

Gifts, not Guilt | Caryn Rivadeneira

Having spent the majority of my working life in professional ministry, I can testify heartily to its rewards. Of course, the benefits of working in ministry don't come in the form of the hefty pay packages my friends in the "secular" world enjoy. The true payoff - at least for me - in ministry work has been the opportunity to use and sharpen my God-given passions, talents, and gifts for something - excuse the cliché? - I believe in. I hope that this is true for those of you who use your gifts in ministry.

But I've also seen many of my friends not so pleased with their ministry experiences - be it in church or in some other type of ministry. This surprised me most with a couple of my friends who are natural leaders in other spheres of life, but who flounder when it comes to finding their niche serving at church. That is, until I realized something: They were trying to use their leadership skills in ways that didn't match their other gifts at all.

I firmly believe that if you want to serve the Lord using your leadership gifts, you need to figure out how to do it using your other gifts, no matter how worldly or unimportant they may seem. This means that you need to recognize that your mighty tennis serve comes not only from hours of practice but from the Lord. Likewise with your perfectly gooey chocolate brownies or your compelling public speaking style. God is the God of tennis, brownies, and public speaking, and all those talents can - and should - be used effectively for serving him.

But what I see happening is women - particularly us leaders - feeling compelled (though not called) to get involved in ministries out of guilt. You know what I mean here - you get involved in a ministry that doesn't appeal to you simply because you feel like you should, because there's a need.

My own example of this is Little Lambs, a preschool ministry at my church. Without a doubt, I think this ministry is the finest our church has to offer. And the men and women (mostly women, really) involved are some of the finest, most patient, able, and gifted, God-honoring people the church and community have to offer. Every week when I bring my son there and leave him in loving hands, I praise God for those people who volunteer, and I marvel at their commitment and their gifts. And I praise God that I don't have to stay.

If ever there was a ministry that didn't fit my skills, it's a preschool one. I know because a few years back I responded to a need for helpers (out of guilt) and committed nine months to it. It nearly did me in. I normally get involved in projects and immediately start eyeing ways to "move up" or contribute significantly, but in that setting, surrounded by wild and wooly preschoolers and other moms and volunteers who actually knew what they were doing, I shrank away to the Play-Doh tables where I could chit-chat with little kids and pray God would get me through till 11 o'clock. He always gave me that strength and has also given me the strength to say no to the saintly Little Lambs director when she calls to ask me to volunteer again. God is good!

Of course, this doesn't mean I think we should say no to every and any opportunity that isn't a perfect fit. Parents are asked to volunteer for Little Lambs once a semester and I do it joyfully - mostly because I know it's temporary.

And there will be times when God asks us to stretch beyond our comfort zones and meet needs - and he will equip us. However, I think the best way to serve him is to combine your leadership skills with that that tennis serve and organize a tennis tournament to raise money for needy kids to go to summer camp or mix some leadership into that perfect brownie recipe and put on the best darn brownie sale your church has ever seen to raise money for the hungry. (Let me know if you're having one - I'm nine months pregnant and will pay big bucks for a perfect brownie!)

But maybe I'm wrong? Maybe my look at this is just selfishness.