

My View... The Secret Sister Dilemma

By Julia Bettencourt

Since first putting this website together, I began receiving email about the Secret Sister programs in our local churches. Many pastor's wives and women's leaders seem so frustrated over the issue. Other mail has come in from ladies who are having a hard time keeping up with the gift giving involved.

If you are not familiar with what a Secret Sister program is, it is basically the exchanging of names within a ladies group, where you give encouragement by the way of cards and gifts to the 'sister' you are assigned, along with praying for them. Usually at the end of the year, you reveal your Secret Sisters.

There's no doubt that the Secret Sister program began in our churches as a good thing with a good purpose. It was meant as a way to encourage ladies at a personal level, so what happened? It probably goes back to a few different factors. One thing maybe is that the gift giving was encouraged and given more importance than the prayers and other forms of edifying. Back when the Secret Sister programs began popping up in our churches, the gift giving was kept small. However, then it was like with anything else, each gift had to be a little nicer, and from there on out it snowballed. Part of it too is that there are more two income families in today's society. In general, women today have more spending money than in past years. Now what we have today in some churches is a gift giving frenzy and gift giving burn out.

Is gift giving for our Sisters in Christ a bad thing? No. Can it get out of control? Yes. Face it. Not everyone lives on the same budget. Diverse people make up our churches. Many people do have extra money to spend on gifts; however, many families live paycheck to paycheck and if they have extra money, they don't want to spend it on a Secret Sister gift. They want to spend it on their kids or something they need for their homes. Or maybe they have the money, but not the time required to pick up the gifts and get them to their Secret Sister as others in their group would.

When you have gift giving within a group at different monetary scales, eventually someone will get hurt feelings over the type of gifts they are receiving. It doesn't have to be the cost of the item that we as ladies can develop an attitude about, but your Secret Sister may just be terrible at picking out something that you'd enjoy and if she's your 'Sister' for an entire year, it can lead to bitterness. I don't think that ladies mean to complain or grumble over how their Secret Sister treats them, but it does happen. Little comments and expressions can cut quickly into the giver of those gifts and into the heart of another Sister in Christ.

The way most Secret Sister programs have been done also has had a drawback. Usually your 'sister' programs run for a year and then the sisters are 'revealed'. A growing church will have new people all the time. What happens to those new ladies? Some churches have something in place to prevent it, but many times those ladies fall through the cracks. They shouldn't have to wait until the next start up year to be involved in a church ministry. I was always taught as a young person to never stand with a group of friends and talk in a closed circle, but to always be aware to keep making an open end so anyone can join in and not be alienated. I still am very conscious not to stand in a complete circle as an adult, chatting in the parking lot after church or wherever the case. I'll move over and open the circle if someone comes up and closes it. I think that's how we make newcomers into our churches feel with our 'Sister' groups sometimes. Those ladies see the exchanging of gifts and are not involved, and may feel left out or outside the group without the prospect of the circle opening until the start of the new 'Sister' program year.

My husband and I recently began attending a new church where they do have a Secret Sister program and I am going to participate in it. However, I have opted out of them in the past. I'm not much on the 'secret' part. Personally I'd rather hear a prayer request straight from someone's lips, not written on a card. I want to be able to see the look in their eyes, hear the pain or concern in their voice, and get a better understanding in order to pray for them more effectively.

Also, I think that if you know who your 'sister' is, it enables you to fellowship with that person and grow a relationship with them. It allows you to have more meaningful fellowship together. You can meet for a cup of tea or go for a walk together, or even make a phone call just to say "hello" and check on them. Personally, I think too much emphasis is put on sending 'secret' encouragement but 'open' encouragement through talking and getting to know each other with one on one fellowship is not encouraged. Too many times, I've seen Secret Sister programs where, yes, encouragement notes were passed, and that's a good thing, but there really wasn't much actual fellowship and unity in the church among the ladies involved. I think there is a world of difference between writing a note to someone to say you are praying for them or are encouraged by them and actually going up to that person, putting your arm around them, and saying, "I'm praying for you" or "You are an encouragement to me." I think we miss out on so much, and our churches miss out on so much when only 'secret' fellowship is encouraged. We've got to remember to encourage other types of fellowship among our ladies as well. A ladies group that is knit together in love and has a huge bond of fellowship can be such a great impact on a local church.

Secret Sister programs can be effective. I know a few churches whose Secret Sister programs just bubble with excitement, are running smoothly, and really uplift the ladies. It can be a wonderful and productive ministry. It's just like every other program in our churches. You have to stop and evaluate it once in a while to see if it's working. If it's working great, then leave it alone. If it needs scrapped, scrap it. If it needs overhauled, overhaul it. If it needs tweaked, tweak it. I don't think we should evaluate our Secret Sister programs in a disruptive way. In other words, I wouldn't give a forum or have an open discussion about it. When we do this, it opens up too many grounds for complaining, gossiping, and hurt feelings. Go about it in a discreet way and get feedback from your ladies individually or through an evaluation form. In a small church you may get feedback from your ladies one on one. In a larger church, you may want to have your ladies fill out a form.

There is a [Secret Sister Evaluation Form](http://www.creativeladiesministry.com/ssevaluationform.PDF) in PDF Format for printing.
<http://www.creativeladiesministry.com/ssevaluationform.PDF>

Okay, say now you've evaluated your Secret Sister program. If yours seems to be working as it was intended, then great. But how do you fix it if it needs fixed? Eliminating the program altogether is probably not a good idea because the purpose for it is still there, that being the need to encourage fellowship among your church ladies at a personal level. A slight or even dramatic overhauling of the program may be more fitting. Here are some ideas to get you thinking about what you can do to improve your 'Sister' program.

- ❖ Change from Secret Sisters to Prayer Partners, Prayer Sisters, Encouragement Sisters, Your Church Name Encouragers, Fellowship Sisters, or anything you would like. Changing the name will be a plus, especially if your Secret Sister program has a bad reputation. But also, changing the name might spur on some of the ladies that don't participate currently in your program to be motivated and involve them in a new ministry.
- ❖ Change your gift policy if your group is involved in gift giving. Things may be running fine with your gift giving and receiving, but if it isn't and it's become too much the main thrust of your Secret Sisters, then change the gift giving policy. You may just want to just allow exchanging of cards and prayers and no gifts. Or you may not want to eliminate gifts entirely, but only allow flowers and food gifts such as candy, breads, desserts, and homemade goodies. Another alternative is to allow only one gift such as a Birthday Gift, Christmas gift, or one to be given at your 'Secret' Sister revealing function. Some churches allow for all three of those occasions.
- ❖ Concentrate on encouragement among your ladies though fellowship and prayer and downplay the gift giving. If you are keeping some type of gift giving policy, then always refer to it as an 'extra'. Make the main thrust of the group a means to edify and build up your 'sisters'. The purpose and desire of each lady should be to be a blessing through the program.

- ❖ Determine the main focus of your group and what you want to accomplish in your 'sister' ministry. Write out a purpose or mission statement.
- ❖ Let everyone involved know what is expected of her as a 'sister'. Have a few guidelines. Is there a minimum number of times that they should contact their 'sisters' throughout the year? Do you have a gift giving policy or limit on what can be exchanged?
- ❖ Make a 'Sister' Ministry Overview Sheet to hand out at your first yearly meeting. Make sure to give it to new ones as they come into the church. Include the main focus and the mission statement for your group. Include any guidelines that you want your ladies to follow.

There is a Sister Overview Sheet available for printing in PDF format.

<http://www.creativeladiesministry.com/ssoverview1.PDF>

Feel free to use it as a sample to construct your own.

- ❖ Emphasize that being a 'sister' is a commitment. It's sad when someone is assigned to you and you never receive any notes of encouragement from her. Let the ladies see how important it is to remain committed to the idea of encouraging your 'sister' all through the program year.
- ❖ Have a couple ladies, or more depending on your church size, that do not take on a 'sister', but involve them in a ministry to be the 'sisters' to the new church ladies that come into the church throughout the year.
- ❖ If you need a change, try assigning 'sister' prayer partners that are not a secret, but encourage the partners to pray together so many times a month and share requests through phone calls, notes, and email.
- ❖ If you are keeping 'secret' sisters, then encourage fellowship among the women in your church apart from their 'secret' sister. Everything needs a balance. Make sure there are still times that the ladies can interact on an open level so that they may bond as a group that way as well.
- ❖ Focus on missionaries and give each 'sister' a different missionary that your church supports to pray for.
- ❖ Have an alternative. Instead of 'sisters', assign names of the elderly or nursing home residents to focus on. Things you will do for them will be different from giving gifts. Encourage each lady to pray daily for the person they are assigned. A few things that can be done for the elderly are:
- ❖ Encourage your ladies to get to know everything about their assigned 'sister'. Have your ladies fill out a form with all of their personal information, including favorites, etc. so that their 'sister' can pray for them more effectively and encourage them in a suitable and personal way.

There is an "All About Me" form available in PDF format.

<http://www.creativeladiesministry.com/aboutmeform.PDF>

This can also be used for any other type of Women's groups so that you can get to know your ladies.

- ❖ Have fun with your 'sister' program. It should be a ministry of encouragement that brings joy to the women of your church. Encourage the ladies to be creative and get excited about uplifting another 'sister' in Christ.