Civil Rights Champions Urge United Methodist Women to End Cradle to Prison Pipeline and Mass Incarceration

by YVETTE MOORE

Two champions of the movement to end U.S. mass incarceration and the cradle to prison pipeline caused by poverty addressed United Methodist Women members in a morning plenary with a racial justice theme at The Power of Bold Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, May 19.

Michelle Alexander, author of The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness, and Marian Wright Edelman, founder and chief executive of the Children’s Defense Fund, fielded questions from Emily Jones, United Methodist Women racial justice executive, while sharing insights from their work on these issues.

Both women said the U.S. phenomena of mass incarceration that disproportionately impacts people of color is a moral issue tied to the nation’s economic policies and unresolved history of racial injustice.

More than 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States with an addition 5 million on probation or parole and another 30-70 million branded felons, a label that subject them to legal discrimination and loss of the right to vote.

Alexander said the economy in many inner cities collapsed in the early 1980s as companies moved overseas seeking “new plantations” of cheap labor, and this fueled the rise of illicit drug abuse, its commerce and the war on drugs. The war on drugs also happened in the context of a massive backlash against the civil rights movement, she said.

Alexander realized the spiritual core of the problem of mass incarceration while speaking about her book at Iliff Theological School at the invitation of Vincent Harding, a racial justice advocate and speech writer for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

“I cited the data and statistics and how Supreme Court had closed doors, and I went on, and at the end of speech, he said, ‘Sister, I appreciate your work and your speech. But I think that the deeper message in what you’re saying is: What you do unto the least of these, you do unto me.’”

Alexander said that experience led her to reconnect with her spiritual foundation and view the facts of mass incarceration through that lens.

“If we could imagine looking at the brother in prison, the person at the border, even the kid who just shot another gang member, and seeing Jesus, that would reorder our justice system,” she said.

“If people of faith are not at the forefront of a movement to challenge a system based on the denial of people’s humanity, who will be?”

Alexander also said that ending mass incarceration is a women’s issue that’s hurting everyone.

“Women are expected to care for the people left behind,” she said. “One-in-four women have a loved one behind bars; one-in-two black women,” she said.

Edelman encouraged United Methodist Women members in the work for racial justice and
efforts to end child poverty and the cradle to prison pipeline. Edelman’s Children’s Defense Fund conducted the initial research documenting the cradle to prison pipeline that United Methodist Women is addressing in its school to prison pipeline work against mass incarceration.

“The cradle to prison pipeline is the resegregation of America, and we have to break this up now,” Edelman said. “Children are born at risk, born into the cradle to prison pipeline when they’re born without having had prenatal care. We can change that. God does not have two classes of people.”

Edelman pointed to successes of King’s campaign against poverty and other efforts to address poverty, including Medicaid, early childhood education programs and Children’s Help Insurance Program (CHIP).

“In an attempt to destroy the last century of progress, we were stuck trying to get CHIP renewed, and they’re trying to cut its funding again,” Edelman said. “It’s a disgrace that 13.2 million children are poor in the United States. We can change that. We can do it—if we stay together and don’t go away. Women are the key to transforming this country.”

Edelman urged United Methodist Women members to pray and act.

“I could not live without prayer,” she said. “This is not our work. It’s God’s work. So we have to say our prayers and move our feet to the polls. I don’t want my grandchild fighting these same battles.”

Edelman shared hope from her organization’s Freedom Schools program that aims to end children’s summer learning loss by keeping children reading during the summer and making it fun.

“I was raised Baptist, but I’m a United Methodist woman in my heart!” she said. “I love you, and I want you to be bolder and bolder!”

Yvette Moore directs communications strategies and marketing for United Methodist Women.
Katharine Hayhoe Talks Faith and Climate Justice

by PRAVEENA BALASUNDARAM

“Who we are, what God has created us to be, is the perfect person to care about a changing climate,” said Climate Scientist Katharine Hayhoe. Hayhoe is an atmospheric scientist who studies climate change, one of the most pressing issues facing humanity today. Director of Texas Tech’s Climate Science Center, Hayhoe may be best known because of how she’s bridging the gap between scientists and Christians—work she does in part because she’s a Christian herself.

Her journey to becoming a climate scientist did not follow a straight path.

“I was studying astrophysics as an undergraduate student, when I needed another course to finish my degree. I saw this course in climate science,” she said. “Growing up in Canada, I knew that the climate was changing and it was part of a whole host of environmental issues like deforestation and air pollution and biodiversity loss, and I thought, that’ll be an interesting course to take. And I took it!”

That was a life-changer for her, she said. And she’s never looked back.

“Because the more I learned about climate change, the more I realized that it was urgent and it profoundly affected real people today.”

Amplified change

For Hayhoe it is important to talk about climate change because it affects all the other things that we already care about.

“As far as we know, as long as there have been humans on this planet, we have faced droughts, floods, hurricanes and heat waves, floods and storms. That’s just a natural part of life on earth. But what climate change is taking those naturally occurring events and amplifying them—it’s putting them on steroids,” she said. Insurance policies are going up across the country because of fires and floods.

Internationally it is even worse.

“Billions of people don’t have insurance. They don’t have FEMA and they don’t have the National Guard. So when disaster strikes, it is orders of magnitude greater. This is why I care so passionately about this change in climate: it disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable who have the least access to resources to prepare and adapt and contributed the least the problem in the first place.”

Issue of faith

“In Genesis we were told that we were given dominion—or stewardship and responsibility—over this planet. Some people interpret dominion as ‘I can extract every resource from the earth and leave it a smoking ruin.’ But we understand that dominion means stewardship,” she said.

Hayhoe pointed out that throughout the Old Testament we read about God’s joy and pleasure in Creation. In the Gospels we learn how God cares about the smallest and most insignificant aspects of Creation. And in the New Testament we are taught to consider our attitudes and actions toward other people and to love others as Christ loves us. Revelation 11 even gives a warning that says God will destroy those who destroy the earth.

“The reason we as Christians care about a changing climate is because of who we are, because God has given us a new heart to love others as God has loved us. God has given us the incredible planet as a gift that sustains our physical life,” she said.

Despite her busy speaking schedule, she made it to Assembly to be with United Methodist Women.

“This is a group that I can speak from my heart to, I can share why I care so passionately and feel that people will understand.”

Praveena Balasundaram is United Methodist Women director of program resources.

Climate justice is a United Methodist Women priority issue. While climate change affects everyone, it does not affect everyone equally. The poorest people in industrialized and developing nations suffer the worst effects of the buildup of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere, and women and children comprise an estimated 70 percent of the world’s poor. The United Methodist Women initiative Be Just, Be Green is working to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainability. Learn how to become an advocate at unitedmethodistwomen.org/climate-justice.

Sustainability signs

Download the United Methodist Women 13 Steps to Sustainability signs at unitedmethodistwomen.org/climate-justice.

Above, Dawn Wiggins Hare, right, top staff executive of the United Methodist Commission on the Status and Role of Women, becomes emotional as she and Harriett Jane Olson, United Methodist Women chief executive officer, lament the failure of two amendments to the church’s constitution focused on equality in the church for women and girls during Assembly 2018.

Above, Staphenae Carey from Louisiana joins fellow United Methodist Women members as they learn about a living wage in Assembly 2018’s Experience Hall. Left, dancer Dolores Sanchez, left, poet Summer Dawn Reyes, center, and dancer Alexandria “Brinae Ali” Bradley enact the story of Elizabeth and Mary during Assembly 2018.
Mobilizing Young Women for Justice

by TARA BARNES

Civil rights activist Tamika Mallory and United Methodist pastor the Rev. Hannah Bonner addressed attendees Saturday May 19 at Assembly 2018 in Columbus, Ohio. In a panel moderated by Yvette Moore, United Methodist Women director of communications, Mallory and Bonner spoke about mobilizing young women for justice.

Explaining how she engages her peers to mobilize for justice, Bonner said her preferred avenue is the arts.

“As a white woman, I’m not usually on the receiving end of injustice. So my role is to amplify the voices of those who are the most impacted,” she said. “I do that through the arts using poetry, video and music in trying to help others’ voices be heard.”

Mallory noted social media as a major tool to reach many people of all ages.

“But I’m also a little old school,” she said. “I believe in door-to-door. I believe in phone calls. I believe in going to the churches, making sure there are flyers. If the pastor doesn’t know what’s happening in the community, the community is uninformed.”

On the topic of the role of faith in social justice, Bonner held up her United Methodist Women Limitless shirt and praised the young women seeking a spiritual foundation for justice and the mentors supporting them. For young people, she said, engagement in faith isn’t hierarchical.

“It’s a very egalitarian, spiritual, intersectional experience where we’re supporting one another and connecting with the spirit.”

Mallory grew up going to rallies—and also going to church. She called the church the centerpiece of the civil rights movement. She sees the church now moving away from being a support system for activists.

“Instead we see churches have become to the system than to the young people and the issues that matter.”

**Say her name**

Both women spoke about the mistreatment of black women by law enforcement and the country’s tendency to look the other way. Bonner held vigil at the Waller County Jail for months after Sandra Bland’s suspicious death at the facility in 2015.

Mallory traveled to Assembly from Alabama, where she had joined fellow activists in calling for justice for Chikesia Clemons, a 25-year-old black woman who was assaulted by police in a Saraland, Alabama, Waffle House restaurant after questioning an additional charge for plastic cutlery.

A black woman standing up for herself, Mallory said, is considered an immediate threat.

**Faith, hope and love in action**

Both women were optimistic for the future, even if the struggle for women’s full humanity is and will be long. They find hope in the women who came before them and the women who will come after.

“I am able to sit before you today because of United Methodist Women,” Bonner said. “I had United Methodist Women members in North Carolina who listened to me. And they didn’t just listen to me—they also let me lead. They figured out the resources to make that happen. They gave me the space the lead. They told me not that I was the future but that I could lead today.”

Tara Barnes is editor of **Response**, the magazine of United Methodist Women.

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**United Methodist Women Reading Program**

Continue your transformative education at home by taking part in the United Methodist Women Reading Program. The booklist includes books reviewed and approved by fellow United Methodist Women members and are organized into five categories: education for mission, leadership development, nurturing for community, social action and spiritual growth. Learn more at unitedmethodistwomen.org/reading program.
Members Tell Their Maternal and Child Health Stories

by PRAVEENA BALASUNDARAM

In the United States, more women die due to complications related to pregnancy or childbirth than in any other country in the developed world. Despite decades of decline and plateau in the 1980s and 1990s, rates have continued to climb, resulting in more deaths or debilitating outcomes for mothers and their families.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that maternal deaths in each state be investigated by a multidisciplinary, peer-review protected maternal mortality review committee. United Methodist Women is calling on members to advocate for these committees in each state, and in states where panels exist, to commit to assess the effectiveness of the panel by examining matters such as prenatal care, other health conditions at death, use of medication drug and alcohol abuse, violence and medical procedures performed. Standardized data makes it easier to analyze trends and recommend changes.

Assembly action station
Assembly 2018 features a maternal and child health action station. It includes a map to show where state maternal review panels exist, a contact list of maternal review panels, and contact information for state health departments.

Those visiting the station were also invited to record their own stories about maternal mortality and write prayers for mothers and children. Some of these were due to inadequate health care or inability to get health care.

One participant told of a friend's daughter who could not afford health care.

"Because she couldn't afford health care she did not seek any prenatal care. She went into preterm labor and had a five-week preemie and had preeclampsia. She almost died herself because she didn't have affordable care."

More than a few stories were about neglect of the hospital in offering care at the right time. One member described her seven-months pregnant niece whose appendix pain was ignored and who ended up going to the emergency room for an emergency cesarean and ruptured appendix.

"She ended up with septicemia and was in intensive care for five days and in kidney dialysis. The baby did not acquire an infection but was in neonatal care for two months. My niece survived, but just barely. It happens in our country too—not just in other parts of the world."

One member talked about her daughter becoming a doula because of her traumatic experiences with childbirth and saw how the system worked in the United States in the hospitals.

"Doctors are doing a lot of cesareans for convenience and not because they are needed for medical reasons," she said. By becoming a doula, her daughter "wanted to be an advocate for women. A doula is a trained professional who takes care of women during her childbirth. They provide emotional support to the mom and are an advocate for what the mother wants for her childbirth. It is amazing that in the United States we are having medical issues and we are needing interventions on behalf of mothers."

At the action station, members were also given an opportunity to offer prayers for mothers and children. Prayers are being requested for births of first babies, loss of mothers and babies during or after childbirth, and sudden infant death syndrome.

Visit unitedmethodistwomen.org/mhealth for more information and resources.

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Praveena Balasundaram is United Methodist Women director of program resources.
Acting Out the Bible With Friends of the Groom

by JULIA CHANCE

The Friends of the Groom Christian theater company and members of United Methodist Women portray a modern-day version of the wedding at Cana during evening worship at Assembly 2018.

Friends of the Groom is a drama troupe known for putting a modern spin on the Bible. They are back by popular demand at Assembly 2018 after performing at Assembly 2014. Founder Tom Long describes the evolution of Friends of the Groom as “divine default.” response spoke with him about the group.

**response:** What does Friends of the Groom refer to?

**Long:** There are a number of places in the New Testament where Jesus is compared to a bridegroom, at the great wedding banquet to which we’re all invited. There’s one specific mention where people ask John the Baptist: “Remember that Jesus fellow you baptized a few weeks ago? That guy has gone down river and now his disciples are baptizing people. Doesn’t that irritate you? He’s stolen your act.” And John replies, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend of the groom is happy to stand by and listen for the bridegroom’s voice.”

**response:** Why use humor in your act?

**Long:** I think people are vulnerable when they’re crying, but also when they’re laughing. They’re both sort of states of mind in which you’re open. I just particularly like the journey from people being opened with humor and warmth and then being able to turn the corner into something deeper.

**response:** What can you get across through drama that you might not be able to in other formats or platforms?

**Long:** There’s something about showing rather than telling. If you tell somebody something, they can always say, “No, that’s not true. I don’t believe that.” But if you show them your story, most people who see it will go, “Well, something like that happened to me.” Storytelling is inclusive and invites people in and encourages them to tell their stories. In some ways, you can get away with things just because people are open to story.

**response:** What’s it like to perform at Assembly?

**Long:** It’s very exciting to perform before a very large group of people. [Assembly] is probably one of the largest audiences we’ve ever entertained. We’re really looking forward to being there again. It’s so exciting to be able to get that large of a group of faithful people who are trying to deepen their faith, together.  

Julia Chance is managing editor of response.