

Evangelical women look beyond Bible study to new causes

Sarah Pulliam Bailey Religion News Service | Feb. 13, 2014
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If past conferences such as Women of Faith drew thousands of evangelical women to indoor stadiums for devotional Bible study, a new generation of evangelical women is looking outward and concerned with issues such as social justice.

The IF:Gathering in Austin earlier this month was one of those conferences. At the Austin Music Hall, about 1,200 women were greeted by farm tables decorated with candles and cabbage- and lavender-filled centerpieces. The free coffee came from Westrock Coffee, an organization committed to safe working conditions in Rwanda. But the wholesome, back-to-nature ambiance was just the start.

The women participating, including more than 44,000 online, sponsored 600 children through Food for the Hungry. Speakers included sex trafficking victim advocates Christine Caine and Bianca Olthoff, humanitarian photographer Esther Havens and Annie Lobert, founder of Hookers for Jesus, a ministry for prostitutes that attempts to end sex trafficking.

"We are part of a world system that has always measured greatness in terms of power, but Jesus always measured greatness in terms of service," blogger and author Jen Hatmaker told the crowd. "If we love mercy for ourselves, then we have to love it for everyone else."

Past conferences and gatherings geared toward women have focused on issues such as marriage, parenthood and forgiveness. Female speakers such as Beth Moore and Kay Arthur have drawn thousands of women to stadiums, but the new batch of women is reaching a new generation concerned about theology, justice and calling.

"This was about expanding our vision outside of ourselves," said Sharon Hodde Miller, a doctoral student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who is studying women in seminary. "It could play out in a variety of different ways but encompassed social justice, racial reconciliation, poverty or thinking about the neighbor next door who is a widow."

Jennie Allen, founder of the gathering, was more direct: "We gather in a new way because we're not driven by women's issues."

This new wave of evangelical women is fueled by an ever-growing online culture of high-profile women bloggers and savvy social media types who have laid the groundwork for the new focus.

Tickets for the Austin gathering, with a theme of "If God is real, then what?," sold out in 42 minutes; word of the conference spread largely through blogs and social media.

"We've grown up in a different context," Allen said. "The technology is unprecedented."

Ahead of the conference, Allen gathered more than 50 influential female leaders to hear about plans for IF,

generating an interest even before speakers and topics were announced.

"Blogs are creating a platform for women who might not have otherwise been heard," said Cindy Bunch, an editor at InterVarsity Press responsible for a new imprint by women, called Crescendo. "Denominations have always had women's ministries. I think what's new perhaps is women having a stronger writing platform and being read widely by men and women."

For example, Ann Voskamp, who spoke at the IF conference, is a farmer's wife and a 40-year-old home-schooling mother of six in rural Ontario. Her New York Times best-seller, "One Thousand Gifts," and photo-driven blog sprinkled with poetry and lyrical phrases have endeared her to evangelical women of many theological persuasions.

Another speaker from Canada, Sarah Bessey, describes herself as "too liberal for conservatives, too conservative for liberals." Bessey, who sports piercings and tattoos, is the author of "Jesus Feminist."

In other ways, IF was similar to past conferences. A mix of music, testimonies, preaching and teaching from speakers and musicians such as Caine and Lauren Chandler filled the Austin Music Hall stage. The group launched an online devotional called IF: Equip.

"It's rare for an event to speak to so many different people who represent very different strands of evangelicalism," Miller said.

Many of the new women's initiatives are geared to navigating conversations about social justice or the role of women in an age of "Lean In," the book on women's leadership by Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook.

In November, the group Q, run by Gabe and Rebekah Lyons, hosted a conference focusing on calling.

Others include gatherings put on by the Gospel Coalition and Allume draw women with large social media followings. Many groups target women, who account for 85 percent of all consumer purchases.

"Many times, Christian products or events are specifically targeted to the stay-at-home mother," said Alli Worthington, a business coach and consultant based in Nashville who attended the IF conference. "They forget all the different roles women play in their lives."

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