

Breaking glass ceilings at large churches: Women underrepresented among senior pastors

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

Methodists opened the ordained ministry to women in 1956, and today female ministers account for about 20 percent of the clergy in the denomination. And 14 bishops heading the 50 U.S. regional jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church are women—28 percent of the total.

Score that a triumph for gender inclusivity in the nation's largest mainline church? Not so fast, say some UMC officials. One mark of acceptance for women pastors is lagging—only some 7 percent of Methodist congregations with more than 1,000 members are led by a female senior pastor.

Methodist statisticians, releasing this month the most recent data (from December 2007), said that 81 of the denomination's largest congregations were led by women pastors and 1,055 by male pastors. Another eight large congregations had men and women serving as copastors.

At a gathering last year of dozens of women pastors who had cracked the glass ceilings of the large congregations, a participant from Wyoming said she was surprised how painful the "success" stories were. "The opening retreat quickly shifted from information gathering to tearful storytelling," said Trudy Robinson, lead pastor of the 1,150-member First United Methodist Church in Cheyenne. "The pain was still fresh."

Ministry is tough for both men and women, she said. But judging from the tales of her female colleagues, Robinson said, gender stereotypes add to the difficulties faced by women. "At the outset," she said in an e-mail interview, "a congregation has positive expectations toward a male lead pastor and a hesitancy toward women lead pastors."

Robinson faces major tasks of her own. When appointed in 2005 as lead pastor at the downtown Cheyenne church, she was succeeding a male pastor who was stripped of his ordination papers because of sexual misconduct.

“It has been a slow process of trust-building and healing, one we are still working on,” she said. Amid the economic recession, the congregation is also “making a tremendous statement of faith” by continuing with a building renovation and expansion.

A Methodist survey showed that nine out of every ten female lead pastors at 1,000-member churches were the first women to head the pastoral staff at those congregations, according to the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

The survey suggested that “clergywomen are still on trial in the large-membership churches,” said Susan Willhauck of the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia, reported United Methodist News Service.

The 2008 survey, sent to nearly 400 men and women identified as lead pastors, found that men were more confrontational in dealing with conflicts and more “analytical,” whereas women were more collaborative, compassionate, adaptive and decisive, said HiRho Park, director of Continuing Formation for Ministry at the Nashville-based education and ministry board.

Park and Willhauck are launching the coaching stage of the Lead Women Pastors Project in hopes of boosting the numbers of female pastors heading large congregations. Sixteen clergywomen recommended by bishops as strong candidates to lead large-membership churches will each be paired with a mentor to develop their skills and savvy.

The survey indicated that male clergy were given increased pastoral responsibility somewhat more quickly than female pastors, and many gained that responsibility by serving successively larger congregations. A common trajectory of women toward leadership of a large church involved some assistance from bishops, who appointed them as associate pastors at large churches or named them district superintendents.

“I don’t think it’s a negative in any way to have come from a superintendency,” said Patricia Farris, who is in her 11th year as lead pastor of First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, California. Farris was the San Diego district superintendent

just before being appointed to the Santa Monica congregation.

“The skills I learned in administration —time management, dealing with a wide range of constituents, interacting with the press and so forth—proved invaluable,” she said in an interview.

Santa Monica First UMC has 1,000 members, with about 350 at worship services. Farris has plans for a new midweek service in the fall. The Harvard Divinity School graduate also writes magazine and devotional articles and, along with Trudy Robinson, has helped guide the denomination’s project to promote female pastors for lead pulpit posts at large churches.

“Progress has been made, but it’s been slow,” Farris said, pointing out that large congregations whose members are not predominantly white and Anglo are least likely to be led by a woman. In addition, officials say that only one of the 100 largest United Methodist churches—those in the megachurch category or close to it—has a woman as the lead pastor.

A large-membership congregation is not simply a bigger version of a small- or medium-sized church. “It’s a peculiar animal—far more complex,” Farris stressed. “Staff dynamics, finances, complexity of committee structures and accountability, visibility in the community—all these factors are exponentially more complex and challenging,” she said. “Hence, the value of the coaching project.”