

2012 Book of Resolutions # 3442.

Every Barrier Down: Toward Full Embrace of All Women in Church and Society

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:27-28 NRSV).

As the Church of Jesus Christ enters its third millennium, women continue to heed the call to transform the Church and the world in the name of the One who names us and claims us all for witness, mission and earth-shaking transformation.

As much as he was a product of his era—one admittedly marked by gender, class, religious, and community exclusion—Jesus Christ brought to us a ministry of transformational invitation. The Living Christ invited—and still invites—to a common table of grace, justice, and power, people who had never before been invited to the religious power tables, including women, cultural and religious minorities, social outcasts, and disreputable community sinners.¹ And women, in claiming their voice in the new faith movement ignited by the Messiah, became leaders in expanding that movement and in pushing further for inclusion of Gentiles in what was then viewed as Jesus' renewal of Judaism.

Women, in fact, advocated for and sought to protect the inclusive equality of discipleship called forth by Jesus. In this way, they challenged the Jesus movement to remain true to the new vision of human relationship that Jesus initiated by extending its table fellowship, sharing the message of the coming Reign of God and inviting Gentiles (non-Jews) to share in that Reign.¹ Jesus treated women with dignity and respect, challenged the conventional sexism of his day, and forever redefined the role of women in the church and society.

As with many expressions of the Christian faith, it took The United Methodist Church and its forebears a while to capture Christ's vision. In 1770, the first Methodist woman was appointed a class leader in the United States; in 1817, women were allowed to hold prayer meetings but denied a license to preach; in 1884 Anna Howard Shaw's ordination by the Methodist Protestant Church was ruled out of order; and full voting rights for women in the Methodist tradition were not universally recognized until 1956.

Since that time, however, God's call to women as preachers, teachers, administrators, mission workers, treasurers, lay leaders, trustees, peace-with-justice advocates, voting rights' workers, Christian educators, and evangelists has blown a fresh breath across the globe and throughout the Church on the wings of the Holy Spirit, despite the rise and fall of our denominational enthusiasm for addressing

¹ *An End to This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African American Church* by Demetrius K. Williams, Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004.

sexism, gender bias, prejudice, and bad theology. God has done great things with us and, sometimes, in spite of us. Among the victories celebrated throughout our denomination's history:

- one in four United Methodist pastors in local churches today are women, compared with less than one in 100 in 1972;
- of the 63 active United Methodist bishops around the world, 16 are women; in 2004 an unprecedented six women were elected in the same week as United Methodist episcopal leaders. The first woman bishop (the late Marjorie Swank Matthews) was elected in 1980;
- The United Methodist Church gave to the world the first African American (Leontine T.C. Kelly, 1984) and first Latina (Minerva Carcano, 2004) bishops in mainline Christendom;
- women comprise half of all students enrolled in United Methodist seminaries and seeking ordination;
- the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries is the largest and most prolific mission working entity on behalf of women, children, and youth in our denomination, with ministries of education, discipleship, economic and social development, health care, advocacy, and empowerment in over 120 nations around the world.

In many ways The United Methodist Church has been a standard-bearer among Judeo-Christian faith communions in terms of full inclusion of women in the life, ministry, and witness of the institutional church and its regional and local expressions. However, if we ask, "Is The United Methodist Church a credible and reliable witness to Christ's exemplary embrace of all women as valued, respected partners in the total institutional life and global witness and impact of the Church"—the honest answer is not yet. We still fall short when it comes to living out the challenge of Galatians 3:27-28, which declares men and women are truly one in Christ. There are still areas of leadership, of professional ministry, of decision-making, and of areas of discipleship for which the Church will not trust, value, revere, or allot resources to women to the same degree as their brothers in the faith. Some recent examples include:

- a number of United Methodist congregations in 2007 still flatly refuse to accept a woman as senior pastor and are especially opposed to receiving a woman in a cross-racial clergy appointment. In 2006, a racial-ethnic clergywoman assigned to an Anglo church was allegedly menaced by members to dissuade her acceptance of the appointment. In another instance, laity threatened to leave the congregation unless the woman pastor wore a dress instead of slacks to prove she was "a real lady";
- in a 2007 survey of local United Methodist congregations, 18 percent said they do not have women serving as ushers (an increase over 2004), and local church chairpersons of the Church Council, Finance, and Trustees are still overwhelmingly men and not women;
- United Methodist membership in the US is declining among young women (and men) and people of color, particularly among those in low-income communities. According to a Wesley Theological Seminary survey, women under 35 comprise less than 2 percent of elders in our denomination;
- a number of lay and clergy respondents to a survey on sexual harassment in the church mandated by the 2004 General Conference dismissed any ministries related to empowering women and addressing sexism as "political crap," which "has nothing to do with spreading the good news of Jesus Christ";

- a woman district superintendent reportedly was called a “bitch” when she disagreed with a male colleague during a meeting of the conference cabinet;
- several prominent Church leaders—including bishops—have joined with secular society in decrying “the tyranny of diversity” and retreating from the work of undoing racism and sexism. such things as: “We need to stop worrying about politics and focus on the gospel . . .” (that is, as long as the gospel is interpreted in a way that continues to privilege North Americans, white people, and males); and “We’ll accept a woman or person of color as long as she’s qualified” (Could this infer that white men are automatically assumed to be qualified and that women and people of color get their jobs because of some other criteria, not because of their gifts and talents);
- the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries is under attack for having too much money and too much power in the hands of a women-controlled board of directors. Proposals by opponents include reducing the number of Women’s Division directors who can also serve on the General Board of Global Ministries in the interest of “gender balance”;
- complaints of alleged sexual abuse of women by lay and clergy leaders in church settings are on the rise, according to the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women;
- women comprise 57 percent of total members of our denomination, yet account for less than 20 percent of ordained ministers, and only 22 percent of the top-paying offices in US annual conferences (treasurers, chancellors, and directors of connectional ministry);
- of 30 active bishops who oversee the work of the church in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines, only one is a woman.

According to United Methodist theologian and ethicist Rosetta Ross, the defining characteristic of an authentic Christian community is that we love one another as God loves us. Such love is not a passive, merely personal emotion, but requires that we constantly strive to be in right relationship with one another, that we pursue justice and well-being for all, and that we be courageous in undoing that in the community that stymies the building of God’s beloved—and loving community.²

In fact, Dr. Ross asserts that agapé love in the Christian understanding is love that “affirms the dignity and value of life,” and depends on the “interrelatedness of all relationships—intimate or corporate, public or private,” as expressed through the actions, practices, and behaviors of individuals and the corporate Christian community.

“Whatever we love with the social love of agapé—our understanding of a particular movement; persons living in war zones or without clean drinking water; communities of which we are a part; the cause of justice; or the natural beauty of creation—is evident in our expressions of faithful attentiveness to it,” concludes Dr. Ross, who is also a South Carolina United Methodist clergywomen.

The United Methodist Church, as a community conceived as a corporate expression of Christ’s love for us all, has declared its belief in the full equality of women and its desire to embrace women, and has historically decried institutional sexism in all forms in every corner of the world. Yet, we are still on the

² “*Blazing Trails and Transcending Boundaries Through Love: Women of Color and ‘Religious Work’*” by Rosetta E. Ross, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Spelman College, Atlanta Georgia, 2006.

journey to faithful living; to “walking our talk”; to emulating Jesus’ model of turning convention on its ear in favor of doing God’s new thing when it comes to engaging women as universally respected, full participants in every aspect of our corporate and congregational lives. We are still living into what it means to extend agape love to all the daughters and sons of God, beyond the historic patriarchy and misogyny that has marred full participation of women in church and society.

Our reliability as an agency of God’s love assumes that we are paying attention to one another and we are seeking to empower, to unshackle, to raise up those who are still oppressed, repressed, derided, treated as “less than.” This agape love seeks to make the world better through persistently affirming all life, and we are willing to call all people and systems—including our own denomination—to account for how we either empower or repress the children of God. Agapé love fears no risk of ridicule or of interrupting business as usual. In fact, God’s love requires that we act, even if it means taking positions that are uncomfortable, unpopular, inconvenient, or even frightening. Further, it requires courage. To quote Dr. Ross, “We are behaving courageously when we have the resolve to take the actions and create the context needed for overcoming challenges we face in seeking to be faithful to what we love and are committed to.”

Until we fully affirm the dignity and value, the contributions, the theological perspectives, the concerns, the hopes, the recommendations, and even the discourse of and among women, The United Methodist Church will not be adequately equipped to make of all disciples, to carry a word of hope and peace and love to a broken world, and to demonstrate our authenticity as the incarnation of the life-transforming and barrier-breaking body of Christ.

We therefore ask the General Conference to recommit The United Methodist Church to fulfilling the following recommendation as we continue our journey toward dismantling sexism in the church and inviting all women from every station to share in God’s welcome table, by challenging the denomination to:

1. Listen anew to women, with new emphasis on women of color. The experiences of racial-ethnic women in the United States and women from The United Methodist Church in Africa and the Philippines mirror the parables and other Gospel stories of triumph over obstacles, being strangers in a strange land, reinterpreting familiar stories for new disciples, and bringing our talk about love and justice in line with our walk, especially as the Church also exists in a society that is still racist and sexist. We ask the general agencies to create evangelistic tools, programs, educational materials, networks, and opportunities to empower women in the church and society, including specific resources for and leadership opportunities offered to women under 35, racial-ethnic women in the United States, women from nations beyond the United States, women in recovery from addiction, divorced women, professional women, farm women, and skeptical-about-the-church women. We further urge church growth teams to include women from these groups in order to help the Church focus more on being a vibrant movement in people’s lives instead of just a religious institution. In our leadership development at all levels, the Church must put energy, resources, skill and prayerful action into engaging new women in lay and clergy leadership.

2. Champion economic parity and justice, beginning in our own communities. Our largely Western-focused denomination must witness in our giving and our living to the power of agape by working actively for the well-being of all people. This is particularly critical in our work with women around the world who, with their children, are more likely than any other demographic group to live in poverty; to lack access to adequate health care, housing, and education; and to lack political power sufficient to transform systems. The United Methodist Church must lead the way by valuing the comparable work and worth of women in our churches, agencies, and related entities, and by championing such things as affordable child care and health care, pay equity, financial aid, and educational support for single women in Africa and the Philippines. Each agency and annual conference should report to the 2012 General Conference on how they have engaged women, including women of color, women from Africa and the Philippines, and women under 35.

3. Evangelize and identify, recruit and develop leaders among women. In recent years, some church pundits have claimed that Christian churches have become “too feminized,” and therefore irrelevant and unappealing to men. However, these same observers fail to consider that even with decades of male-only leadership among churches, and even in the face of narrow and misogynist misreading of the Bible to exclude and blame them for human sin, many women have continued to stay actively and joyfully involved in the life of the institutional Church. We challenge general agencies and annual conferences to include in church growth and new discipleship strategies efforts to reach women of color, young women, poor women, career women, teen girls, older women, immigrant women, women survivors of violence, women in prison, women leaving prison, women seeking, women rearing children on limited incomes, etc.

4. Adopt a posture of “no tolerance” to sexual violence, harassment, and abuse in church and society. According to some estimates by denominational advocates and legal experts, The United Methodist Church has paid more than \$50 million from 2000 to 2004 in legal fees, counseling, mediation, and reparations related to sexual misconduct and abuse in church settings committed by lay and clergy. While sexual misconduct can impact anyone and be perpetrated by anyone, most cases involve men as offenders and women and children as victims. If women cannot trust the Church to believe them, protect them from abuse, and offer them clear justice when abuse happens, it again calls into question the authenticity of the Church’s witness. It could suggest to them that the Church—and, by extension, God—does not care about, want, or value the participation of women. We call on the Council of Bishops to collaborate with the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women to continue to develop and enforce effective policies, laws, and practices and consistent application of those policies and practices to reduce risk of misconduct and offer swift and just recompense and remediation for victims when abuse happens.

5. Engage women in theological exploration and shaping and teaching church doctrine. There is no one women’s perspective or women’s theology or women’s view of Christianity. What is common among many women in The United Methodist Church, however, is that their participation in theological discourse is typically treated as “in addition to” the “classical” biblical and theological teachings. Feminist/womanist/mujerista perspectives are often considered subversive and treated as suspect.

Discussions of gender-inclusive language, reading the Hebrew and Greek text through women's eyes, and liberation theology—especially as discussed by women—are regarded by many as a threat to the Christian faith, instead of new and perhaps even more authentic perspectives on it. Further, laywomen and clergywomen in local parishes often do not see themselves as theologians, with as much right to explore Scripture, to embrace the gospel anew, and to offer their learnings to the wider Church. We urge the denomination to affirm the importance of women's perspectives in theological discussions in the denomination, and we applaud the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry for its Women of Color Scholarship Program that empowers and engages women of color in theological education and discourse. Further, we ask that the board monitor United Methodist seminaries for inclusion of women's theological perspectives as expressed in the number of tenured faculty, etc. Also, we invite the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women to create curricula for local churches with teaching tools on inclusive language, sexism, creating a girl-friendly church, and myths about women and church leadership. And we ask active members of the Council of Bishops to study with pastors and lay leaders in their respective annual conferences on the history of women as preachers and teachers in the church, using "Women Called to Ministry," a six-part curriculum developed by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, and available at www.gcsrw.org.

6. Create a "report card" on overcoming sexism for each agency and annual conference. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women shall create sufficient monitoring tools, focus-group interviews, desk audits and surveys, along with baseline standards in order to evaluate the progress of each annual conference and each general agency in terms of full participation of women, dismantling institutional sexism, and addressing sexual misconduct. The Commission will report its findings to the 2012 General Conference, along with recommendations for further improvements.

Recommended resources: www.gcsrw.org, www.umsexualethics.org; *The Journey Is Our Home: A History of the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women*, by Carolyn Henninger Oehler, 2005; 2008 Resolutions #2044, "Sexual Misconduct Within Ministerial Relationships," and #2045, "Eradication of Sexual Harassment in Church and Society."

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resolution #3443, 2008 Book of Resolutions

resolution #190, 2004 Book of Resolutions

resolution #180, 2000 Book of Resolutions

See Social Principles #163.