



## WOMEN BY THE NUMBERS

# U.S. women, racial-ethnic clergy increase; still in smaller pulpits, more likely to leave pastoral ministry

By Felicia Howell LaBoy

The good news is that the number of women and racial-ethnic clergy in the U.S. United Methodist church nearly doubled between 1997 and 2008.

The challenge: Women are far less likely to lead churches in the U.S. Southeastern Jurisdiction than in the Western and Northeastern Jurisdictions. Meanwhile, racial-ethnic clergy—women and men—are more likely to spend their careers in small congregations or multi-congregation charges.

These were among the findings in **The State of Female and Racial Ethnic United Methodist Clergy in the U.S.**, a research project developed by the denomination's General Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the General Commission on Religion and Race. The study draws on statistical data collected between 1997 and 2008 and tracks the career trajectories of clergy of color in the U.S. church.

During this period, the number of women pastors increased by 45% and racial-ethnic pastors rose 22% between 1997 and 2008.

This commentary will look at the most revealing trends with regard to female and racial-ethnic clergy, separately, then offer some insights and tools to move forward that are relevant and complementary to the mission of the church.

## Jurisdictional and Large-Church Leadership

Even when one takes into account years of service and seniority, female and racial-ethnic pastors still remain less likely than white men to lead the largest congregations in our denomination in the U.S.. In addition, the appointment of women pastors varies greatly by region and by call. The Southeastern Jurisdiction, percentage wise, has far fewer female pastors than any other U.S. jurisdiction. (Women comprise 20% of female pastors in the Southeastern Jurisdiction, compared with 36% in the Western and 35% in the Northeastern jurisdictions).

In fact, according to the study's findings, women comprise only 16% of senior-pastor positions in the Southeastern Jurisdiction, and "a female is approximately 45% less likely to be a congregation's pastor in the Southeastern jurisdiction than in the Western jurisdiction."

When we factor in race and gender, the study finds that overall only 40% of racial-ethnic congregations are led

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by females. Asian, Hispanic/Latino and racial-ethnic female clergy are between 60 and 70% less likely than White females to be appointed pastor in our denomination.

Although the average age of females entering ministry is slightly higher than males (47 years old versus 45 years old), women are more likely than men to seek ordination as deacons (5.5 to 1, female to male) or licensing as part-time local pastors.

A higher percentage of women than men serve as associate pastors. This disparity is also reflected among the laity in local congregations, especially in racial-ethnic congregations. Although women comprised between 55 and 70% of lay leadership roles in racial-ethnic churches, they were underrepresented on congregational governing bodies such as administrative councils, trustees, finance or staff-parish relations and overrepresented in serving in small group leadership and Christian education roles.

Furthermore, the number of women entering the ministry between 2005 and 2008 is not much greater than women entering the ministry 10 years earlier. The study also reports that after eight years in ministry, women and racial-ethnic clergy are more likely to be appointed to congregations smaller than their first appointments and more likely to move out of pastoral ministry either to extension ministry appointments or to go on leave.

### Racial-ethnic Clergy

The study found that even though racial-ethnic pastors are more likely to be elders rather than local pastors or deacons, they are more likely to be assigned to small congregations or multi-congregation charges

Second, while the numbers of African-American United Methodist pastors within the denomination has stayed relatively consistent, the number of Asian and Hispanic/Latino pastors increased between 1997 and 2008. Racial-ethnic pastors are most often concentrated in just a few annual conferences, most of which have large urban centers.

Cross-racial appointments are still relatively rare in the denomination, with fewer than 10% of racial-ethnic clergy serving white congregations (the U.S. church membership is about 92% white). According to the research, a larger percentage of racial-ethnic clergy (40%) than white clergy currently serve cross-cultural appointments.

### Toward leadership excellence in our future

Women enter the ministry later and are more likely than men to leave pastoral ministry, leaving the denomination with a smaller pool of women with the training and experience the denomination expects of lead pastors in large-membership congregations and its churchwide decision-makers and connectional leaders.

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This also leaves fewer female clergy mentors and role models for younger women in local congregations. If this continues, it may be harder to help young women envision and respond to the Spirit's leading to pastoral and academic leadership within our church. And, while many choose to pursue local-pastor licensing, the denomination should dig deeper to determine if women seek this status because ordination as elder is not as open to them. For example, do women have equal access to financial support for seminary education? Do women exploring ministry have supportive pastoral role models and mentors available to them? Do annual conferences "encourage" women away from the elder track?

Racial-ethnic pastors are less likely to serve larger congregations, in part because they are more likely to serve churches within their own cultural groups, and the denomination has fewer large-membership churches among those groups. What has impeded the denomination from investing in, planting and nurturing large racial-ethnic and multicultural churches? Are racial-ethnic pastors trained, encouraged, resourced and given the opportunity to grow large-membership congregations?

Also, given that most cross-racial appointments occur one way (racial-ethnic pastors to white congregations), denominationally, we must ask how do such appointment enhance growth, expansion, evangelism, outreach and nurture of congregations—and the professional growth of clergy especially in an era of increasing diversity and multiculturalism?

Finally, the findings raise the question: Why do women and people of color end up in small-membership congregations and/or multi-church charges? White men are more likely as a group to start out in small churches but to move "up" into larger congregations. Church size is a marker of career trajectory—larger congregations equal larger salaries, greater responsibility, and increased visibility and prestige.

The United Methodist Church must examine why and how white male clergy are able to move to the leadership of larger congregations, so that these processes may be replicated for the full inclusion of female and racial-ethnic clergy. Also, given that many of our larger congregations have been grown by male clergy leadership, we need to develop processes that help identify gifts and graces in female and racial ethnic clergy and devise creative leadership models (i.e., co-pastorates) that allow for them to be mentored in these environments.

If our denomination is going to appeal to a variety of persons, then we will have to address seriously and quickly the issues this study raises. We cannot simply have a "colorblind" and "gender-blind" approach to clergy and lay leadership in our denomination. We will have to be bold in naming issues of discrimination and rectifying them – publicly. Also, we have to work hard to help our congregations do the same.

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