

## UMC District Superintendents Part III: Least and Most Representation

by Kelley Fenelon

October 20, 2016

In our previous discussion of representativeness among district superintendents, we noticed trends occurring within the UMC in the U.S. overall and within each of our geographically derived jurisdictions. Here, we will look instead at those annual conferences (ACs) that buck the trend, whether for good or ill.

These tables reveal those annual conferences with either substantial or absent representation of district superintendents who identify with non-white race and ethnicity categories. They also depict the percentage of female district superintendents in the annual conference, as well as the total number of district superintendents for the AC. This additional information provides further context for each AC's race and ethnicity representation; for example, an AC may have only white district superintendents (and, subsequently, 0% race/ethnicity representation), but that fact could be mitigated – although not exempted from questioning – by the fact that the AC only has 1 or 2 district superintendents in total. In fact, let's see if that factor plays a role for many of the ACs that have a startling 0% of racial and ethnic identities represented among their district superintendents. For only one annual conference – Yellowstone – is there only one DS. Three others – Oregon-Idaho, Minnesota, and Northwest Texas – have only three. On the whole, however, these ACs lacking in racial/ethnic diversity have a range of total DS roles to fill, and they all do so without selecting anyone non-white.

In contrast, the table on the right lists those annual conferences wherein traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic groups make up at least one-third of all district superintendents. Although too often a limited number of positions means that white identified persons will fill them, the opposite is true in Alaska and Oklahoma Indian Missionary. Both of these ACs upend situations in which no racial diversity exists because all leaders are white, providing exactly the opposite situation: their one or two district superintendents identify with a nonwhite racial or ethnic group. The other ACs with substantial representation of historically underrepresented groups range in their total number of district superintendents, revealing that, as with the least representative ACs, greater racial/ethnic diversity does not emerge simply because there are more slots to fill. Another takeaway is found in the "Female" column, which reveals all but one of these ACs as also near or above average in their appointment of female district superintendents. What about these annual conferences encourages the appointment of district superintendents with a range of identities and experiences? Are

answers found in their congregational or ministerial demographics, or among the beliefs, practices – and, perhaps, demographic identities – of their bishops? With ACs as geographically distant and socio-culturally distinct as Alaska, Eastern Pennsylvania, California-Pacific, and Mississippi, both location and cultural norms can only be one piece of the puzzle. Whatever the impetus, these annual conferences have created cohorts of district superintendents that can speak from a variety of experiences and to the advances our church has made since its days of schism and codified discrimination.

These next two tables provide the same information about gender representation among annual conference district superintendents. We first notice that only four annual conferences have no women among their district superintendents. This lack of representation of women noticeably contrasts with the 14 seen in the race/ethnicity tables that have no non-white racial/ethnic representation. A greater number of ACs lack a non-white perspective than the number that lack a non-male perspective. Even so, of the four ACs without women district superintendents, two have multiple potential DS positions that might be held by a female elder, but fill all of them with men. Each of the other ACs with a low percentage of female district superintendents has between five and ten DS positions to fill. That some women are among these AC's district superintendents shows improvement since the days of an all-male clergy. However, the percentage of women district superintendents in these ACs falls well below the demographic presence of women in the church. We might ask if it also falls short of the percentage of women who are ordained elders in each AC. If these annual conferences have similarly low percentages of ordained women, what might cause so few women to seek ordained ministry? If they have a higher percentage of ordained women than is seen among district superintendents, what causes the lack of female representation in that leadership role?

The table also shows that six of the ACs with low representation of women completely lack representation of non-white racial/ethnic groups. In other words, fully half of these ACs have district superintendents who are mostly white men, with a few white women. On the other hand, only three of the ACs with a high percentage of female district superintendents are without racial/ethnic diversity. Does openness to one historically underrepresented group in leadership roles (women) correspond with similar openness to another (non-white racial/ethnic identities)? Looking back to the ACs with the least racial/ethnic diversity, only three lack female district superintendents. Only one AC with high racial/ethnic representation lacked women – and that AC only has one district superintendent. Why is gender diversity in district superintendents seemingly easier for annual conferences to achieve than racial/ethnic diversity?

Only two annual conferences – Oklahoma Indian Missionary and Yellowstone – have an all-female DS team, and these ACs have a small total number of district superintendents. With the exception of Northwest Texas, those ACs with four or more district superintendents have gender diversity on their DS teams, neither men nor women inhabiting all available DS positions. Even so, the ACs with a high percentage of women tend to have fewer DS positions to fill; the ACs with the most female representation have an average of 5.25 district superintendents, whereas the average number of district superintendents across all ACs is 7.5.

Does having more DS positions available only increase the presence of white men rather than providing more opportunities for historically underrepresented groups? Finally, one geographic region is notable for its absence from the list of ACs with high female representation: the South. Why do all ACs in the South have less than 50% women among their district superintendents?

The tables discussed in this post specify those ACs with the highest and lowest percentages of women and racial/ethnic among their district superintendents. While such information demonstrates which ACs have made particular decisions in their DS appointments, it cannot reveal overarching trends. Instead, these tables serve as a reminder that averages and overall depictions of leadership in the U.S. Methodist Church are derived from individual annual conferences, each with its own story of presence and representation to tell.