I wanted examples of how, in a complementarian context, you create good and robust women's ministry that teaches, equips and cares for the women in congregations whilst remaining in submission to the elders. I wanted to read how others built their structure ensuring what was being created didn't become unhinged, independent or unhelpful. What safeguards did they use to ensure what women taught women wasn't fluffy but solid? How do you establish good complementarian women's ministry without becoming

egalitarian in disguise? What does accountability really look like? I wanted a how-to guide, my questions answered and someone showing me the pitfalls to avoid. I couldn't find it.

I searched out and read fabulous, well written and absolutely essential books but none of them quite landed the plane where I needed it to. Someone needed to put practical meat on the bones and share examples of what this looks like on the ground. Then I deepened my search and looked for resources that specifically address women's ministry in complex and hard places; it was a barren desert. It was depressing. This is where I hope this book will find its niche.

### **What to Expect**

*Unconventional* is in all honesty a testimonial of my work in my small evangelical church, Niddrie Community Church (The Mission) in the southeast of Edinburgh, Scotland, and more recently as the Director for Women's Ministry for 20schemes. 20schemes is a ministry which aims to plant 20 gospel-centred churches in the most deprived areas of Scotland and train up the next generation of indigenous leaders. My role involves teaching, training and mentoring women both here in the schemes (housing estates) of Scotland and internationally.

In part 1 of the book, I begin by laying out the theological foundations for a biblical understanding about womanhood and women's ministry. I then share the story of how a women's ministry was developed at Niddrie Community Church. I share a picture of what women's ministry looks like for our church planting ministry, 20schemes, today and map out the journey we took to get here. Building from scratch with no guide was hard. I made mistakes (far too many), God took us in unexpected

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directions and what we have today doesn't look like the original plan I had in my head.

I will be writing specifically from the perspective of poor, deprived and hard places; after all, this is my context. I'm not suggesting you carbon copy our ministry plan and try to replicate it in your area, because what works in Niddrie, Scotland, won't work in Middlesbrough, England; Kentucky, USA; St. John's, Canada; or Nairobi, Kenya. I am, however, hoping the principles will be transferable in some way. Hopefully, the big issues we wrestled with will help you think through women's ministry in your context. It's with this in mind that throughout this book there will be references to the toolkits in the appendix. These are some of the key toolkits we created for use in our women's ministry training.

In part 2, I will discuss evangelism and discipleship, finishing with the simple, practical application of good accountability and discipleship. It never fails to surprise me when I teach on these topics all over the world just how many people think our discipleship and accountability methods are something new. They aren't, but what they are is well thought-through, strategic and more than the standard Bible study with a little surface application chucked in and no accountability whatsoever. In Niddrie Community Church and 20schemes, robust discipleship and accountability are the foundational bedrock on which we have built the women's ministry. Then finally in part 3, I want to consider some of the key questions and subjects I get asked about.

The voice you hear coming through these pages may be mine, but women's ministry in Niddrie and 20schemes Women isn't a solo effort. We have a team! Our care team at Niddrie



Community Church is made up of wonderful godly women who have quietly and sacrificially served our congregation and its ministries. Without this team and our elders, I would have nothing to say and this book wouldn't exist.

As I write this book I hope some of the truths, principles and resources I highlight will give you a head start and make your life easier as you think through and do women's ministry in your context.

### **Further Resources**

For more reading on working in deprived areas:

- Sharon Dickens, *Unexceptional: Ordinary Women Doing Extraordinary Things Through God* (10Publishing, 2019)
- Mez McConnell & Mike McKinley, *Church in Hard Places: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy*, 9Marks (Crossway, 2016)

