

Introduction:

THEY SHARED ALL THINGS IN COMMON

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

—Acts 2:42

“Mom, I’m hurt! I fell off my sled, and my arm really hurts!” These tearful words echoed over my cell phone from my thirteen-year-old son, Patrick, as I drove my nine-year-old daughter, Hannah, home from her weekly violin lesson. As I wound my Ford Explorer through the mountains surrounding our home in the Hudson Highlands at the US Army garrison at West Point, New York, the cell-phone signal was fleeting, but as best I could, I harnessed calm and instructed Patrick to go into the house, put a bag of frozen peas on his arm, and watch TV until I returned home in five minutes.

In reality, those five minutes were about forty minutes because I could not get back to the house until I picked up my fourteen-month-old baby, George, from day care. Upon arriving home, I found that Patrick had followed directions, but he was huddled in a fetal position, whimpering in pain. With one look at his contorted arm I thought, “Wow! That. Is. Not. Normal. Arms are not supposed to do that!” To keep Patrick from getting hysterical, I took a breath, whispered a prayer, and said in my

most prescriptively metered tone, “Okay, buddy. It looks like you broke your arm. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

The kids climbed back into the Explorer, and we retraced the path down the mountain toward the army hospital to embark upon our evening in the emergency room. Since my mental state was in response mode for Patrick’s immediate need for medical care, I did not think through the facts that it was dinnertime, none of the kids had eaten, and the \$1.25 in change in my wallet would barely buy a bag of Doritos from the vending machine.

Within an hour, Patrick was taken for x-rays, Hannah was bored and hungry, and George was lying on the floor of the emergency room crying for food. These chaotic days were when I missed my husband, Greg, the most. You see, our family was navigating a situation intimately familiar to many military families: Greg was serving month seven of a twelve-month deployment. While I knew his heart was with us, there was no way for him to help us physically that evening.

I started to feel defeated but then remembered something. A good friend, Nicole, whom I met through the women’s ministry group at the Catholic chapel, had leaned over the pew multiple times to say, “Elizabeth, if you ever need anything, please call. I mean it.” Despite her heartfelt offer of hospitality, I had privately resolved not to ask for help during this year. Rather stubbornly, I told myself that I was strong and could manage on my own.

But that is not the point of being in community with others. In Christian charity, my friend offered to help, and I was being pretty uncharitable in refusing to let her, or anyone else, help me. This day, however, was different. I needed help! I retrieved my cell phone and called my friend. When she answered, I said in a weak voice, “Nicole?” “Elizabeth?” she responded. I managed to say, “I need help . . .”

I don’t remember the rest of the conversation, but within five minutes, Nicole, brimming with energy, appeared at the sliding-glass emergency-room doors pushing a double jogging

stroller loaded up with blankets. She had walked to the hospital from her house in the stinging cold of that February night! Without any pretenses, Nicole got to work. She buckled baby George into the stroller and covered him snugly. She assured me to take my time with Patrick and that she would take care of Hannah and George.

Patrick and I spent the next few hours snacking on cheese-flavored Doritos—thanks to that \$1.25 in change—as we drew tic-tac-toe and hangman games on the paper gurney sheet, and eventually had his arm set in a cast. After Patrick was discharged, we drove the short distance to Nicole’s house to pick up the younger children.

When I entered the dimly lit living room, I found Nicole’s husband rocking in a chair with George sound asleep on his chest. My pulse stopped for a second or two. For months, George had not been rocked to sleep by his father, but this night he was fast asleep in the arms of a father who was enjoying rocking a baby as much as George enjoyed being rocked. I was overwhelmed. It was the sweetest thing I had seen in some time. I thanked Nicole for her kindness and wearily but gratefully took the kids home.

God showed me that evening one aspect of why women’s ministry is important and necessary in a vibrant Catholic community. In a tense situation, God made himself known to me through a friendship built in our parish women’s ministry. God reveals himself in a variety of ways. In John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene recognizes her resurrected Lord when he calls her name (see John 20:16). We learn from Luke’s gospel that the men on the road to Emmaus recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread: “And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Lk 24:30–31). God incarnate may have revealed himself to Mary through speech and to the men going to Emmaus through bread, but that

February night God showed his love incarnate for my family through a friend with a double stroller and a father rocking my sleeping baby.

I did not realize it until later, but the foundation for this manifestation of God's love had been prepared through intentional, everyday interactions between Nicole and me in the women's ministry group at our Catholic chapel. Over shared Mass attendance, spiritual reading, strong coffee, carbohydrate-laden potluck breakfast casseroles, praying the Rosary, visiting a nursing home for retired nuns, decorating the church for Christmas, and even weeding the church garden, we had forged a kinship mediated by Christ's love.

LET'S GET ACQUAINTED

But let's back up. How is it that you came to be reading a book about women's ministry written by me, a person who believes with as much certainty as I believe in gravity that women's ministry is essential to vibrant parish life and the propagation of the faith? Maybe you have been asking God to help you meet other Catholic women at your parish, but you don't see a natural opportunity that fits with your schedule. Or perhaps you're interested in a certain book or service opportunity, and you would like to share that experience with others in your parish. Or maybe you tried the current offerings at your parish, and they don't quite fit your needs. Don't worry—this book will help!

I have been involved in women's ministry in some capacity for most of my adult life. The first time I attended a women's ministry was my sophomore year in college. My bestie, Melissa, invited me. So, I went. I was curious but not expecting anything. About six of us gathered in a small circle on the floor of a college residence-hall kitchen. When the group leader asked us to open our Bibles to the Gospel of John, I opened my Bible to the *First Letter* (epistle) of John. Though a cradle Catholic and

raised going to Mass on Sundays, I had a hard time navigating the scriptures on my own.

The leader asked me to read a verse, and I did, but it was from the wrong book—and I was mortified. The leader graciously helped me find the right passage and correct course. Then something happened: I discovered that I loved what we were learning. I came back to the group week after week, eager to learn more. I wanted to learn about the faith as well as the women who shared their lives with me. What's more, I wanted to follow their example.

After college, which included some graduate work in theology, I gradually started taking more active leadership roles in women's ministries. (Please note that while formal theological training can be useful, especially for catechists and teachers, you certainly don't need a degree to serve the Church with your gifts!)

During our years at West Point, I came to know the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, and its women's ministry group, the Military Council of Catholic Women (MCCW). This was where I met Nicole, my emergency-room rescuer.

In 2012, I helped organize the MCCW as a nonprofit, directed MCCW's faith-formation program from 2012 to 2014, and served as the president of the MCCW from 2014 to 2016. Since then I have continued to serve in this ministry, helping it extend its reach to even more women through our shared faith. Today, the MCCW forms a faith community of Catholic women across the United States and across the world. Local groups gather regularly for faith studies and fellowship, and throughout the year we hold several faith-formation retreats and conferences in the United States, Europe, and Asia.¹ It has been a privilege to see how God has made this ministry grow through the good work of many faithful women.

Now, before you are tempted to close this book, overwhelmed at the thought of God calling you to do something

this complex, please keep reading. I assure you that this is far more about God's grace than my natural abilities. If someone had asked eighteen-year-old, college-aged me—the woman who did not know the difference between the First Letter of John and the Gospel of John—if I would someday lead a women's ministry for a global archdiocese, the answer would have been a resounding, "No way. I'm not smart enough. I don't know enough. I'm too sinful. I'm not good enough."

And if I had done that, I would have fallen into a trap of deceit set by the enemy of our souls, who wants us to doubt our God-given potential and believe that we are not good enough to know and serve a God who wants nothing more than our love.

However, by God's grace, I am good enough. You are good enough. In fact, we are "very good" (Gn 1:31). God does not expect us to be perfect in our women's ministry work; he asks for our obedience to his calling. God puts that burning restlessness in our spirits that propels us to seek something outside our own comfort zones, that causes us to want to draw close to Christ, and that makes us want to connect with other women in our faith walks. I am grateful that God put in my heart a curiosity to know him and love him, and a spirit to serve him.

WHY WOMEN'S MINISTRY?

Other than that college Bible study, my women's ministry experience has predominantly been in military communities, where we know that the work of the service member is inherently dangerous, and families are often separated because of deployments and extensive training time in the field or at sea. Women's ministry becomes the foundation of a necessary network of support in which the proverbial "village" that raises children is a trustworthy one that shares values and life experiences.

However, the same is true about any vital, sustainable women's ministry outside military life—participants rely on one

another, trust one another, and grow in the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love together in authentic spiritual friendship.

Throughout the New Testament, the closest Greek word to describe the intimate relationships formed through women's ministry is *koinonia*. "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life (*koinonia*), to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). For me, the *koinonia* forged in women's ministry goes beyond mere "communal life"; it is the enduring fruit of devoted friendship, catechesis, and prayer, undergirded by the love of Christ. We foster a communal life of faith and friendship through catechesis, prayer, and participating in the sacraments.

Women's ministry is important because it invites us to a venue to learn about the Christian faith and live it in ways that befit the feminine genius with which God uniquely endows each of us.²

Women's ministry can be surprising, humorous, and yes, even frustrating at times, but that can be overcome with a lot of cooperation and ingenuity. St. Teresa of Ávila reflected that "men of learning seem to get theology without much effort. But we women need to take it all in slowly and muse on it. We need to feel it."³ And as we take the time to talk about it and bond over it, we discover another aspect of the feminine genius, as new life emerges from those moments of shared generosity, compassion, intuition, and vulnerability.

Could anyone have met me at the emergency room on that chaotic night? Yes. We know that there are good Samaritans in this world. But my relationship with Nicole that night was special. It was *koinonia*. Nicole's help was living the communal life and sharing Christ's love. Our shared relationship, mediated in the Church, inspired her to offer assistance and moved me to ask for help. This shared relationship in the Church sustains our friendship to this day.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As you are reading this book, maybe something is stirring within you. Perhaps you have a hunger to find a friend like Nicole. Maybe someone like Melissa invited you to a gathering and you simply accepted her invitation to help create a new ministry. If so, welcome!

People venture into leadership roles for all kinds of reasons. Perhaps you are consulting this book to begin a new women's ministry, or you are formulating a plan to help you strengthen an existing ministry. Maybe you feel disheartened or unappreciated in your current ministry and you are ready for something new. You know that women's ministry is important, but you are not sure where God is calling you now. No matter where you are in your life in women's ministry, my hope is that *Joyful Momentum* will help you reflect on your work more deeply and provide tools and best practices to keep moving forward.

momentum builders

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

Tip #1. Move forward with a team. If a women's ministry has not yet been established in your community, seek out other women who may feel called to start one. Make an announcement at Mass; put an invitation in the bulletin and on the church's social media, inviting women to an interest meeting so that many hands can assist in starting the ministry. The initial gathering does not have to be large, but we know that God sends us out at least two by two, so do your best.

*Tip #2. Let this book serve as a guide to starting or revitalizing a women's ministry. Use *Joyful Momentum* as a group study to share experiences of ministry, celebrate your good work, and consider how the ministry could be strengthened through applying the practices and strategies shared in each chapter. Be prepared for God to work through you, and enjoy the surprises along the way!*

Tip #3. A vibrant women's ministry benefits the entire faith community. Women's ministry provides an environment in which women grow in faith (through catechesis), hope (through prayer and sacrament), and love (through shared relationships). And yet the benefits extend to the rest of the community as well. Through vibrant women's ministries I have witnessed women returning to the Church and communities growing outwardly in missionary discipleship. Parishes that invest in women's ministry often see corresponding growth in other areas: members of the group may be more likely to enroll their children in religious-education programs, have their marriages convalidated and their children baptized, and influence their non-Catholic spouses to enroll in RCIA. When women's ministry thrives, the whole parish benefits.

You have taken a step to responding to that restlessness that God has placed within you to work in women's ministry. However, no one can do ministry alone. Women's ministry is by definition relational, and so this book will show you how to gather your "tribe" and make plans as a group.

Joyful Momentum has eight chapters, and each explores a different facet of women's ministry. The first two chapters are foundational: Chapter 1 explores two kinds of Christ-centered relationships that are vital to any woman's ministry: friend-to-friend (within the team) and team-to-pastor (within the parish). Chapter 2 presents women's ministry as a vocation—a call within

a call. It invites readers into a process of discernment about their vocation in women's ministry.

The remaining chapters of *Joyful Momentum* offer a practical guidebook to *doing* the work of women's ministry and include many ideas, exercises, and best practices. These chapters incorporate essential elements of women's ministry:

- Learn how to practice hospitality that attracts women currently sitting in your pews who have never attended a women's ministry, and to go outside the comfort zone of your parish to introduce women around you to Jesus.
- Rediscover (or discover for the first time) the spiritual gifts that God has given you to build up your faith community.
- Build a team that celebrates one another's spiritual gifts and diversities and avoids traps of comparison and insecurity.
- Assess the efforts of your group and make changes in ways that unify people.
- Offer and seek forgiveness when conflicts arise in relationships—and understand when to walk away from toxic relationships when they hinder your ability to do the work God calls you to do.
- Find out how to pass the leadership baton without losing momentum and how to find (and be) spiritual mentors.

Each chapter is structured in three parts: *Share*, *Apply*, and *Ponder*.

Share. Women naturally relate to one another through sharing our experiences, feelings, and dreams. We lift up one another through listening empathetically, offering encouraging words, expressing our love for one another through our deeds, supporting one another in prayer, and just holding a hand or sharing a hug. The Share section of each chapter does exactly that—it shares personal experiences in women's ministry that relate to the theme of each chapter.

Apply. The second part of each chapter invites readers to reflect upon an essential element of women's ministry theologically through scripture and Church teaching. This section presents aspects of the lives and writings of women saints such as Teresa of Ávila, Teresa of Calcutta, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Thérèse of Lisieux, Katharine Drexel, Faustina Kowalska, Hildegard of Bingen, and Blessed Jutta of Disibodenberg. These women loved God and their neighbors. They were passionate about the faith, practical, witty, and diversely gifted. They provide a compelling witness of discipleship for women's ministry and, indeed, for the whole Church.

Each *Apply* section incorporates a feature called "Momentum Builders" containing tips, exercises for group discussion, and other how-tos that can be adapted to a wide variety of groups and ministries. Additional online, printable resources are available at joyfulmomentum.org or avemariapress.com.

Ponder. Each chapter concludes with scripture passages and questions to use, individually or as a group, to help you apply the material to your particular circumstances and ministry goals.

St. Teresa of Ávila taught that "God appreciates it when we do not put limits on his work."⁴ God will work wonders with a team that is open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I dare say that with an active and healthy women's ministry *koinonia*, parishes and indeed the world can be transformed. Let's get started.

PONDER

Today's passage to ponder is from Acts 2:42–47:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and

possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1. This passage describes the nascent Church in Jerusalem. How does this community resemble the Church today? How can our parishes more closely strive for this community?
2. Think of a woman who has helped you grow in your relationship with Jesus. How did this person encourage, instruct, or model the faith for you?
3. Do you help other women grow in their faith? If so, how do you share your faith with them?
4. Have you ever participated in a women's ministry? If so, describe your favorite experience in women's ministry. How did this experience resemble the Acts 2 community? How did this community enhance your life and the life of the parish?
5. Have you ever experienced the gift of receiving from a "Nicole" in your own life? In what way can you extend Christian charity to someone else today? Do it.

Foundational Relationships:

THE FAVOR OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

What a good favor God does to those he places in the company of good people!

—St. Teresa of Ávila

SHARE

Do you have a best friend? I have always been friendly with many people, but few people know the inner workings of my heart—my prayers, aspirations, insecurities, and the places in which God is challenging me or allowing me to struggle.

My friend Maggie is one of these precious people. We met through the army while our husbands were stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas. We bonded over a conversation about Mary because, when we met, we were both wearing necklaces with medals of Mary. We share many things in common, including our goofy personalities, the adventure of raising young children, and army life. In Texas, we met weekly for a Bible study, shared our

Thanksgiving tables, cared for each other's children, and confided in each other about nearly everything. There are few areas in my life in which Maggie has not offered support or counsel. The thread that ties our experiences together is our Catholic faith. We point each other toward Christ and help each other when we falter.

Several years ago, Maggie and I were fortunate to spend a weekend together in San Diego, California, at a Catholic women's ministry gathering. During the opening dinner at an Italian restaurant, I ordered a glass of chianti, and I noticed that Maggie ordered lemonade. Knowing that Maggie enjoys a peppery chianti as much as I do, I stared at her with a look of "Do you have something to tell me?" She returned my raised eyebrows with a smirk of "Yes, I have something to tell you."

Maggie shared with our gathering that she was pregnant, and we all cheered at this announcement. In contrast to her previous two pregnancies, Maggie was seven weeks along and relieved that she was not in the throes of morning sickness. In fact, she felt great. One of our many bonding points is that we are both violently nauseous in the early stages of pregnancy. My four miscarriages each followed weeks of not feeling sick enough. Knowing Maggie's similarly queasy history, I made a cautious mental note.

After dinner, we returned to our hotel rooms, and about fifteen minutes later, my phone rang. Sobs poured through the receiver, and I instantly knew what had happened. I grabbed my pajamas and toothbrush and said to my roommate, "I won't be back tonight, but pray for Maggie. She's having a miscarriage."

I stayed with Maggie that night. We prayed for her, the family, and the baby, and we cried and laughed through all the emotions women have when we lose a baby. With mascara smeared down her face, Maggie remarked that if she had to go through this with someone other than her husband, she was glad it was with me.

The next morning, I found our group leader and explained what happened. Our gathering met for morning Mass, and afterward, our priest, Fr. Joe, called us into a circle at the front of the church. He reflected on a verse from the book of Job: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD!” (1:21).

“Oh yeah? Where is the blessing?” some of us wondered. Our priest showed us. Fr. Joe anointed Maggie with the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, for healing—for her body and her broken heart. Then he offered to anoint any other woman who felt the need for healing from losing a baby. Of the forty women, at least twenty-five came forward to receive an anointing. Through this experience we were blessed with sacramental grace and grew closer by sharing about the children we will not meet on this side of heaven.

So often women hold losses like this privately in our hearts. The first time I miscarried, I spent Sunday after Sunday sitting in the back row of the church with tears welling up in my eyes. I told myself that if I did not blink, the tears could not spill out all over the hymnal, so I would not, *technically speaking*, be crying in public. This was, of course, nonsense. The tears always spilled.

Our society does not love our unborn children the way we do, and our neighbors or coworkers may not grasp the magnitude of pain that a miscarriage can bring. However, because my friendship with Maggie is a Christ-centered, spiritual friendship, we traversed the valley of tears vulnerably with each other, turning to God through prayer with our community, being fortified by the Eucharist and the grace of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. With Fr. Joe’s pastoral care, we rightfully put this sad experience into God’s hands.