

FYI

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Women lead pastors in The United Methodist Church

Nearly 40 years after women received full rights as ordained elders in The United Methodist Church, they are still hitting the "stained glass ceiling" when it comes to appointments as lead pastors in local churches, according to the Rev. Lynn Scott, director of continuing education for ministry in the Division of Ordained Ministry (DOM), General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

Statistics compiled using data from the General Council on Finance and Administration show that of 81 churches with a membership of more than 3,000, none is served by women lead pastors.

Other statistics show:

- of 181 churches with memberships of 2,000-2,999, 5 are served by women
- of 248 churches with memberships of 1,500-1,999, 2 are served by women
- of 690 churches with memberships of 1,000 to 1,499, 10 are served by women

The totals show of 1,200 churches with a membership of 1,000 or above, 17 or 1.4 percent are served by women lead pastors.

Women elders constitute approximately 11 percent of all ordained elders in the church. Currently, 16 percent of district superintendents are women and 15 percent are active bishops.

"Women hit the stained glass ceiling when it comes to serving in positions

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as lead pastors. We have done well in having more women as district superintendents and as bishops, but the impact of women as lead pastors in local churches is still lacking," the Rev. Liz Lopez Spence, lead pastor of Christ United Methodist Church in Rochester, Minnesota, said.

A gathering of women who are serving in lead pastor positions is planned by the Division of Ordained Ministry, Section of Elders and Local Pastors in the coming year. The Rev. Lopez Spence contacted DOM to propose the consultation.

"I am hopeful this consultation will help us work in partnership with bishops, district superintendents, and the women who have the gifts and skills. I want to explore what avenues are being blocked to women, and how we can raise awareness and educate local congregations," she said.

Lead pastors are defined as those who work with at least one other ordained minister on staff, Scott said.

Lack of education and experience with women in leadership roles among local congregations is one of the reasons cited for the lack of women in lead pastor roles.

"I don't think all of our churches have been adequately prepared for receiving clergywomen in lead pastor roles. It seems to me the reality is that people still think of lead pastors in terms of Anglo males," said Bishop Ed Paup, Oregon-Idaho Conference.

"Some leadership styles simply have not been considered very carefully at this point," he said.

The Rev. Patricia Ferris, a district superintendent in the California-Pacific

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conference, says clergywomen need more opportunities to receive leadership training and need to gain more visibility in their annual conferences.

“Some of the younger women haven’t had the experience yet to prepare them to take on a larger church,” she said.

“Women often get stuck in smaller churches because their gifts are not known. We are looking for ways to increase their visibility so we are more aware of them. It is important for male pastors to include women and invite them in as pastors, workshop leaders, or presenters so congregations will have the opportunity to see women in these leadership roles,” she said.

“Some local churches seem to question whether women really can handle a larger church, will they be good managers, how will they handle the demands of a family with the demands of the church? These are questions they don’t often ask of the male pastors,” said the Rev. Lopez Spence.

“As a single mother I have found my church to be wonderfully supportive. They understand the demands of this church and the demands of being a single parent. I have had a very positive experience. The people of this church are wonderful. I can’t sing their praises enough,” Rev. Lopez Spence said.

“There are all kinds of struggles around the complete acceptance in our church today regardless of gender or ethnicity that for some automatically leads to a time of difficulty. The current pastor of a church needs to do much to pave the way for the next pastor,” Paup said.

“Clergywomen need to be thinking of how to increase our skills, to push ourselves into leadership roles, and to attend training events. We need to be more

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intentional in helping bishops and cabinets know who we are and what gifts we have to offer," Ferris said.

Paup said a positive change he has seen is in the appointment of women as district superintendents and bishops.

"In my cabinet two of five superintendents are women and are very capable leaders that are well received. I know from the leadership they are providing in their districts that this in itself has been providing an education to our congregation about the gifts of women in these roles. It speaks well for our future, but we do need to work harder," Paup said.

"I think the challenge that bishops and district superintendents face in the appointive process is to look at the gifts and graces rather than gender," Lopez Spence said.

The purpose of the consultation for clergywomen in lead pastor positions will be to listen to their needs and concerns, network with other women, develop new models of ministry for lead pastors, and look at specific issues facing women lead pastors, Scott said.

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