

Women's Division Set to Propose Historic Changes

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At its 2009 fall board meeting to be held this October 16th, the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church (UMC) will announce a plan that will dramatically change its relationship with its parent organization, the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM). At its April 2009 meeting, the board of directors, with some initial hesitancy, gave permission to the Division to begin a process of restructuring by voting to affirm a "proposed strategic direction" document. The Women's Division is the governing body of United Methodist Women, the only officially recognized women's ministry within the UMC.

The document states, "In short, the Women's Division would cease funding the work of Global Ministries, except for remitting the allocated share of joint cost which would be reduced as need for those services decline".

Specifically, the Division would:

- Retain funds it currently allocates to GBGM for mission personnel and missionary direct support;
- Directly administer funds for international grant making and church program funding;
- Assume direct responsibility for relationships with national mission institutions;
- Take direct responsibility for the board's program of ministries with women, children, and youth;
- Directly oversee the office of deaconess and home missionary, but no longer contribute to the program for church and community workers; and
- Cease its contributions of 5-10 percent of several administrative budgets within the GBGM.

These proposed changes coincide with a major organizational restructuring taking place at the General Board of Global Ministries with the objective of achieving "more effective ministry". This restructuring is in response to financial difficulties affecting the Board and an operational audit conducted by Management Partners of Cincinnati, Ohio that made 218 recommendations. Several task forces have been set up to assist with components of the restructuring such as governance issues, staffing, mission and vision, and how GBGM locates itself around the world.

GBGM has already made major cuts in its 2009 budget and eliminated forty-five staff persons this past summer in response to a financial shortfall. Twenty-six of these employees were laid off and nineteen accepted retirement or voluntary severance packages.

Many of the changes proposed by the Women's Division and the General Board of Global Ministries will require disciplinary actions at the 2012 General Conference.

The forty-year relationship between the Women's Division and the General Board of Global Ministries is deep and complicated. Just before the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches merged in

1968 to form the United Methodist Church, the 1964 General Conference mandated a unified structure for mission within the denomination placing the Women's Division under the Board of Missions. In exchange for coming under denominational authority, the Division retained control of their money and assets and were given oversight of their mission work through a 40 percent guaranteed inclusion of women on the mission board staff and a 50 percent inclusion of women on the mission board of directors.

While resistant to giving up the historic independence that early women's missionary organizations had maintained, the Women's Division managed to wield much power and influence over the General Board of Global Ministries during the course of their association. The mandated distribution on staff and board appointments at GBGM has enabled the Women's Division to not only control program and policy issues at the agency, but also maintain a powerful voting bloc among the board of directors.

Of the current 92 member GBGM board of directors, 47 are women. Thirty-six of those forty-seven women are associated with the Women's Division. Board directors are given quadrennial assignments to serve the various units and committees that make up the GBGM. Representation of the Women's Division on these decision-making entities averages 51 percent.

The financial difficulties facing the General Board of Global Ministries have been intertwined with those facing the Women's Division. Net assets have taken a major hit at both organizations, with GBGM losing \$112 million during 1999-2002, rebounding some during 2006-07, and then plummeting \$62.5 million in 2008 alone.

The net assets of the Women's Division have fallen steadily over the last decade as operating expenditures have routinely exceeded operating income, forcing the Division to spend from investment reserves. In 2000, the Women's Division had net assets of \$95.7 million. By 2008, these assets had fallen to \$47.7 million, a 50 percent decline. The economic downturn has contributed to a 37.2 percent decrease in net assets (\$27 million) in 2008 alone.

Membership losses have also affected the financial health of the Women's Division. In 1974, there were 1.4 million members of United Methodist Women. By 2007, there were only 640,000 members, representing more than a 50 percent decline. In one year (2007), they have experienced a loss of over 20,000 members and 451 units across the church. Loss in membership of UMW has been two and a half times greater than loss of membership in the UMW.

As the Women's Division has experienced loss of revenue due to a decline in membership and loss of net assets, it has also significantly decreased the amount of money given to GBGM for mission programs. In 2005, the Division contributed \$10.5 million to GBGM. This contribution was cut 10.3 percent in 2006 (9.4 million), 16.3 percent in 2007 (7.9 million), and 11.4 percent in 2008 (7 million). The new strategic plan budget would completely eliminate this contribution.

The General Board of Global Ministries faces a critical time in its history. The board's treasurer Roland Fernandes has expressed concern about the board's increasing dependence on the denomination's World Service Fund, derived from apportionments from the local churches and conferences. GBGM

now receives 40 percent of the World Service budget, “by far the largest share of any agency”, he noted. Other agencies are pushing for a further distribution of the Fund, creating more challenges for GBGM. This reality, coupled with the economic downturn and the lost funding from the Women’s Division is placing severe strains on the mission agency.

How the changes proposed by the Women’s Division will affect its powerful position and influence on GBGM and throughout the United Methodist Church will bear close scrutiny. A reduced level of financial support should effect board representation. Furthermore, the audit recommended a decrease in board size, which could diminish the authority of the Women’s Division at GBGM. These structural changes, coupled with the fiscal challenges facing both agencies, will undoubtedly force these organizations to rethink their mission objectives.

These and many other questions will emerge as these historic changes take place at the Women’s Division. Such developments will warrant close observation by the entire denomination.

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