

Mission Illinois Offering Encouraging women

What happens when these Illinois Baptist women learn they are, in fact, leaders

By Lisa Misner

(Editor's note: Watch the video of Carmen Halsey's story at missionillinois.org, part of the 2018 state missions story collection. Use the full set of videos and download teaching materials to lead a state missions study.)

Carmen Halsey has a passion for educating and empowering godly women. As IBSA's Director of Women's Ministry, she organizes leadership training cohorts, large equipping events, and mission trips in Illinois and abroad. Her desire is to help women find their God-given gifts, and to bring those gifts to build up the local church and carry the gospel to the marketplace. "We're investing in you," she tells women as they grow into leaders, "so you be ready to invest in others."

Halsey said she tends to see where "God has women versus where he doesn't have women." According to the U.S. Department of Labor, almost 47% of the country's workers are women and 70% of mothers with children under the age of 18 are in the workforce.

One of those women is Andrea Cruse. "When I met her, she was already a young mother, she was already a pastor's wife, but one of the things that intrigued me about Andrea was re-engaging the workforce, and wondering where she was going to fit," shared Halsey.

Cruse, who is married to Adam Cruse, pastor of Living Faith Baptist Church in Sherman and has three young children, has been the recipient of Halsey's leadership through Illinois Baptist Women (IBW).

"Carmen has taught me to be a leader in the marketplace and my church by just allowing me the opportunity and inviting me to participate in the cohorts that are available," Cruse said. "I've just gained valuable knowledge on those foundational leadership skills that have proved significant in my own personal marketplace."

Cruse began sharing the leadership skills she was learning with her supervisors at work, and when an opportunity for advancement came up, she was tapped for the position.

She credits Halsey and IBW, saying when she expressed doubts about accepting the new management role, her supervisor told her, "Andrea, we can teach you what you don't know, what we need is your leadership skills."

"And it was at that moment," Cruse said, "I was just so thankful that IBW and Carmen were willing to invest in me and provided me with the resources to develop those skills."

Halsey's work is possible, in part, because of support from the Mission Illinois Offering & Week of Prayer. Collected annually in September by IBSA churches and designated exclusively for ministry in Illinois, this offering supports IBSA missionaries and staff in missions especially needed within the state. That includes Illinois Baptist Women, the group within the IBSA Church Resources Team that focuses on growing women in their roles as disciples, missions mobilizers, and leaders. Under Halsey's guidance, that has grown to include leadership at home, church, mission field, and in the marketplace.

That's one main theme of the annual Priority Conference Halsey organizes for Illinois women. "Priority provides a safe environment for us to come and learn together. We can ask questions. We don't have to feel foolish; we don't have to shy away from some hard conversations," Halsey said.

Her conferences have approached hard topics such as assisting refugees, human trafficking, and sexuality. And leadership. "Women are influential folks, and sometimes they just need someone to tell them that."

Growing influence

Another woman who has benefitted from Halsey's leadership is Becki McNeely. She is a member of Lakeland Baptist Church with a rich heritage.

McNeeley is the wife Brandon McNeely, Baptist Collegiate Ministries director at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, the daughter of Lakeland's pastor Phil Nelson and granddaughter of International Mission Board missionaries Jack and Ava Shelby. Even with that pedigree, taking on leadership roles in her church could be intimidating. Until she met Halsey.

"I felt like I was through into being a leader until I met Carmen," NcNeeley said. "She poured so much into me personally through leadership cohort groups. If it had not been for Carmen, I wouldn't have had the tools I needed to lead."

"I couldn't put a price tag on how much I learned from her."

Jacqueline Scott, a member of Dorrisville Baptist Church in Harrisburg, may be retired but the natural born leader isn't about to slow down. Since becoming active in Illinois Baptist Women, Scott said, "Carmen increased in me a sense of urgency to be serious about the Great Commission. The world is going so fast, we've got to catch up, get into the game."

Last summer Scott joined Halsey on a mission trip at the southern tip of the state in Cairo. Scott said the experience taught her, "We need to be ready, better equipped. Cairo mission trip was a learning curve for me." She described how many of the people they met while going door-to-door said they practiced other religions. They "challenged" her.

Halsey noticed.

"Jacqueline just saw oppression that her eyes had never seen before," she said. "And what I loved is that inner leader just came out. There was a boldness, there was a confidence there that can only come from God."

Scott agreed. "When I went to Cairo, it was good for me to be there."

Halsey's work includes encouraging women in missions mobilization. Her team has led mission trips to Chicago and New Orleans, Europe and South Asia, and urged Illinois Baptist Women to engage their own neighbors and communities with the gospel.

"It does make me proud—you know, Godly proud—when I see somebody succeeding," Halsey said. And that encourages her in her work with Illinois Baptist Women all the more.

A call to prayer

Please encourage your church to pray for state missions during the *Mission Illinois Offering & Week of Prayer*, September 9-16. Pray especially for women's ministry and missions across the state, and the development of leaders through the Illinois Baptist Women. Pray for Carmen Halsey and all the members of the IBSA Church Resources Team as they equip churches and leaders for ministry.