

Laywomen and Leadership

The Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders (AACLL) met from February 25 to the 28, 2018, on St. Simon's Island, Georgia to worship, learn, and share. During that time, the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women had the opportunity to ask lay leaders from all over the United States how women were faring in their specific annual conference. While some of the results were expected, others were surprising.

Method:

During a [listening session](#) that lasted about 10 minutes, we posed two questions to the lay leaders:

1. What are the struggles of lay women in The United Methodist Church?
2. How can we better prepare lay women for leadership in The United Methodist Church?

The questions were intentionally open-ended, and the respondents used index cards to record their answers. In some cases, we received several answers to one question, in others we received none. As a result, the number of responses to each question are not identical.

Results:

The 73 responses to our first question fell into 7 categories. The categories, number of responses, and percentages appear below:

What are the struggles of lay women in The United Methodist Church?

Category	Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses
Need for encouragement, education and mentoring	25	34%
Sexism and bullying	17	23%
Lack of visible women leaders	10	14%
Time management and the need for daycare	9	12%
Not valuing women's gifts and graces	5	7%
Overcoming traditional gendered roles	5	7%
Unclear process for reporting grievances	1	1%
No struggles for women in my annual conference	1	1%

According to the data, there is a clear need for programs, communities, and individuals who educate, encourage, and mentor lay women in their church leadership journey. Curriculum like

Women Called to Ministry and *God of the Bible* are designed to help women identify their calling and place in the life of the Church. Both are offered for free on the GCSRW.org website. Churches who support women in leadership are key in promoting women into influential positions in the Church. These nurturing communities provide a place for women to hone their skills for motivating and directing others. Church leaders who willingly recruit, train, and coach their successors assist in smooth transitions for the church and the denomination.

Unfortunately, the listening session also identified sexism and bullying in our churches, the struggles of women to overcome traditional gendered roles, and the disregard for the unique gifts and graces women bring to the work of the church. These attitudes and behaviors accounted for 37% of the concerns shared by lay leaders.

Lay leaders also reported that there are too few women in visible leadership positions, contributing to the shortage of role models. During Women’s History Month, GCSRW highlighted women lay leaders through its blog posts and Facebook Live events. Those are still available on our website and Facebook page.

Support for lay women in the form of efficient meetings and childcare during meetings was also raised by 12% of the respondents. If we hope to recruit and retain men or women who work and/or have children, it will be necessary for our church meetings to be efficient and our churches to provide childcare. In today’s hectic environment, caring for one’s time is a priority regardless of gender.

Two lay leaders mentioned equally concerning struggles. The first involved an unclear grievance process for individuals in the annual conference, and the second suggested that women do not struggle at all in their annual conference. We encourage annual conferences to make their grievance process known on their websites, and use GCSRW’s UMSexualEthics.org in the case of sexual misconduct. We urge anyone who does not see the struggle for women’s leadership in The United Methodist Church to take another look.

The 31 responses to our second question fell into 5 categories. The categories and number of responses appear below:

How can we better prepare lay women for leadership in The United Methodist Church?

Category	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses
Provide more education, encouragement and mentoring	21	68%
Manage time and provide daycare for meetings	5	16%
Acknowledge women’s gifts and graces	3	10%
Make women leaders more visible	1	3%
Stop bullying women	1	3%

Suggestions for preparing women for leadership generally mirrored the obstacles that were presented in the first question. 68% of the sample asked for more education, encouragement, and mentoring for lay women. 16% encouraged efficient time management and planning for meetings, as well as providing childcare. The need to acknowledge the gifts and graces women bring to leadership, as well as making women leaders more visible, was also mentioned. Finally, one lay leader simply stated, “Stop bullying women.”

Conclusions:

A listening session is an efficient and effective way to collect basic information from any size group of people. In this study, GCSRW used ten minutes to collect responses about the state of lay women in our annual conferences.

While the method may be simple, the results are invaluable, and warrant further inquiry. This study illustrates the importance of relationships with potential leaders in the pews, as well as existing leaders who may become disillusioned by obstacles in their journey. We encourage all United Methodist leaders to actively work to mentor their fellow female leaders. There are many ways to do this, including

- Sharing [#HerTruth](#) with congregations,
- Offering a copy of *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry*, by Karoline M. Lewis, to potential women leaders, or
- Starting a women’s leadership study group using resources such as *The Leading Women*, by Bishop Judith Craig, or *50 Women Every Christian Should Know*, by Michelle DeRusha.

Of course, there are many other things that can be done to strengthen the relationships between women leaders in the church. Attending retreats, motivational events, or weekends apart are all ways to ignite the leadership within your annual conference. Most importantly, stay connected and pray for one another.

From this brief, but meaningful sample of some of the most influential lay leaders in The United Methodist Church, we can conclude that the best ways to raise up women are through education, encouragement and mentoring. At the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women we are committed to providing curriculum, blogs, news articles, toolkits and training that provide guidance and leadership models at every level of the church.