

## Encouragement For Leaders by Mary Younger

### **ALONE (Part Two)**

“Turn to me and be gracious to me for I am lonely and afflicted.”

Psalms 25:16

Alone! Why do I feel so alone in the leadership of this ministry? With dozens of people around me, I feel separate, isolated and cut off. *What am I supposed to do, Lord? Do I carry this responsibility alone? How do I share the weight of ministry with my team? Is there a problem in my life, or my ministry life, that I am unaware of, or unwilling to address, that is leading to my loneliness?*

In Part I of this series we assessed three personal or internal reasons for loneliness in leadership: leadership position, personal spiritual life, and emotional pain. Once we have resolved those areas, yet loneliness seems to prevail, it is time to evaluate external pressures that can lead to loneliness: team structure, spiritual warfare, lack of rest, and the cost of ministry.

Take time to analyze your ministry in light of the questions below.

#### ***It's a team effort.***

What did leadership look like when God called people to specific purposes? Adam was alone, so God gave him Eve. Noah was helped by his family. Moses had Aaron and Miriam. David had his mighty men. Elijah had Elisha and the 7000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal. Mary, Jesus's mother, had her aunt. The disciples had one another. Paul had Barnabas and Timothy and others. I think we can safely say that God doesn't want us fulfilling his purposes alone. After all, God has his own team so to speak with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. John 14 reveals the work of all three in us.

Hopefully, we have a team, or at least a friend to bounce ideas off of and help with the work. We must be careful in this busy world we live in that our teams do not degenerate to group texts and meet only to perform the work that needs to be accomplished. Although texts and emails have made life easier in communicating facts, this type of detachment leaves the leader feeling alone, unsupported, and unprotected.

Before I was hired by the church, I spent eighteen years as a volunteer in Women's Ministry. I started by serving coffee. As the years passed, the Lord led me to other positions as I grew in spiritual maturity. During those years I learned the importance of teamwork. We helped one another grow, pray, laugh and serve. We were “iron sharpening iron” (Prov. 27:17) as the Lord motivated us to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phil. 3:13)

Consider these questions concerning your team.

How many helpful dependable hands do the work of the ministry?

How much of the work do I do alone?

Who could help me through delegation of duties?

Why am I not asking for help?

How could the team size grow?

Who could be trained?

Who has gifts or strengths in certain areas of ministry and would be willing to at least consider helping if asked?

What are the Spiritual Gifts of the team members?

An honest assessment of workers and future helpers, considering their strengths and weaknesses, provides the leader with information to determine the best placement of volunteers. A well-worded application form can reveal much and be a springboard for in-depth conversations.

Job descriptions are necessary and should include the time commitment required. A volunteer may not understand the responsibilities of the ministry they are seeking to serve. A Sunday School teacher needs to prepare crafts, music and teaching. A bereavement team will spend three to five hours setting up and cleaning up the reception after a memorial service. Baptisms may require preparation for multiple services and time beyond to do laundry or clean the baptismal. Bible teachers will spend hours preparing for a forty-five-minute presentation. Music requires practice time and coordination with other musicians. People need to know the level of commitment they are making, and so does the leader. Unfulfilled expectations in either person lead to misunderstandings and problems.

A vital aspect of team leadership is prayer support and attention. Do the team members feel cared for, or are they only valued for their work? How much time is spent praying for current helpers?

Prayer time directed toward ministry and ministry team members is confounding for most leaders. Often we use “Lord help me...” prayers at the last minute to deal with decisions and people problems. I have a doer personality, and prayer time usually was third or fourth on the list of things that needed to be done. However, I also knew that prayer was imperative in finding God's will and strengthening the various ministries and leaders. To combat my weakness, I recruited a team of four mature women. Each one committed to meeting with me one hour per month for prayer. We concentrated on bringing every ministry and each leader before the Lord. It was a most fulfilling and exciting time as we watched how the Lord interacted with those ministries. Perhaps you could be creative in developing a system of prayer for your ministry. Praying with a trusted mature woman will alleviate some of your loneliness.

It takes time, effort and lots of prayer to develop a team of people who function well and move a ministry to accomplish God's will, but the rewards are great. When we don't have the time or we lack the desire to establish relationships or train and support people, it may be time to step aside.

### ***Spiritual warfare induces fear as a tactic to discourage us.***

II Tim. 1:7 tells us that God does not give us a spirit of fear, but of love and a sound mind, so where does fear come from? There are many circumstances that generate fear in women: fear of failure, fear of people, fear of the unknown to name a few. However, we sometimes underestimate the enemy of our souls who uses worldly thinking, fleshly desires and devilish tactics to create fear causing us to feel isolated and alone.

The **world** tells us ministry is not important and the Word is foolishness (I Cor. 1:18) causing us to fear we are wasting our time. If we refute those ideas, then the world tells us that the professionals, those with degrees, or expertise or seminary should be doing our job. Fear tells us we are not competent, relevant or needed. However, Jesus chose a few fishermen to continue his message and change the world. Never underestimate the Holy Spirit's ability to use the common ordinary person (like you and

me) to spread love, demonstrate care and change the smaller world in which we live.

Sometimes our **flesh** tells us we should be acknowledged and paid for our time and effort, and if we are on staff we should be paid well. However, Jesus sent out his disciples and told them to leave their funds at home and accept whatever hospitality was offered to them. (Matt. 10:1-13; Mk. 6:7-13; Lk. 10:1-4) Large churches may be able to support a large staff, but the majority of churches are small and their offering barely covers expenses. Fear of not having enough finances for our ministry, or for our family, can make us withdraw from people and eventually from ministry itself. Remember, the Lord only has to sell one cow on one hill to meet our financial need (Ps.50:10). Let's use our need to build our faith by watching and waiting to see how God works on our behalf.

The **devil** is a continual liar and his cohorts whisper lies in our minds every day generating unfounded fears, especially at 3:00 am when we can't sleep. Learn to say, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (Lk. 4:8; Matt. 16:23; Mk. 8:33) Sometimes it helps to say it out loud. Eph. 6:14, 16 tells us to stand firm and lift up the shield of faith. Verse 18 directs, "With all prayer and petition pray [with specific requests] at all times [on every occasion and in every season] in the Spirit. And with this in view, stay alert with all perseverance and petition [interceding in prayer] for all God's people." (Amplified translation)

It is the Lord who gives us love for others and for the ministry he is accomplishing. He promises to give us a sound mind to handle whatever ministry challenges arise. Courage has been defined as not the absence of fear, but the ability to acknowledge the fear and move forward anyway. Calvin Miller, in his book *Conversations with Jesus*, states, "Growth always happens on the cusp of courage. Be brave therefore. Try new ideas, walk new roads." Refuse Satan's lies and press on with your Savior and Lord and watch fear and the resulting loneliness move aside.

### ***Rest from ministry is essential.***

The constant pressure of leading a team takes its toll physically. It becomes even more important that you rest from serving if your ministry is weekly such as Sunday School or leading worship. Leaders of small groups also need a rest. Daily ministry in missions or ministry to the poor can be all-consuming, bringing on compassion fatigue. If your ministry is to those who are ill, in crisis or need constant care the burnout factor is high.

Perhaps these questions will give you some ideas:

Is a change in my schedule needed?

Am I recognizing the signs of burnout?

What would my husband and children say about my ministry involvement if asked?

Am I neglecting home responsibilities? (I would manage to get the laundry done, but not put away. When my husband started asking for clean underwear, I knew I had to make some changes.)

### **Ideas for finding rest**

What is the slow season in ministry? Is my team large enough to let me have some time off? When could I mark some rest days on my calendar? Where is a safe place I could go to be alone with the Lord? Retreat centers will often allow a leader to spend a day on their grounds without charge. Call and ask. How about a friend's mountain/beach cabin or guest house? I sometimes used the home of one of our single working women. I would arrive after she left for work and leave before she came home. An unexpected side benefit of this: she felt deeply blessed by the Lord.

NEWIM offers "Gatherings" for women in ministry to connect. Search [NEWIM.org](http://NEWIM.org) for the nearest

meeting. Encouragement and new friendships await. Or, contact NEWIM [info@newim.org](mailto:info@newim.org) and set up a video conference with women in similar ministries.

Ministry conferences give support from others and valuable new ideas. If you are on staff, try to build money into your budget for a yearly conference or a NEWIM retreat (scholarships available). If there is no money available, call around to other churches and learn who is doing the same type of ministry as you. Then, call and go to lunch or breakfast and talk ministry. I was always amazed at how uplifted I was by those meetings. Eventually, we became friends and supported one another in times of problems.

Teams need rest also. Look at your team and ask these questions:

Who looks or sounds weary in well-doing?

Is the team cross-trained so they can fill in for one another?

When was the last time you took them away, even for a day, so they could discuss the future, share personal struggles and pray together?

When did you last have an evening of fun together with no thought of ministry?

Could your church have an evening of appreciation for ministry teams? Dinner, acknowledgments and a gift bag go a long way in saying, "Thank you. We appreciate you." Gal. 6:10 directs us, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Jesus was well aware that his team, the disciples, needed rest and debrief time. After he sent them out to minister to others, he removed them to a quiet place, Mk 6:31. He removed himself from the press of the crowds to the quiet of the wilderness, Lk. 5:16. When selecting the men who would follow him, he spent an extended time praying alone, Lk. 6:12. This is not new material to us, as leaders. However, we may ignore it until the stress and loneliness in ministry demand a change in us.

### ***Have you considered the cost and sacrifice of leading a ministry?***

We often go into leadership with great faith and idealistic enthusiasm. Both are needed to bring new life to ministry. Somewhere along the way, we realize we are dealing with flawed, sometimes damaged people. Simple problems become amazingly complex. Confusion and loneliness begin to creep into our hearts. We call out to God and he turns our eyes to his son, Jesus.

Jesus walked a singular path to the Cross. His followers did not understand him. The spiritual leaders of the day hated him. His family didn't know how to think about him. He didn't even have a home or a spouse to talk to. When that fateful night came, his disciples betrayed and abandoned him to his enemies. As he hung on the cross he asked in pain why had God forsaken him.

There's an interesting scriptural principle in Phil. 3:11 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection..." Isn't that what we all want as leaders? We want to have a deep knowledge of him that is so compelling it will draw others to a personal relationship with Christ. We want to experience the power of his resurrection in the transformation of our lives and in the lives of those we love. We want the victorious life of Christ reflected in our ministries.

However, we usually stop reading before the end of the verse. There is more to consider: "... and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death..." Now we have a problem. Are we willing to share in his sufferings? What does "death" look like as we live? Is feeling alone part of leading this ministry? Am I willing to experience loneliness as a leader, while dying to self and sharing the burden with a trusted few? Are we willing to be hurt and still fulfill the duties of our ministry?

Some loneliness comes from naiveté, some from not developing a good team, some is self-inflicted through neglect of our spiritual life, some from spiritual warfare and fear, lack of rest, or emotional pain. In addition, the loneliness of sharing in Christ's sufferings is a serious matter to contemplate. No one likes feeling alone. Yet we see that it was a part of Christ's daily life. Perhaps what you are experiencing is the deepening of your faith and walk with the Lord. If so, praise God who is leading you through the discipline of loneliness to be ever more like his beloved son, Jesus.

My prayer for those of you in leadership positions is this:

*Dearest Lord, God of all comfort, make your presence known to the Reader today. Wrap your arms about her, and bring a sense of safety. Draw her to a realization of those external forces that bring loneliness to her life. Strengthen her inner being to endure aloneness until those problems have been solved. Comfort her heart, if you are teaching deep levels of transformation, as Christ's character is built into her life. Thank you that you are aware of all things concerning us, and constantly call us to a deeper walk with you.*

*In the name of the one who walked alone in the midst of suffering humanity,  
Amen*

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