Learning for a Lifetime: Developing Leaders

By Julia Tulloch*

Objective

To learn about the importance of United Methodist Women’s commitment to leadership development and the potential of their Call to Prayer and Self-Denial gifts in equipping women and girls for leadership in church and society.

Preparation

Read through the program prayerfully. Take time to reflect on your own experience and growth as a leader. Offer a prayer of gratitude for women leaders that have mentored or influenced you. Give thanks for those you know who are emerging as leaders.

Consider the members of your unit and what they need to know about women and leadership development, nationally and internationally and within the United Methodist Women organization. In advance of the Call to Prayer and Self-Denial service, invite members to think about the women leaders in their lives and the significance of their offerings.

The program may be expanded by:

- Devoting more time to the reflection questions
- Including communion
Sharing a fellowship meal and conversation. Additional reflection questions might include asking about significant mentors and attributes of respected leaders.

Materials
Gather the following items to use in the program:

- Baskets or other containers for the offering
- Bible (NRSV)
- Envelopes for offerings as desired
- Colorful cloth for the worship setting
- Other objects or images for the worship setting within the theme, for example, photos from response of women and girls in preparation for leadership or in leadership roles
- The United Methodist Hymnal

NOTE: Please note the use of “kin-dom” in place of the traditional “kingdom.” This term was first coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. It emphasizes relationality, community and equity as the basis of God’s reign.

Participants
Before the meeting, ask individual women to help with the following roles:

- Read the scripture.
- Lead the songs.
- Share the readings (three readers are needed).

Room Setup
Set up the room so that participants can see and hear each other by arranging the chairs in U-shaped rows or concentric circles. Allow space for movement and for any business-meeting needs.
Bible Study and Reflection

Pray
God of our hearts and minds, open us to hearing stories of women and girls seeking to learn and to lead. Empower us to imagine and create glimpses of your kin-dom in barrier-removing sacred places of hospitality, learning and transformed lives. Amen.

Read

Sing
“Seek Ye First,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 405

**Reader 1:** In the familiar mustard seed parable, Jesus presents the kingdom of God as the tiny seed that grows prolifically into a “tree” that houses bird nests. The image recognizes both the initial hiddenness of God’s kin-dom and the breadth of its presence. It is a faith perspective that first acknowledges the smallness and simplicity of Jesus’ ministry and then its consequent expansion across the Roman Empire through the witness of the disciples. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary movements are also likened to the sowing of the mustard seed and the resulting global growth of the church.

**Reader 2:** Our 150 years as women organized for mission, like the mustard seed, also had a small beginning: Eight women gathered in Boston in 1869 and saw the need for planting the seeds of God’s kin-dom in the lives of poor and disregarded women in India. Forming the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, they sent Isabella Thoburn and Dr. Clara Swain to work with women and girls in India, where they provided schooling, medical care and education. Along with founding the Clara Swain Hospital and a school that continues today as Isabella Thoburn College, a Bible Women program empowered Indian women to teach and work in their own communities among the poor and sick. Within 10 years, the Bible Women program grew to 200 local leaders in India, China, Japan, Italy, South America and Mexico, all working to create safe and sacred spaces for women to learn and grow.
**Reader 3**: Leadership development remains a key part of United Methodist Women’s vision today. “Equipping women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches” is one of the five commitments in our vision statement. Our foremothers developed and strengthened their own leadership capacities as they sent out missionaries and started homes, schools and community centers here and abroad. This was at a time when women were not encouraged to speak publicly, let alone be in positions to make significant financial and administrative decisions. As the early organizations grew, education for members and developing leaders became an integral part of the program. Mission education, reading programs and magazines, seminars on peace and international relations and leadership development were initiated decades ago and continue to this day.

**Reader 2**: United Methodist Women invests in growing leaders and learning for a lifetime. Today, more than 20,000 individuals receive mission education in annual Mission u’s; hundreds of elected and emerging United Methodist Women leaders attend Leadership Development Days each year; young people and seasoned United Methodist Women members regularly flock to the Seminar Program at the Church Center for the United Nations; Hispanic, Korean and women from other language groups participate in specialized educational events such as the annual Voices event; teen and college-aged women gather at events hospitable to their needs; and others are awakened to new perspectives and strengthened leadership capacity through National Seminars, Ubuntu Journeys and legislative events. United Methodist Women leaders serve in their congregations, workplaces, community boards and public offices, frequently citing United Methodist Women learning experiences as instrumental in their decisions and capability as leaders.

**Reflection**
Ask the group to share their responses to the following questions in pairs and triads for five to seven minutes:

- How are you serving in your church or community?
- When did you first realize that you had leadership potential or saw yourself as a leader?
Reader 1: Let’s look at another angle in the parable of the mustard seed. There are those that see the growth of the seed as unruly and the birds as pests that interfere with the farmer’s work. They want to remove the tree and the pests to control who can be a part of God’s kin-dom. Jesus’ image of the flourishing and hospitable sacred space of God’s kin-dom is challenged.

Reflection Questions
Share in pairs or triads as time permits:

- Who are the pests and the unruly ones that some may see as not worthy of God’s kin-dom?
- What powers are at work to exclude others?

Reader 2: The desire to “weed out” the kin-dom is evident in the barriers against and attempts to control women seeking their personhood in leadership. “Women are absent in corporate boardrooms, parliaments, peace negotiating tables and almost all major institutions around the world,” writes Claire Charamac, co-founder and executive director of Women LEAD. “The lack of female leaders,” Charamac writes, “is one of the most enduring forms of inequality in the 21st century.” She notes the disadvantage this places on women: “While women are shut out of decision-making institutions of power, they often face the brunt of poverty and violence.”

Reader 3: United Methodist Women Regional Missionaries Grace Musaka and Catherine Akale write:

Education, an enabling and transformative right, which can be practical or academic, is a typical example of the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights, and a key for redressing gender injustice in a wider society. The pervasive denial of this human right to access education experienced by young women across the globe, as shown by the fact that two-thirds of the world’s non-literate adults are women, is a striking example of a legacy of young women’s rights violation through exclusion in the educational cycle. Systemic barriers, beliefs, attitudes and practices, violence, HIV and AIDS, as well as the gendered impact of
school fees and other associated costs of schooling, combined with a preference for educating boys, impacts young women disproportionately. Even though several international treaties emphasize the right and importance of gender-equitable education unequivocally, the disconnect between international law and national law, and between law and practice, means that many young women have limited or no access at all to education, which is just the tip of the iceberg of the discrimination most young women face across the globe.³

**REFLECT AND ACT**

**Reader 2**: Systemic gender injustice in education and leadership opportunities impacts communities globally. UN Women reports that women in national parliamentary positions have doubled since 1995, but women still comprise only 22.8 percent of national parliaments. Nevertheless, research shows that women in local government leadership have impact. For example, the frequency of drinking water projects in India was 62 percent higher in areas with local councils led by women.⁴

**Reflection Questions**

- How have you seen gender injustice at work in your leadership journey?
- What risks have you been willing to take as a leader?

**Reader 3**: Grassroots workers, women and girls take daily risks to move forward in learning and leadership. The Kapatiran Kaunlaran Foundation, Inc. (KKFI) in Manila, Philippines, received a Call to Prayer and Self-Denial grant in 2014. KKFI is a long-time mission partner with United Methodist Women and is working to keep the branches of the mustard seed kingdom tree a hospitable and sacred place.

Child development and enrichment programs reach out to vulnerable children who live in a dumpsite near Manila. Poverty is the oppressor along with public policies that keep families in poverty. KKFI works on community development with these children and their families, teaching life skills through informal education programs that not only give new ways to live but also teach the children to dream for a better future.
Annie, a 12-year-old girl from the Pulilan dump community near Manila, shouted, “Wow! Someday I want to study here!” when she saw University of Santo Tomas in Manila for the first time. The university is a place of education that is close to her own community and at the same time quite far from the reality of her family’s poverty.

“‘Teach them to dream’ is my mantra as a community development worker,” says Christian Love Daroy-Gagno of KKFI. “I know I cannot free all children like Annie from poverty, but if I can put a dream in their hearts . . . and help keep the dream alive, there is a chance that something good will happen.”

**Leader:** In 2018, the offering from the Call to Prayer and Self-Denial observance will support national and international programs that develop leaders of all ages. These programs will offer educational opportunities to the underserved and marginalized. Projects will include (but are not limited to) child development and after-school programs, GED and ESL programs, job readiness, life skills and livelihood training, scholarships, workshops and seminars, informal and formal educational opportunities. One hundred percent of the offering will go to the projects receiving the grants.

**Reader 1:** Hearing these stories of our long-time work as United Methodist Women members to empower women and educate girls for leadership, and considering some of the barriers and outcomes facing women in leadership, what power do we have as women? How might we use it to effect change?

**Reflect and Act**

Let’s share together, pausing for a moment to reflect individually and then in pairs or as a group. What are some actions and commitments we can make to increase opportunities for women and girls’ leadership? *The group can generate a list as part of the discussion. The following ideas can be added to the list or shared as follow-up actions.*

- Mentor younger women in your group, congregation, workplace, community organizations or family.
- Sponsor younger women to participate in United Methodist Women education and leadership development opportunities as
they arise, such as Mission u, Assembly, the Seminar Program, Leadership Development Days or other special events at the national, conference or district level.

- Listen to the concerns of younger and other women whose experiences are different than your own.
- Reflect on your own leadership journey. What are your strengths? What are your biases? What might you need to “give up” to empower others for leadership? Pray and act upon how you might create space for another to serve.
- Actively monitor public policy and legislation applying a gender-justice lens. Challenge decision makers on policies that adversely affect women and girls.
- Commit to reading response and Reading Program books on leadership development and justice issues that affect women and children.
- Be faithful in meeting your United Methodist Women’s Mission Giving pledge.
- Prayerfully give to the Call to Prayer and Self-Denial offering.

**Leader:** *Summarize or highlight in the above list as needed.* There are challenges for all of us as women in leadership. As Harriett Jane Olson, United Methodist Women’s general secretary and CEO, remarked in November 2016:

As we have always done, United Methodist Women will... [continue to pay] attention to women’s gifts for leadership and to their needs, by responding to the needs of children and youth, and by standing up alongside the most vulnerable. Our history of courageous leadership is the backdrop for our work, rooting ourselves spiritually, learning in ways that challenge us, and building skills and plans for leadership to respond to the call of God.6

Let us begin by committing ourselves to cultivating the hospitality, creativity and sacred space of God’s kin-dom through the giving of our offering.
Sing

Sing as the offering is brought to the worship center.

“Sois la Semilla (You Are the Seed),” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 583

Pray (unison)

We give thanks for these gifts that will be used for the empowerment of women here and around the world. Put them to good use as we recommit to being a creative supportive community on behalf of women, children and youth. Nudge us to act in ways that nurture and support women in leadership. Strengthen us as leaders and to live out God’s kin-dom “where justice and truth always reign.”

Amen.

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1 See United Methodist Women’s vision statement, Living the Vision, online at www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/about.


The places in which we encounter God and neighbor are sacred. When we interact with God, we learn something about ourselves and we discover God’s purposes for our lives. So, too, our encounters with people become sacred when we consider that humans bear God’s image and are recipients of God’s love and grace.

The programs will explore sacred spaces where you can experience God and neighbor. As Christ’s disciples, we are entrusted with creating spaces of wholeness and abundance for all.

This Program Book brings new elements to each topic including Bible studies, times of reflection and experience, a call to action and ways to make the programs your own!