

A Clear and Present Danger: The 2005 Reading Program

The title of this report is not used lightly. *Danger* is defined as a situation that is not safe; one that represents risk; something/someone that may cause harm or injury. A large percentage of the titles selected by the Women's Division this year for the women of our church represent a minefield of danger and should be approached with caution.

This report analyzes the 2005 Reading Program by giving a brief overview of some troublesome titles in each category of the program, detailed reviews of some of the most disturbing books, an analysis of various publishers used in the selection process and some information concerning the history, participation, goals and influence of the program. **Any program of the Women's Division such as The UMW Reading Program which has significant influence over the minds and spiritual lives of the membership of United Methodist Women, and also impacts youth and children, needs to be held to the highest standard and deserves scrutiny.**

United Methodist Women put a tremendous amount of trust in the discernment of its leadership to make choices that are theologically sound and representative of the Christian beliefs and values of its members. Many women are either appalled by some of the selections offered through the Reading Program, baffled at some of the topics chosen or confused by the absence of mainstream Christian authors. The cover of the February 2005 issue of *Response* magazine portraying an African American woman reading a book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, by Philip Yancey is interestingly deceptive. The book she is holding by this popular Christian author is *only* offered in Spanish on the 2005 reading list. Another book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, a choice we could applaud, is *only* offered to Korean readers. One is led to ask why titles of a more conservative theological persuasion are rarely included in the UMW Reading Program? Where is the balance? Extreme choices are the order of the day—extremely liberal, extremely partisan, extremely pluralistic, extremely feminist and extremely disheartening!

The Reading Program has been a major UMW program for many years. **One of the stated purposes of this program is “to grow in understanding Scripture as it relates to Christian faith in contemporary life.” This is ironic in that one of the major themes revealed throughout the selections on the 2005 book list is the mixing of many religious traditions into one interfaith stew with little emphasis on the orthodox beliefs of the Christian faith.** Many of these books undermine the uniqueness of Christianity as the only way to God and discount His Great Commission mandate that we spread the Gospel throughout the world. What a confusing message to young women (a target audience of the Women's Division) at the onset of their journey with Jesus Christ.

There is also a tremendous lack of balance with regard to political viewpoints and social activism. For example, *Making Peace with Conflict* comes from the perspective of the Mennonite Church U.S.A., which has a strong pacifist theological stance on war and peace. **This is not balanced with the just cause position regarding war that is a part of our *Book of Discipline*.** Perspectives on issues such as globalization, Cuba and public education are presented from a secular worldview without alternative resources reflecting different viewpoints about the problems that confront us both nationally and globally. For example, the only supplemental reading material to the Cuba mission study (another partisan resource) is a propaganda piece by **Fidel Castro** on globalization, *War, Racism and Economic Injustice: The Global Ravages of Capitalism*. There are other books available, such as *Cuba: The*

Morning After by *Mark Falcoff*, that could provide a balanced look at the complex relationship with our U.S. neighbor where communist oppression has enslaved its people for over forty years, and where religious persecution continues.

As many women within our church seek to know Christ more intimately they are given numerous books about women of all faith traditions from a feminist perspective of oppression and subjugation, denouncing patriarchy at every turn. The beautiful messages contained within God's Holy Word are misrepresented and overshadowed by the constant griping of feminist theologians who feel women are not mentioned enough in Scripture and their contributions to God's plan for the world not deemed important enough. These radical theologians are also obsessed with giving God feminine attributes and names—a position repeatedly dismissed by the majority of the women in our country, our church and our organization. Out of all the resolutions submitted at the 2004 General Conference by the Women's Division, the one calling for the adoption of inclusive language for God was overwhelmingly defeated. Books that highlight this fascination with self-empowerment, self-help and self-sufficiency, give little attention to our complete helplessness to achieve anything without a relationship with the living God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

There is a growing awareness that there exists a divide between the worldview of many of the women of the church and the leadership of the Women's Division. The 2005 Reading Program clearly reflects that division. Many units no longer participate because they can't find titles that reflect their foundational Christian beliefs. We know of one unit in the process of an official boycott of the program based on the inclusion of a book by retired bishop **C. Joseph Sprague** titled *Affirmations of a Dissenter* that renounces almost every historic doctrine of the Christian faith. Many women participate out of loyalty to the organization and a desire to receive a certificate for reading a certain number of books. Many participate out of trust in the leadership of the Women's Division. While some women within UMW embrace the worldview of the Women's Division, the majority do not. Women within the UMC have limited alternatives within the "official" realm of the church as the power and influence of the Women's Division continues to suppress the desires and voices of mainstream Christian women. The Renew Network will continue to evaluate the resources provided by the Women's Division, such as the Reading Program, in order to hold our leadership accountable for the content of those resources, and to provide analysis of these materials from a biblical worldview. This is the aim of this report.

The material in this analysis of the 2005 UMW Reading Program was prepared by Liza Kittle, North Georgia Conference Representative for the RENEW Network, and by Dawn Marks, Co-Representative for the Tri-State Area (Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia).

Brief Overview of Books from the 2005 UMW Reading Program List

(A more comprehensive review of some of these titles follows or will be forthcoming.)

Education for Mission:

In the book entitled *A New Religious America*, by **Diana L. Eck**, *pluralism* is uplifted, the recognition of the pagan religion Wicca on American military bases is heralded as a “milestone,” and the notion of our country being a “Christian nation” is denigrated throughout.

From the re-publication of a 1973 title *Conduct Becoming to a Woman*, by **Elaine Magalis**, the early stories of the noble feminism of our church foremothers (most of whom had an unwavering heart for evangelism and the sanctity of human life), are told through the eyes of radical 70’s feminism, where patriarchy is disdained and self-empowerment is the new gospel.

There is a continued attack on “the religious right” in *When Religion Becomes Evil*, by **Charles Kimball**. Respected evangelical Christian leaders such as Rev. Franklin Graham are maligned for advocating the Bible as divine truth. The author claims, “Christians who say they take the Bible literally are either ignorant or self-deluded.”

Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure, by **Camille A. Helminski**, embraces feminine-centered, aberrant theologies, presenting a mystical path of Islam where “the Sufi way is brought to life...as they witness the truth in many realms.”

These are only four examples out of twelve in the category of Education for Mission. Our obvious questions must be: For what are we being educated? What is our mission as United Methodist Women? Where is Jesus Christ in this mission education?

Social Action:

Under this category several titles sent up red “danger” flags.

A very partisan anti-U.S. government, anti-capitalist, pro-socialist political viewpoint is blatantly reflected in the selection of a book written by none other than **Fidel Castro**, the oppressive communist leader of Cuba! In his book *War, Racism, and Economic Injustice: The Global Ravages of Capitalism*, the United States, our democratic institutions and the war on terrorism are vilified in a mouthpiece of propaganda so extreme it boggles the mind. Due to failure of the Reading Program to feature a book with a perspective other than that of Fidel Castro, we might deduce that the Women’s Division joins the Hollywood elite, the liberal mainstream media and many democratic political figures in embracing the political and social policies of Fidel Castro. Little attention is given to the realities of life in Cuba, or to the fact that over a million people have risked life and limb to leave this “failed utopian paradise.”

Other titles which appear on the subject of globalization are *Pigs at the Trough*, by **Arianna Huffington**, and *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization: Making Sense of Economic and Cultural Upheaval*, by **Ira Rifkin**.

Journeys That Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955-1975, by Sara Evans is a book that highlights actions and leaders of radical feminism during this era. This book, along with *Conduct Becoming to a Woman*, are relics from the radical feminist movement that has lost its attraction to most women of today.

Over the years the Women's Division has produced many resources that endorse socialism/Marxism and convey disdain for our democratic/capitalist government. Such views clearly do not reflect the opinions of most mainstream women within our organization—many consider some of these extremist views reprehensible. Social activism is an important part of the Methodist tradition, one that encompasses complex issues, diverse ideologies and numerous methodologies for action. The Women's Division partisan view does not speak for a large majority of the women of our church. Has the Women's Division ever considered asking the women of our organization how they feel about the positions they take on many of these issues? Shouldn't we at least expect books that represent a variety of perspectives on these topics?

Nurturing for Community:

This reading category offers a diverse selection exploring many different themes; however, finding Jesus Christ in the midst of this hodge-podge of titles will take some searching.

Strong, Smart, & Bold: Empowering Girls for Life, by Carla Fine, explores the approach used by Girls, Inc. in raising confident, courageous and self-sufficient girls. **This reliance on self-empowerment in our culture as a means to freedom and wholeness reflects a secular worldview**—one that has little to do with the transforming power of the Holy Spirit through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Another seemingly innocuous choice is *Knitting into the Mystery: A Guide to the Shawl-Knitting Ministry*, by Susan Jorgensen and Susan Izard. But careful reading reveals otherwise. This volume is both instructive in beginning a knitting outreach ministry and narrative as **women from different faiths tell stories of experiencing “Mother God,” the “Divine Feminine,” and the “Mystery” that is a steadfast presence in our lives—“God, Sophia, Allah, Yahweh, Wisdom, Abba, Amma.”** Shades of pluralism, re-imagining theology and feminine images for God abound—handle with care!

Spiritual Growth:

The last category for books in the 2005 Reading Program is *Spiritual Growth* and contains the most telling examples of how the Women's Division has lost touch with the lives of mainstream Christian women.

Titles reflecting feminist theology include: *Hidden Women of the Gospels*, by Kathy Coffey; *Women of Spirit: Stories of Courage From the Women Who Lived Them*, by Katherine Martin; *Drawing From Wisdom's Well*, by Gloria Ulterino; and *Daughters of the Desert*, by Claire Murphy. There is also a book entitled *Stories of Feminist Theology* on the Korean reading list. While reading about biblical women is inspiring and interesting, the perspective of these books whereby the patriarchal suppression of women in our theological history is the primary focus is misleading at best.

The pluralistic approach to our spiritual growth that is revealed in these titles also undermines the historic foundations of our faith as Christians. For women who wish to grow spiritually in their faith by a deepening relationship with their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they best look elsewhere. **Many of these books will offer a confusing mix of various faith traditions all pointing to the commonality of a “one God fits all” mentality. Christ is given barely a mention in the choices offered to United Methodist Women this year.** Oh, except one title! That would be *Affirmations of a Dissenter*, by **C. Joseph Sprague**, a retired bishop in The United Methodist Church. This book amounts to nothing more than spiritual poverty as this controversial leader within our church goes about **denouncing every historic, doctrinal tenet of the Christian faith including the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus, the atonement and the resurrection.** Bishop Sprague has been accused of heresy four different times in The United Methodist Church and has each time been absolved by his peers who refuse to hold him accountable for his blasphemous beliefs. The inclusion of this book under any category for the women of our church speaks volumes about the failure of the Women’s Division to “engage in actions that foster growth in the Christian faith.” **At what point do we draw the line for acceptable reading material? How can we accept a book that refutes everything we hold to be sacred and true about our Lord Jesus Christ?**

You will find detailed book reviews on several titles mentioned previously attached to this report with additional ones being released later.

Publishing House Sources for UMW Reading Program Books

This section will examine and evaluate some of the publishing houses used in the book selection process to show a pattern by the Women's Division of seeking out radically extreme vendors when choosing books. One would be hard-pressed to find any of the titles listed at your neighborhood mainstream Christian bookstore! All descriptions were collected from mission statements found on each company's website.

Beacon Press:

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, Beacon Press has been in existence for 150 years. Four books were selected this year from this publisher. There is a complete department for the Unitarian Universalist Association and the catalog currently emphasizes African-American studies, gay/lesbian/gender studies, religion, children and family issues and women's studies. **"Our books often change the way readers think about fundamental issues; they promote such values as freedom of speech and thought; diversity, religious pluralism and anti-racism; and respect for diversity in all areas of life."** One of the strategic goals of Beacon Press is "to grow steadily more prophetic in identifying areas of need, concern and interest and addressing them with the most progressive and effective interventions."

We have to ask ourselves—what does this company possibly provide to enhance the Christian faith? The titles on the 2005 book list from Beacon Press include— *Breathing Spaces: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*; *West of Jordan: A Novel*; *Schools That Do Too Much: Wasting Time and Money in Schools*; and, *Will Standards Save Public Education?*

New World Library:

Based in Navato, California, New World Library has been "publishing books that change lives for over 25 years." Many titles are categorized as New Age although it's founder states, "there's really nothing new in New Age; it's been around for a long time." **"The ultimate goal of the company is a sweeping one: personal and planetary transformation—awakening both individual consciousness and global social potential by publishing inspirational and practical materials in spirituality, personal growth and other related areas."**

The book on the 2005 Reading Program from this publisher is called *Women of Spirit: Stories of Courage From the Women Who Lived Them* and is described as "our wake-up call to become empowered and take responsibility for the light we all shine so brightly. Other titles available through this publisher (*not* on the UMW list) include: *Creative Visualization*; *The Power of Now*; and, *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior*.

Where is Jesus? This is the question one must ask again and again when trying to select a book off the 2005 Reading Program list.

Marlowe & Company:

This company is the source of one book on the list called *Inside Islam: the Faith, the People, and the Conflicts of the World's Fastest Growing Religion*. This company “publishes books in the areas of personal growth, psychology, self-help, inspiration, folklore mythology, eastern wisdom, gay and lesbian issues and spirituality.” Although not on the 2005 Reading Program list, this publisher carries some extreme titles under various categories, the tone of which should cause us to avoid this publisher altogether. Under gay/lesbian issues, one could find *Gay Star Signs/How to Meet and Keep the Man of Your Dreams* and *Families of Value: Intimate Profiles of Pioneering Lesbian and Gay Parents*. Under folklore mythology one can find many titles embracing Wicca/pagan theologies such as *In the Light of the Moon* and *Storyteller's Goddess*. Under women's issues, we could find *Feminist Political Theory*. And under religion/spirituality we could purchase *One Heart*, a book whose purpose is “to illuminate the common sacred ground at the heart of seven faiths from Buddhism to Taoism and practical steps to enhance 65 universal principles through prayer beads, home altars and labyrinth walking.” This company has very little to offer Christian believers but, it appears, is a comfortable place for book choice by the Women's Division. One would hope that selecting books from this site does not reflect an acceptance of religious pluralism, radical feminism, homosexual practice and re-imagining theologies.

Sorin Books:

Sorin is a subsidiary of **Ave Maria Press** and provides two selections on the reading list, *Drawing From Wisdom's Well* and *Living Forward: Perspectives on Reaching “A Certain Age.”* This company was created “to help people make sense of their lives; to address important questions in a substantive manner; and to meet the needs of adults who yearn to discover and nurture authentic spiritual values in their quest to become fully human.” Another available selection which illustrates the theological viewpoint of Sorin (which, thankfully, is NOT on the 2005 list) is entitled *God Has No Religion: Blending Traditions for Prayer*. This book proclaims that “half of all Americans under 30 think the best religion is one that borrows from all religions. This volume will help you do just that! Options are provided to tailor it to your own personal preferences.” There are few choices through this publisher that would offer spiritual food for most mainstream, evangelical Christian women.

Skylight Paths Publishing:

Skylight is the source of two books in the 2005 Reading Program, *Daughters of the Desert* and *Spiritual Perspectives on Globalization*. Skylight Paths is “creating a place where people of different spiritual traditions come together for challenge and inspiration, a place where we can help each other understand the mystery that lies at the heart of our existence.” They see “believers and seekers as a community that increasingly transcends traditional boundaries of religion and denomination—people wanting to *learn from each other, walking together, finding the way.*” Categories of books offered here are earth/natural spirituality, mystic poets, inspiration, religious etiquette, spiritual aging, spiritual fiction, women's interest and world faiths. Examples of the “transcendent” choices available (not on our list thank goodness!) include *Who Is My God? An Innovative Guide to Finding Your Spiritual Identity* (out of a hodge-podge of different faiths including “New Consciousness, Creation Spirituality, Wicca, Zen, Liberation, Humanism, Sufism, Tibetan Spirituality, Pentecostalism, Celtic Spirituality, Buddhism, Mennonite...” the list goes on and on) and *Spiritual Manifestos: Visions for Renewed Religious Life in America*.

Ocean Press—“*In the World to Change the World*”:

Ocean Press is “**an independent publisher with a unique list of books offering a radical global vision of politics and history with a strong focus on Latin America.**” Books from Ocean Press “are designed to capture the imagination of those who not only believe that another world is possible but who are also actively working toward bringing that world into being.” There are currently two series of books designed to nourish the “new activism,” selections that “sparkle with a contemporary relevance, revealing an astonishing similarity between today’s struggles and those that have gone before.” These are **Radical History** books that “seek to revive events, struggles and people erased from conventional and conservative media and memory.” Another series are **Radical Lives** that “unearth the rebel histories of some familiar figures and introduce some lesser known rebels.” This is the publisher that gives our women the book written by Fidel Castro that appears on the 2005 Reading Program. There are books on revolution, anarchy, radical political theory and history—what a curious source for UMW Reading Program selections.

The Feminist Press:

Last but not least, we have The Feminist Press, whose name clearly says it all. This is the source of one of the Youth Books chosen this year called *Red Sand, Blue Sky*. Based at the City University of New York, this nonprofit literary and educational publisher started in 1970 and is “dedicated to preserving the voices of women around the world.” While its early work focused on restoring print work by 19th and early 20th century women writers whose “legacy had been erased or forgotten,” the program has expanded to include African American women, other women of color, international women and lesbian writers. Besides literature they also publish non-fiction works on women’s history, politics, sociology, an academic journal on women’s studies programs and books for young readers featuring strong female role models. Their purpose is to “**continue to view our work as a means of social change, and our books as tools for transforming educational curricula and public consciousness.**”

The series from which the book for the 2005 Reading Program was selected is called the **Girls First! Series** and is described as “a bold and spirited new series for middle-grade readers that seeks to capture the independent spirit of girls from all over the world. It celebrates the differences and commonalities in the life of young women.” While the particular title chosen for the UMW list is not a bad choice, the first book in the series (featured on the inside book cover of *Red Sand, Blue Sky*) is a title called *A Clear Spring*, which is advertised as “**for children looking for books showing nontraditional families....including gay couples...**” As any parent of young children knows, if one title is enjoyed that is a part of a series of books, they will undoubtedly wish to read the entire series of books. The Women’s Division has reflected a pattern of acceptance of the homosexual/lesbian lifestyle through various policies programs. This very divisive issue within our denomination is one in which the viewpoint of the Women’s Division may differ significantly from that of many women within our organization. Therefore, it is critical for United Methodist Women to be informed and aware of the content (and sources) of resources offered both for themselves and for our children and youth.

Summary:

The publishers examined are just a few of the sources for books which we felt were suspect because of their failure to reflect the theological, social and political viewpoints of the majority of women within our organization. Many other selections come from secular publishing houses such as Random House, Harper San Francisco and Simon & Schuster. Only a handful comes from companies which have a mission statement that we can celebrate. These include Harvest House (one novel selected), Abingdon Press (a United Methodist house, although the publisher of the Bishop Sprague book), and Zondervan (one children's book). How sad it is with the wealth of titles available through reputable mainstream Christian publishers that we are given books put out by companies representing controversial theologies, radical teachings and extremist political viewpoints. What drives the selection process? What is the mission of the Reading Program? Are these books having an impact? Who is participating in the program? How much of our pledges are going to endorse these controversial issues? These are questions that United Methodist Women want answers to.

These are questions that have been submitted to the Women's Division regarding the Reading Program. Having heard so many concerns expressed about the titles offered through the program, we were interested in how many units actually participate, whether or not demographics play a role in participation and how involvement has increased or decreased over the past several years. We have not received a formal answer to our questions to date, but will provide those if they are forthcoming.

One staff person with whom we corresponded expressed an obvious love for the program as she feels it offers "a beautiful opportunity for spiritual growth and Bible study and that many books offer a chance to experience evangelization first-hand." This is a surprising viewpoint given the books that are consistently offered by the Women's Division—the spiritual growth is suspect, the Bible study is sparse and the mandate for evangelism is consistently absent. The booklet used to promote the program describes the motivation of the Women's Division to fulfill its purpose. The booklet states, "we recommend a diverse range of books with the intention of broadening exposure to a variety of concepts. The Division does not intend that UMW accept each word or idea contained within each volume. Some books you may agree with. Some you may not. Either is all right. At the least you know the Women's Division cares and wants you to be a knowledgeable and caring Christian about the issues of the day."

These statements are troubling. Diversity of thought is virtually nonexistent on the reading program list. While we appreciate the permission to disagree with the concepts and ideas expressed in the books recommended by the Women's Division, this statement shows an acknowledged awareness that many of the viewpoints within the recommended books are controversial. The last sentence gives the impression that by participating in this program, it will lead one to be a knowledgeable and a caring Christian about important issues. Yet, the publishers cited in this report repeatedly described their intended purpose of influencing the reader toward a certain way of thinking. If our core Christian values are "unaffected" by reading radical material, why do the publishing houses themselves claim, "Our books often change the way readers think about fundamental issues; they promote such values as freedom of speech and thought; diversity, religious pluralism and anti-racism; and respect for diversity in all areas of life."—Beacon Press; "The ultimate goal of the company is a sweeping one: personal and planetary transformation—awakening both individual consciousness and global social potential by publishing inspirational and practical materials in spirituality, personal growth and other related areas."—New World Library; "creating a place where people of different spiritual traditions come together for challenge and

inspiration, a place where we can help each other understand the mystery that lies at the heart of our existence.”—Skylight Paths Publishers. **If the Women’s Division truly desired to strengthen the Christian faith of women, deepen their understanding of God’s Word and encourage discipleship based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, wouldn’t books that reflect the beliefs of orthodox Christian faith be a major part of the reading program? And, would not a more balanced representation of the thoughts, values, and ideals of UMW members reflect this motivation?**

What effect does all this have? Does the Reading Program really matter in the grand scheme of things? Why are we scrutinizing the program in such detail? The answer is simple. Books matter. They have the power to inform, to influence, to inspire and to indoctrinate. Most people when asked can recall a particular book which had a profound impact on their life. At one of the board meetings covered by the RENEW Network, several women stood up and shared how a book on the Reading Program had influenced them greatly, changed their life in some way and called them to action in a particular manner.

(From Liza Kittle) In my own early formative years, I was greatly influenced by feminist writers such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Freidan. This influence had a devastating impact on my life as I embraced a feminist worldview and based many of my choices on the ideals it espoused. These choices finally brought me to my knees at the foot of the cross as an adult—seeking forgiveness, redemption and love from my heavenly Father through His Son Jesus Christ. Words really do have the power to transform. The Bible, God’s Holy Word, can have the greatest life-changing impact on the world around us. Everything we do as we mentor, educate and shepherd other women in the Christian faith should be measured and evaluated in the light of His Word—the guidebook of our faith journey.

Many women grow weary of the radical theologies and partisan assumptions that are deceptively packaged in glossy covers and photographs and Scripture-laden prose. Title after title in the 2005 Reading Program reflects these viewpoints. Isn’t it time for the Women’s Division to honestly tell the women of the church what they truly believe and cease this duplicitous deception, convictional confusion and exasperating extremism. If you believe that there are many paths to the same God—Say So! If you believe that there should be female language for God—Say So! If you believe the policies of the U.S. government are evil and you embrace socialism—Say So! If you believe that evangelism is not important in Christian discipleship—Say So! If you believe that the homosexual or transgendered lifestyle should be accepted and embraced—Say So! If you believe that abortion is acceptable in any and all circumstances—Say So! United Methodist Women have a right to know the positions, beliefs and core values—stated *clearly*—by the *present* leadership.

In the Gospel of Mark, as Jesus asked His disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi, “Who do the people say I am?” The disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Our worldview reflects how we answer this poignant question. Is Jesus just the prophet of Christianity, equal to the prophets of other world religions? Is the Bible no different than any other sacred text? Is the Gospel about societal transformation first and foremost and not about personal transformation—out of which comes societal transformation? Many of the books on the current reading program would answer these last three questions in the affirmative—shall we accept this?