

'I have been waiting on this book for years. And it was worth the wait. Sharon Dickens in this book has organized and filled a huge gap to empower all Christian women to see their God-ordained value and to help them to flourish in what God has called them to do. Every contributor writes from a place of honesty and vulnerability that is powerful and refreshing. This is a must read for not just women in the church, but all pastors who seek to truly help the women in their congregations identify God's unique ministry for them and empower them to pursue it without reservation.'

Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church
and Senior Fellow, Church Revitalization Center, SBTS

'Your heart will be stirred as you read these beautiful accounts of the power of the gospel. Practical and insightful, every chapter is infused with timeless wisdom and gospel-centered grit.'

Gloria Furman, author of *The Pastor's Wife*

'I am so glad that this book has been written. It's been a long time coming and Sharon has put together wisdom from women from a variety of backgrounds, looking to honour Jesus. Well written, engaging and helpful.'

Mez McConnell, Pastor, Niddrie Community Church,
Director of 20schemes, Co-Director of Acts 29 Church
in Hard Places

'This book is an excellent encouragement to persevere in ministry, through both the normal routines of life and the times of difficulties and crisis. It also helpfully illustrates the biblical reality that gospel ministry, in the midst of the lives God gives us, is the call for every believer and not just for a select few.'

Jan Timmis, wife, mother, grandmother, long-time
church member and disciple

UN EXCEPTIONAL

*Ordinary women
doing extraordinary things
through God*

SHARON DICKENS

20 schemes
Gospel Churches for Scotland's Poorest

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Sharon Dickens

(20schemes)

As I, Sharon Dickens, write this, I'm sitting in a café in the departure lounge of Edinburgh Airport, heading for Sydney, Australia. I should be thinking of the horrendous flight I am about to endure or the fact my brain needs to function the minute I land. There was a mistake made when my flight was booked and I arrive at 6.30 a.m. to participate in a workshop that starts just a few hours later. But all I can think about is Katy and Natasha.

As we were packing the car, Katy and Natasha were leaving church together and stopped to chat. Natasha was one of our first indigenous converts and I remember well the day of her conversion. As on many other days I'd been intentionally hanging out with her and we chatted about everything. Once we had been together for the whole day, yet it was when she was home that she texted 'Shabba, I think I want to become a Christian.' Natasha did become a Christian that very night and we employed her three months later to be a youth worker, which may surprise many reading this book. She didn't know a thing about the Bible, but she did have a God-given gift with children and young people. Theology we could teach. Over the next five or so years

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she has been disciplined, mentored and trained, and has become an amazing godly woman.

So here she was standing on the steps of our church with Katy, a new believer she'd been discipling, both chatting away and mocking me for the size of my suitcase. Apparently I packed too light (not enough shoes). Natasha was heading out to run errands and taking Katy along with her for the jolly. This is discipleship in action – doing day-to-day life together, teaching and exemplifying Christ along the way. I absolutely loved seeing it first-hand. Katy was about to embark on our discipleship intern programme and she was excited – a young Christian loving the new life God had given her. This little scene is like a trip down memory lane, reminding me of the early days when it would have been me hanging out with Natasha. It may have seemed such an insignificant moment in time, but what it does is give such a significant glimpse of good women's ministry in action: an older, more mature woman (Natasha) teaching a younger woman in the faith (Katy) what a godly woman looked like as they did life together along the way.

As Christians we have a bad habit of complicating and structuring what is such a simple and natural thing: mentoring and discipleship – doing life together. When many of us think about women's ministry, we think about events, Bible studies, cell groups, prayer meetings, weekends away or things such as visiting the elderly and infirm. Women's ministry is compiled of lots of different structured and prescribed events, with the women's worker as the facilitator of the events. Now don't get me wrong, these are great things and very helpful, but it's not the whole story. It's not how we grow Titus 2 ministry where mature Christians come alongside younger Christians,

really getting involved in their lives and showing, teaching and exemplifying godly maturity. That is passing on from old to young the life lessons they need to stand firm.

In this introduction I set the scene and consider some of the big-picture questions, such as why women's ministry is important. But, before we even get there, I want to pause to address what I think may be an elephant in the room, so to speak. When I talk about women's ministry, there are many who think that what I'm suggesting are closet female pastors or elders in disguise. Far from it. I absolutely believe that the spiritual authority and leadership of the church and its members biblically lies with the pastor and elders. The foundations of any women's ministry has to be rooted and firmly imbedded within church structure, in biblical submission to our elders and under their authority, to enable us to serve the church members effectively. Yes, I absolutely believe pastors and elders are called to pastorally care for their female congregational members. One of the ways our elders choose to do that is to equip, trust and release us into the roles we each have.

The Importance of Women's Ministry

Where to start? One of the most common questions I am asked is: 'Why bother? Why do we need a ministry specifically for women?' The questioner is usually far more eloquent in the way they say it, but the crux of their query is the same. I am saddened by this question for two simple reasons. Firstly, a great proportion – probably more than half – of the standard congregation is female, and we have a duty to not only care for them, but to do it well. It's at this point some bright spark always says something like, 'They can always go to an elder's or pastor's

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wife for help if they need it.’ This response assumes that the elders’ and pastors’ wives are pastorally gifted and actually want to serve in this way.

The second reason I am saddened by this is the unhelpful assumption that women don’t struggle with certain sins the same way as men do. Men aren’t the only ones who battle with porn, masturbation, same-sex attraction, anger, violence, abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, debt, gambling and so on. Women do struggle with these and many more issues such as mental health, abortion, single-parent homes, submission or singleness. Maybe you think that women in your congregation couldn’t possibly contend with these issues. I promise you that no matter their background, or whether their postcode (zip code) is from the most affluent area in town or the most deprived, there will be women struggling with one or more of these issues – maybe even issues not listed here. There are women in our congregations struggling in silence, silently screaming inside, with no one to come intentionally alongside them, or because they think there is no one to whom they can talk. That is a complete travesty! How can we be exemplifying Christ, love and maturity to them if we aren’t engaging with them? How can we help, support and pray for them if we aren’t part of their lives?

Others ask, ‘Can’t the pastor just minister to them?’ I know there will be many who find this offensive, but I’m going to say it. I absolutely think that when it comes to investing intentionally and intimately in the lives of the women in our congregation, the kind of in-depth, personal and deep relationship we want to cultivate should be with someone of the same sex. I usually get some pushback from this statement, such as, ‘What if she is struggling with same-sex issues?’; ‘Are you saying we can’t be

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trusted with the pastor? That's presumptuous and offensive'; or even 'Do you not think that's a bit of an old-fashioned view in this day and age?' I've heard them all. One of the reasons I believe same-sex discipleship is essential is because the discipleship women do on the ground is very intensive and time-consuming, but it's not just that. I think we have to follow biblical principles in our relationships and Titus 2:3–5 is very clear:

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 leaves us in no doubt that as mature women we should be investing in younger Christians. Realistically you might be reading this thinking, 'I'm not older or mature,' but I want to challenge that view. There is always someone younger in the faith we can be investing in, or a friend who isn't yet saved with whom we can be intentionally sharing Christ. We need to strategically work out what a cohesive women's ministry looks like and what part we can play.

At the start of this chapter I mentioned Natasha and Katy. In our relationships with each other we see Titus 2 playing out. As an older and more mature Christian, I have the privilege of speaking into Natasha's life. She may be a younger Christian to me, but she is a mature Christian to Katy. At the time of writing Katy had only been a Christian for ten months, and it's difficult for her to find many younger Christians in the church, but she shares with

her friends about Christ. When her friends ask her something she doesn't know the answer to, she can always go back to Natasha for help and guidance. And the pattern continues. As we grow up in the faith, we need help along the way: someone to whom we can ask the hard questions; someone who will help us unravel unbiblical thinking; someone who will continually point us to Christ, not only by words, but through the example of their lives. Women's ministry isn't new; we have as mothers and sisters been teaching the young how to navigate life.

My Vision

Before you start delving into the pages of this book, I want to pause and share with you the vision for this book and why, in the pages that follow, you will hear from several women – ordinary women who have in some way been involved in women's ministry in deprived areas. These women are a mix of full-time women's workers, church planters' and pastors' wives, and active church members. It's significant, I think, to ensure from the very beginning that you, the reader, recognise that women's ministry isn't just for the full-time worker, but that we all have and can have a significant part to play. Many times when I speak on the subject of women's ministry I am challenged with the same sentence: 'That's okay for you – you're paid. I haven't the time.' I always push back with the same response: 'We all make time for what we really want to do.' You don't have to work full-time for the church or even be the wife of the pastor/planter to be involved in ministry; we all, in some way, can play a significant part. Spending time with just one or two women intentionally, strategically and well can have a massive impact in our congregations. There are several women in this book who

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aren't paid staff members, and some even have full-time jobs in the real world but still serve others.

When I had the idea for this book, I wanted, as a collective, to tell the story of a women's worker but from different perspectives – the idea being that no one woman can do everything or tell the whole story. To get the whole picture we need several voices. Therefore in this book you will be introduced to seven women, myself included. We are all ordinary women. Some have been to Bible colleges; some not. We aren't all paid full-time employees on a church staff. We aren't perfect. But what we do have is experience. We have all shared in some way the good, hard and bad times. We love the Lord and are passionate about taking care and investing in the women in our communities.

Each chapter will be written by a different woman, who will share a little about what ministry looks like in her context before sharing some of her testimony. This testimony will be a very focused segment of her personal story, linking to the theme of her chapter. These women and the subjects they are focusing on haven't been selected at random – I gave them their chapters specifically because I know them and their stories. They all have something to say that is helpful for us to hear.

I remember how hard it was when I started to think about creating women's ministry in our church. I wished there was a group of women I could meet up with over coffee and have them point me in the right direction. That is the vision behind this book. I always wished I could go back in time and help the younger version of myself to avoid the big mistakes on the way. That is why I thought it was important to use this opportunity to share the lessons that we have all learnt and the big mistakes we wish we could undo. As we look back in hindsight and share,