



Photos from Horizons photo archives

“Joined for the Journey”—at the 1985 National Meeting, members of the UPW/WOC Working Team, share a unified vision of Presbyterian Women.

Two Streams Unite

Merging UPW and WOC

BY DEBORAH KAPP

Deep in the Brazilian rainforest near the city of Manaus, the Rio Negro and the Rio Solimoes flow together to create the Amazon River. The two are quite different. The waters of the Rio Negro feel warm and look black to the naked eye (hence its name). Cooler and muddier light-brown waters flow in the Rio Solimoes.

When they meet, the two rivers do not mingle immediately. For nearly a mile downstream they maintain their separate identities. The warmer black and cooler brown waters flow side by side for over six kilometers (nearly four miles) until finally they become one.¹

Following the reunion of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA), elected women in both the “northern stream” and “southern stream” were charged with melding their two women’s organizations into one. My clearest memory of the Working Team, as we were called, is that, like the Negro and the Solimoes, we traveled in separate streams for a long time. A common vision eventually emerged from our

work, but that was not where we started. Instead, we began our work with more than a little suspicion, reluctance and distrust.

I remember that I was standing in the kitchen when the phone rang and I received the invitation to join the United Presbyterian Women (UPW) and Women of the Church (WOC) Working Team. I said yes immediately. Three years earlier I had left a UPCUSA General Assembly position as area staff person for UPW in the Synods of Trinity, Covenant and Lincoln Trails. I deeply respected the women I served and was touched by the vision, energy and intelligence of women’s work in the church. I truly loved UPW and I believed in its importance. Here was a chance for me to continue to serve the organization; I eagerly accepted the charge as I understood it: seek to preserve as much of UPW as you can—that is, give away as little as possible and don’t let WOC take over!

Was the charge I heard that day really the one I was given, or did the invitation have a more generous and creative agenda? I still don’t know. But I do know that I

Celebrating 20 Years of Purpose

began with a determination to hold on to as much as possible. I came to the first meeting with all my defenses in place.

In this I was not alone. Our earliest meetings were devoted to getting acquainted and organizing our work. We talked endlessly about how the organizations we represented were different. We returned again and again to the same issues: giving programs, staffing patterns, UPW and WOC structures, and relationships to our previous denominations. Over time, we gradually grew to like and respect each other. Meetings were increasingly characterized by laughter and genuine pleasure in one another's company.

We secured outside help for the task of bringing UPW and WOC together. The two consultants I remember best were Catherine Gunsalus, who led us in theological reflection, and Diane Fassell, who helped us with process. I remember we were *so surprised* to learn Diane was a Sisters of Mercy nun! The new denominational research office conducted a survey that gave us helpful data, and we listened carefully to what women were telling us about their hopes and dreams.

Discovering Commonalities

Slowly we moved from being two streams to being a single stream, and eventually we could talk about our similarities instead of our differences. A few of us found the conversation difficult at first. "Whatever do we have in common?" someone asked. As we pondered her question,



Catherine Vaughn, left, was chairperson of the Women of the Church Committee from 1986–1988. Jeanne Marshall, right, was president of UPW from 1985–1988.

we discovered that the answer was, "A great deal."

Both UPW and WOC had roots in the nineteenth-century women's mission movement with its commitment to serve the church, spread the good news of Jesus Christ, and minister to women and children worldwide. Both UPW and WOC were Bible-based organizations, grounded in the study of scripture and prayer. We may have been structured differently, but we cared about the same things: Christ's church, her scriptures, her work and her Lord.

So that's where we began. Our first dream for the new organization was to keep the best of the past. We wanted to preserve shared practices like Bible study, special offerings, programs and emphases that encouraged women to reach out to others in need, and an organizational structure that supported women's work.

At the same time, we wanted to differentiate the new organization from its predecessor bodies. We did that partly through nomenclature. I think the only term carried over from either WOC or UPW was

"circle," and that was because we both used that name. I remember fighting to keep the phrase, "second-mile giving," which I still think is a great phrase, but there was too much of a UPW-only echo, and it went the way of other phrases that were too attached to the older bodies.

The offerings did keep their original names. At first, we built three special offerings into Presbyterian

Women: one from WOC (the Birthday Offering) and two from UPW (the Summer Medical Offering and the Thank Offering), each of which had come from earlier predecessor bodies that merged in 1958.² It felt unbalanced to keep two offerings from UPW, and later leaders combined them into the Thank Offering (including Health Ministries).³ But at the time it was the best way we knew to honor the fact that for many women who had been active in UPW prior to 1958, the new organization we were creating was from three predecessor bodies, not just two.

The biggest change we made was at the presbytery level, with the introduction of the Enabler system (now called Leaders Network). That involved another nomenclature wrangle, of course, because of the pros and cons of the word "enabler," but we couldn't figure out a better term. The purpose of that system was to provide support and training for women at the local level.

When researching the two Amazon tributaries, Rio Negro and Rio Solimoes, I discovered that the

Celebrating 20 Years of Purpose



The UPW/WOC Working Team met from 1983 through 1986 and wrote the “Proposed Design for Presbyterian Women.” From far left clockwise: Deborah Kapp, Patsy Correll, Betty Jean Moore, Jeanne Marshall, Christine Dinsmore, Ann Ritzius, Barbara Mann and Sylvia Washer

Amazon has over 200 tributaries. This massive river that supports so much life and produces a significant portion of the world’s fresh water owes its vibrancy to dozens of smaller streams that flow together to create it.

Presbyterian Women is similarly fed. By God’s grace, the contribution of hundreds and thousands of local tributaries—groups and individual believers—join together to make PW. Through the Enabler system we sought to nourish the people who give life to us as a church organization. Our dream was to flow energy and support toward the local organizations and women who make Presbyterian Women possible, and who sometimes look to the larger church for guidance.

Traveling Together

The Working Team’s dreams for Presbyterian Women strengthened as our two streams merged. Although we each began our work with a determination to “win” a battle for supremacy over the other and a staunch commitment to preserve what we held dear, we ended with a

shared vision for a strong, functional, single organization that would allow women to continue the meaningful work of the past.

After our plan was adopted, I was admonished by a UPW woman whom I admired deeply. She told me how disappointed she was that we had not made bigger changes and dreamed of a more radical, contemporary organization. Maybe she was right, but we brought to fruition the dream we eventually shared; from strong sources we released a new entity that was familiar enough to keep current work afloat, yet challenging enough so that adventurous future leaders would navigate it effectively.

When the Working Team was traveling to various summer conferences to explain and promote the new organizational plan, someone wrote a song for us:

Joined for the journey, joined
for the journey,
There are footsteps behind us
and footsteps before.
Traveling together, two streams
united,

We are joined for the journey,
serving God whom
we adore.

Rio Negro and Rio Solimoes join near Manaus, but they traverse a distance before they truly commingle. It was the great privilege of the Working Team to travel with Presbyterian Women on the portion of the journey in which we were separate but together, not yet commingled. By the time we disbanded, the commingling was accomplished, at least on the surface. There was a long journey yet to travel. I thank God that the wide, life-giving river of Presbyterian Women flows on today. 🍷

Deborah Kapp served on the UPW/WOC Working Team from 1983 to 1986. She is a minister of the Word and Sacrament, and currently serves as the Edward F. and Phyllis K. Campbell Professor of Urban Ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

Notes

1. I visited Brazil in 1994 and saw this with my own eyes. I revisited it last September when I did a web search for “Amazon meets Rio Negro” and found a YouTube video taken by another Amazon visitor. Check this source, if you want to see the meeting of the two rivers for yourself.

2. In 1958 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Presbyterian Church of North America merged to become the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Women’s groups in the PCUSA used the Summer Medical Offering. The Thank Offering, however, came from UPCNA. We kept both to honor the three streams, and to make sure that the UPCNA heritage (the smaller of these two denominations by far) did not get completely lost.

3. In 2006, the phrase, “including Health Ministries” was dropped. The Thank Offering is now known as “the Thank Offering of Presbyterian Women.”