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STAGGERING UMW MEMBERSHIP LOSS CONTINUES

The 2009 local church statistics* from the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) are in. United

Methodist Women is the only officially sanctioned women's ministry program in the UM Church. What about the other 86.5 percent of the women in the UM Church? Sadly, due to pressure from the Women's Division, United Methodist

leadership refuses to listen to the heart cries of most of the women in the denomination.

Currently, the *Book of Discipline* requires that every local church "shall" have a United Methodist Women group. For twenty years, RENEW and the women of the church have waged a spiritual battle with the Women's Division at General Conference to have the *Discipline* changed to read that every local church "may" have a UMW group. This new language would not "tear down" United Methodist Women, but give women more options in forming other types of women's ministry programs.

Changing that one little word in the *Book of Discipline* has proven a herculean task. The first year the language change was proposed, the vote was very close when brought to the main floor of General Conference, as many delegates saw the benefit and logic of a variety of women's ministry options.

In subsequent years, however, the Women's Division has waged an all-out battle to maintain the original language. Why would anyone disapprove of offering other options for women, especially as the needs and gifts of women are so varied in today's world? This question has remained both puzzling and frustrating in the minds of laity and clergy for years.

While many larger churches have vibrant women's ministry programs in their local churches and ignore the UMW

Methodist Women (UMW) lost 45,151 individual members and 488 local units in one year. (*Numbers reported from GCFA run one full year behind.)

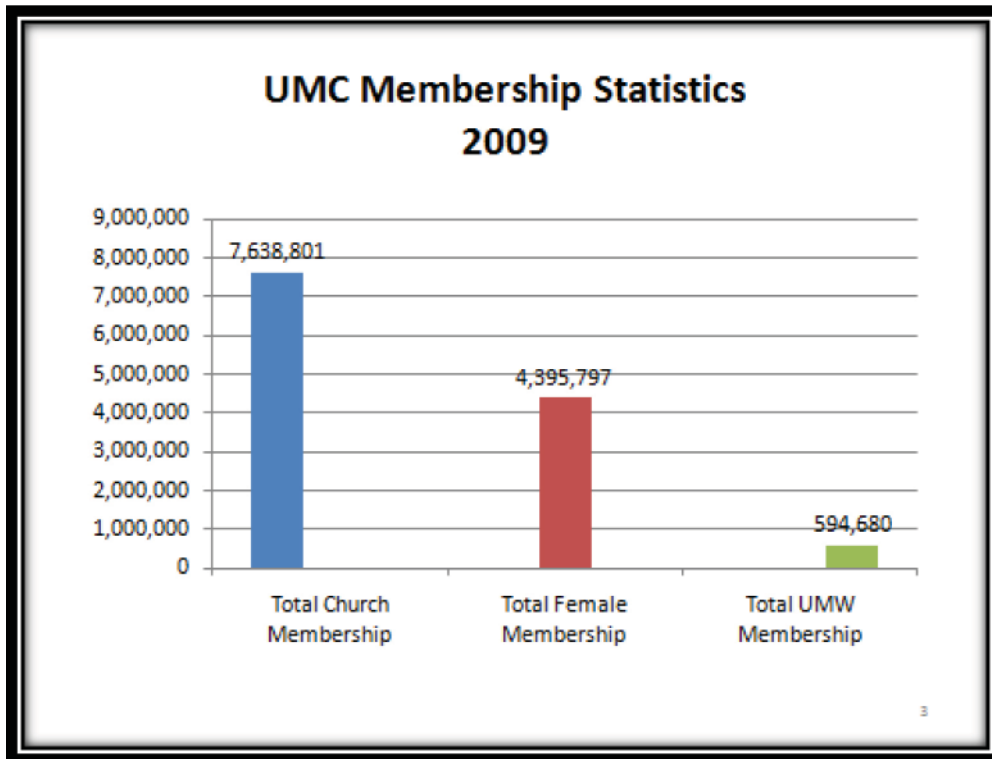
The annual membership loss in UMW reflects a pattern that has taken place for several decades, but much more significantly in the past several years. Since 2006, UMW has lost over 72,000 members and over 1,200 local units.

According to GCFA, the current membership of UMW at the end of 2009 stood at 594,808 with 18,963 local churches reporting UMW units. These numbers are taken from individual local church reports which are required by the United Methodist Church and therefore represent a highly accurate assessment. The Women's Division, the governing body of United Methodist Women, is not required to report their membership numbers to GCFA, as they operate differently from other church entities. The Women's Division continues to maintain that UMW membership totals "more than 800,000." In 1974, UMW had a membership of 1.36 million women.

With the female membership of the UM Church remaining fairly stable at about 4.4 million, the new UMW membership numbers mean that only 13.5 percent of the women in the denomination belong to United Methodist Women.

This is quite shocking due to the fact that United Meth-

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breakdown of the 2011 budget of the Women's Division can be downloaded from the RENEW website (www.renew-network.org). The Women's Division continues to be a powerful autonomous force within the United Methodist Church even as their membership dwindles.

Another important reason for the powerful influence of the Women's Division lies at General Conference. The Division is allowed to host the orientation session for female delegates, whereby they tell the delegates which legislation they favor/disfavor and instruct them on obtaining powerful positions in legislative committees. This "orientation" gives the Division an

requirement in the *Book of Discipline*, it remains a greater challenge for medium and small membership churches. Pastors and women in these churches feel threatened by violating the *Discipline*, so they continue to struggle along even as their membership dwindles and fruitfulness diminishes.

Many district superintendents and bishops even pressure their clergy to stand by the language and don't provide encouragement or support for women who desire other ministry options. Without official endorsement from annual conferences and the General Conference, vibrant women's ministry will continue to be maligned and discouraged.

How is the Women's Division able to sustain so much power and influence over women's ministry? There are several reasons. One reason is the Division maintains a virtually separate structure from the other boards and agencies, which allows them to operate autonomously within the church. While currently the Division comes under the mantle of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), that relationship has become less symbiotic as the Division has withdrawn its annual gift of 10 million to GBGM. The Division does however still maintain a 40 percent representation on the GBGM Board of Directors.

Current economic conditions and impending restructuring of general boards and agencies haven't seemed to affect the Women's Division. Not only has the Division taken several programs under their wing from GBGM such as the Deaconess Program, the National Mission Institutions (which the WD owns), and Community Ministries personnel and programs, but their 2011 budget reflects staff additions and increased administrative costs. A current

unfair advantage and access to delegates before the first plenary of General Conference even begins, making substantive disciplinary changes difficult.

While United Methodist Women has a great historical legacy, its sole position as the only avenue for women's ministry is growing increasingly unrealistic and unacceptable. The falling membership numbers of the GCFA report bear this out.

With a new emphasis on building vital congregations over the next decade, a new emphasis on strong women's ministry options must be a priority of the church. Each local church has a group of unique women with unique needs and gifts. Every local church's women's ministry program should reflect the diversity of the women it serves and equips for ministry.

If we are truly the church of "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors," this motto should apply to women's ministry as well. It is time for the bondage placed on the women of the UM Church by the Women's Division to end. In a few years, if statistics continue to show these sharp annual declines in UMW membership, the church will face a crisis. Women want vital women's ministry and if it's not available, they will find a church home elsewhere. Please join RENEW in advocating for the women in the UM Church who desire a variety of women's ministry options.

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