

# THE FLYER



APRIL 2012

General Commission on the Status and Role of Women  
in The United Methodist Church

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### GCSRW Staff:

M. Garlinda Burton  
S. Kim Coffing  
LeeAnn Goldman  
Elaine Moy  
Darryl Stephens

### FLYER editor:

Heather Peck Stahl

### Web coordinator/editor:

Lindsey Graham

### Intern:

Tasha Sargent

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[www.umsexualethics.org](http://www.umsexualethics.org)

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## GENERAL CONFERENCE

**‘Gender’ in Constitution critical  
to global equality for women***By M. Garlinda Burton*

1. Gender equality is not yet a given in the U.S. United Methodist Church.

- » **A congregation can say “no” to a woman pastor and have their bias affirmed by the cabinet.** During the 2012 clergy appointment season in one U.S. annual conference, at least five United Methodist congregations with worship attendance of more than 200 told their district superintendent that they “did not want and would not accept” women pastors, and the superintendent and cabinet capitulated: not one of those churches received a woman as senior pastor.
  - » **Women are still often engaged in church leadership according to archaic gender stereotypes.** In a recent study of local church opinions on gender conducted by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, 16% of pastors in local U.S. congregations admitted that women are not allowed to serve as ushers.
  - » **Not one woman serves as senior pastor in the largest 100 United Methodist congregations.** According to **research** by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, in 2010 only 94 women served as the lead pastor in United Methodist congregations with membership of 1,000 or more. And among so-called “mega-churches,” not one woman has ever been appointed as senior pastor. Although there are many, many capable women serving as pastors, district superintendents and even bishops, the highest-paying and most prestigious pulpits are still the exclusive venue of clergymen.
2. Gender equality is not broadly accepted in many United Methodist judicatories outside the United States, particularly in Eastern Europe and Africa.
- » **At least one annual conference in Europe has yet to ordain a single clergywoman.** President of the Baltic Methodist Seminary in Tallinn, Estonia, Meeli Tankler, said in a recent presentation that the influence of Orthodox and Catholic churches (neither of which ordains women) makes United Methodist leaders in Europe less receptive to the ordination and appointment of women as clergy. Without a clear and unequivocal statement by the worldwide church in our Constitution that women and men are equally called and that gender discrimination by the church is sin, the social and cultural pressures will continue to undermine our call to live out fully the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
  - » **African clergywomen and laywomen are underrepresented in leadership, in part because gender equality is seen by some as contrary to African culture.** At a February 2012 international conference of African clergywomen, the Rev. Tumani Nyajeka of Zimbabwe (now a researcher at Berea College, Berea, Ky.), decried what she termed “an idolatry of ‘maleness’ as divine,” which continues to keep women from ordination and lay leadership across the African continent. She

This article was written to help delegates and all other United Methodists understand and prepare for General Conference, April 24-May 4, 2012, in Tampa, Fla.

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said that the notion that gender discrimination is a cultural right is a myth. “We have let gender rule as supreme. But I say that our being here this week is a reminder to the church that it is the liberating Christ who calls us and it is the liberating Christ who sends us out,” she adds.

3. Without an unequivocal, international declaration of the equality of women in our church Constitution, The United Methodist Church is allowing congregations, conferences and geographic regions to determine that some of God’s people are superior and more desirable than others. This would be considered unconscionable if this standard were legally applied to race-ethnicity or national origin, yet the church again seems divided on the issue of gender equality. Consider the following numbers.

- » **Women are still underrepresented at the top decision making tables in the denomination,** mainly because The United Methodist Church is not of a common mind about the full and equal worth of women in church leadership. Women comprise more than 56% of churchwide membership, yet women are only 37% of all 2012 General Conference delegates.
- » **United Methodist lay and clergy women in Africa, the Philippines and the United States say that sexual violence in so-called Christian homes and sexual misconduct by ministers** affects them disproportionately, yet the church still has no official international training, resources, standardized protocol or clear guidelines and practices for prevention education, quick intervention, justice-making and healing for congregations and individuals harmed by sexual violence or misconduct. (And neither of the most prominent agency restructure plans have defined or assigned this responsibility to any churchwide entity.)
- » **Women, particularly African and African-American women, are the fastest growing population of first-time diagnosis of HIV, yet the church’s so-called global health initiatives are virtually silent about this women-specific pandemic.** Nor has the denomination developed and disseminated education, funding for prevention and care-giving ministries, or training for pastors and laity on how to be in ministry with women with HIV and their loved ones.
- » **Young women (and men) are woefully underrepresented as leaders at all levels of United Methodist life.** The median age of a U.S. United Methodist is 57 years old, while the median age of a world citizen is 24 years old. Young women are virtually absent from the top decision-making tables in congregations, annual conferences and churchwide entities, due in large part to the denomination’s antiquated and incongruent beliefs and practices related to gender equality. Women have broken the glass ceiling in almost every other aspect of corporate and social life; for The United Methodist Church to remain constitutionally on the fence about the full equality of women renders the denomination irrelevant at best and undesirable at worst for women ages 17-29.

—*M. Garlinda Burton* is general secretary of GCSRW.



## WOMEN BY THE NUMBERS

# Central conferences have fewer female delegates to General Conference than U.S. jurisdictions

By Craig This

Of the 1,017 delegates elected to the 2012 General Conference, 63% are male and 37% are female, according to the data supplied by the General Council on Finance and Administration<sup>1</sup> (see Table 1). In comparison to the delegates elected to the 2008 General Conference, 60% were male and 40% were female. Women’s representation to General Conference is down by 3%.

There are 988 delegates who have voice and vote; 29 additional delegates—mainly from affiliated Methodist bodies—have voice. These additional delegates may speak and influence legislative committees as well as plenary sessions. This article and the statistics used herein include all 1,017 delegates because they all have the ability to speak at General Conference. (The next issue of THE FLYER will examine the 988 voting.)

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the 1,017 delegate count is above the 1,000 limit set forth by The Book of Discipline. Further, the data supplied by GCFA is preliminary based upon initial delegate lists provided by the annual conferences.

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**TABLE 1:  
GENDER AND STATUS BY CENTRAL CONFERENCE/JURISDICTION**

|  | Clergy     |            |            |            |            | Laity      |            |            |            |            | Total       |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
|  | Female     |            | Male       |            | Total      | Female     |            | Male       |            | Total      |             |
|  | #          | %          | #          | %          |            | #          | %          | #          | %          |            |             |
| <b>Central Conference</b>                      |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |             |
| Affiliated or Concordat Church                 | 3          | 14%        | 19         | 86%        | 22         | 13         | 54%        | 11         | 46%        | 24         | 46          |
| Africa Central Conference                      | 5          | 28%        | 13         | 72%        | 18         | 9          | 50%        | 9          | 50%        | 18         | 36          |
| Congo Central Conference                       | 9          | 13%        | 63         | 88%        | 72         | 27         | 37%        | 46         | 63%        | 73         | 145         |
| West Africa Central Conference                 | 5          | 10%        | 44         | 90%        | 49         | 14         | 28%        | 36         | 72%        | 50         | 99          |
| Africa   | 19         | 14%        | 120        | 86%        | 139        | 50         | 36%        | 91         | 65%        | 141        | 280         |
| Central and Southern Europe Central Conference | 1          | 14%        | 6          | 86%        | 7          | 3          | 43%        | 4          | 57%        | 7          | 14          |
| Germany Central Conference                     | 1          | 33%        | 2          | 67%        | 3          | 1          | 33%        | 2          | 67%        | 3          | 6           |
| Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference | 1          | 9%         | 10         | 91%        | 11         | 6          | 55%        | 5          | 45%        | 11         | 22          |
| Europe   | 3          | 14%        | 18         | 86%        | 21         | 10         | 48%        | 11         | 52%        | 21         | 42          |
| Philippines Central Conference                 | 4          | 18%        | 18         | 82%        | 22         | 9          | 36%        | 16         | 64%        | 25         | 47          |
| <b>Central Conference Total</b>                | <b>29</b>  | <b>14%</b> | <b>175</b> | <b>86%</b> | <b>204</b> | <b>82</b>  | <b>39%</b> | <b>129</b> | <b>61%</b> | <b>211</b> | <b>415</b>  |
| <b>US Jurisdictions</b>                        |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |             |
| North Central Jurisdiction                     | 22         | 20%        | 34         | 30%        | 56         | 29         | 26%        | 27         | 24%        | 56         | 112         |
| Northeastern Jurisdiction                      | 24         | 22%        | 31         | 28%        | 55         | 30         | 27%        | 25         | 23%        | 55         | 110         |
| South Central Jurisdiction                     | 21         | 16%        | 43         | 34%        | 64         | 28         | 22%        | 36         | 28%        | 64         | 128         |
| Southeastern Jurisdiction                      | 42         | 19%        | 68         | 31%        | 110        | 50         | 23%        | 60         | 27%        | 110        | 220         |
| Western Jurisdiction                           | 8          | 25%        | 8          | 25%        | 16         | 12         | 38%        | 4          | 13%        | 16         | 32          |
| <b>US Jurisdiction Total</b>                   | <b>117</b> | <b>19%</b> | <b>184</b> | <b>31%</b> | <b>301</b> | <b>149</b> | <b>25%</b> | <b>152</b> | <b>25%</b> | <b>301</b> | <b>602</b>  |
| <b>UMC Total</b>                               | <b>146</b> | <b>14%</b> | <b>359</b> | <b>35%</b> | <b>505</b> | <b>231</b> | <b>23%</b> | <b>281</b> | <b>28%</b> | <b>512</b> | <b>1017</b> |



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In the 2008 General Conference, U.S. delegates made up 76% of the U.S. delegates and women were 44% of the delegation. Central conferences (from United Methodist annual conferences outside the United States) were 24% of the delegates and women were 28% of those delegates. In the 2012 General Conference, U.S. delegates make up 59% (-17% from 2008) of the delegates and women are 44% of the delegation (same as in 2008). Central conferences make up 41% of the 2012 General Conference delegation (+17% from 2008) and 29% of those delegates are women (increase of 1%).

While 37% is the overall representation, the U.S. jurisdictions have 44% female representation and the central conferences have 28% female representation (see Table 2). Representation of women has risen steadily over the last 40 years (in 1972, only 13% of General Conference delegates were women).

It is no surprise then that 266 of the 377 female delegates (70%) are from the United States, largely because the United States has more delegates, but also because gender-justice work has not been a priority among many central conferences. At least one annual conference outside the United States has yet to ordain a single woman.

**Clergywomen and Laywomen**

Women represent more than half of United Methodist membership around the world, but only about 19% of all clergy. While women, lay and clergy, represent 37% of General Conference delegates, clergywomen have the lowest percentage of representation at 14% of General Conference delegates (see Table 1). In terms of sheer numbers, there are more clergymen (175) from the central conferences than there are clergywomen (146) from the U.S. jurisdictions and the central conferences combined (see Table 2). The same is true for clergymen (184) from the U.S. jurisdictions and the clergywomen (146) combined.

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**TABLE 2:  
RANKED BY FEMALES AS PERCENTAGE OF  
JURISDICTION/CENTRAL CONFERENCE REPRESENTATION**

| Jurisdiction/Central Conference                | Female     |            | Male       |            | Total       |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
|  | #          | %          | #          | %          |             |
| Western Jurisdiction                           | 20         | 63%        | 12         | 38%        | 32          |
| Northeastern Jurisdiction                      | 54         | 49%        | 56         | 51%        | 110         |
| North Central Jurisdiction                     | 51         | 46%        | 61         | 54%        | 112         |
| Southeastern Jurisdiction                      | 92         | 42%        | 128        | 58%        | 220         |
| Africa Central Conference                      | 14         | 39%        | 22         | 61%        | 36          |
| South Central Jurisdiction                     | 49         | 38%        | 79         | 62%        | 128         |
| Affiliated or Concordat Church                 | 16         | 35%        | 30         | 65%        | 46          |
| Germany Central Conference                     | 2          | 33%        | 4          | 67%        | 6           |
| Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference | 7          | 32%        | 15         | 68%        | 22          |
| Central and Southern Europe Central Conference | 4          | 29%        | 10         | 71%        | 14          |
| Philippines Central Conference                 | 13         | 28%        | 34         | 72%        | 47          |
| Congo Central Conference                       | 36         | 25%        | 109        | 75%        | 145         |
| West Africa Central Conference                 | 19         | 19%        | 80         | 81%        | 99          |
| <b>Total</b>                                   | <b>377</b> | <b>37%</b> | <b>640</b> | <b>63%</b> | <b>1017</b> |

**TABLE 3:  
RANKED BY DELEGATES**

| Jurisdiction/Central Conference                | Female     | Male       |
|--|------------|------------|
|  | #          | #          |
| Southeastern Jurisdiction                      | 92         | 128        |
| Northeastern Jurisdiction                      | 54         | 56         |
| North Central Jurisdiction                     | 51         | 61         |
| South Central Jurisdiction                     | 49         | 79         |
| Congo Central Conference                       | 36         | 109        |
| Western Jurisdiction                           | 20         | 12         |
| West Africa Central Conference                 | 19         | 80         |
| Affiliated or Concordat Church                 | 16         | 30         |
| Africa Central Conference                      | 14         | 22         |
| Philippines Central Conference                 | 13         | 34         |
| Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference | 7          | 15         |
| Central and Southern Europe Central Conference | 4          | 10         |
| Germany Central Conference                     | 2          | 4          |
| <b>Total</b>                                   | <b>377</b> | <b>640</b> |



## STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

Laywomen have the second lowest percentage of representation at 23% or 231 delegates (see Table 1). The 149 laywomen elected from the U.S. jurisdictions constitute 65% of the laywomen representation. There are more laywomen delegates from the U.S. than there are central conference women (111) combined (lay and clergy). Likewise, there are more U.S. laywomen (149) than central conference laymen (129). It is also interesting to note that while U.S. laywomen (149) and laymen (152) are nearly even in total numbers, the central conference laymen outnumber the laywomen 129 to 82.

### Jurisdictions Ranked by Number of Women

Of U.S. regions, the Western Jurisdiction has the least delegates but the highest percentage of women delegates (63% of that region's total elected delegates are women), followed by Northeastern (49%), North Central (46%), Southeastern (42%), Africa Central Conference (39%) and South Central (38%) (see Table 2). The Congo Central Conference has the highest number of women delegates among central conferences (36 of 145 delegates are women). However, women comprise 25% of the total delegates from Congo, which makes the Congo Central Conference second to last when ranking female delegates as a percentage of a region's total elected delegation (see Table 2). Numerically, the Southeastern Jurisdiction has the largest number of women delegates (92), followed by Northeastern (54), North Central (51), South Central (49) and Congo Central Conference (26) (see Table 3).

— **Craig This** is data analyst at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.





## NATIVE AMERICAN CAUCUS

# Marking its 40th anniversary, caucus reflects on struggle to counter racism in the denomination

*By Sandra Brands*

Beginning in 1968, protests and occupations by the American Indian Movement (AIM) brought the attention of the American public to the continued bigotry and the suppression of Native American cultural and spiritual traditions.

The U.S. Congress finally responded with the 1968 Native American Civil Rights Act and the 1978 Native American Religious Freedom Act.

During the same period, Native Americans in the new United Methodist Church called for the church to include them as full participants in the life of the church. They asked the denomination to acknowledge that Native American people have had a long and painful relationship with the church – a history that continues to haunt Native American communities to this day.

In 1968, the new United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries called for a national consultation to consider ways to empower Native Americans. That consultation led to the creation of an advisory committee and the National American Indian Committee caucus. By 1972, the caucus, supported by funds from the General Commission on Religion and Race, became the Native American International Committee (NAIC).

“It was needed because we [Native Americans] are so few in the church and we needed to advocate for our Native American ministries, Native American people and across the nation,” says the Rev. Shirley Montoya, a retired elder of the New Mexico Annual Conference. A member of the Diné (Navajo) Nation, Montoya works with the Four Corners Mission in Shiprock, N.M., a Navajo cooperative parish.

The purpose of NAIC, according to Anne Marshall, current chairwoman of the caucus and a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, was to advocate for greater representation by Native Americans at the general and annual conference level, to develop relationships with indigenous peoples in Canada, Mexico and the rest of the world, and to provide training and development for Native American peoples in The United Methodist Church.

“If we were going to be effective leaders, then we needed to be trained,” Marshall says. “We needed to be aware of the focus [of the church] and the changes that would have effect on local Native American congregations.”

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*Evelene Tweedy  
Navarrete Sombrero*



*Susanne Aikman*



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## Strengthen Native American ministries

There was also a need to strengthen the ministries of the Native American people, she says. And, there was a need for the church to make room for Native American staff members and board members who could advise and address the unique needs of the Native American community, both inside and beyond the church.



*Anne Marshall*

“There wasn’t a whole lot of voice for Native Americans, and we weren’t very visible in the church,” says Evelene “Tweedy” Navarrete Sombbrero, senior pastor at Trinity United Methodist Church in Yuma, Ariz., and a full-blooded Diné.

“NAIC figured there should be some sort of group that overlooked the projects instead of other persons doing it for us,” says Sombbrero. “The church used to take it upon itself to say that this is what we needed. We needed more ways to be independent, to make our decisions, to do what we needed for ourselves.”

That advocacy by NAIC has helped native people, Marshall says. “It has helped The United Methodist Church understand the whole essence of [Native American] spirituality. The church needs to understand who we are, that we are equal and that we have gifts to offer the church that probably could help take us to the next level.”

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## The Native American International Caucus (NAIC) turns 40 this year.

*By Sandra Brands*

In preparing for the anniversary celebration, it became clear that the history of dedicated and talented native women was missing. Few people knew about these women who have been cornerstones of many Native American churches and the backbone of the church and community.

To correct the missing history, the caucus launched the “Precious Memories Project.”

According Susanne Aikman of **alterNativeVoices radio** the project includes stories of these women for recognition on a Wall of Honor at the NAIC’s website.

The original intent was to compile a book extolling the contributions of these women, and the General Commission of Religion and Race of The United Methodist Church awarded NAIC a grant for the work. However, it soon became apparent that a book would be too expensive.

So, the planning group decided to create the Precious Memories Project and Wall of Honor. Aikman, the designer of the project, says that the goal was to solicit stories about the women who inspired other people’s spiritual journey, particularly in relation to the Methodist Church. And the project also emphasized the important contributions to Native communities made by these women.

“The purpose of the precious memories is to tell the stories of who we are as native women in the church,” says Anne Marshall, chair of NAIC. “We wanted to write about the lives of the women, we wanted to honor them. We wanted to offer to the church this cadre of [Native American] women who have been faithful and who have served their local churches. We’ve never recognized them.”

“We’re doing something the church doesn’t have – offer as a gift recognition of the Native American United Methodist women,” Marshall says.

The Precious Memories Project will debut at General Conference 2012 in Tampa, Fla., and the stories of the women honored will be available for viewing and downloading on the **NAIC web site**.

NAIC’s celebratory poster (11” x 17”) will be available in limited quantities at the GCSRW display booth at General Conference 2012.





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## Overcoming painful legacy

It has not been an easy journey. “The relationship between Native Americans and Christianity is painful,” says Susanne Aikman of alterNativeVoices radio. She originally served on the NAIC board as a representative from United Methodist Native American Center based at the Claremont School of Theology in California. That painful relationship includes the historic relationship between the Methodist Church and the Native American community. “The Methodist Church was one of the denominations that partnered with the United States government to open boarding schools.

“We are living out the dysfunction and cruelty, oppression and violence [of the boarding school legacy] every day in our communities,” she says.

That issue was one of the first topics of the NAIC-sponsored Native American Leadership Development Camp. “We realized the boarding schools had a big impact on our lives,” Sombrero says. NAIC has “brought more issues to the front. I think it’s truly helped Native people realize a lot of things about their own struggle.”

In the 40 years of its existence, the caucus has:

- » helped put into place Native American Awareness Sunday, a fund to support new ministries and churches,
- » helped create the Native American Comprehensive Plan,
- » brought attention to demeaning images of Native Americans, and
- » enabled church members to understand the unique perspectives Native Americans bring to theology and spirituality.

“The caucus has been a focal point that brings new perspectives to the church,” says Marshall. Since the caucus’s founding, “we [have seen] a lot of churches start and some are still around, still struggling to be relevant in the community, struggling to be the light of hope in their communities on and off the reservation.”

“We’re constantly trying to educate, to find ways to help our people find ways to become self-sufficient churches and ministries,” says Montoya. “We’re constantly looking for support from the general church and the conferences. One of the things we really fought for was to have a Native American presence on each of the general boards, agencies and commissions. It almost became a reality, but without constant reminders from NAIC, it has kind of gone away.”

## ‘We are not being heard’

There is a growing sense of frustration that while the NAIC has made strides, the work done is losing ground as the church struggles with declining membership and narrowing focus.

“We’ve seen a drop in staff or at least staff people who make decisions and in the number of people who can help with carrying out the vision with sensitivity and understanding,” says Marshall. “The church should be big enough to honor everyone at the table. You may not do what we want, but we are heard. I think we’re not being heard.”

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## STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

“There should be at least unified voice in the church for the different ethnic groups,” Aikman agrees. “We all have differences that need to be respected and heard. All of our communities and cultures have different histories and needs and relationships with Christianity. The church seems to be taking steps backwards with ethnic people, particularly with native people.”

“Sometimes we feel like we’ve made strides,” says Sombrero, “and then there are times we feel we haven’t made or done anything and it seems to be getting worse. I wish the church would be more open to hearing and listening to the native people; being more open to what we have to offer not only spiritually, but also what we have to offer in the ways of our knowledge and our wisdom. Unfortunately, we don’t have a voice—even though we’ve come a long way.”

“We don’t want to be invisible, but we are,” says Montoya. “It takes a lot of patience on the part of listeners to understand and to rid themselves of the stereotypes of Native Americans in general. How long do we have to keep reeducating the church on what it means to be Native American?”

“The presence of Native Americans, as small as it is, is important to the church,” she says. “We want to be part of the church and for as badly as I feel I’ve been treated by the people, I believe in The United Methodist Church.”

— **Sandra Brands** is a freelance writer and communications consultant living in upstate New York.



## SEXUAL ETHICS

# United Methodist seminaries lead the way on standards of sexual health and responsibility

*By Marie Alford-Harkey and J. Michael Cobb*

**The Religious Institute**, a multi-faith organization dedicated to sexual health, education and justice, reports that the number of United States seminaries, divinity and rabbinical schools that are preparing the next generation of clergy with the training they need to address sexuality issues in ministry has doubled in the past three years.

Twenty seminaries now meet a majority of the criteria for a sexually healthy and **responsible seminary**, compared to just 10 in 2009. Three of these institutions are affiliated with The United Methodist Church: **Candler**, **Claremont** and **Drew**.

“There is an urgent need for ordained clergy who understand the connections between religion and sexuality, particularly given so many denominations concerned about sexual abuse or embroiled in controversies over sexual orientation issues,” says the Rev. Debra W. Haffner, executive director of the Religious Institute. “This work makes significant strides towards combating future clergy sexual abuse, while helping all future clergy become sexually healthy and responsible. These seminaries are the vanguard in ensuring that tomorrow’s clergy are prepared to minister to their congregants, and to be effective advocates for sexual health and justice.”

The Religious Institute provided assistance to the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW) as it developed guidelines for raising United Methodist standards of sexual health and responsibility for future clergy. Haffner was one of 12 invited participants in a GCSRW-sponsored faculty forum in April 2010 that generated the guidelines now being considered as legislation (**Advanced Daily Christian Advocate vol. 2.2, p. 1467**) by the Ministry and Higher Education

Committee at General Conference 2012. **This petition** “calls for a rigorous program of ministerial readiness regarding professional ethics, sexual ethics, healthy boundaries and self-care to become a standard aspect of United Methodist seminary and course of study education.”

The United Methodist Commission aims to create, promote, resource and implement a rigorous

program of ministerial readiness regarding professional ethics, sexual ethics, healthy boundaries and self-care as a standard aspect of United Methodist seminary education. More information about GCSRW’s work with seminaries can be **found here**.

A full list of all qualifying institutions, designated as sexually healthy and responsible seminaries, can be found at <http://www.religioustinstitute.org/Seminary>. This list updates a 2009 study, which found sexuality courses largely absent from most seminary curricula and degree requirements.

The Religious Institute ([www.religioustinstitute.org](http://www.religioustinstitute.org)), based in Westport, Conn., is a nonprofit, multifaith organization dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education and justice in faith communities and society. More than 5,400 clergy, seminary presidents and deans, religious scholars and other religious leaders representing more than 70 faith traditions are part of the religious institute’s national network.

*—Marie Alford-Harkey and J. Michael Cobb are associate directors of the Religious Institute.*

*Cobb is a certified lay speaker in the New York Annual Conference. Alford-Harkey is an aspirant for ordination in the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut.*



## INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

# Make worship language more inclusive

Language has power. Language is also a powerful tool. It transmits facts, ideas, emotions and values. What we speak, how we speak, where we speak, with/to whom we speak and when we speak can become “conscious snapshots” revealing the various influences moving in and through us.

Christians have a responsibility to bear witness of God’s “Word made flesh” through our language. We need to remain mindful of how we describe and include one another; embracing and enriching the myriad of ways God is described throughout scripture; avoiding and addressing biases that foster stereotypes; and taking seriously not to participate in harming others for whom Christ died.

When preparing worship materials (litanies, hymns/songs, sermons, announcements, prayers, etc.), asking tough questions can be revealing: How is God’s diversity and richness, as revealed in scripture, revealed in this worship? How, when and which humans are included or not? Who is valued? Who may be devalued? What biases may be at work in the design of this worship? What biases ARE to be at work in United Methodist worship services? All are challenging and worthwhile questions to consider.

To help you assess what biases—and how biases—may be functioning, below are some categories to consider in your worship services.

### Sexual bias

Both men and women have been harmed by biased usage of language. But the image of women has historically been diminished, if not denied, by the generic use of “he” and “mankind,” favoring the masculine over the feminine. A more accurate and honoring reflection of reality is language that specifies that both women and men are involved in “humankind.”

- » **God language** – God is both male and female. Avoid gender pronouns when speaking of God or be intentional in providing both female and male pronouns. Insisting the God of the Bible is only “he” denies the fullness of God’s revelation throughout scripture and is a theological practice of idolatry.
- » **Pictures** – Use graphics that include men and women, boys and girls, engaged in the full spectrum of life in our homes, work, play, sports, missions and school. Be aware of the dynamics within the graphics as to who the “givers” are and who the “receivers” are. Avoid gender, race, age and class stereotypes.
- » **Music** – Assess the images and language in hymns and songs. Are there inclusive options that can be provided? Has there been additional and newer verses created for a particular “old favorite” hymn that may be more inclusive of the community? Are there a variety of images of God and humanity dispersed throughout the selection of music during a service? Consider: If this song was the ONLY proclamation made in the service, what is the proclamation? What other music provides a balance of imagery in the service?
- » **You guys** – While many people use this phrase as a gender-neutral vernacular, women and girls are not “guys.” “You” may refer to one person or a group. Also, “you all” is a great option, and a shout-out of gratitude to our U.S. southerners for “gifting” our U.S. English with this inclusive framing when addressing multiple sets of people.
- » **By spirit** – Assessing language usage throughout our worship services is a matter of asking, “What spirit is being invoked, proclaimed and present?” Having an intentional review (monitoring) of the

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## STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

images and language for humanity and God helps a faith community recognize where their biases are, so to direct attention where spiritual growth may be needed.

### Racial bias

Racial divisions are often cited by one group of people to justify separation or oppressive treatment of other human beings. Racial stereotyping, through pejorative or joking references or stories based on presumed traits of nationalities, is not just “poor taste” but speaks to the assumed supremacy of one group over another. It fractures not only the Body of Christ but also profanes the unifying power of the Holy Spirit in and through all Christians.

- » “White” and “black” in theological language: Which is considered positive? Which is considered negative?
- » Avoid portraying non-white persons in essentially subservient roles. Depict a variety of lifestyles, skills, historical and professional and artistic contributions, and living in diverse home and family settings.
- » Be aware of the norms you’re promoting as acceptable, successful, worthy and “blessed.”
- » Mentioning of a person’s race or nationality should be made only when it is necessary or important to the sense of the material.

### Ethnic bias

“*Oh you know, (a group) are just that way.*” Such statements attribute characteristics of ethnic and/or regional peoples, fostering stereotypes and denying that every nationality is endowed with “fully human” attributes.

- » Geographical stereotypes are hurtful and taint our openness toward others. What images and locations are provoked when you hear the terms “redneck,” “bumpkin,” “hillbilly,” “under developed countries,” “third world,” “terrorist,” “conservative” or “liberal?”
- » While people from other nations may speak imperfect or accented English, this is not an indication of being uneducated or inferior. Avoid implying that English is superior.
- » Don’t let anti-Semitism color your biblical interpretation. Jesus was born into a Hebrew family and saw reforming his beloved faith as a part of his ministry. When decrying Pharisees and scribes, the point was—and is—to criticize all church authorities when they subscribe to the letter of the law and not the spirit of God’s love for all people. Make sure you do not frame these stories as anti-Jewish.

### Material & physical bias

Language used to describe those who are recipients of care or are people dependent on other caregivers to support them, or their churches, can often reflect an attitude that they are inferior or “needy.” It diminishes the suffering they have experienced. In the human community, we are all dependent on one another to be fully human.

*These guidelines were drawn from a resource by The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We extend our gratitude for their helpful Inclusive Language Guidelines, [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org).*





## KUDOS AND OVATIONS:

**The establishment of the first all-African clergywomen's steering committee.** Participants in the largest-ever gathering of African United Methodist clergywomen held in February in Mutare, Zimbabwe, elected the Rev. Kabamba Kiboko, a native of Congo, now pastor in the Texas Annual Conference to head a committee to facilitate networking, support, mentoring and relationships among women clerics across Africa. The Zimbabwe consultation was sponsored by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, with additional support from other groups, including the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women.



Courtesy of GBHEM

**Bishop Rosemarie Wenner** and 24 female United Methodist pastors from nine countries in Europe met in Braunfels, Germany, for fellowship and to exchange ideas. The clergywomen came from Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Russia, Switzerland and Serbia, for a time of worship, conversation and renewal. The gathering was supported by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

The Center for American Progress named **United Methodists Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Bishop Minerva Carcaño** on the top of their list of **13 Religious Women to Watch in 2012: Changing the World for Good**. Sirleaf is the president of Liberia and the first female head of state on the African continent. Minerva Carcano, the first Latina ever elected to the episcopacy of The United Methodist Church, has become the official spokesperson for the Council of Bishops on immigration.

**Trudy Kibbe Reed**, president of United Methodist-related Bethune-Cookman University (Daytona Beach, Fla.) and former general secretary of GCSRW, recently announced she plans to retire on May 13.

**Eight students have been selected by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) as the 2012-2013 Dempster Scholars.** The Dempster Graduate Fellowship supports doctoral students who are committed to serving the church by becoming professors who will educate the next generation of United Methodist pastors. The fellowships are funded by the Ministerial Education Fund through GBHEM's Division of Ordained Ministry. The fellowship recipients are Carolyn Davis (Texas Annual Conference), Darius Hills (Louisiana Annual Conference), Amy Beth Jones (Upper New York Annual Conference), Sangwoo Kim (New England Annual Conference), Gerald Liu (Mississippi Annual Conference), Michelle Morris (Arkansas Annual Conference), Adam Ployd (Virginia Annual Conference) and Jennifer Quigley (West Ohio Annual Conference).



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