

United Methodist Women
July 2020 2020 Newsletter article

The Friendship Circle will not meet during the month of July. The Shalom Circle will meet on Saturday, July 18, 2020 at the home of Vickie Failor.

Prayer Focus

Our prayer focus for July is on the Red Bird Mission in Beverly, Kentucky. It was founded in 1921 to provide education and Christian evangelism ministries to residents of the area. It was started by the Evangelical Church and today is supported by the UMC and UMW.

The story of the Red Bird Mission is one of deep faith in God. Red Bird Mission was born in answer to prayer. It is a story of gracious outpouring of prayers by the church. Their ministry programs include - Education with a Christian school for grades K-12 and a licensed child care center Community outreach with programs for senior citizens and families Red Bird Clinic offering screenings, home visits, and dental care Work Camp that provides home repair for low income citizens year round Economic Opportunities including community store and craft marketing program

Birthday cards will be sent to Jana Marie Whitten in New Hampshire and Mary Winslow in Tennessee.

Women Taking the Lead

Women leaders from across the country gather at Leadership Development Days to ensure women's voices are heard in The United Methodist Church.

by Tara Barnes

Leadership development is a pillar of United Methodist Women, equipping women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.

In February 2020 United Methodist Women invited organization leaders and women General and Jurisdictional Conference delegates to St. Louis for its annual Leadership Development Days. The time together focused on raising awareness of oppression and privilege as women leaders within the church and working together to dismantle both, beginning with General Conference, then scheduled to meet in May 2020.

The United Methodist General Conference, the top policymaking body for the denomination, rescheduled because of the COVID-19 global health crisis, will take place sometime in 2021. There, 862 delegates from around the world will set denominational policy, revise church law, approve budgets for churchwide programs and adopt resolutions on current moral, social, public policy and economic issues. This will be followed by Jurisdictional Conferences, where the five jurisdictions in the United States traditionally assign and elect bishops and boards of directors of agencies of the church.

“We are committed to developing women leaders in The United Methodist Church,” said Mollie James-Vickery, director of mobilization and advocacy for United Methodist Women. “Our members are leaders across the church and their communities. We have worked hard this year to encourage women to run for leadership, to make their voices heard and to carry the purpose of United Methodist Women with them.”

Women in the church

In 2016 and at the special session in 2019, only 36 percent of voting delegates at General Conference were women—in a church where women are more than 58 percent of the membership. In 2016, according to Commission on the Status and Role of Women, only 7 conferences had more women district superintendents than men, 5 had equal numbers, and the rest out of 56 had majority male district superintendents. The denomination actually employs more women than men, but the majority of the women serve in support positions. The majority of the leadership positions—directors, managers, professionals—are held by men. Clergymen are disproportionately represented in top leadership.

The Rev. Effie McAvoy, of the New England Conference, who attended the event, pointed out that it is women who fund the mission and ministry of the church.

“On a huge scale, if it were not for women working in the church things would not get done. From the financial support of mission and ministry to the hands and feet in the world—women make ministry happen and render the much-needed support of prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.”

Only 27 percent of the church’s clergy are women, and 28 percent of its bishops. Women organized for mission have made great advancements, but the work for equity clearly must continue. Advancements happen when women work together says the North Texas Conference’s Shandon Klein.

“There is power in community. One voice may be small, but it is magnified when we are together,” she said. “When one of us feels weak or discouraged, another can come alongside to remind us of the joy that goes before us. We need to work together for the future generations. We need to work together for the mission of making God known throughout all the world. The world will seek to divide us and separate us in whatever way possible, but if we hold fast to our love of Christ and one another, we can invite the world into the resurrection story of humanity.”

Privilege and power

The February gathering began with an exploration of Acts 16:16-24, the story of Paul and Silas in prison. The focus of this passage is often on the earthquake that sets Paul and Silas free. The focus for the women gathered, however, was on why Paul and Silas were imprisoned—the official story and the real story—as well as on the enslaved girl and the power she had (or didn’t have) in the community. How did Paul react to her? Did he consider the impact of his actions on her? This biblical story provided a lens to examine power and privilege and how they operate within systems of oppression.

Oppression is a system that maintains advantage and disadvantage based on social group memberships, and it operates, intentionally and unintentionally, on individual, institutional and cultural levels. The other side of oppression is privilege. Antiracism educator Peggy McIntosh describes privilege to be “what exists when one group has something of value (resources, access) that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do.”

The decision-making of the church can’t happen without acknowledging oppression and privilege, not in a church that wants to lift the marginalized.

“We want to ensure diverse women’s voices are heard at the General Conference decision-making arena,” said Sung-ok Lee, connectional officer for United Methodist Women. “It is about making sure our leadership strengths are in force and ready to go when we arrive at General Conference. Often those who take the helm of leadership at General Conference are not fully inclusive of all and fail to examine decisions through lenses of gender, race and other marginalized voices.”

The February leadership event gave United Methodist women leaders the chance to be together, build relationships, discuss barriers and work together to dismantle those barriers.

One of the women attending was Carmen Vianese from the Upper New York Conference, a two-term former United Methodist Women Board member and current conference president. She is also the head of her General Conference delegation.

“I still get called ‘honey’ or ‘dear’ by clergyman with whom I sit around the same table,” she said, even after years of proven leadership. “It’s still assumed that I lack certain knowledge or skills needed for the task at hand.”

Now a veteran General Conference delegate, Vianese notes that women at General Conference need “a safe place to debrief, to share conversations and pray or relax a moment—and to find support to be bold, a full sisterhood support.”

In addition to its exhibit space, United Methodist Women has planned to host a women’s delegate lounge for central conference women delegates to gather throughout the conference as well as a central conference women delegates’ orientation and an all-women’s orientation when the next General Conference takes place. The delegates who attended Leadership Development Days had the time and space there to build relationships before they are back together again at General Conference.

Cornerstones of faith

United Methodist Women invited women from each U.S. annual conference to attend Leadership Development Days: Conference United Methodist Women presidents, treasurers and nominations chairs along with General and Jurisdiction Conference delegates. Around 260 women including staff attended, about 75 of whom were delegates. Usually a laywomen’s event,

this year's event invited clergywomen into the space as well, bringing together a mix of women from various leadership experiences in the church.

Attendees explored privilege and oppression deeper within jurisdiction breakouts, working to recognize the different identities they hold and the social power (or lack of social power) associated with them, such as age, ability, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, citizenship status, religion and class.

“I feel called to serve as a delegate to General Conference because the discussion around the table will be about me and people like me,” said McAvoy. “After decades folk are aware of and care about the harm that has been done to LGBTQ persons in the church. As a Black woman, I also know that the church has much more work to do in regard to racism and colonialism. And though I cannot speak for all Queer persons or all Black persons, I can and will represent with voice and vote those issues that will benefit persons of color and the LGBTQ communities.”

United Methodist Women exists to empower all women and to ensure that marginalized voices of women, children and youth are not silenced within or by the church. United Methodist Women members hold multiple identities but know that as members they have a community in which they can dialogue, learn and grow in creative, supportive—and sometimes challenging—ways.

Women at the event also spent time looking at General Conference legislation from the point of view of different marginalized groups within the church: laywomen, clergywomen, racial ethnic caucuses, central conferences, LGBTQIA United Methodists, and others, and strategizing how to get more women in leadership at all levels of the church.

“Women, biblically, have been cornerstones of our faith tradition, instrumental in the Gospel and to ministry,” said Deaconess Kelly Tazuko Marciales, from the Alaska Conference.

“Simultaneously, women have been underrepresented in the leadership of our church, often not having voice at the highest levels of decision-making. It is an imperative for me, as a woman and mother of four children, that women's leadership continues to assert itself into all levels of leadership for the equitable co-Creation of the Kin-dom come.”

Marciales believes the church is at a pivotal time, especially in its global connection.

“How the Global North has related to our siblings in the Global South is marred by colonialism. As the Church in the North stalls its growth, the South flourishes. I hope that The United Methodist Church will restructure itself post-General Conference in a way that creates equitable sharing of resources, theology and praxes for a revival of our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” she said.

Supporting women leaders

Every United Methodist Women member is a faith leader and has a role to play in supporting women as faith leaders, especially as the church is making important decisions about its future. Use your sphere of influence to support women's leadership. Continue to be present in the

church and build relationships, wearing your United Methodist Women hat—or glasses that help you see where women need to be uplifted. Become a voting lay equalization member at your annual conference, serve on conference committees, make United Methodist Women a part of clergy training, attend and invite others to Mission u, partner with other church and community groups. There are many ways you can be present to ensure women's voices are heard.

In this time of uncertainty, be a mentor.

"You don't know how ready I was to give up on any hope that The United Methodist Church could be an institution that I felt comfortable participating in," said Tiffany French-Goffe of the New York Conference after Leadership Development Days. "I wish there were more spaces like that in the Church. United Methodist Women really seems to be doing the tough and necessary work. The intentional intersectionality there was unlike anything I've witnessed in the denomination. They are talking about real global issues and doing real justice work. I see it now. And I really left there feeling energized and motivated to do more and to speak louder. It was awesome."