

UMC District Superintendents I: Intro and Gender  
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Although the bishop of each annual conference (AC) oversees the work of those undertaking ordained ministry within it, the most direct supervision and guidance of pastors comes from the AC's district superintendents (DS). This important leadership position must be held by an elder, or an individual who has been ordained in Word, Sacrament, and Order, and rather than being elected into their positions, district superintendents are appointed by the Annual Conference's bishop. Given their responsibilities, district superintendents hold significant power within our church: not only do they take part in the bishop's cabinet, helping to guide decisions that impact the annual conference, but they also more directly supervise the ministry of the church within a given geographic area, their district. That role can shape the life of both clergy and laity within their district, as it includes their responsibility – with their bishop – for appointing clergy to churches and other ministries. To undertake this task, district superintendents must know the clergy and churches of their area intimately, enabling them to thoughtfully and prayerfully use their experience to match individuals with appointments.

So ensuring that many viewpoints and experiences are present among district superintendents is doubly important, given the range of their influence on the life of their annual conference and, particularly, the depth of their impact within their district on the lives of clergy and the churches and ministries they serve. As district superintendents determine who will best fulfill a given ministerial role, what life experiences and perspectives do they draw upon? To what extent are they able to relate to the various clergy and church members within their district?

What's more, the DS role can function as a stepping-stone towards the role of bishop, as the individual clergy member and church alike discern leadership potential. If serving as a DS can supplement a clergy member's qualifications for the role of bishop, it becomes all the more important to ensure that certain categories of individuals are not excluded from the DS ranks. This is particularly true if we hope that our leadership demonstrates how, as a church, we value and represent the breadth of human experience found in our congregations. And it's also important if we hope to embrace the notion that God's plan for our church does not include gender or race-based discrimination in our view of who is suited for leadership.

With all of these factors in mind, this and the next three posts will explore how well women and various race/ethnicity categories are represented among those serving our church as district superintendents.

When we look at gender, we find that across all annual conferences, women represent roughly one-third of all district superintendents. While certainly illustrating the important progress our church has made since the ordination of women, this figure nonetheless represents a narrowing of opportunities for those female clergy well suited for leadership and administrative

roles in each annual conference. Ultimately, there are twice as many male clergy fulfilling the responsibilities of this role and gaining the experience of church leadership.

Turning to the gender breakdown within each jurisdiction, we find two primary takeaways. First, there are always more male district superintendents than female, regardless of geographic region. But the second takeaway nuances the first: when seeking gender parity, the region of the country does matter. For example, both the Southeastern and South Central jurisdictions lag behind the overall gender statistics, with only 27% and 28% female district superintendents, respectively. On the other hand, the Western region significantly outperforms both the U.S. Methodist church and each of its jurisdictions in the presence of women district superintendents. Fully 47% of district superintendents in ACs found in the Western jurisdiction are women, a figure approaching gender parity (or sameness), even if it remains lower than the percentage of women in the church at large (58% of UMC members are female). Finally, the North Central and Northeastern jurisdictions improve upon the average for the U.S., either by 5% (North Central) or 6% (Northeastern).

All told, it seems that something about each region impacts their AC's likelihood of having female district superintendents. Without more information, we cannot do more than speculate as to what that might be. Are there more women serving as elders in the Western jurisdiction? And even if a given region has fewer female elders, should that necessarily have an impact on the proportion of women among district superintendents? It may be that society and beliefs shape these percentages rather than the presence or absence of female elders. Do particular stereotypes and cultural norms about women in leadership prevail in other regions of the country? Or does the individual bishop responsible for appointing district superintendents matter most, their choices for DS shaped in part by their own beliefs and experiences? What impact might their surroundings have on such decisions?