



A Ministry of Reconciliation

For the second installment of my “God’s Gutsy Gals” series, I spoke with Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, president and founder of Salter McNeil & Associates, a racial and ethnic reconciliation consulting firm based in Chicago.

Tell us how your work began.

Brenda Salter McNeil: The journey began about 15 years ago, while I was working with InterVarsity. At the time, the discussion about cultural competency was happening in corporate America but not in our churches. I have a passion to see the church become and stay relevant in this society, and I believe that all Christians have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. By “relevant” I mean that Christians should be aware of the major issues that are defining our generation—like globalization, multiculturalism, and the economic realities here and abroad.

What are some of your main concerns right now?

BSM: One is to empower women, because they bring a unique voice to this issue of reconciliation. When there is war, the men get killed, but the women are left behind to make sense of what is left, to restore the country out of the violence and hatred that remain.

Globalization is another. Historically, in this country, because of slavery, we have made the reconciliation issue black and white. Racism is still in many ways categorized by black and white, but that can only be a limited discussion when, around the world, people are dealing with the increasing diversity of their populations and the complexity that brings. My role is to help people understand that

it’s about cultural competence. All the races have to learn how to be more global. All of us should know and interact with people of other races and cultures even if it’s uncomfortable.

What are some of the most significant challenges you face in your work?

BSM: Many people amen the message of reconciliation, but they have trouble implementing it in their lives. They want to play it safe, but Christians are called to be countercultural, to think differently, not to conform to the pattern of this world. We’re not to be co-opted by Democrats or Republicans but by the blood of Jesus.

People often assume that my work for reconciliation means I’m a liberal and that I’m preaching on a political agenda versus a biblical mandate. I get a lot of resistance from conservative evangelicals who don’t believe that women should speak or that reconciliation or embracing diversity are biblical issues.

What encourages you?

BSM: Seeing a growing awareness and hunger to take this issue seriously, like church-planting pastors in their 30s who intentionally want to have a multiethnic church. My visits with them give me great hope for the future.

What kind of support systems are you missing?

BSM: I could use more technology to spread the message. Right now it all is based on me going out to spread the message—it’s exhausting, as I can only go to so many places at one time. I’d love to find a way for people across global lines to share in the reconciliation message without me being required to travel. Financial support is always good. We all need people who believe enough in our ministries to make things happen—investors, social entrepreneurs.

What challenges are particular to

being a woman in leadership?

BSM: We carry a lot of responsibility for our homes, nurturing our children, being a good spouse. People ask, “How could Sarah Palin be a good VP as a mom to five children?” Michele Obama says she struggles to find time with her kids. We try to do it all so we don’t shortchange anyone, and so we suffer from super-woman syndrome.

And there are still places that can’t handle strong women, where people think “passionate” means “pushy.” We have to be careful not to demean our role in order to lift up men who are ego-driven.

We feel pressure to be physically fit and attractive, but have to be careful to dress “feminine” versus “sexy.” As a married woman I have to acknowledge my husband so as not to send a message that I am available. These are all issues that most men don’t have to think about.

What makes you gutsy in this role?

BSM: I’m clear on my call. Esther was one of the original gutsy girls. She said, “If I perish, I perish.” The times demand it—“Whether I like it or not, I’ve been given the leadership, voice, and education, and I believe I have to use it for such a time as this!”

What can you tell other women involved in leadership roles outside church?

BSM: First, learn to practice self-care and spiritual disciplines—when God calls a woman, she has to be gutsy, but she also has to be holistically healthy. Second, don’t undervalue your work by giving it away. People pay for what they value and value what they pay for. Third, it’s okay to say no—sometimes it’s someone else’s assignment. ■

Salter McNeil is the author of A Credible Witness (2008) and co-author of The Heart of Racial Justice (2004), both from IVP. Rev. Dr. Liz Rios (lizrios.com) is a wife, mother, teacher, church planter, author, and organizational executive.