

Cracking the Stained Glass Ceiling: The Lead Women Pastors Project

The Rev. HiRho Park, D. Min., Ph.D.

The Rev. Susan Willhauck, Ph. D.

The Lead Women Pastors Project (LWPP) was begun in 2008, but had its origins in the 2006 International Clergywomen's Consultation which celebrated the 50th anniversary of clergy rights for women in the Methodist tradition.¹ That event sparked curiosity about how women were cracking the stained glass ceiling to serve in large membership churches. As the United Methodist Church is greeting a new era of women's leadership, a question that arose was, "How can the Church equip younger generations of clergywomen to fulfill their calling to serve the needs of the present age that demands gender inclusivity in theology and practice?" The Lead Women Pastors Project was envisioned by HiRho Park, Director of Clergy Lifelong Learning of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, and she invited Susan Willhauck to serve as a consultant. The collaborative leadership team also included two large church lead women pastors, The Rev. Patricia Farris of the California Pacific Conference and The Rev. Trudy Robinson of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference.

The goals of the LWPP include: 1) establishing an online continuing education and support network for clergywomen serving as lead pastors in large membership churches; 2) researching leadership styles and issues of lead women pastors—the research to be both quantitative and qualitative; 3) facilitating a coaching program between current lead women pastors and other women pastors identified by Bishops and Cabinets as having potential to serve large churches. The LWPP seeks to affirm, empower and nurture women as lead pastors in churches with a membership of 1,000 or more.² The LWPP is exploring the distinct call to pastor a large membership church and women's leadership in that role.

Typically the large membership church has been viewed as the benchmark for judging ministerial success in the denomination. And, as such, it has remained essentially an intact stained glass ceiling for clergywomen, until a few women began to crack it. The LWPP does not make the presumption that bigger is always better or that women ought to “climb the ladder” to that benchmark of success, but aims to ensure that all ministries are fully open to women’s leadership in the UMC and that women’s leadership is valued in all settings. The LWPP seeks to tap into the rich resource of lead women pastors to better understand pastoral leadership. Rather than measuring pastoral effectiveness against already established criterion that is male defined, the LWPP looks at ways lead women pastors are re-defining pastoral effectiveness on their own terms. People who are invested in male models of leadership (especially for the large church) are loathe to admit that women bring anything unique to leadership or something that will reform the church because it threatens the status quo of males in charge. We made no essentialist assumptions, however, in this grounded research methodology, but sought to discover the content of women’s leadership in the large church setting. Lead women pastors have been cracking a glass ceiling within the church in spite of an apparent lack of support, affirmation, and recognition of their unique contributions. Clergywomen and proponents of women’s leadership in the church can continue to affirm and claim the gifts of women for the church despite the barriers.

In *Women and Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change*, Barbara Kellerman and Deborah Rhode acknowledge that despite a half century of equal opportunity legislation, women are still frustratingly underrepresented in leadership roles in society. Though the situation has improved over time, women are still a small minority in the most influential leadership positions. They site gender bias, double standards and disproportionate family

responsibilities among the obstacles to leadership opportunities for women. “The ‘great man’ model of leadership is still with us.”³ Keeping women out of influential leadership roles compromises fundamental principles of equal opportunity and social justice. They also note that researchers consistently find a positive correlation between a high representation of women leaders and business success. Though correlation does not always imply causation, they argue that there are “strong reasons to believe that diversity in leadership has tangible pay-offs.”⁴

To meet the first goal of the project, the LWPP leadership team planned and hosted an opening retreat for the 82 lead women pastors to launch the project (and a second retreat seven months later).⁵ We introduced the clergywomen to Blackboard, a distance learning program which we used to foster networking and discussion and to gather information. We divided the clergywomen into chat groups and conducted a series of chats during the year. The women were given two books on leadership to read and discuss.

The second goal of the LWPP was the research component. The quantitative aspect consisted of an online survey sent to the 94 lead women pastors (LWP) and a randomly selected sample of 300 lead male pastors (LMP) of large churches. The survey sought to obtain data on demographics, career trajectory, leadership styles and issues faced by clergy.⁶ 30 % (61) of LWP and 70% (139) of LMP responded to the survey. Qualitative data was also obtained from online chats, the discussion board, case studies and interviews. Here we will summarize a few key findings from the research.

Age, Race and Marital Status: 99% of the survey respondents were white. There was one Asian and one African American LMP and one African American lead woman pastor, clearly indicated a dearth of ethnic lead pastors in large churches. According to a 2000 *United*

Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study conducted by the Anna Howard Shaw Center of Boston University, Caucasian women may find acceptance somewhat easier in local churches than women from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds.⁷ The LWPP study confirmed that this was true for lead women pastors.

Lead women pastors are an average of three years younger than lead male pastors, but LWP have served slightly more appointments than their male counterparts before becoming lead pastor of a large church. 69% of LWP are married compared to 99% of LMP, a gap that is greater than for the general population. One factor that causes clergywomen to suffer, according to Barbara Zikmund, et.al. is “role strain.” The role strain of clergywomen results from ‘role hegemony.’ in which stereotypes of certain gender roles provoke overt discrimination and a lack of acceptance.⁸ The role strain that clergywomen experience in their ministry could partly explain the fact that one third of LWP are not married. Without speculating on what the data indicates too much, suffice it to say that it challenges the church toward consistency in inclusivity.

Education, Career and Salary: More LWP were educated in UM seminaries than LMP. More LWP have doctoral degrees than LMP. More LWP are second career clergy than LMP. More women than men have served as a District Superintendent prior to an appointment to lead a large church. According to the survey, LWP are within an average of four appointments and men an average of 3.75 appointments before becoming a lead pastor. 49% of LWP took five appointments compared to 31% for LMP. More LWP have been associate pastors than men prior to serving a large church. More LWP have been candidates for episcopacy in the past than LMP. The consensus from the discussions was that the episcopacy is more acceptable for women,

“easier to take” than a woman as pastor of a large church. It was interesting to learn that there were seven males and one female who became a lead pastor in their first appointment. Does this mean that these pastors already had leadership qualities that large churches demand when first entering into ministry? Or does this mean that more Cabinets perceive that males have a higher capability of leading a large church than women? It was also interesting to find out that one-fourth of LWP and one-third of LMP are second career clergy who had been teachers, in business or had military careers. This means that clergy who bring different skills into their ministry may do well in a large church ministry context where previous leadership and teaching skills that deal with diverse opinions and deeper understandings of finances are expected in the large church setting. The Church needs to recognize and utilize skills that second career clergy bring into ordained ministry, especially in the leadership of large churches. This correlates with the most challenging issues for women in ministry today. Both LWP and LMP agree that the “appointment process” is one of the most challenging issues within the UMC structure. LWP tend to serve in suburbs of large cities, while more LMP serve large churches that are located in mid-size and small towns. As far as salary is concerned this study showed that more clergywomen than men earned over \$100,000. The LWP survey respondents earned slightly more than the LMP. According to the Lewis Center for Church Leadership, this finding does not match other reports about clergy salary. For example, the top 100 largest congregations are served by male clergy (with one exception that we have been able to identify). The majority of the male respondents of this survey are serving in the middle and bottom third of the large churches.⁹ A very few LWP are serving the top one-third of the largest churches and their average salaries are about 27% lower than LMP.

Leadership: A significant finding in this study is that the average membership and worship attendance of churches served by LWP are higher than the churches served by male respondents. The average number of professing members in lead women pastors' churches was 1,827 compared with 1,736 in lead male pastors' churches. The average worship attendance of churches served by LWP is higher than that of churches served by the male respondents in this study. Lead Women Pastors' churches have more weekly services on average than the congregations served by the male pastors.¹⁰ LWP spend more time in pastoral care than LMP. LWP also had more full-time staff (ten or more) and some lead pastors reported that they have to supervise over twenty different staff positions. LWP supervise an average of additional two more staff than LMP. The data shows that LWP have more responsibilities than LMP in a similar context.

Though there were similarities between the men and women respondents on leadership style, the overwhelming majority of both the LWP and the LMP in this survey noted that they perceive gender differences in leadership. That being said—many qualified their statements to avoid blanket generalizations. Slightly more women identified their leadership style as collaborative. More LWP lead change by “informally planting seeds and hope they take root” and LMP more likely to lead change by “intentionally recruiting support from individuals and groups.” LWP are more likely to engage in collegial efforts in terms of dealing with conflicts and financial issues. LWP are less likely to openly display emotion than their male counterparts.

The survey revealed that there is agreement among men and women that there are different standards for clergy men and women. Men are given a standing of authority often not present for women. The top two challenging issues for male and female clergy are finances and

staffing. More clergywomen than men believe that the need for more clergywomen serving large churches is an important concern.

LWP reported less major conflicts for the last two years than LMP and more LWP considered conflict something to be avoided according to the survey. For example, more LWP would rather ignore the situation if they are verbally attacked by a parishioner in a meeting. Staff, changes in worship style and finances are top conflict sources among lead pastors.¹¹

Other traits that are valued by both male and female lead pastors are strong spiritual grounding, excellence in preaching (hours spent in preparation) and strong financial leadership. More than 60% of LWP reported that their confidence level with financial management has improved and their skills of managing finance have changed since becoming a LWP. More LWP use indirect communication, through other leaders in the congregation, about stewardship. More LMP feel more comfortable talking about money directly. More LWP (49%) reported that they feel confident in fundraising then LMP (34%). However, only 33% of LWP reported that they feel confident in church finances compared to 58% of LMP.

In the Blackboard discussions, chats and interviews, the lead women pastors noted that sexism is alive and well in the church. The women noted that there is an “undercurrent” in the church that a male is needed to “handle” a large church. Here are some of the things the LWP said:

- “Women are very much still on trial in the large church. Authority is not automatically given to a woman because she is in the role of lead pastor.”
- “Women have to walk a tightrope about how they dress, speak and show emotion.”
- “I was told my voice in preaching is not low enough.”
- “My male associate pastor is often assumed by new people to be the senior pastor.”

- “I was asked by an SPRC member if the church could have a formal arrangement with a nearby church with a male senior pastor, so that when men wanted to talk to a pastor and did not want to talk to a woman, they would have someone to go to.”
- “As a part of a clergy couple, I am often introduced as the preacher’s wife.”
- “When men fail, they say that it was a bad fit. If a woman fails, she is more likely to feel responsible or to be blamed.”
- “I find that male clergy are more likely to ask for an appointment to a large church—are more likely to voice their needs to a Cabinet.”
- “Women tend to say ‘send me where I’m needed.’ Women are conditioned to wait to be asked (for a date, asked to dance, etc.) We need to up our confidence level about self identifying to serve the large church.”

Despite these challenges, these lead women pastors overwhelmingly believe that serving a large church is their distinctive call, and they are gracefully and uniquely fulfilling that call and continuing to transform the church. Bishop Jane Allen Middleton of the Central Pennsylvania Conference said in an interview, “We are not just men in skirts. We have our own styles and we have another way of looking at the world and we have changed the church.”¹²

The results of the survey and qualitative data were reported at the second retreat. The LWPP attracted national media attention with an Associated Press article appearing in dozens of newspapers including USA Today and another in the *Christian Century*, interviews on *You Tube*, and many other online and print publications. The experiences of these lead women pastors will serve as a resource for the formation of future generations of women’s leadership. The third goal of the LWPP was to develop a coaching program among LWP and those who have potential to

serve a large church setting. 77% of LWP developed their leadership style by having role models, a fact that provided validity for developing a coaching program for future lead women pastors. Bishops nominated 25 women who have been identified as potentially serving a large church for a coaching program in spring 2009. Each woman was paired with a coach among the current lead women pastors and they have covenanted to communicate monthly to work together to understand the issues and challenges of leading a large church and to nurture needed skills for a large-membership church. After a concluding conference of the Lead Women Pastors Project in April, 2011 the lead women pastors came up with six recommendations to the bishops, cabinets, and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry:

- Requiring that the annual new district superintendent/directors of connectional ministry training include a component to facilitate pastoral appointment transitions involving clergywomen and racial ethnic clergy. That should include intervention for sexism and racism.
- That the district superintendent offer congregations and the Pastor Parish Relations Committee an orientation prior to a clergywoman being appointed to that church for the first time.
- An annual pulpit exchange for all UMC congregations. The exchange would be with a clergyperson of different gender or ethnicity, beginning in 2012.
- Exploration of the possibility of group coaching for clergywomen in general and women pastors of large churches in particular.
- Hold a gathering every other year of lead women pastors and potential lead women pastors.

- Ask GBHEM to produce a resource for the development of clergywomen's leadership for the large membership churches by 2013.

In conclusion, we learned that lead women pastors still serve large churches as pioneers. 90% of women said that they were the first women pastor serving as a lead pastor in their current appointment. 75% of lead women pastors believe that serving a large church is a special call. Their understanding that they've been called by God to serve this particular setting sustains their strength and integrity. Their leadership styles appear generally more collaborative, relational, equipping, diplomatic, discrete, equipping, directive, prophetic, delegatory, confident, decisive, creative, adaptive, compassionate and less confrontational in conflict than lead men pastors in this study. Even though there is still evidence of a glass ceiling (only one ethnic LWP, only one woman serving the top 100 of the largest United Methodist Churches), some cracks have definitely been made! The experiences of these lead women pastors will serve as a resource for the formation of younger generations of women leadership for not only the UMC but also in our society.

Endnotes

¹ The 2006 Consultation was sponsored by the Office of Continuing Formation for Ministry of The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM). The 1956 General Conference passed legislation approving the ordination of women. The United Brethren Church had ordained women since the 1880s but their merger with the Evangelical Church complicated matters, however, some women continued to be ordained in the Evangelical United Brethren church which merged with the Methodist Church in 1968. See Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women:*

Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 23.

² A lead pastor of a large membership church was defined by the General Board of Finance and Administration as clergy who are serving churches with 1,000 or more members within the UMC. As of December 31, 2004, there were 34,659 UM churches in the U.S. Of those, 1,154 had a membership of 1,000 or greater and 64 of those churches had a woman as lead pastor. In October 2008, the Office of Continuing Formation for Ministry identified 94 lead women pastors of large churches. Note the increase in lead women pastors since 2004.

³ Barbara Kellerman and Deborah L. Rhode, eds. *Women and Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 1, 6.

⁴ Ibid., 16. Two examples of said research are Catalyst, *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity* (New York: Catalyst, 2004) and “The Special Report: Women in Business,” *Economist*, (July 23, 2005), 64.

⁵ Figure provided by the General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church, 2008.

⁶ The survey was prepared by the LWPP leadership team and statistical analysis was provided by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary. Leadership style was defined as “relatively consistent patterns of interaction that typify leaders as individuals.” Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders* (Center for Public Leadership) (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 133.

A full report on the survey can be found on the GBHEM website,

http://www.gbhem.org/atf/cf/%7B0BCEF929-BDBA-4AA0-968F-D1986A8EEF80%7D/CW_LWPP2009.pdf.

⁷ *The United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study* (Anna Howard Shaw Center: Boston University School of Theology, 2000), <http://www.bu.edu/sth/shaw/retention/chapter-two.html> (accessed September, 2009).

⁸ Zikmund, Barbara Brown, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia M.Y. Chang. *Clergywomen: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 23, 189.

⁹ Based on 2007 report larges churches have three levels in The UMC: the small size (1,000-1,272 members), the medium size (1,272-1,809 members), and the large size (1,810 or more members). Among the small size churches women and men serve make comparable salaries: women are paid about two percent more. Among the medium size large churches men are paid about four percent more. Among the large size large churches men receive twenty-seven percent more than women. Lovett H. Weems, Jr., Ann A. Michel, Joseph E. Arnold, and Tana Brown, *Report on Lead Pastor Survey Conducted by The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Fall 2008.*, 2.

¹⁰ 32% of LWP have four weekly services compared to 16% of LMP.

¹¹ 23% of LWP reported that there have been major conflicts over the past two years compared to 37% of LMP. 2% of LWP experienced conflicts related to sexual misconduct over the past two years compared to 8% of LMP.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-ci63EYAzc>. (accessed March, 2009).