

Telling Their Story

Women's Division Fall 2008 Board Meeting

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Introduction

The theme of the Women's Division's fall board meeting in Stamford, Conn. was "Tell Your Stories" and chief executive Harriet Jane Olson called on directors to stop being reticent and engage in storytelling about the work of United Methodist Women. The "stories" told during the semi-annual meeting included partisan explanations about the current financial crisis, immigration issues framed in the context of institutional racism and an increased activism with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

Sadly, the stories about the 85% of women within the United Methodist Church who do not participate in United Methodist Women were not heard. Many of these women have "opted out" of the organization due to their outrage at the political, social, and theological ideology of the Women's Division.

In an interview with Ms. Olson during the meeting, she left little doubt that the concerns and protests from these women would go unheeded, even though their numbers represent over 3.5 million women within the church. Ms. Olson repeatedly expressed that the Women's Division would be opposed to any attempt by RENEW which called for the official recognition of other women's ministries within the church and that United Methodist Women should be the only official avenue of women's ministry within the United Methodist Church.

As the membership numbers and mission giving dollars continue to decline within the organization of United Methodist Women, one is left with a deep sadness that there are so many women within the UMC who are not being reached through the many alternative models available for vibrant women's ministry that exist today. While some churches have decided to start alternative or supplemental women's ministries, these options are currently not sanctioned officially by the UMC. Churches, pastors, and women frequently experience resistance and persecution when they move forward to reach the women within their own congregations with these new ministries.

Diversity, inclusiveness, freedom, empowerment, and "speaking truth to power" are very popular words and ideals talked about at the Women's Division board meetings. However, when it comes to offering the women of the church freedom of choice in ministry options at the local church level, these words ironically just don't seem to apply.

Deputy General Secretary's Address on Storytelling

Just as Jesus used parables to share the biblical message, Deputy General Secretary Harriet Jane Olson talked about the power of storytelling in revealing life's truths and how United Methodist Women of the past and present have used storytelling to find their humanity and power. She said that storytelling is fundamental in seeking social justice and offering opportunities for liberation. "Learning the stories of those on the margins, telling them in theaters of power, supporting and equipping oppressed persons so that they can tell their own stories is a powerful way to speak truth to power....Stories about healthcare,...war,...economic development,...immigration policies...Storytelling from the margins is an important practice."

Ms. Olsen continued that it is morally imperative that we amplify the stories of the marginalized, give them context and preserve them. The stories tell us a lot about the "dominant narrative", because "systems are not objective". "We can tell the gospel story, the story of our work in making it known and the story of the outsider in a way that has power to challenge the dominance of the principalities and powers." She reiterated that the directors and United Methodist Women must do this as previous women did before them.

NOTE: Something always missing in these presentations that talk about our early United Methodist Women foremothers is the fact that the primary focus of their incredible work was taking the salvation gospel message to a lost and hurting world. While the early women of the church fought for injustice and the rights of women and the poor, they were very biblically grounded and their work was always undergirded with the salvation message of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a component rarely seen in programs and mission outreach of the Women's Division. The "gospel story" of the Women's Division is about social justice, pure and simple.

According to Ms. Olsen, the language of United Methodist Women coincides with the current theme of the United Methodist Church, "open hearts, open minds, open doors" and "is a cinch for United Methodist Women.

Ms. Olsen also spoke of how easily integrated the work of United Methodist Women is with the larger denomination's four prescribed focus areas for the next four years. These areas include developing principled Christian leaders, forming new and revitalizing existing congregations, engaging in ministry with the poor, and stamping out killer diseases by improving health globally. The Division feels they will accomplish these tasks through their seminars, schools of mission, women's colleges and scholarships, on-line community, work for peace, gender justice, and taking on racism in all its forms.

Another important reason for telling our story, according to Ms. Olsen, is "deep in our Wesleyan DNA". The classes and bands of early Methodism were vehicles for transformational stories about grace and sanctification and "moving on to perfection". While "we have lost the sense of the meaning of that language in today's common parlance, at the time it well described the journey from alienation to assurance that is recorded over and over in the journals" of early Methodists. Ms. Olsen contends that

“perhaps we do not aspire to be as obsessive about observing our every fault and failing as Wesley appears to in his journals”, but we can learn from his deep expectation of moving deeper in his life of faith.

A sound booth was available at the meeting for directors to record their stories. While Ms. Olsen said “it may be too much to ask as the early Methodist did, ‘how is it with your soul?’, perhaps your story includes a moment of understanding or assurance or forgiveness or perception that has changed everything. The women were encouraged to ask questions such as how does the current financial crisis affect you? What is your first memory of some major event concerning women’s rights? Tell us about how UMW has impacted your life?

I could only think about how sad that the stories of millions of women in the UMC are not being heard? How many women sit in our pews who would love to be asked ‘how is it with your soul’? There are so many stories about salvation, new life in Christ, and transformed lives that are not being heard.

Opening Night with a “Mad Economist”

Dr. Julianne Malveaux, a prominent economist and President of the United Methodist Women-supported Bennett College, was the guest speaker at the opening night plenary. She is also an activist, author, and commentator and in two of her papers she refers to herself as a “mad economist” in the titles. Dr. Malveaux was at the board meeting to discuss her views on the current economic crisis and how it poses an opportunity for United Methodist Women to bring their values to bear on the marketplace as the rules for business are in evidently restructured. Most of her suggestions, however, were presented from a blatantly left-leaning and partisan perspective. Bennett College is a historically black women’s college located in Greensboro, North Carolina.

During her introduction and on her website, Dr. Malveaux relishes the endorsement of Dr. Cornel West who described her as “the most iconoclastic public intellectual in the country”. Dr. West, a fiery and controversial Princeton professor who is a self-described socialist, has written in his own biographical information that he has admired “the sincere black militancy of Malcolm X, the defiant rage of the Black Panther Party, and the livid black theology of James Cone”. Dr. West has branded the U.S. a “racist patriarchal” nation where “white supremacy” continues to define everyday life and where “free market fundamentalism” trivializes the public interest. With endorsements like this one, we can only assume the framework for the presentation and worldview of Dr. Malveaux.

Dr. Malveaux said that capitalism is a predatory system by nature and needs regulation by the government. “I call capitalism a wolf and regulation the dentist, she said, and the wolf needs to go to the dentist for some filing because regulation dulls the fangs of the wolf.” She continued that we need to “restrict and contain the capitalistic structure” and that the behavior of the United States has triggered this world crisis. Most of the blame of course goes to Republicans like Ronald Reagan and her views about the current president were made vividly clear when Dr. Malveaux said “you can’t believe anything that comes out of the White House—I’m not supposed to be partisan, but that’s just a fact”. She calls McCain’s economic proposals “desperate” and that Rep. Barney Frank and Rep. Nancy Pelosi have “behaved honorably” in the current crisis.

Bennett College is one of only two educational institutions in our nation “where women of color are at the center of the universe, not the periphery....it is one of just a handful of places where African American women are systematically celebrated, not cursorily ignored and vilified”, according to Dr. Malveaux. Many of these women are torn in the election process this year because “race and gender are intertwined for African American women” when they were asked to choose between Obama and Clinton in the democratic primary.

Our speaker’s views on the plight of black women in society are described in several of her papers written on the subject. Black women carry a third burden besides race and gender because their “status is a function of the way that the majority society marginalizes and demonizes African American men” and “the intertwining of African American male and female lives in the context of patriarchy and economic oppression”. Poverty, unemployment, and female-headed homes are realities many African American women face due to these factors. . According to Dr. Malveaux, the reason for the high level of “underemployment” of black men and women results from “the deinstitutionalization of our nation’s cities, and economic policy failures”. There is no mention of personal responsibility in her reasoning.

Another interesting aspect of Bennett College is a program of study offered to its students. There are courses offered such as “Contemporary Problems in Philosophy and Religion”, with an emphasis on the study of liberation theologies, especially Black Theology and Feminist Theology. Black liberation theology is best exemplified by the militant ranting we have seen recently by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the senior pastor and spiritual mentor of presidential candidate Barack Obama. A complete Womanist Religious Studies Program was initiated in 2004 and specifically deals with the feminist perspectives of African American women—highlighting “the pursuit of justice in the liberationist tradition of feminist and womanist religious scholarship”, according to the current Bennett College catalogue.

Community Organizer Discusses Immigration

Rev. David Ostendorf, a United Church of Christ minister, is the Executive Director of the Center for New Community in Chicago, Illinois. This organization was founded in 1995 and is a partner organization of the Women’s Division. The Center seeks to unify citizens and other groups in raising awareness about racism and discrimination and to advocate for reform in order “to counter anti-immigrant activity and extremism” in the United States. It is a blatantly partisan organization and Rev. Ostendorf’s presentation was no different.

One of the initiatives of the Center is the Campaign for a United America, which asks people and groups to join together “to defend our nation’s historic commitment to unity, equality, and opportunity”. The emphasis of the campaign is the perceived notion of “hateful rhetoric of an anti-immigrant movement that aims to divide America in order to advance their far-reaching and intolerant agenda”.

Any group or person that advocates for protection of our nation’s sovereign borders or for enforcement of current immigration law is labeled extremist and/or a “hate group”. Many mainstream conservative organizations are on this list, including the House Immigration Reform Caucus, a large group of members of the House of Representatives who support comprehensive immigration reform. Others “hate groups”

include the Minutemen, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, and the Council of Conservative Citizens (labeled a white supremacist group).

A new project of the Center is Imagine 2050, a blog that seeks to explore the prediction that by 2050 the American population will drastically shift and that one in five Americans will be foreign born. The website for Imagine 2050 says that this demographic shift will ask Americans to question how they define themselves. The blog editor Sarah Viets said, "Being an American means to take what you've been given, and to transform it into something unimaginably new."

According to Pew Research Center, by the year 2050 the population of the United States will rise to 438 million persons, from 296 million in 2005 and 82% of the increase will be due to immigrants and their U.S.-born descendants. The Latino population, already the nation's largest minority group, will triple in size and will account for most of the population growth. Hispanics will make up 29% of the U.S. population, compared with 14% in 2005. By 2050, it is predicted that whites will become a minority (47%) population in the U.S. according to this research.

Women's Division Increase Efforts on Immigration/Civil Rights Initiative

The views of Dr. Ostendorf affirm those expressed in a report by the Section of Christian Social Responsibility committee given at the meeting as an update on the Immigrant Rights/Civil Rights Initiative of the Women's Division, launched in 2006. New efforts will be focused on "ending immigration raids, detentions, deportations, and separation of families". Justification for these new efforts comes from the passage of a resolution at the 2008 General Conference entitled "Welcoming the Migrant to the U.S." that states the refusal of the United Methodist Church to welcome these people and to stand up for them is "complicity to sin".

United Methodist Women are told to actively call on the U.S. government to "cease all arrests, detainment and deportations of undocumented immigrants, including children, solely based upon their immigration status". The Women's Division, in the coming months with a new administration and a new Congress, "will build on church policy" by doing the following: 1) sending a joint letter from United Methodist leaders to President Bush and the next immigration calling for an end to raids and deportations, 2) public witness to challenge detentions and deportations, and 3) support congregations that extend sanctuary to immigrants facing deportation to keep families united.

Current United States immigration law is given no mention and illegal immigrants are considered the same as the early immigrants who came to this country legally when our nation was opening its borders to new settlers. The Women's Division frames immigrant rights as a racial justice concern and affirms it as "the frontline of the ongoing civil rights movement...It builds on and gives continuity to the struggles for equal rights that have been waged by African Americans and their allies for many decades".

The Women's Division also expressed in writing their "solidarity" with members of Adalberto United Methodist Church, a church in Chicago, Illinois, who are fasting for two weeks to demand an end to immigration raids. Adalberto UMC and its leader Rev. Walter "Slim" have been at the forefront of the immigration debate as providing "refuge and holy sanctuary" for a year to Elvira Arellano, an illegal

immigrant facing deportation for falsifying documents to obtain employment. Ms. Arellano was arrested when she left the church to attend an immigration rally and has since been deported.

Ms. Arellano's radical disdain for the United States and its sovereignty and rules of law are evident in the following quote: *"...We have supported self-determination and opposed assimilation into this nation's individualistic, imperialistic values. We have taught that our people did not come here because of the American Dream but because of what the American nightmare did to our countries of origin. We have asserted that our demand to be here and to be fully enfranchised here is a right not a privilege and a destiny of our people to transform this nation."*

Another church member Flor Crisostomo is "picking up the torch" and taking sanctuary at Adalberto UMC and the Women's Division, in a statement said, "we join with Flor and other mothers who choose to resist deportation to protect their families and to draw attention to unjust deportation and immigration policies and we lift up the witness of Adalberto UMC in offering Flor sanctuary". Ms. Cristostomo blames the North American Free Trade Act for making her come to the U.S. illegally in 2000. She has been living "in holy sanctuary" at the church for nine months. Another church member, Francisca Lino, has filed a petition with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to delay her deportation for one year, hoping a new U.S. president will be more sympathetic to her cause.

The cost of illegal immigration to the federal government alone is estimated at over 10 billion dollars a year. This does not include the massive cost at the state and county level as well. In California, which has the highest population of illegal immigrants in the nation, studies show the cost to taxpayers to be 1.4 billion dollars annually. In South Carolina, taxpayers are paying over 186 million dollars annually due to the influx of illegal immigrants. The state comptroller of Texas estimates the cost to their state hospitals in 2006 was over 1.3 billion dollars, forcing many to close due to soaring deficits. Public services such as health care and education translate into huge costs for state and local governments.

States are beginning to crack down on employers who break the law and hire illegal immigrants. These employers abuse the system by not paying workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance, state, federal, and social security and medicare taxes. They also do not provide health insurance, therefore placing the burden of healthcare for illegal immigrants on law-abiding taxpayers, which in turn forces increases in health insurance premiums. Illegal employers also encourage identity theft and the use of fraudulent documents.

Another component to this Women's Division initiative on immigration rights is for United Methodist Women to support the Justice for our Neighbors (JFON) network. This is a network of the United Methodist Committee on Relief, annual conferences, local congregations, and ecumenical partners. The mission of JFON is to "provide free, high-quality, immigration legal services and a warm welcome to immigrants in our congregations and communities..... to provide education for ministry and advocacy....and to encourage deeper theological reflection on biblical imperatives that clarify the moral issues raised by U.S. immigration policy".

The Women's Division not only wants United Methodist churches to open their doors and encourage illegal immigrants to break the law by providing "holy sanctuary", but also to provide them with free legal services to advocate on their behalf in the public square.

Other Actions and Recommendations:

1. The Women's Division will support current efforts to promote farm worker concerns through the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM). The board signed a petition to request that Susan Ivey, CEO of Reynolds Tobacco Company will meet with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). The President of the WD will also appoint one director to attend NFWM board meetings along with WD staff to promote partnership and raise awareness around economic justice and human rights issues related to farm workers and their families.
2. The Women's Division and United Methodist Women will reaffirm their "strong support" for reproductive health and freedom in the United States and around the world as part of the focus on women's health and one of the four quadrennial foci of the United Methodist Church which is "improving health globally".

This will be accomplished with several initiatives including: 1) endorsement of the REAL Act (Responsible Education About Life Act) to provide \$204 million to states for programs on comprehensive sexuality education (see separate report on website); 2) sponsorship of sending a delegation of WD board members to the spring 2009 national gathering of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice in Washington, D.C. and have two directors participate in the RCRC semi-annual board meetings; 3) advocate for access and availability of affordable birth control (including the "Morning After" pill) and comprehensive family planning for all women without "interference" from pharmacists or medical personnel; and 4) opposition to the Mexico City Policy ("the Global Gag Rule") that limits family planning funding efforts in the international community.

These initiatives are an endorsement of comprehensive sex education (vs. abstinence only) curriculums in our school systems and increased activism with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, an organization that supports abortion on demand, partial birth abortion, and is against parental notification laws.

3. The Women's Division will partner with Healthcare-Now to address the health care crisis by supporting a campaign that promotes a universal single payer (i.e. the federal government) health plan in the United States.
4. The Women's Division will support the Jubilee USA Network's national campaign Picture New Leadership which supports the debt cancellation "to the 24 deeply impoverished countries left out of the past debt relief initiatives". A picture was taken of the board to be sent along with a petition to the campaign offices of both presidential candidates.

5. United Methodist Women will join with Women Thrive and Amnesty International to secure additional co-sponsors for the International Violence Against Women Act before the U.S. Congress. This legislation will affect all foreign aid programs by making them include activities that promote ending gender-based violence. The State Department would have to reorganize to accommodate this change through an Office of Women's Global Initiatives to monitor and oversee U.S. resources and programs dealing with women's issues.
6. The Women's Division will partner with the Grace and Race Ecumenical Ministry and this initiative will be directed by the Racial Justice Office. The Division will share racial justice resources with them and encourage UMW at all levels to make the personal and collective commitment "to the transforming ministry of racial understanding and reconciliation" within church and community settings.
7. The Women's Division will endorse the *Declaration of Principles for a Presidential Executive Order on Prisoner Treatment, Torture, and Cruelty*, which calls on the newly elected U.S. President to issue an executive order regarding the affirmation of core principles on the human rights of prisoners in keeping with international law (through the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture). These principles were developed through partners of the Global Ministries Restorative Justice program.
8. A report was given on human trafficking. The Women's Division as a member of the National Council of Churches' Justice for Women Working Group affirms their Resolution on Human Trafficking and will work to implement educational programs and policy actions related to this issue.
9. The Women's Division will develop ways for United Methodist Women to respond directly to the home foreclosure crisis, working with partner organizations in faith, labor, community housing, women's, and racial justice groups across the nation. One suggestion would be to provide access to counseling services for troubled homeowners such as ACORN. Another could be a mobilization to stop unjust foreclosures and to build pressure for state and federal legislation. One method could be to pressure banks to re-negotiate mortgages on new terms and stop foreclosures.

NOTE: ACORN is currently involved in numerous cases of voter registration fraud which has been a hotly contested issue in this presidential election campaign. ACORN has clearly been shown to be a partisan organization which openly supports the candidacy of Democratic nominee Barack Obama, a clear violation due to their receipt of taxpayer funding. There have also been charges of intimidation by of ACORN workers towards bank personnel and lenders to pressure financial institution to give loans to unqualified citizens.

Conclusion

As the above actions and featured speakers testify, the partisan political activism of the Women's Division is alive and well. Associations with radical community organizations and leaders of "womanist"

academic institutions shine a clear light on the worldview of the Women's Division. It doesn't matter how many millions of women continue to "opt out" of United Methodist Women or how many UMW members continue to question the radical worldview of the Women's Division.

The associations are continued, the speakers are invited, the dollars are given, the advocacy is increased, and the worldview is uplifted.

For 85% of the women in the church, the bondage is continued, the freedom of choice is denied, and the voices are ignored. But we are strengthened in the knowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, His purposes will be fulfilled, His salvation is eternal, and His hope is everlasting.

We move on under His wings, in His hands, and by His side---empowered by His strength, enveloped by His love, and entrenched with His truth.