

Women-Led Local Church Initiatives

- The Young Moms Support Group of Riverside Baptist Church
- Coastal Community Church Support Group

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Ever wonder how a local church initiative gets started? Here are two amazing stories of support for abused women operating under the umbrella of the local church.

The Young Moms Support Group of Riverside Baptist Church

It all began when three middle-aged women had a ministry idea that put their faith to the test.

They were all members of a medium-sized evangelical church located in a downtown area of a small city. Their church was mission minded and interested in outreach, but it had a problem. The middle-class congregation had almost no contact with the needs of the people who inhabited the downtown area where it was located.

Three housewives—motivated by a desire to share their faith and their time—decided that they wanted to make a difference in the lives of some young mothers whom they considered to be “at risk.” Their dream was to provide needed material and emotional resources for women and children whose lives were marked by poverty, violence and despair.

“I want to be remembered as somebody who cared about people and somebody who tried to do what Jesus would do,” said Jean, one of the originators of the ministry idea. Their compassion for the young women was infectious and before long many others in the church were eager to help out to ensure that the program was a success.

The program formally began with four young moms and grew in a few years time to include 34 women with small children. Placements are filled by word-of-mouth, donations of food and clothing come from the church people and professionals in the local community lend an hour of their time once a year to talk to the young women about restraining orders, or applying for a job, or lodging a complaint against a landlord.

Over its five year history, the program has evolved but the ministry ideas are basically unchanged: to bring the love of Christ and the practical support of a faith community to young mothers in need.

For nine months of the year, one morning a week, there is a merger of spiritual support, child care, food donations, coffee and snacks, Bible study, gifts of clothing, craft activities, peer mentoring and life skills training occurring at Riverside Baptist, led by a small army of housewives.

At 9:00 am the volunteers, and the women and their kids who they have driven, begin to arrive at the church. There are age-appropriate programs run for the children, and snacks for the women. At 9:30, there is a guest speaker—a nutritionist, a lawyer, a social worker, a teacher or a job consultant—and at 10:30 the women go shopping through the racks of clothing that have been donated. At 11:00 there is the choice between an informal Bible Study or just “chatting” with one of the volunteers. As each woman prepares to leave, usually around 11:30, they are offered a bag of groceries as they depart. Their volunteer drivers take them home, or to a doctor’s appointment, or the social assistance office, as best suits the women.

The simplicity of the program coupled with its profound impact on both volunteers and the women and children it serves cannot be overstated. But it was far from a simple program—it offered a bridge between the church and the community. Its flavour was social justice, but it had an

educational component, kept the spiritual journey alive, was nonpretentious and cooperative in design, empowering for participants and volunteers and very, very practical.

The challenges facing the volunteer leaders were many: how to draw boundaries, how to maintain an ample supply of volunteers, how to ensure that donations kept up to the demand, how to refer those with specific counseling needs, how to ensure that there was adequate respite for the caregivers and most of all the challenge to make it worthwhile and impactful for the women it sought to serve.

The women-mentoring-women approach was intentional and therapeutic. Getting to know several young women whose life circumstances were quite different from their own had a dramatic impact on the volunteers. Some of the “graduates” of the program returned later as volunteers and a few of their children got connected with other activities run by the church. But for the most part, success was measured in terms that were very straight-forward: the young women kept coming, they brought their friends and they brought their children.

Coastal Community Church Support Group

Coastal Community Church was a small fellowship of believers whose livelihood was derived from the sea. As fishing families, they faced the vulnerability of depleting cod stocks, competition from the large trawlers called “seiners” that sucked fish off the ocean floor, aquaculture that bred fish but often pushed the “schools” to deeper waters, and the slow demise of community life as their children left the fish behind in search of a more prosperous living in the inland towns and cities.

Amid the idyllic, serene setting, there was a vital resource for women who suffered trauma at home. At Coastal Community Church a small group of women victims and survivors met regularly for support and encouragement. The group’s beginning was humble enough. “Six or seven women approached me after I offered a workshop at the church,” said Marianne, the organizer, a university-educated woman in her late thirties. “They were all victims of abusive homes, and they wished there was a Christian support group to help them in their efforts to deal with the past.”

Several months after the women’s initial request had been voiced, the support group began. A pastor’s wife and a nurse had been recruited to help with organizing the group and Marianne agreed to facilitate the discussion. The initial commitment was for a twelve week block, once a week for 90 minutes. With confidentiality assured and unconditional love and acceptance felt, the group “laughed, cried, prayed, confronted, teased, complained, rejoiced — most of all we have been learning to love and to trust.”

Dealing with so much pain pushed both survivors and facilitators to the boundaries of their emotional and spiritual resources. The roles of leading the group and participating in the group became blurred over time. All those attending the meetings felt both a sense of personal vulnerability and the weight of another sister’s anguish and abuse.

Compassion and care is not for the faint of heart. Such is the message of Coastal Community Church’s outreach program to women who have endured years of abuse. Yet, when women listen to each other, care deeply for one another’s wounds and offer a healing environment, amazing things can be accomplished. It takes great courage to listen, but even greater courage to disclose.

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