

A Call for Renewal through Creative Chaos

**An Analysis of the Speech of the Deputy General Secretary
“From Building Blocks to Network”**

**Given at the 2008 Spring Women’s Division Board Meeting
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The final Women’s Division board meeting of the 2004-2008 quadrennium was recently held and provided not only a retrospective look at the work of the Division over the last four years, but also a contemplative vision of the future of United Methodist Women under the leadership of the new Deputy General Secretary, Harriet Jane Olson. Her speech was reflective, prophetic and worthy of careful analysis.

Summary:

Ms. Olson, in her opening address, reflected on the rich history and tradition of this 135-year-old organization within The United Methodist Church—a legacy given to us by our foremothers which embraced the Bible, doctrine, hymns, accountability groups and social action. While these early United Methodist Women provided us with the building blocks to reach out to a hurting world with love and compassion, Ms. Olson acknowledged that “the context in the world that God loves is changing.”

Olson shared that the early structures of UMW reflected the “needs and capacities of their time” and the leadership built the strongest organization possible—one which “involved broad-based support among the women of the church, independent action and careful reporting.” This model of ministry reflected a “builder-generation, mechanical view of organization” common after World War II that had a clear “chain of command” with established steps of leadership advancement.

Ms. Olson gave a comparison to business models during this time in history that focused on the management of individual parts of an organization versus the whole system itself. This emphasis on structure versus vision and innovation ultimately led to tension and eventual collapse of many of these rigid business models. New models were needed to “break free from the constricted paradigms of the past.” Likewise, Ms. Olson maintained, new models of ministry are also needed.

Where will these new models come from? How do we adapt and renew the organization of United Methodist Women to reflect our changing times and new realities? According to Ms. Olson, that process comes by embracing a theory of “creative chaos.”

A film was shown before Ms. Olson’s address entitled “Leadership and the New Science” and introduced us to the teachings of Margaret Wheatley. Ms. Wheatley has been “teaching business and non-profit leaders about ‘chaos theory’ for 10-15 years....and tells us that chaos (or disruption) is one of the ways in which systems renew themselves,” stated Ms. Olson

The “science of chaos” looks at natural systems to illustrate new organizational models for business and, according to Ms. Wheatley, can be applied to models of ministry as well. Like rivers and streams for example—these are systems that are flexible and constantly changing. They are models of diversity,

complexity, and adaptability. The film highlights that we can also look at workplaces and ourselves through the lens of “chaos theory.”

In nature, “the turbulent chaos of storms or shifting ecosystems is often a necessary step to refresh and recreate environments that sustain life.” The theory proposes that order can emerge out of chaos as we begin to focus on the whole system versus its individual parts. By embracing “creative chaos,” whether personally or corporately, Ms. Wheatley claims we can find “feelings of peace” from within and this can “free people to contribute” in new and creative ways. This enables people to create “enormous varieties of behaviors” when they let go of how they have understood the world.

Ms. Olson then applied the messages of the film to the current organizational structures of United Methodist Women. She asked her audience to think of our structure as a series of building blocks. The work of the unit extends to the district, then to the conference and so on until we reach the Women’s Division. This type of configuration may appear solid, but “it is actually pretty fragile.” The pieces can slide and the ability to optimize its reach is fairly limited.

Ms. Olson asked her audience to imagine instead of building blocks, our organization as more of a network. What if UMW was composed of interlinking pieces—each unique and strong—that allowed for greater reach and influence? She pointed out that some steps have already been made in this direction with the formation of district units and on-line communities.

Other suggested steps could be offering more “entry points” for women—meeting women where they are—and upgrading our communication methods through logos, taglines, websites and text messages. Ms. Olson also suggested looking for “new ways to engage women directly in the experience of mission,” through UMW work in community centers, schools and national/global partnerships.

The new leader of the Women’s Division ended by saying that United Methodist Women are at the heart of UMW and an effort will be made “to increase the depth of connection” with them. She called on the leadership to join her in this “grand network”—one that is being renewed, has flexibility, reach and strength One that is willing to take risks and experience chaos in the process.

Analysis:

As press representatives we can embrace many components of the vision for the future for women within The United Methodist Church laid out by Deputy General Secretary Olson. However, serious differences in how to attain that vision remain.

WE AGREE:

- **That the legacy and tradition of the organization of United Methodist Women is rich and built on a firm biblical foundation by our foremothers.**

Evangelism and reaching the lost with the Gospel of Jesus Christ was always the central focus of these early pioneers of women’s ministry within the church. Personal holiness and social holiness were never preached separately and were always integrated in their mission outreach. According to the research and reporting of the RENEW Network, this evangelistic component has been greatly ignored and is virtually absent in the current programs and policies of the Women’s Division. (See Financial File IV, available at www.renewnetwork.org)

- **That broad-based support among the women of the church and accountability are important components of fruitful ministry—as it was for our early sisters in mission.**

Members of United Methodist Women have been concerned with the programs, financial policies, political activism and the feminist theology of the Women’s Division for 17 years—concerns which have been consistently ignored and discounted. The RENEW Network was formed in response to these many unaddressed issues.

- **That the world is changing, increasingly turbulent and chaotic, and in desperate need of the love of God through Jesus Christ and new models of ministry are needed to “break free from the paradigms of the past” and face these new realities.**

At the end of 2006, there were approximately 8 million total members in The United Methodist Church. Of these members, 4.4 million were women (with 85% of churches reporting). Women make up approximately 58% of the total church membership. Only 15.3% of these women (666, 983) participate in United Methodist Women. What about the other 85% of women in the church?

Ms. Olson’s call for new models of ministry is particularly interesting in light of the Women’s Division’s continued refusal to support a change in the *Discipline* from every church “shall” to “may” have a United Methodist Women unit. This change would embrace what is currently happening across the entire denomination. Indeed, the insistence on fighting this legislation reveals a holding onto the “building block model” which dictates from the top (the top being the Women’s Division), a model Ms. Olson acknowledges is outdated, rigid and ineffective.

Unfortunately, with strong opposition from the Women’s Division, the 2008 General Conference again failed to pass legislation recognizing women’s right and freedom to pursue additional models of ministry (as United Methodist Men was granted at the 2004 General Conference) without persecution from the Women’s Division. Why shouldn’t United Methodist Women be one of many ministry options offered to the women of the church? Is the Women’s Division really “breaking free from the paradigms of the past” and facing new realities?

- **That the organization and structure of UMW is fragile, limited in reach and steadily breaking down.**

According to data from the General Council on Finance and Administration (www.gcfa.org) , membership in United Methodist Women has steadily dropped 51.0% from 1974-2006, while total lay membership in The United Methodist Church as a whole has dropped 19.9%. (In 1974, there were 1,361,025 UMW members and in 2006, according to GCFA, there were 666,983 UMW members. In 1974, there were 9,906,852 UMC lay members and in 2006, there were 7,931,733 UMC lay members.)

The number of United Methodist Women units in local churches has fallen by 29.8% from 1974-2006, while the number of United Methodist churches has fallen by 12.3%. (In 1974, there were 28,760 UMW units and in 2006, there were 20,195 UMW units. In 1974, there were 38,942 United Methodist Churches and in 2006, there were 34,136 churches.)

These dramatic figures show that the loss of membership in United Methodist Women has been 60% greater than the drop in the total lay membership in the UMC during this 32 year period. The loss in UMW units has been 58.7% greater than the loss in United Methodist churches over the same time period. These numbers are an astounding affirmation that the organization of United Methodist Women is in dire circumstances.

Financial giving continues to decline within the organization. Mission giving has steadily declined from \$25 million dollars to the current 2007 level of \$16.4 million.

- **That we need to “meet women where they are” and provide them with many entry points and opportunities to grow in their spiritual journey.**

Women of today come to The United Methodist Church from many walks of life, with very different needs. One common thread the RENEW Network has observed is their passion for developing a deep, abiding personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and for sharing this life-changing gift with a lost and hurting world through mission outreach.

Women want Christ-centered resources that nurture them spiritually. They don't want books written by Fidel Castro blasting American economic systems (2005 Reading Program) or those insulting conservative, evangelical Christians like *What's Wrong with the Christian Right?* (2008 Reading Program). They don't want their money going to support partisan political advocacy or radical organizations that have little to do with the Christian faith. They don't want programs for their circle meetings that call for “re-evaluating the Cross as the symbol of our faith to one that is less violent and more appealing to women” (2004 UMW Program Book). They don't want to be ignored when their valid concerns are dismissed by the Women's Division as unenlightened or irrelevant.

Women are still passionate about social justice, but they want it to be based on the foundational principles of our Wesleyan heritage. Many reject the social justice gospel of the Women's Division that is based on the outdated political movements of the 1960's such as radical feminism, Marxist socialism and militant racism. They reject aligning their national and international mission outreach with the programs and policies of the United Nations, an organization in need of much reform and accountability. (Despite UN failures, in the May 2008 issue of *Response Magazine*, Deputy General Secretary Harriett Olson, castigates the United States for its failure to pay the \$2.77 billion in assessed contributions “owed” to the United Nations—and calls for United Methodist Women to contact their representatives asking them to pay the U.S. contribution.)

Every United Methodist Church has a diverse and unique group of women. This reality calls for diverse and unique types of women's ministry. For many women within our churches (over 90%), this is not being found through United Methodist Women.

- **That members of United Methodist Women at the local unit are the heart of this organization and deserve to be nurtured spiritually, listened to when concerned and given the freedom to be flexible and creative in responding to the calls God has placed on their lives.**

How wonderful and fruitful the kingdom of Jesus Christ would be if the United Methodist Church and the Women's Division in particular, would embrace the diversity, creativity and gifts

of millions of women as they claim they do and support their efforts to develop and implement new forms of ministry.

AND:

- **That renewal can come out of chaos, that we are all a part of a “grand network” of women and that there is always great hope for the future of women’s ministry within The United Methodist Church.**

We continue to pray that the Lord will not only renew the turbulent chaos that is present in the leadership of the Women’s Division and subsequently within United Methodist Women, but that He will also refresh and revitalize women’s ministry within The United Methodist Church in a way that is even more glorious than we could ever imagine.

HOWEVER, WE DO NOT AGREE:

- **That the introduction of new communication methods or “allowing different configurations of women to form” will give stability and strength to United Methodist Women.**

By “allowing” the establishment of District Units with the intention that this will give women more flexibility to be creative within the organization is unrealistic. How does allowing a few structural changes within UMW give women more avenues for creative ministry? How does merely reshuffling the components of the existing model, one which Ms. Olson acknowledged is fragile and limited, bring strength and greater reach to the organization? The establishment of on-line communities is well and good, but if the content and focus of the policies and programs of the Women’s Division remains the same, how will this innovation renew and revive United Methodist Women?

Ms. Olson’s suggestions of other new “trajectories” for the future are also limited. Updating and repackaging the same programs, resources, policies and advocacies will ultimately prove ineffective as well. The core message of the package is what needs changing.

- **That the principles embraced in “chaos theory” or the “science of chaos” are appropriate and applicable to organizational models within the church and women’s ministry.**

The chaos theory of Ms. Wheatley rightly puts more emphasis on people as individuals than on rigid rules and structures. This principle is readily evident in the ministry of Jesus. But ideas such as “change from within,” “freeing people to be creative” and allowing “enormous varieties of behaviors” have the potential to be misinterpreted in light of biblical teachings and the doctrines and mission of the church.

The film talked of redefining standards of human behavior. However, the teachings of the Bible—whether found in the Law of Moses, the words of the prophets, the teachings of Christ, or the writings of Paul and the apostles—all come from God and provide guidelines and clear standards for human behavior. It would be a grave mistake to leave the women of the church with the idea that God has not given us, through His Word, clear prescriptions and prohibitions for human behavior. The Bible provides a timeless blueprint, which if followed humbly and obediently, will give women the greatest quality of life the human heart can experience.

- **That God embraces “turbulent, creative chaos” as a primary means of fulfilling His purposes on Earth through His Son Jesus Christ.**

Throughout His Word, God reveals that He delights in order and not confusion. God gives Moses explicit instructions in the Book of Exodus regarding the deliverance of His chosen people and the establishment of His laws and decrees. Jesus created order in the feeding of the five thousand so that the hungry crowds could be fed efficiently by His disciples. Jesus organized His disciples in groups of two and gave them well-ordered guidelines for ministry.

FINALLY, WE CANNOT AGREE:

- **That the main focus of the mission outreach of United Methodist Women should be a social justice gospel based on liberation theology versus the mandate of the Great Commission given directly to all believers by Jesus Christ Himself.**

The Women’s Division clearly believes that the Bible’s central theme is liberation and God’s intended mission in the world is to set humanity free from bondage. Our Wesleyan and biblical sense of liberation isn’t the social, political and economic reordering of the world; rather, involves freedom from the power and penalty of sin. This was the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and He clearly ordered His followers to carry this message “into all the world.” This evangelistic mandate applies to all the women of The United Methodist Church as well. No greater satisfaction can be achieved through a life in Christ than sharing this special gift with others, through word and deed.