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Women and the Seminary

October 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

Maria Marsico was treading on mostly male ground when she stepped through the doors of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary a few years ago.

The 26-year-old who recently earned her Master of Divinity from LBTS didn't realize women could attend seminary classes when she first came to Liberty University. Yet the education-major-turned-seminary-student felt the Lord's hand leading her there.

"God was putting the burden for ministry on my heart," she said. "I started to discover that my heart wasn't so much for teaching academics as it was for reaching people in general and helping them emotionally and spiritually."

God soon started bringing people into her life who'd attended the seminary, and He even provided her with a receptionist job at LBTS to pay her full tuition.

"In a lot of ways, as a girl, I [was] thinking, 'This is not practical. What am I going to do with an Elementary Education degree and a Seminary degree?'" she said.

Though LBTS does not endorse or train women to take on a head pastoral role, Marsico learned that the seminary welcomes women to study there and work toward other ministry-related roles, such as missionary, women's ministry coordinator, children's ministry director or Biblical counselor.

Marsico prayed through her concerns, and she determined that the seminary would be the ideal place to prepare for ministry.

"I realized that if I'm going to do ministry, I need to know the Word more, and I need direct ministry training if I'm going to be effective," she said. "I can [show God's love to] people, no problem; I can share my testimony, no problem. Those things are great and they're effective, and we're called to do those things, but I realized I really needed to get some more solid training ... and know how to answer the hard questions."

Now that she has completed her M.Div. with a focus on pastoral counseling, Marsico hopes she can encourage other women to consider the seminary.

"We're definitely outnumbered, but there are more girls in it now, even since I've started," she said.

As an LBTS receptionist, she occasionally sees wide-eyed young women walking in with questions like the ones she once had. They ask: Is this practical for me? Are girls allowed here?

"There are all these misconceptions about what seminary is. Now I think more girls who feel called to minister to other women or go into the mission field and want to know their stuff [think] maybe seminary is an option," she said.

She believes attending the seminary can help women fulfill God's calling on their lives.

"We are definitely called to discipleship and to all the things that God has designed women specifically to be good at as women. Having a degree like this gives a solid foundation to whatever it is He has called you to do," she said.

As for the male reaction to women at LBTS, she said it was widely positive.

"You get the question a lot: 'Why are you in seminary?'" she said.

Once that question was answered, though, the men welcomed Marsico and encouraged her. Most of the men she encountered hadn't been around many women who felt called to ministry, so she was able to share a female perspective with them and even give them insights into ways that women struggle in their personal lives and in their faith.

"As a girl, especially a girl that was in an [undergraduate] major that was 99 percent female, jumping into something where I [was] one of seven or eight [women] in a class full of guys, you learn to adjust and answer questions honestly. They become your friends; they become your study partners," she said.

She recently turned in her application for the seminary's new Ph.D. in Theology and Apologetics and believes that door could open for her. If not, she's ready to "go out and change the world" in any way that God may lead her.

"Not every girl needs to go to seminary, but for me it has been foundational," she said. "For girls who might think it's unpractical or this isn't for females, get rid of that idea. Anytime you want to go someplace to study the Word, that is very practical. That is something that God is going to honor and reward."

LBTS President Ergun Caner recently said the seminary will not be complete until it has a Ph.D. in Women's Ministry someday.

"I want to train the next generation of Beth Moores, of women who have a Ph.D., who have the chops to confront culture," he said. "They will write the books that women read and speak to issues that women love."