

Nation & World

News throughout our nation and world relating to United Methodists of the Holston Conference

Clergywomen Rediscover, Reclaim Sabbath

God's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is often difficult for pastors working in a tradition that observes its day of rest on Sunday.

By **Linda Green**

SAN DIEGO (UMNS) – Sunday is the busiest day of the week for pastors, who are ensuring that their congregations are spiritually fed. They fill the rest of the week responding to the demands of others so much that they often neglect their own spiritual needs and fail to set aside a time of rest for themselves.

Jesus encourages everyone to get away to a deserted place and rest a while, but people are too busy to respond, said Bishop Charlene Kammerer, who leads the church's Charlotte (N.C.) Area.

"Most of us live in such a whirlwind of activity that we don't always hear the voice of Jesus."

The Sabbath is a time to rest in Jesus' presence, she said. "Jesus says to us to come away by ourselves, and I will be there to renew you, heal you, hold you and bless you. This is an invitation we should not refuse," she said.

More than 1,185 clergywomen from across the globe gathered Jan. 7-11 in San Diego to rediscover and reclaim the Sabbath while responding to the challenge to change the world.

Meeting for the 2002 International United Methodist Clergywomen's Consultation, the women focused on the theme of "Creating a Woman's Sabbath: Come Away and Rest Away." Each day began and ended with worship, and participants had opportunities to explore what it means to rest in God.

The United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry had held the consultations every four years since 1975, but the 2002 event was six and a half years in the making. The Rev. Marion Jackson, director of continuing education for ministry at the board in Nashville, Tenn., speculated that the time frame was extended in order for the 2006 consultation to coincide with the clergywomen's jubilee. The jubilee will mark the 50th year since General Conference voted to give women full clergy rights, she said. Those rights were reaffirmed in 1968 at the uniting conference of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches.

Clergy with full rights are ordained to a lifetime ministry of service, word and sacrament, according to the United Methodist Book of Discipline. They are authorized to preach and teach the word



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▲ Clergywomen's Consultation: Clergywomen from Africa help lead worship during the 2002 International United Methodist Clergywomen's Consultation in San Diego.

of God, to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of the church for mission and ministry.

The consultation's 17-member design team came up with the theme of Sabbath after discussing the fact that many clergywomen are suffering from burnout, taking leaves of absence and struggling to stay connected to God amid myriad daily responsibilities, Jackson said. "The more we talked, the more it seemed that the world is becoming too fast and we all had difficulties in finding time for our own prayer life."

The event drew clergywomen from across the United States as well as Bulgaria, Canada, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Korea, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Philippines, Russia, Sweden, South Africa, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe.

The clergywomen were encouraged to take time for consecrated holy leisure. They were told to take time to rest in God and be healed, reformed and re-created by divine love. Speakers emphasized that allocating an unstructured day – without meetings, projects, tasks, agendas or scheduled time with others – provides time for visioning, discernment, listening

to the inner self and acquiring a relaxed alertness about life.

Many clergywomen described feeling constant stress from heavy work loads, pay equity concerns and sexism, particularly from congregations that don't want women in the pulpit.

"The Holy Spirit is getting ready to do something and is preparing clergywomen to follow God's lead," Jackson said. "The energy coming from the clergywomen has reached a point where they realize that they no longer have to be victims."

Holy Leisure "We have not reached the point of being equally accepted, but more and more eyes are opening ... and in these 50 years, we've been strengthened. It hasn't been easy nor pleasant, but we've used them to build our spiritual muscle," Jackson said.

The Rev. Minerva Carcano of Portland, Ore., agreed. "I know my sisters, it is not easy even now. The cold stares of the world have not stopped. The struggle continues, but God is still in charge and has the last word," she said.

In the Bible, the widow who gave her last two coins at the temple knew that the only way to respond to the loving grace of God was to give all she had, Carcano

said. The story is a reminder of those women of faith and courage who, in spite of all, saw what God was doing in their lives and were inspired to give all.

But is giving all worth it? That is the question the Rev. Lydia Jackson Waters, Compton, Calif., asked as she spoke of the divergent expectations held against clergywomen and described their struggle to be superwomen and twice as good as men.

In order to meet the vast expectations placed on them, clergywomen are succumbing to high blood pressure, strokes, burnout, chronic fatigue and other maladies, Waters said. "The church rewards us, and we get a thumbs up for killings ourselves," she said. "Jesus did not die on the cross to turn around and watch us kill ourselves nor allow anyone else to do it. ... Is all of this labor really worth it?"

Life is a gift from God, she said. "As often as you can, stop, take a break, and get away to allow the spirit of God to breathe into you a breath of life." She urged the clergywomen to "stop taking this call so seriously and get a life." ■

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