

**The Heart of First Impressions**

**Mary Ann Sibley, Speaker**

**The Columbia Metro Connection Podcast 028**

**May 2019**

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Chris Reinolds: Welcome to the Columbia Metro Connection Podcast where you can go to get valuable, relevant, and quality resources for you and your congregation. The Columbia Metro Connection is sponsored and supported by the Columbia Metro Baptist Association and the almost 100 family churches that support the ministry of the CMBA. Hosts for this week's episode are George Bullard, the executive director of the Columbia Metro Baptist Association, and I'm Chris Reinolds, certified church consultant and lead pastor at Killian Baptist Church. This week, we had an opportunity to sit down with Mary Ann Sibley, from MatterSpark, where they make people matter. Mary Ann regularly engages with churches and other nonprofits to help them engage people with excellence to keep them coming back time and time again. At MatterSpark, they are constantly striving to see people win and excel in leadership, customer service, and volunteer engagement. Therefore, we are really excited to sit down and hear from Mary Ann about all of the insights that she has on this essential ministry.

George Bullard: Welcome, Mary Ann. We're so glad to have you with us today.

Mary Ann Sibley: Thanks. I love being here!

George Bullard: Well, I love having you here because of your passion about first impressions and guest services. And having heard you speak a couple of times and knowing about the church where you did a lot of your early work, boy, I am just so excited about you being here.

Mary Ann Sibley: Thanks, George.

George Bullard: This first impressions ministry and guest services ministry is becoming more and more prominent in church life and culture, but how did you become interested and involved in this type of ministry?

Mary Ann Sibley: That's a long journey. I kind of fell into it, honestly. My first job at a church was to be a project manager for the construction, because my background is in banking. So that seemed like something I could do in church, because it was finances and building. But when the building was getting finished, I started looking around, and looking at, because that's how my brain functions, what happens if people go there? They'll get lost. What happens if they go here? What does that look like? And also understanding that I did not grow up in church and church can be very scary and intimidating. I remember telling my pastor, "We need like 100 people tomorrow," and he looked at me and said, "That's your new job," so that's how I started it.

Chris Reinolds: Now, you bring a certain element of passion to it, and it's really driven by a series of questions, sort of like somebody's experience and them coming for the first time and them ... Can you go through a couple of those questions that really spur you and encourage you, yes, as a leader in this area, but also the same questions that you ask people that are coming in to start serving this area to emphasize the importance of what it is that they're doing?

Mary Ann Sibley: Boy, that's a loaded question, but here's where I fall on that, is that in the beginning, when you're trying to start something, you really don't know what you don't know, except for your own experience. I just believe God took my crazy experience growing up Buddhist, not knowing anything about church, and as our church started to grow, I remember thinking, "If I was scared and intimidated at church at 100 people, I can't imagine what they're going through now." So that's where that passion started coming with, and when I started talking about those kind of things with other leaders, and they weren't assigned leaders, these were the volunteers that you look around and they're all in, they're bought in, and you start having those conversations, and they're just nodding going, "Right, right," and so I'm like, "What are we going to do about it?" And God honors that and grows it, and that becomes contagious.

George Bullard: Mary Ann, one of the things that I've been impressed with about you is the fact that you don't use terms like consultant, coach, or things like that. You say that you're a cheerleader. What does it mean to be a cheerleader and how's that different from the other, because you're doing some consulting/coaching, but cheerleader, wow?

Mary Ann Sibley: Well, I was a cheerleader in high school, so let's start with that. It's a known thing for me, but when you think about cheerleaders, it's like we're on the sidelines and we're just doing everything we can to encourage the one that's in the game to keep going and to celebrate every win, every touchdown, every basket, like that's all we do is celebrate, celebrate, and then when we're not doing so well on the field, we still are going, "You can do it. You can do it." So when I think about my heart and seeing volunteers who have hard jobs, they have illnesses they're dealing with, they've got family drama, and they're showing up and they're wanting to pour themselves out, I will stand by them all day and encourage them and cheer them on.

Chris Reinolds: Right. That's great. That's really good, and you don't see the guest services ministry as a throwaway ministry. I heard you recently, you were saying that a lot of the times, if you're looking for somewhere to serve, you go stand at a door. You don't see it as a ... That's not a throwaway position, but you don't view it as this any warm body can come and do this. You actually see there's some intentional value in it, and from the impression I get, you think that some of the best people should be serving in this type of ministry.

Mary Ann Sibley: Yes, yes, yes. Here's the thing I talk about when people are just looking to serve in this role, is the heart that this is a ministry. When people can really see and believe, and they experience it, because you're walking up to them and you're like, "You just made a difference in someone's life, like that person just told our pastors, 'I got greeted three times this morning and I didn't even want to come,'" and you look at them and go, "That's because of you." Then all of a sudden they're like, "That's right." And so what happens is when we think of it as a throwaway ministry, now we're in the trap of having to “fire volunteers,” so now we've got this team of people and we think it's okay and it's hard to have the conversations, so what do we do? We ignore it and we just think it doesn't matter, and over time, it becomes like white noise and we're blind to it, and then we wonder why people don't come back, and there are a lot of other factors, but I'm telling you, that's a huge factor.

Chris Reinolds: What's a story that you can share with us, maybe about somebody's experience to where they thought, "I'm just going to come and stand at the door," but all of a sudden God really changed their heart and their perspective on what the guest services ministry really could do?

Mary Ann Sibley: I have a mom and daughter who the daughter was in her 30s, and we were just starting this ministry, and I was encouraging them to come be part. I said, "We would love for you to be at a door." The mom is saying, "I can't. I stutter." I never heard the mom stutter, but she believed she did. The story is a very hard story. There's a lot of things in their past, but I know who our God is, so they said yes, and they said, "Put us in the most remote place, because we're shy, we don't ... " I'm like, "Awesome." I put them on one of those side doors that hardly nobody goes in, and so one Sunday, the mom came up to me after church, and she had that look on her face, and she said, "I have to tell you what happened today." I said, "Tell me." She said, "My daughter needed to go to the lady's room. I'm standing at the door. This couple walks up." They were really nice couple, retired. They had a lot of money. Really intimidator. Hit all her buttons. They stopped and said, "Where is your daughter?" Her go-to was, "Uh-oh, we're in trouble." She said, "She just left for a moment. She'll be back," and she said they smiled and said, "That's okay, we'll wait." Now she's getting anxious. The daughter comes back, the couple looks at her daughter and says, "Good morning." They said, "We cannot start our day until we get our bulletin from you. Thank you so much for what you're doing."

Chris Reinolds: How about that?

Mary Ann Sibley: The mom looks at me, tears in her eyes, going, "You know what that means?" I said, "I so know what that means." And so that is a story that's true because it tells, and when I tell other greeters, you are not hidden from God. You can try to find the remote places. That was Him saying, "I see you and you're important and people will wait for you."

Chris Reinolds: That's good. That's awesome. That's really encouraging.

Mary Ann Sibley: Yep. It is.

George Bullard: Yeah, you know, Mary Ann, I know several other people that you network with like Greg and Rebecca and things like that, and when I think about Greg and we had Greg around here last year, I think about how he is on the techniques and all the different things like that. But you seem to focus on helping churches do the right stuff, in a certain sense, helping them fall in love with people who are coming to visit. What influenced you to begin thinking about guest engagement in this way rather than all the techniques and the science and all this other kind of stuff?

Mary Ann Sibley: Yeah. Those are important, and we do use them, but I think what we can sometimes find ourselves is we fall into that trap, give me a tool, give me a template. For me, what I saw happen was everything in the church has got to be relational, so when you look at the Gospel, it's so obvious to me, it's relational, and if we're willing to be messy and be relational at every single point in our church, children, greeters, anywhere, that's when church happens, that's when God happens, that's when we let go, that's when we start trusting Him, that's when we get to experience Him, like the story I just shared. For me, I can give tools and there are lots out there, and we use them, but we have to be willing to say, and this is one of the phrases I used to use, because our church was so large, we had to have a lot of processes and rules, and it kind of got overwhelming a little bit sometimes with particularly our newer volunteers, and we were having a huge Christmas production with like 10 services.

I remember I just stopped and I said, "This is all I want you all to remember. No matter what happens, if you're hit with something and you don't know what to do, I want you to answer the question, what is the most loving thing to do? And do that with that person in front of you," and immediately, you could just see the whole room go, "Okay. I can do that."

George Bullard: That's good. I want to ask as a follow-up, because also when I think about you, Mary Ann, I think about the fact that I wish for you that you'd known Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior from your childhood up, but it only happened for you about 20 years ago. But that may be part of the gifting that God has given you to have understood as an adult what the relationship with Jesus Christ means, because that helps you to understand so much, those adults who are walking through the door, arriving in the parking lot, and that kind of thing, how do you think about that differing perspective for you?

Mary Ann Sibley: Oh my gosh, George, you just hit the nail on the head. Just sitting, hearing you describe it back to me is true, because it's hard, life is just crazy hard. And when I've seen people in my neighborhood say they go to church, but I didn't see anyone want to reach out and help, that was confusing to me. Like I would see them get in their cars on Sunday morning, and then they'd come home and the garage door would open, and then they'd go in, the garage door would close, and that would be it. Meanwhile, I was a single mom struggling, and so I just didn't understand how you could say the things that I've heard on TV or movies and yet this is what I see what you're doing in my neighborhood. But then when I actually got to experience Jeff and Becky in my neighborhood, they demonstrated that kind of love to me. I was like, "Oh, they didn't preach at me. They loved me into the kingdom." Pure and simple, and God did the heavy lifting. He did the change of heart, but they did their part. To me, that's where it clicked.

Chris Reinolds: It wasn't about the formula of, "These are the steps that we need you to take, Mary Ann, for her to reach this point." It was about the, "We want to show and share our faith with her just in the realm of doing life together," and that's what made the impact.

Mary Ann Sibley: Yeah. I think one great example was I was in a book club, and I was in banking, so one of the attorneys was doing a book club, but the night she wanted it, my boys, I didn't want to leave them by themselves. And so I called Jeff and Becky, and I thought, "Oh, maybe they can watch my boys for a couple hours." Now, guilt-ridden single mom, I was like, "It's a good book club. It's really friendly. It's only a couple hours." I'll never forget Jeff and Becky said, "We would love to watch your kids, but Wednesday night we do church, so you're welcome, we'll take them, but that's what we're doing, so you let me know, you have freedom to say no and we will still love you." And I said, "I don't know." I went to my boys and I told them. At that point they were like, "Yeah, we want to go." So I let them go. But again, not preaching at me, and they weren't saying, "Look at us go to church." They're like, "Hey, this is what we do on Wednesday nights."

Chris Reinolds: Yeah. We want to fold you, we're folding them into what it is that we're already doing and we're wanting to help you at the same time.

Mary Ann Sibley: Very relaxed. Yep.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. That's really good stuff. Now, in that same vein, some people would call that discipleship in a way. It's sort of like evangelism over the long term. Discipleship doesn't begin necessarily at the point by which somebody puts their faith in Jesus Christ. Discipleship can begin well before that process, and you have a different perspective on the purpose of ministry as it exists within the context of the church. You don't see it as exclusively functional but you really see it as a developmental process for discipleship. How does that process really work itself out, maybe in the guest services ministry on a weekly basis?

Mary Ann Sibley: Oh my goodness, a million stories, but I think what I've heard, I just go by what my volunteers have told me, and what I've experienced, is particularly with leaders, like leaders were really starting to grasp that, "Oh, this is my church. Oh, I have a bigger responsibility," and I was able to live this out on a Sunday. I was able to actually flex my muscles a little bit of God's word, and sit down with one of my fellow teammates and say, "Man, that message was crazy convicting, and I just know that I need to go home and ask my boss for forgiveness." And so by a leader sharing that with the team member in a very safe context of church, now they've said it out loud. It's like, "Oh, that wasn't so bad, was it? That was kind of easy. Now, guess what? God is going to give you an opportunity to say that to your neighbor or to your coworker." And so it just grows from that. God gives you those other opportunities.

Chris Reinolds: That's good. That's real good.

George Bullard: One of the things I really enjoy about you, Mary Ann, is that you aren't just about the business of first impressions in terms of that. For you, it really is a ministry. It's a mission for your life, and that kind of thing, but one of the things I want to know, in the most recent time I heard you speak, you spoke in terms of that team leader or that director, whatever, getting there early before everybody else, and even staying later after everybody else leaves. Where does the leader of first impressions in a church get their spiritual vibrations going and get the refreshment and the nourishment they need?

Mary Ann Sibley: Right. To be a leader, it's a different path. Just because, and I had to actually train all my leaders and volunteers, that just because someone is really good at doing the tasks, doesn't mean you're an automatic leader. So we created a really simple three-step, how do you know someone is a leader. But the number one thing was know that you know that you know that they know the Lord. And then I talk about it very intentionally, like I'm all about, I love to talk, but talking about it, so we sit across the table and we unpack that, and we talk about the examples. What does this heart commitment really look like? Because trust me when I tell you on Sunday, anything can happen, or life, anything can happen, and we may bump up against each other or something may fail, and I have to know that you have my back, and I will have your back, and so we talk about it with them, and it's an intentional thing that we do, and then we meet regularly with them, and so for my high level directors, I met with them monthly.

And so yes, sometimes the monthly meetings would be, "Hey, what's happening in the church?" But sometimes it was like, "Hey, let's just share devotion. Let's get in God's word together." And the number one thing I remember all my other ... I did a summer camp thing for all my leaders, and I saw a really cool video that a pastor did. I just felt like it would really speak to some of my volunteers, and it was out of Nehemiah, saying, "I will not come down from this good work I'm doing," the enemy is trying to taunt him. And so I looked at them afterwards and said, "What is the good work you're doing? What is the good work ... I'm not talking church."

One of the moms came up to me and she said, "I so needed this because I'm getting a lot of flack that my favorite thing to do with my daughters as they're growing is to sit with them at night until they fall asleep, just to have that time with them. And some people are giving me a hard time and going, 'Well, they should be old enough.'" And she said, "I'm now convicted that this is my good work and I will not come down from it." And then she looks at me and says, "Thank you for caring enough about me to want to hear this," and I'm like, "I love you more as a mom than as a leader," and when your people get that, boy, you storm the gates of hell like nobody's business.

Chris Reinolds: Right.

George Bullard: Absolutely.

Chris Reinolds: Because ultimately, they know that you care about them as a person-

Mary Ann Sibley: Exactly.

Chris Reinolds: ... and they're just not serving a purpose, in other words, a tool that helps accomplish whatever task is at hand.

Mary Ann Sibley: Yep.

Chris Reinolds: Now, for the pastor or church leader, that honestly, they're exhausted, they're wiped out, they're exhausted, they're trying to figure out a way to motivate their volunteers and encourage them and get them excited about guest services and first impressions ministry, what are some ways in which they can really engage those leaders and get them…yeah, connect with them personally, but what do they do to excite those people?

Mary Ann Sibley: Sometimes, you just need a reset button. I think sometimes what I hear is, "Churches are in the middle of whatever season they're in, and it's hard, or people are burnt-out," and they're going to try to fix it while people are burnt-out. You're not going to get very far, because they're still burning out, right? And so I love to give permission to say, "You know what? Take a break. Step off. Let's rethink this and trust God through that," because you will have the few that aren't burnt out, so let's just give some grace and let's give some freedom instead of trying to, "Come on, muster it up, I know you're burnt-out, but come on."

That's futile for me. So in the past, what I've done is I'm like, "Let's have a reset button. Let's figure a date. Everyone, you don't need to be doing this anymore. I want you just to come to church and be fed. I want you just to be able to sleep in on a Sunday if you need to sleep in on Sunday. Meanwhile, we're going to be working on some new ideas. Would love for you to come back and be a part of it if that's right for you." It's okay. We can't force it.

George Bullard: Chris would love that as a pastor, every once in awhile, for us to tell him, "You need to sleep in for a Sunday or two." That would sound great. You know, Mary Ann, before we end, you told a wonderful story today because I think part of the issue of story, and story is such a valuable commodity for us in ministry, is for people to think about, in a certain sense, "I want to be a part of a story." And so I heard you tell a story about these men and a woman and a car and stuff like that. Would you tell us that story again?

Mary Ann Sibley: Of course. Our volunteers that serve in the parking lot are known as roadies, because they're in the road, which I love that. That's another thing, empower your volunteers to own however they want. It's not going to be the end of the world if they rename themselves. So we had an off-site campus because of our growth, and they understood it was a ministry, and so it took four big guys to do this, which it really didn't, but they wanted to, and this woman gets out of her car, and they notice her back tire was a little bit low, so they, when she got out, they said, "Hey, ma'am, your tire is a little low," and she started to cry. They then saw she was very pregnant, and that made them very uncomfortable, but what they also heard as she was crying was that her husband was stationed overseas in Afghanistan, and now, she's got a flat tire, and she's pregnant. Could you feel more helpless?

And so they immediately were like, "We got this. We'll change the tire for you. If you give us your keys," like they had T-shirts on, "We're with the church. We're fine." So she gave them the keys. She went to church. When they opened the trunk to get the spare tire out, the spare tire was flat. I remember them telling me this story. They're looking at me like, "Can you believe it?" I was like, "Of course it was flat." And they go, "But guess what we did? We all piled into Joe's truck, and we thought, 'We're going to buy her a tire,'" like they were determined. She is not leaving here today without knowing that the church really cares about her.

So they went down to the local Costco or Sam's or whatever and said, "It's open. Let's get a tire." Four men in a truck show up there, and they tell the story like, "Hey, we're just trying to help this lady out," and when the employees heard that, they gave the tire for free.

Chris Reinolds: Oh, wow. That's incredible.

Mary Ann Sibley: They got to change it, and of course they waited by her car when she got there, and these four men, man, you couldn't get them out of the parking lot after that. It was awesome.

Chris Reinolds: They were looking for every flat tire they could find.

Mary Ann Sibley: They were looking for flat tires, like, "Hey, that needs a little bit of air, don't you think?"

George Bullard: They were part of the story.

Mary Ann Sibley: Yep.

George Bullard: Absolutely.

Chris Reinolds: That's powerful stuff. If there are pastors or church leaders out there, that areinterested in hearing more information about what it is that you do, or getting you out to their church, what's the best way for them to be able to reach out to you and connect with you?

Mary Ann Sibley: The best way is obviously go to my website, matterspark.com, or an email, info@matterspark.com, or on my website, you can just click, it says, "Contact me," and send me an email, and let's talk.

Chris Reinolds: Great, great. Thank you so much. We appreciate all the insight that you've given us, and honestly, the power of the stories that you've given us to be able to go back and share with the congregations, and hopefully somebody listening, it really challenged them as well.

Mary Ann Sibley: Good.

George Bullard: It's a great blessing. Thank you very much.

Mary Ann Sibley: You, too. Thank you, guys.

Chris Reinolds: Absolutely. Thank you.

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