



Diversity in the Pulpit

By Mariellen Yoshino



Recently, a male seminary student told me, “I finally see the itineracy as a system of justice because I realize, now, that if congregations were to call only pastors who they thought they would like and feel comfortable with, then many pastors who are women and who are people of color might never be given a chance to be pastors in appointments that realize their

gifts and graces. And congregations would miss out on a lot of good ministry.”

This seminarian’s insightful comment about the itineracy being a “change agent” is compelling when it is remembered that just twenty-five years ago, “Women Clergy: Breaking through Gender Barriers” (Transaction, 1985) was published. This sociological study by Edward C. Lehman, Jr., examined the attitudes of 2,863 lay and

clergy concerning women in ministry, and “found that both groups [lay and clergy] strongly preferred a male as head of a church staff.”¹

While the Lehman study was with a Presbyterian constituency, this same attitude might well have been present with many of our United Methodist churches twenty-five years ago.

In fact, almost twenty years ago, I was

invited to be the preacher for a seemingly far away district's spring pastors' retreat. I was invited to preach on the theme, "Should Women Be Preachers?" I don't remember the sermons preached nor do I remember the workshops facilitated. But, I do remember how serious everyone was about this issue. And, I remember how few women pastors attended the retreat. And, I remember the very few pastors of color.

Twenty years later, I am the District Superintendent of that same seemingly far away district. Now, this district has thirty-four male pastors and twenty female pastors. Of those fifty-four pastors, twenty are pastors of color. There have been a number of reasons for the shifts in the gender and ethnic make-up of this district's pastors, but a primary "change agent" has been the system of itineracy.

Resistance despite Itineracy

Itineracy helps congregations expand their comfort zone, and some local churches welcome the challenge and newness of diversity. However, there is still resistance in many cases. Some churches do not want to accept a pastor because of gender or race; or do not support that pastor once he or she is serving in the appointment. The resistance also comes from decision-making bodies who will not risk appointing pastors who are women or who are men or women of color. As well, there is the resistance that happens when former pastors cannot accept the appointed pastor and then triangulate the congregation, making it even more difficult for the congregation to accept the leadership of the new pastor.

Women make up more than half of the denomination's membership, and half of the students in divinity school, but are quite underrepresented in local church pulpits. Instead, lay and clergy women make up a vast amount of the leaders in local, district, and conference ministries. A 2006 *New York Times* article quoted Rev. Dr. Catherine Stonehouse, dean of the School of Practical Theology at the Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., "It is often easier for women in the mainline churches...to get elected as bishops and as other leaders than to head large congregations."² In the same article, the President of the McCormick Theological Seminary (a Presbyterian

seminary in Chicago, IL), Rev. Cynthia M. Campbell, said, "It's still difficult for many in this culture to see women as figures of religious authority."

Rev. Nancy Gammill, now in her fourth year as Senior Pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Emporia, Kansas, might agree with these statements. Even though the church knew her to be a District Superintendent, some church members were skeptical when she was introduced as their new Senior Pastor. Similarly, Rev. Victoria Schlintz, from the California-Nevada Conference, remembers that when she was appointed to a church receiving a woman pastor for the first time, some members left the church. "They were gone about three weeks," she said. "Then, they returned and we talked about the biblical aspects of women in ministry. They stayed."

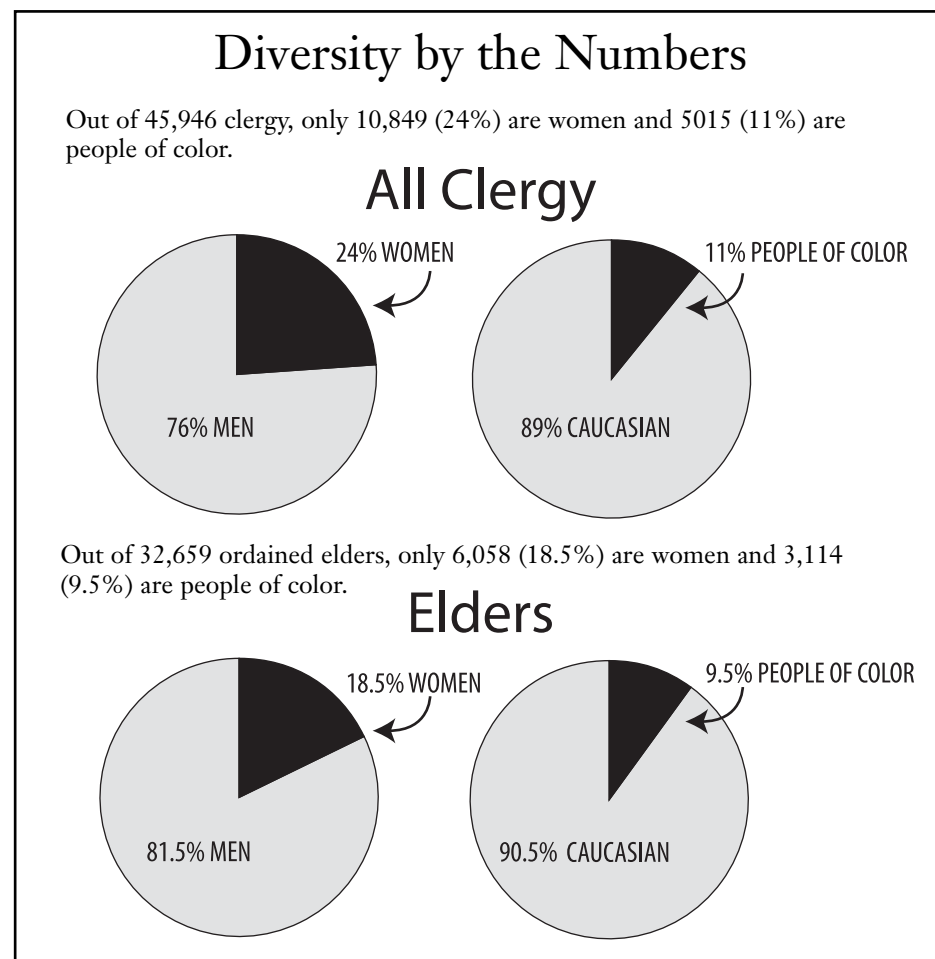
Other clergywomen have experienced disrespect and anger from congregation members. Rev. Lauren Chaffee, now completing Clinical Pastoral Education in Albuquerque, New Mexico, recalls that in more than one church where she was

appointed as pastor, members "who never even met me said that they would never step foot in the church while I was the pastor because I was a woman." She says, "At one church, members put on my car windshield Xeroxed articles explaining why being a female pastor was wrong."

This year, more than one Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) has said to me, "Send us a man minister." Upon further conversation, their earnest rationale included statements such as, "Men have more authority when they are in the pulpit," or "We need a man to lead us, no offense to you," or "It just seems right to have a man."

The problem is especially pronounced in large congregations—those with over one thousand members. Across all protestant denominations, women comprise only 3 percent of the pastors of large congregations.³ Out of the 1,134 "lead pastors" of large membership United Methodist churches, only 81 (7%) are female.⁴

"There are few large membership churches who are willing to risk a woman



senior leader,” says the Rev. Janet Forbes of St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. “The appointment takes much interpretation and support from the cabinet and the SPRC.” SPRCs of large churches often have “powerful, corporate styles,” says Forbes. “Large membership church leaders expect to work with the CEO of the conference [the bishop], because they know that they pay a significant percentage of the apportionment dollars.” In cases like these, the power of itineracy to encourage diversity is limited.

Embracing Diversity

Certainly the Church needs to include pastors who are women and pastors who are people of color. Now more than ever, the Church needs the gifts and graces of a diverse clergy group. Remarks like those I’ve heard from SPRC chairpersons overlook the long-fought-for right for a woman to be ordained and reflect a bias toward white males. These remarks evoke a barrier beyond the giftedness, educa-

tion, and experience that a woman or person of color might bring to the leadership of a church.

A census of the clergy of the United Methodist Church would find that it falls short in the diversity of pastors serving in local churches. (See “Diversity by the Numbers,” on p. 9.) However, all is not lost. The statistics are slowly improving and the acceptance of pastors who are women and people of color is also improving. The denomination is aware of its shortcomings, and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry has established an initiative to study and raise awareness of the realities of clergy diversity, and has launched a program to encourage and mentor women to be lead pastors in large membership churches.

Those who make decisions amidst itineracy need to help and encourage churches to embrace the gifts of diversity, the challenge of change and growth, and the blessing of justice it enables. Indeed, with all its shortcomings, the itineracy, as the seminarian noted, has been a system of

justice. It has been a change-agent in including and broadening pastors and local churches. But it can only be a tool of change when it is used well, by those with open minds and willing spirits. □



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- 1 Carlson, Carole. “Clergywomen and Senior Pastorates,” *The Christian Century*, January 6-8, 1988.
- 2 Banerjee, Neela. “Clergywomen Find Hard Path to Bigger Pulpit,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2006, A1.
- 3 Kellerman, Barbara and Deborah H. Rhodes, eds. “Women and Leadership,” San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 2.
- 4 General Council on Finance and Administration