



## Season 10: Episode 9 | Ellen Graf-Martin | How Has God Called You To Use Your Gifts?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, I have the privilege of interviewing Ellen Graf-Martin. Ellen Graf-Martin is the President and Chief Strategist at Graf-Martin Communications, with over 20 years of experience helping purpose-driven organizations share their message with clarity and impact. She's led marketing strategies for national and international nonprofits, Hollywood films, and best-selling authors, all rooted in her passion for justice, hope, and generosity.

Ellen has also founded The Table, a network of 50 Canadian women of faith in leadership, and creating space for them to have encouragement and collaboration with one another. She lives in Ontario with her husband, her daughter, and their spirited Bengal cat. Enjoy our conversation.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Ellen Graf-Martin, I am delighted to have you on the podcast. Thanks for joining us on Scripture Untangled.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I am so grateful to be here. Thank you, Joanna. Let's jump in.

**Joanna la Fleur:** I know, this is fun. And, you know, as we explain in your intro a little bit about your work context and who you are, I mean, the most obvious question is, like, you've been doing this for two decades, this kind of work helping people,

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leaders, organizations, Christian and maybe not, but you're talking about powerful and purpose-driven stories.

So, how did you get into this? Was this always what you wanted to be when you grew up? How did you get into this kind of work?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah, you know, I couldn't have imagined this when I was a kid and trying to dream of what I would be when I grew up. Although, I have to say, I was the kid that really cared about story. I grew up in a family that loved garage sales.

And so, we would go to garage sales on Saturday mornings. And without fail, I would use my allowance or my newspaper money or whatever I had to buy old typewriters. Sounds so funny, but if there was a typewriter, I would buy old typewriters because it was easier to buy an old typewriter than the ink tape to put in them.

These were, like, legit old typewriters. And I would write stories. And my family knew I could sit for hours and hours and hours at the typewriter typing stories from the time.

I was really small when I learned how to read and write. I was very small. And yeah, I was a story teller, a story writer, like, from my genesis, I think.

**Joanna la Fleur:** And so, in that, was there a kind of story now that you were like, did you have a genre? Was it action-adventure? Was it romance? Was it, you were knights and ladies of King Arthur's court? You know, was there a certain kind of narrative that really drew you in?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Funny enough, it was more about facts to make them interesting for people. And so, I think I've really landed in the right role, but I even found a book that I wrote when I was small recently about facts about Siamese cats to make them interesting. And I had, like, this most bizarre fact in there.

And my teacher had written a little note, "I did not know that." That is surprising. That was my idea was always, how can I make facts interesting, and information interesting

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and presented in a way, things that are important to me, how can I make others care about them as well and know what they need to know?

**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah, I love that.

Well, and in that sense, you're describing things that were important to you, that you wanted to share. But I suppose there are ways that you could have taken this skill set and you could have maybe gone into journalism and news. You probably could have told the stories of, I don't know, big banks or consumer packaged goods.

And perhaps, I don't know the details of your income, but perhaps in just simply a corporate world could have made a ton of money or, you know, government telling stories and spin doctors for politicians and things. The people who can tell a good story, of course, in one direction can really leverage that into like a really lucrative business. But yet you have been working in particular.

Now, I'm not saying that you don't make money, but that you've been working in particular with charitable organizations in a lot of your work. So how did that happen for you that you focused your energies in that direction?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah. And, you know, I think it started out, I wouldn't have known that this was the start, but my start was when I was 11 years old, I knew I had a call to ministry.

And I was raised in a church that at that time, when I said I had a call to ministry, remember telling my mom, and I was clear as day, like clear as day calling. I remember telling my mom and she said, "well, dear, we're Lutheran." And at that time we were Lutheran Church Canada, which I don't know that they even still have women in ministry as ministers or in ministry.

And so, it was almost like, oh, there's a dead end. And yet I knew that God had called me to this. So, I continued on in my education.

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I was like, well, I guess I don't get, I remember even asking then when I was a teenager, if I could go to seminary. And I was told that the scholarships for that were only for boys. So, our minister told me that, and I was like, okay, I guess I have to use my gifts in other ways.

But then when I was in university, I was, very much prompted to join a trip to Haiti that was doing a dental clinic. And I saw for the first time that you can use other gifts. Like I was accompanying a dentist and a bunch of other people like moms, accountants, like people who were not just ministers in quotation marks, but people who were doing all sorts of things and that they could use their gifts to help people.

And it was at that time. And I actually saw women, this was a long time ago, but women handing their babies across the fence at the airport, wanting someone to take them because they couldn't care for their children. And that changed my perspective forever because I just thought if you get to a point of being that desperate for someone to help you, then there are deep needs in the world that I didn't understand.

And so that really changed my trajectory. And then I went with Operation Mobilization to Latin America, and it was there again that I learned that I wasn't..., I was always invited to do the Sunday missions testimony, not invited on the evangelistic trip. So as much as I went to be like a missionary, I was more invited to do the things that were encouraging.

I was like a marketer for missions every Sunday and then was working in the office with the captain, like the captain's office, managing PR in every port. And so, I learned that I could use my skills for good in a context I never even knew existed. And so that's really what set me on my path early on.

**Joanna la Fleur:** So, okay. We need to back up a little bit then, because you're talking about this sense of really like a call to ministry, asking if you could do seminary

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at an early age. And at that point, at least in your denomination, it wasn't available to you, things like that.

So, let's go back. Let's share a little bit about your own faith story, because I think that is the thing before it. Before this, like the Bible, I mean, here we are Scripture Untangled, but the Bible itself was like part, you think of that as part of the story of coming to faith.

So, tell us a little bit about it.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah. So, when I was a girl, I was taken, like my family was definitely believers and faithful, but not in the, like we go every Sunday.

And I was taken by a friend to a weekly kid's club meeting where I learned about Bible drills. It was like super evangelical. I was at an evangelical Lutheran church, but then we didn't do those typical evangelical things, if that makes sense.

**Joanna la Fleur:** And you mean, was that like the sword drill I did, when you had to remember, memorize Scripture? Okay.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I was like, what are you talking about? We are Lutherans.

We don't do that. But I went to a Pentecostal children's group, which at the time was called Missionettes and then Crusaders, which are things that we don't call things anymore. That tells you my age, anyone, Gen X, uh, I'm a late Gen X, but still, they would know those.

And if they were in a Pentecostal church with red carpet, they would know those things. But yeah, I learned about sword drills, and I was a really good reader. I was, I was a gifted child, which sounds really braggy, but it's not.

I was like, I said, I was reading, when I was four, I could read, write, spell, do all the things. And so, when I got into like Bible memorization and reading, I could do that. I knew words, words were my jam.

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And so, I loved doing my memory verses and learning to read the Bible. And then when I was in fourth grade, I think I told you I had finished high school English. So didn't have to sit into the English classes in my,...

**Joanna la Fleur:** Are we catching that everyone by fourth grade, she had finished grade 12 English?

So, we could say you were good with words.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Words were my thing. Words were my thing.

And to be honest, I was just a pain in the neck for the teacher. And so, she would just send me to the library to read while everybody else did their spelling. And because I was just, I was beating every, like you couldn't do a spelling test with me and it was awful.

I can only imagine how obnoxious I was. Um, and bored. I was bored.

So, they sent me to the library. I read all the books in the library, and then I was given a *Gideon New Testament* and this little red New Testament. I read through it, and I got to the end, and it had the prayer of salvation in it that you would sign off on.

And all of those Bible verses that I had learned in children's club and through my mom. And just like, we had a, *Good News for Modern Man* Bible in our house that I would read because it had pictures. It was fun.

And it just all made sense. It kind of all came together at that moment. And I really know that the Holy Spirit just made God just so clear to me.

And I have, I agreed with that prayer of salvation. I was like, yes, I believe this. Yes, I believe this.

So, I signed off and 11 years old. And that's when I got the same call to ministry was right around the same time. We were calling a minister at our church, and I recognized the Holy Spirit's voice and that I was called to ministry at 11 years old.

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And, fortunately God is just so faithful because yes, I could have been incredibly discouraged, but, and this, I tie back to the Word of God, like the Word of God was where I started, not just what people said. And so yeah, Scripture does matter because it's what does God say? Not just what do people say no to, because I got a lot of no's, but for whatever reason, I was resilient and kept on going.

**Joanna la Fleur:** And whether in those days, because you talk about being this like voracious young reader writing and reading stories, or now thinking about Scripture, is there a passage that you have from your early days hung on to, or is there a story or a character that, again, maybe then was formative to you or maybe continues with you now?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Um, there's not one Scripture.

There's a lot of them. There's kind of like storylines. I would say there's that storyline of faithfulness and redemption that has taken, I mean, it's still just so critical to me.

The idea of the fall in the garden and yet God is still faithful to the end of Revelation, you know, like that we could be deceived and, have our thinking so infected or affected by an enemy. And yet at the end, God overcomes that same enemy. Like that to me, that storyline, I would say a character, there are a few characters.

One of them is Joseph. I think I really, I think of Joseph as this.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Oh wait, which Joseph? Do you mean Joseph Technicolor Dreamcoat or Joseph Father of Jesus?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Joseph Technicolor Dreamcoat.

I think Joseph was probably like an advanced reader. He was probably a little bit like, he was like, "I got this guys."

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He was sparky, spunky, all the things, scrappy and his brothers didn't like it. And I get that, you know, like, and Joseph was a bit braggy too. And which is why I could have been a bit obnoxious in that fourth grade. No wonder they sent me to the library.

So, I knew stuff. And God had gifted me just like God gifted Joseph. And we have to grow into that gifting, and we get thrown in pits.

We jump into pits of our own making. We end up in tough circumstances, but at the end, that's again, that redemption story, like God intends this for good. You intended it for evil, but at the end, I mean, God intended Joseph's story and all the things he went through for the redemption of His people and not just for the salvation of His people.

Um, practically, like in practical terms, like famine, but also just forgiveness, all of those things. Um, and so I really resonate with Joseph in many, many ways.

**Joanna la Fleur:** I love that.

Um, I am the youngest sibling of many older brothers. So, uh, I know what you mean about, about the Joseph factor. I resonate with that a little bit myself, but okay.

I'm very curious about this idea because maybe not everyone listening would, understand how you're using the language of ministry being called the ministry, because I want to kind of pull this out a little bit because of course you work in a marketing and public relations sphere. Uh, and maybe you would define it differently than that. So, I'll let you define it in communications but talk to us about that because you have this motto - *Marketing for Good*.

And I would love to understand how you think about what you're doing as a ministry, what do you mean when you say *Marketing for good*.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Well, the tradition I was raised in, like our pastor was called the minister. And so, you quite literally would get a call to ministry.

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This idea of vocational ministry, like your career is around this calling from God, but also vocation doesn't just necessarily mean to like Christian work. You can have a vocation in Christian work, but also vocation is just, what has God uniquely gifted you for and called you to do in this world? Like what, how has he called you to use your gifts in this world? So when I think ministry, I don't maybe think in the way, like we have to work in a church or in a Christian organization, but very much your ministry is what has God gifted you with and how has He called you to share those gifts in the world?

And yes, there is that, you know, very official being called to ministry, but then there is that, how am I just using the gifts that God has given me? So, you know, with that in mind, I did have to wrestle a little bit because I got involved with operation mobilization and I was like, oh, these people have this really cool calling on their life. They were going to go and work in ... I remember just thinking, you know, it would be the coolest if I got to go work in like an Indonesian slum.

That was the word. You know, or like with people who like, I don't even know where I got this idea. I think I would have been awful.

And God knew that. And so instead of sending me there, God sent me back to Canada and I came to Canada, and I had these gifts. And I remember somebody said to me, you look at what are the gifts in my hands and who are the people in my circle.

And then as Henry Blackaby would say, "look where God is at work and join Him there." And so, I look where God is working and join Him there. And so that doesn't mean it's in church.

It doesn't mean it's in evangelism. It doesn't mean it's in all those things, but it's in knowing who God is, how He's created you. And how God has created me is as a storyteller, a connecting the dots-er, or I don't know how, how else to like...

**Joanna la Fleur:** A dot connector!

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**Ellen Graf-Martin:** A dot connector. Like I'm good at... I'm a creative, like I was creative, very creative young, and also very strategic. Like my brain just works for strategy and in relationship and looking at human relationship patterns and human behavior. And so, and I care about, joining where God is at work.

And I think God is at work, whether it is at a children's hospital, through incredible medical care that families are able to access or through a food bank in a local community or through a Bible translation and distribution organization. All those things are true in God's common grace in the world. So, I get to use my powers for good.

So, if I was to say, what are the gifts in my hand? I am good at those things. And I'm a marketer, in my skillset and who are the people in my circle, I can look around and see who can I actually bring those gifts to, to use for and to support and to really care about. And then where's God working in the world and how can I use my gifts and my people and connect those things and join them there.

**Joanna la Fleur:** I love that where you're saying that Henry Blackaby quote of, looking for where He's at work and coming to join Him there. And that can be on the, in the slums, I think you said slums in Sri Lanka.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Indonesia.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Oh, sorry. Indonesia. Okay.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Very specifically Indonesia was in my brain. I have not been to Indonesia. I know nothing about Indonesia.

That's where I was.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah. But it was in your mind as an archetype.

Well, and help us get there because, I think you and I have similar conversations sometimes with churches or Christians in general, like, what do you mean marketing

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and Christianity? Because maybe people have the idea in their mind of like a televangelist who's trying to take money from people who have no money to give, or there maybe are some like negative connotations about if we're marketing something, what do we need to market?

Jesus is good news. Uh, doesn't that just say it all? Like why are we trying to make it advertising? Like the world is doing? So, what's your response to that as you think as a professional marketer, where people might be apprehensive about that in Christian context?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah.

Well, first off manipulative marketing is gross and it's not okay. That's using your powers for evil, not for good. Um, and so when people said, I'm like, yeah, you know what? Marketing is just a tool.

It's a tool and it's being wise and intentional. So, it doesn't have to be manipulative. It can be wise and intentional.

And I remember, oh, who was it? It was, uh, Danielle. She speaks all over the place. Women's speakers,

**Joanna la Fleur:** Danielle Strickland?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Danielle Strickland? I heard her speak one time and she said, we use all things natural and all things supernatural. And I think of that in my marketing, in my work with marketing, we use all things natural and all things supernatural. And so, yes, we use understanding the psychology of how people think and what needs they have and how we meet those needs.

Uh, we use really strong tools to bring clarity and we find data and proof points and we build messages that connect with the right people. But then we also understand that God will use those things in ways we don't anticipate or expect. And we want to join Him in the work He's doing.

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So, we're not just trying to get people to do things because we want to do things, but so that more good is happening in the world. Our mission as an organization is to strengthen organizations committed to hope, generosity, and justice. So that's really important to us.

So how do we strengthen organizations is through really strategic, intentional marketing and communications tools. But our job is to strengthen organizations committed to hope, generosity, and justice.

Why our vision like is, because we see the day when organizations who are serving the most marginalized people in need of hope have everything they need to do that work. And so, like that changes the story. It's not just about marketing as a tool.

It isn't marketing as the end goal. It's marketing as a tool so that at the very end, people in most need of hope have access to it.

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**Joanna la Fleur:** You said that they have everything they need to do the work that they've been called to do, and marketing is one of the tools in their tool belt. And you know, broadly, I'm curious in this, we have a digital world, a post COVID world, a noisy world.

And so when, when people are knocking on your door, you're having conversations, you know, I'm not looking for the things you can't share, but where you see patterns, what are some of those things that are those big needs that like, you know, it's like we see that, you know, we see this all the time. We hear this all the time. Um, the organizations you're working with, they're trying to work for justice.

They're trying to talk to their donors. There's so much noise. Should we do mail anymore? Does the print even matter? Oh, the Canada Post is going on strike.

How do we get attention on Instagram? Now there's TikTok and YouTube and email. It's complex. And so, what are some of those things that you're hearing as maybe, you could say like pain points where they do need these tools.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I think everyone, if I had, and I know I've said this so many times, even in the last week, if I had a dollar or \$5 for every time somebody said their organization is the best kept secret, I would be able to donate a lot more to charity.

Yeah. They think they're like, they're the best kept secret. And so, for me, it's always kind of taking that step back.

Like why are all these organizations that are doing such incredible things, a best kept secret. And it's kind of trying to drill it down. And I mean, that's why we do the work we do.

We try to build our solutions around the actual problem. And one of the things that I have identified is that organizations aren't intentional about their communications. They don't know who they are, who they serve.

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They know why they exist, and they know what they do. And then they will often tell you why it's unique. But when I've talked to three organizations that are, you know, in this sector, they'll all say the same thing about being unique.

So, it is noisy. The world is really, really noisy. And if we're not clear, we actually don't serve anyone well, you know, the end beneficiary of our work or our donors.

I think they ask, they don't know who they partner best with. And it's not just about asking people to give you money, but it's about helping meet a need that your donor actually has. And so, I think we forget often, or organizations forget that their donors are people first, who again, have gifts in their hands and are looking for people in their circle to meet the need that is in the world and see where God is at work.

And so, we treat them as transactions rather than, you know, or way to get to do our mission rather than as people that we care for and love. And, so because of those two things, we don't show up consistently. And so, organizations aren't recognizable when they're digital or in person.

If you meet with somebody's ED and you see their socials and then you get their fundraising newsletter, you wouldn't know they're the same organization. And so that consistency, so like we've got these different pieces and then, you know, I think that there are just so many things that are, old school, smart to do, and then you apply them to kind of where the world is right now. And, does that make sense? Yeah, for sure.

**Joanna la Fleur:** I love what you're saying. I think it's in some ways you're talking about like where we started, like your heart to do this as ministry, to work with people who have issues of generosity and justice and impact at the center. And this is about people.

I mean, there are people who might be potential donors who like the thing that you do is a great longing in their own heart to see that thing come to be in the world as well. But you need to connect those, help people connecting those dots and yeah,

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how do you then tell the story in a way that resonates with not everyone, but the kinds of people who really connect with the story that you're telling. So, in all of this, I mean, you're also working with nonprofits and charities.

You're working with bestselling authors. You often are working now with like The Chosen and Hollywood blockbusters. So, in all of this, what are the ways in which you stay in those? I would call it Biblical values really, but these values that you started with in such a wide spectrum of clients and demands, and maybe, well, this thing works for these guys.

Can we try it here? And maybe there's, I don't know if it's ethical issues or like, how do you stay grounded in this sort of source that you started remembering where you started? How do you stay rooted in this work?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I think that is a learning, that is something to learn as we go, isn't it? Because I think having values that really matter to me, but also to our team. And yes, we have core values, but even just saying, no, we strengthen organizations committed to hope, generosity, and justice, kind of grounds me. Because people say, well, do you just work with charities? I'm like, no, we do great work with charities, but no, we don't just work with charities.

Do we work just with film? No, we work with specific kinds of film companies, the ones that are, you know, telling stories of hope or justice or whatever that looks like. And we work with organizations like credit unions that are doing justice work and generosity work in our communities. So, but knowing that my job is to strengthen them is what would keep me rooted.

So, we are never to exploit. And so that means deep rooted. It means we're not an inch deep mile wide, wherever possible.

It's been a growth path for me of like; how do we keep growing? And now, I mean, I've got... in the fall, it'll be, uh, 17 years that I've had the agency like Graf-Martin as an agency. And, so yeah, we are pretty deep roots by now, but I think if I could kind of

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even take one big step back when we started the agency or when I started the agency in the fall of 2008 was the bottom of the great recession. I had lost my job because the company I worked for went bankrupt out of the bottom of that.

And I had the opportunity to start because two people asked me if I would continue working for them. One asked me if I'd start my own agency. And I remember my husband and I, like we had only been married for six months and just praying and saying, God, if this is the door you're opening, we will go through that door until you close it.

I learned quickly that my husband shouldn't work in the agency with me. That's another story, but you know, he's also a faithful partner in this. He doesn't work doing what I do, but he really supports everything that we do.

But that okay, if this is the door God's opening, I will walk through it until He shuts it, trusting that He is faithful because I have seen the story from Genesis to Revelation, that God is faithful to His people and He still loves them even when they fall and when they struggle. And then God, I felt really lead me to Isaiah 61. I thought, what a strange Scripture to have as a founding Scripture for the company, like for my calling in this company. Why that one?

But it really works. This is actually where we got our hope, generosity, and justice. Like this is Jesus call, a day of the Lord's favor.

And I saw that at the very end of that, it says, *"and they shall be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His glory."* And so, at the end of my work, like I do all these things like, so that the blind will see that, those who are imprisoned will be, will be set free, like the, or the oppressed will be set free. Those who are in prison will be encouraged.

Those who grieve will be comforted all of these things in Isaiah, but not so that I become rich, because all of the, like, if you read Isaiah at all, you know, that, you

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know, you have become rich off the fat of this land. And there's condemnation for that. You haven't followed my commands, et cetera, et cetera.

But if we spend ourselves in those things that Jesus came for, and to fulfill that prophecy that we will be oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His glory, not for my riches, but man, I get to participate in that. That's incredible. It's not easy, but it's incredible.

And an oak tree has deep roots. I've got oak trees outside of my office.

**Joanna la Fleur:** I was going to say for those who are, who are seeing the video version of this, there's a huge, beautiful tree swinging in the wind outside your window.

And then there's even leaves, a different kind of tree, but there's leaves on the print behind you on the wall. So I love that this idea, this sort of a resilience that has come in this metaphor of the tree for you, you know, and all the change, the growth, the complexity of this work, the ups and downs of the entrepreneurship journey of just life's journey, frankly, that is really planted you. Do you have this idea? We keep coming back to hope, generosity, justice, hope, generosity, justice.

Is there a story or an illustration you could share? Maybe you can't, I don't know if you can or can't name the organization that you've worked with, but, or, you know, something that like where you've seen this come to life, maybe something, it could be a long time ago, but something in the work you've done that has connected those dots for you, a story of hope or justice or generosity.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I don't know if there's one in particular, but I think something when you're just doing the work and Joanna, you'll know this. And I think all the listeners who are listening will know this there.

Yes, it looks glamorous and fun when you're doing really cool things, but then there's just like the real part of it is like the really administrative following up. Like when

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you're intentional, it means you're deep to, you have to follow a lot of details. You need to have, like it's boring, like faithfulness is boring.

And so, we kind of forget and it can be really discouraging. And then taking a step back at some point and going, okay, did we actually do what we said we were going to do? Did we strengthen organizations, community, hope, generosity, justice, and then looking at the organizations we were working with. And I was like; this is astonishing to me.

So, say, yeah, we actually did brand clarity for International Justice Mission, which meant that freedom partners were released to go on rescue missions for children who were being trafficked. And then we did a campaign for a children's hospital, which meant that funders came alongside to purchase NICU beds so that babies could be medevaced there from Northern Ontario. And, but we're just doing like, we're doing the boring part of that, if that makes sense.

And then working with another organization in Alberta that is, um, releasing girls or creating the situation so that women, girls can be released from childhood marriage, and not having to be married as children can be educated and receive water. And like all of those things, like we're just doing our faithful thing here in Canada. And I think the impact that I have been able to have, and like, even there is something like The Chosen, like that we get to work with The Chosen is so cool.

I was a missionary for five years, Joanna, and I have told more people about Jesus just through being able to promote The Chosen and get it in theaters across the country and see it in church, used in churches. I have told more people about Jesus indirectly through working with The Chosen than I ever could have imagined doing in five years. Cause it kept sending me to churches, but wow.

I just think God fulfills His call and His promises in ways that we really, so you said that, could you have expected this as a child? Absolutely not. Like I couldn't have expected

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it five years ago, let alone as a child, but this is how we see that hope and generosity and justice being built.

**Joanna la Fleur:** And you talk about, you know, you reference back to the child, and I think of this young Ellen who didn't see a lot of women in these ministry roles.

And then you're talking about the work you're doing to, you know, you just reference empowering women, or women and girls, you know, out of childhood marriages or just out of, human trafficking, all these kinds of things that you're connected to, but you're also, and I don't know if this is still an active group, but you were gathering this thing you founded called The Table, which was all about Canadian Christian women in leadership. I don't know if it's still an active group, but even just the idea of how you were naturally as an entrepreneur, you can't help but start a new thing and bring people together around it. This idea of women's leadership, those friendships, mentorship opportunities.

Speak to that a little bit, tell us about where that has played out in your work.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah. So our mutual friend, Melinda actually inspired this 10 years ago, which is wild.

It was 10 years ago in October. Or like this October it'll be 10 years. At the time we were working with a lot of publishers, and I love to read, like I said, so I was reading different things, and I would come in and tell the team, Melinda was working with me at that time.

**Joanna la Fleur:** This is Melinda Estabrooks from See, Hear, Love?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah. See, Hear, Love, a good shout out for Melinda.

And she, this is before See, Hear, Love. And she said to me, like, who else are you telling about these? Like, who are you telling about these books and what you're reading? And I said, you guys, that's enough. And she was like, your peers, she actually said to me, your peers need to know about this.

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You need to be telling them. And I said, I have no peers because I'm neither ministry nor fully business. I am, you know, just me.

And she was like, yes, you have peers. We will find them. And if you know, Melinda, she's just, she's a,...

**Joanna la Fleur:** ...She's tenacious.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** And so, she was like, here are your peers. I found them. And we made this list of women across Canada that I could maybe invite to kind of like a book club with me.

And I sent out an email saying, hey, would you guys want to join me in this book club? And I thought no one is going to say yes. And no one wants to have that party that you invite all these people you don't know to and nobody's supposed to have. It's like so embarrassing.

I actually sent the email, left and went for lunch. Because I can't handle the rejection.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Does anybody want to come to my party? Yeah.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Will anyone want to come to my party?

And I came back, and I had said, okay, 50 spots. This is what I can do is 50 spots because I could get 50 books and ship them out. And, um, within 24 hours, I had, I think, 40 people.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Wow. There was a resonance. Women in leadership were saying we need this.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** They were all lonely. And it's not just about a book or a resource, but it's about knowing each other and knowing each other exists. And there was at the time, there was nothing really doing that in our country.

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And it wasn't just for people working in a church. It was for like any woman who was leading leaders, if that makes sense. And so that's what I did.

And that was, yeah, nine and not over almost 10 years ago that I did that. And it has evolved over the years. I, at first, I was very ambitious, like one book a month.

No way that was not going to happen. So now it's kind of like bimonthly or quarterly that we're doing this and connecting and women. There are some women that are still in it.

Um, my friend, Alana Walker, who is with Intricity, she really encouraged me.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Now we've had her on the podcast here too.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** She's incredible.

And she encouraged this and has been such a champion of it from the very beginning. So, she's so faithful to show up and it's been really good. And what I didn't know, Joanna, and I mean, you are in this too with Word Made Digital, is that only 1% of marketing and ad agencies in North America are owned by women, owned and controlled by women.

I didn't know that until I had been doing this for 14 years.

And that's why it was lonely.

Like I was lonely because not just the sector that I serve or the niche that I care about and serve best, but also because like the actual vocation that I have chosen is not a lot of women. And so, I guess maybe those early rejections, now that I think about it, were probably God preparing me to be like, you're going to be alone in this, but just, I've got you. If I call you, I will do it.

And so, yeah.

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**Joanna la Fleur:** And when you think of your team, it's men and women, but you know, younger women coming up, whether on your team or, you know, with people you may interview, maybe you don't end up hiring, but, uh, do you see your role in that? The next generation of young ministry minded marketing type, you know, it is a niche for sure, but do you, you know, this idea of younger women, they have someone, if there's 1%, uh, they can look to you. Do you feel a weight from a weight of that role or a responsibility there to younger women coming up?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I feel a responsibility, but I also feel a real excitement because what is possible for them was not possible for me in the same way, or they're on ramp is shorter.

And so, if I can equip them in this season, this is my season to do that. That's what I'd say. If my first 17 years were about establishing and building this, my next, however many years, 10 years, however many it is, is about equipping and releasing them, to have both the heart and the skill because values really matter.

And I was gonna say the next generation, but you know, they're, I have just brilliant young women that I get to work with every day and they're 27 or 38. And I want to equip them and release them and then their daughters and whoever comes.

So that's my next job.

**Joanna la Fleur:** So, you know, let's talk about this sort of the Canadian church by which I mean, you know, Christians across the country in this moment, you have kind of a unique vantage point, because of the, you're crossing ministries and sectors here. I don't know, maybe in some ways it's not meant to be, but you know, the therapy of a call with a new client and hearing all the things they're going through.

And as we said earlier, some of those are common stories were another best kept secret or whatever. But what do you see God is doing across the country today? I mean, with The Chosen and other things that you've referenced, you have a unique vantage point of what God might be up to from coast to coast to coast. What are you

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seeing that's sort of emerging, uh, these days, you know, I'm hearing you say women, young, more women are being represented, but there's much more going on.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Oh, there's a lot. And you're right. It is kind of like a therapy role.

It's like when I have a call with someone is often like a doctor's appointment where they come in and tell me what hurts. And I'm not joking this morning; I had to show you my pain point is literally what she said. And then when, you know, shared her screen with me.

**Joanna la Fleur:** And perhaps that's the analogy too, of, you know, you can offer someone their physiotherapy plan.

You can't, here's the drugs, but you need to do this exercise every week. And if you don't, you will come back and not see results.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Yeah.

Well, and for me, I feel like my job is to do the core strength and I'm like, okay, yes, we can relieve this temporarily. However, it's going to come back. So why don't we actually talk about what's deeper? So, that's how I, dive deep Joanna at this time.

I don't have time for that. I don't have time to be too shallow. But what I see in kind of all of these different areas that we get to work in is that people are more open to hope, they need hope.

Like the concept of hope is critical. And so, we did some research on The Chosen, for example, and there's far more openness in a general Canadian population to watching at least one episode of The Chosen than I would have ever anticipated. So, there is an openness, like, tell me about Jesus.

Like, I mean, it's not like Jesus is a forbidden figure. I think we sometimes we forget that it's actually good news, not just like...,

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**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah, that people are curious or interested. They're not immediately hostile to it.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** No. And I think we put too much pressure on this, like it's idea of evangelism. I'm like, we're just telling good news.

Like there's this historical fact that this man, Jesus was alive. Let me tell you who He is. And people are open to that.

I think that there is a lack of leadership transition, across, not just in the church, but in the charitable sector and in general. And, so we need, I would say, like I said, my calling right now is to be a mama and to be like, how do I raise up the next generation to step in and allow them to make mistakes and allow them to learn and don't withhold information, but like brain dump for them so that they can learn everything they can, because there is a significant leadership gap. There is a skill and heart gap because I think we have made this like dichotomy.

Like you either have to work in ministry, like quotation mark ministry, or be in a skilled trade for lack of a better phrase. And so, I'm like, but there can be both. And it's maybe seems still unusual.

I think, there's a little bit of a panic in many circles of how do we become known because the world is noisier. What I am encouraging organizations to do is to pause and to go deep. Not deep forever, like not circle the drain deep, but, really try to be wise.

And then if very intentional, uh, because I think we can get really caught up in that shiny object, like AI into the end of the world, all those things. I'm like, AI is a tool. Again, what are the tools in your hands? Who are the people in your circle and where where's God at work? I'll go join Him there.

So those are just a few of the things.

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**Joanna la Fleur:** That's really good. You know, as we come to a close, we've said a lot and maybe you'll bring us back to that Isaiah passage, but I wonder when we think of sort of where you are currently, if there are Scripture or here we are Scripture Untangled, is there a Scripture that you've been untangling lately? You know, maybe it's in the Bible study you've been in this year, or it's from the sermons you've heard on Sunday sometimes, or a podcast you're listening to, or of course, your personal study, you might, might have a rhythm.

I don't want to assume not everybody does have some rhythm of reading Scripture or listening to Scripture in their life. Yeah. Is there a passage that in your kind of this season of your life is, or this week of your life has been sticking out to you as God is speaking to you through the Word?

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** I'm very fortunate to have a pastor or pastors of our church who really dive into Scripture every week.

So, it's like every week is something new. I would say, again, its themes, like looking at themes. So, lately it's about wisdom, about seeking wisdom.

Like there are some, like the Proverbs about seeking wisdom. And then Proverbs 31, which has gotten such a bad rap. Um, I actually just spoke at a women's event about this not very long ago, but Proverbs 31 women get such a bad rap.

**Joanna la Fleur:** And this ideal, this idea of the woman, that's sort of ideal that a woman could never live up to, or it's sort of made fun of in some ways. Uh, but it's, as you're saying, it's powerful.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Powerful. This is a woman like that.

We have done a disservice, but this idea, like this woman of valor, it's not just, we have translated it value, but it's actually wrong. It actually says a woman of value, valor, like a warrior woman who can find her. And then it describes what a warrior woman looks like.

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And a warrior woman looks like one is a businesswoman and taking care of business and looking after details and being kind to people, being generous to the poor, seeking wisdom, making sure her household is in order, uh, contributing to her community, looking globally and a global trade. And so, I look at that and I know all women won't say, well, I, you know, I don't do that. I don't.

And I think, but God doesn't say it's a prescription. Like, these are the five things you need to do in order to be a valuable woman of courage. I'm like, again, look at what is in your hands.

That was what was in the hands of the woman of Proverbs 31. And I mean, personally, I'm fortunate because I get to do a lot of the things that that Proverbs 31 woman did, but what are the things in each of our hands that make us a woman of courage or a person of courage?

**Joanna la Fleur:** Well, Ellen, let's leave it there. Ellen Graf-Martin, woman of valor.

Uh, I really enjoyed this conversation. It's great to have these diverse conversations we do every week, because we might talk to someone who's a theologian or a scientist, or, you know, as you're a marketer, and that we're seeing how Scripture is being lived out, how it affects us so deeply. Plans perhaps, not even plans, just pushes us on the trajectory of our life and then comes back in dry seasons and in good seasons.

This resilience that you find as that Isaiah tree planted, the oak planted beside the river. So thank you for your time. Thank you for your work, across the country. Marketing for good.

It can be so, and you're showing us how it's done. So, thank you so much, Ellen, for joining us today.

**Ellen Graf-Martin:** Thank you, Joanna.