THE GENERAL COMMISSION
ON THE STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN
The United Methodist Church

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ASIAN FEMINISTS DISCUSS THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY, MUTUAL SUPPORT

By Elaine Moy
GCSRW Assistant General Secretary for Finance and Administration

Many people can walk into a classroom, worship service or meeting and see colleagues or leaders who look like themselves. But for the Asian feminists who gathered at a theology and ministry conference in mid-March, it was an extraordinary experience.

“I can come here and look at a room of women with whom I have common tradition and struggles. It is a sense of relief because there are similarities” said Yuki Schwartz, PhD student and co-coordinator of the Asian and Asian American Ministry Center at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill.

The 28th annual Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry conference met at Garrett March 14-16. Of the 65 participants, 30 are United Methodist affiliated. And 6 of the 30 are part of the Women of Color Scholar program by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (see related story).

Ahyun Lee, PhD student and co-coordinator of the Asian and Asian American Ministry Center at Garrett, appreciated the opportunity to meet with other Asian women pastors or theologians.

“I am able to share similar stories and we have a shared cultural understanding because we belong to a particular group: Asian women,” she said.

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About 30 of the participants are affiliated with the United Methodist Church.

Many of the participants said they found it lonely to be the “only” Asian women at their schools or church appointments. They come to conference to get support for their Asian feminist voice in their work, and it becomes their “trusting space” to fellowship, share their challenges and be comfortable.

“There is such a need for spaces such as this . . . because we are constantly dealing and wrestling with issues of race and transnational history in our churches,” said Kelly Lee, a student in the master of divinity program at Drew and in the Greater New Jersey annual conference. “Whether we will be in cross-cultural ministries or a predominantly white congregation where we would be the ethnic pastor, the discourses from this conference really feed our intellectual conversation as well as give us a space to rest in the comfort of fellow Asian/AsAm sisterhood.”

The conference supports academics, graduate students and pastors in the local church setting. There were discussions regarding the theme of “Dangerous Memories – Theologies in a Time of War and Healing” as well as practical workshops.

Boyung Lee, Associate Professor of Education Ministries at Pacific School of Religion and Elder of the California Nevada Conference, credits the early United Methodist women such as Jung Ha Kim (Senior Lecturer at Georgia State University) who helped support her as well as her colleagues through their ministries. Lee is proud to say she is a product of the pioneer Asian women in theology.

Asian Americans are 4% of the U.S. population and the fastest-growing minority group in the country, outpacing Hispanics. From 2000-2010, the Asian population grew 46 percent. Asian Americans also have the highest percentage of inter-racial marriages, at 29%. Many Asians Americans are no longer in large urban areas such as New York or San Francisco but in smaller communities.

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The United Methodist Church has 358 Asian churches, 1.1% of the total. Asian American clergywomen (187) make up 2.2% of the women clergy. Nearly 60% of the Asian American women clergy (105) are in cross-racial appointments, primarily leading white churches.

Ouk-Yean Jueng, district superintendent in the Northern Illinois Conference, shared with students the practical information needed to go through the candidacy process and the challenges of cross-racial appointments.

“Asian students have much fear and difficulties… they hear stories from others who had many problems because of language, cultural barriers and legal process for working in the U.S.,” she said.

Most Korean UM churches are led by Korean clergymen, not clergywomen. Asian clergywomen who want to be in a local church would most likely serve in a cross-cultural appointment.

There are many challenges for this small group, but the conference has deliberately made space for Asian Americans and Asian women, students, professors and pastors, first generation and immigrants.

“The conference helps us to be authentic Asian American or Asian women and faithful United Methodists,” Lee said. “This forum provides us to integrate our multiple identities.”

Lee, herself the first Asian/Asian American student in the Boston University Doctoral Program, credits the group with supporting and nurturing her. She is paying it forward to help other Asian/Asian American women in theological education or ministry.

As United Methodist in the United States are trying to grow their membership, they are finding more leaders, clergy and professors of different ethnic groups can help us understand the population we serve.

The conference is held yearly and meets at Garrett again in 2014. If you or if someone you know in your church, conference or school may benefit from being a part of this group, please go to panaawtm.org.

PANAAWTM is run through volunteers and donations. If you or your church would like to make a financial contribution, please contact Dr. Anne Joh at anne.joh@garrett.edu.

(more stories, photos on following pages)

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WOMEN OF COLOR SCHOLARS GROW INTO LEADERS

By Elaine Moy
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The Women of Color Scholars Program was established to remedy the lack of women of color on facilities at United Methodist seminaries, to increase the number of women of color who teach, lecture, write and research at the PhD level in seminaries and to heighten church-wide awareness of the need for women of color in theological education.

Already we are seeing results. Many of the leaders of the 28th annual Pacific Asian North American Asian Women Theology and Ministry conference last week are part of the program from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

All three Asian American Mentors of the Women of Color Program have been an integral part of the conference. Jung Ha Kim, Professor of Sociology at Georgia State, and Rita Nakashima Brock, founding co-director of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School, are on the advisory board, and Anne Joh, Associate Professor of Systemic Theology at Garrett Evangelical Theological School, is on the steering committee and served as coordinator of the conference.

Kim and Brock were mentors to Joh when she was a doctoral student. Now Joh is herself a mentor to the next generation of women. Joh has served as a mentor in various other organizations but said, “WOC is the best model out there.”

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The Women of Color Scholars (from left) Jung Ha Kim, Rita Nakashima Brock, Ahyun Lee, Hannah Ka, June Hee Yoon and Anne Joh.

“WOC was my place of rest but also reinvigoration,” she said. “If it was not for them I would not have made it. Doctoral programs are hostile places for women of color -- existentially, structurally and intellectually -- and have a way of reducing you constantly to a state of marginalization and struggle. WOC allows us to thrive.”

Boyung Lee (not pictured), Associate Professor of Education Ministries at Pacific School of Religion and Elder of the California Nevada Conference, a graduate of the Women of Color Program, credits the Women of Color Program with helping her be authentic and more importantly, more accountable to her work. Her mentors reviewed, challenged and affirmed her and the work she was doing, she said.

Ahyun Lee is a student in the Women of Color program, getting her PhD at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, and is a co-coordinator of the Asian-Asian American Center at Garrett. She assisted Joh in coordinating the conference.

“WOC has unique mentoring system which Asian American women students get the particular help and support. I can't think I can finish my study without WOC program. It helps me to develop my identity as a scholar and to affirm my calling as a teacher for ministerial setting of UMC.”

Hannah Ka, a recent graduate of the program who is serving in a local church, said her mentors kept her focused on her graduate education.

“They affirmed me when I was losing confidence in my intellect, sustained me throughout all those years, and challenged me to find my own voices in the larger academic context,” she said. “Their voices affirmed me that my unique perspective as a Korean/Korean American woman in my field was not only acceptable, but also necessary in the flourishing of other minority voices in the academic world.”

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June Hee Yoon is in her first year as a doctoral student at Drew in Theology.

To get more information regarding the application and eligibility requirement, please go to the gbehm.org website.

The WOC Scholarship needs additional funding. The fund was endowed in 2006 but with the cost of education and expenses, the payout doesn't cover as much as it once did. The goal is to raise the endowment to meet the needs to fund all the scholarships. The fund awards an average 5 or 6 scholars a year. The scholars also receive mentors to help them with their work, which adds to the expense but it is a valuable asset to the program.

To support the Women of Color Scholarship endowment, please send your check to GBHEM, Scholarship Office, PO Box 34000, Nashville, TN 37203.

FIRST-TIME ATTENDEE DESCRIBES CONFERENCE

My name is Kelly Lee. I am in my last semester of my MDiv program at Drew Theological Seminary. I belong to the Greater NJ Annual Conference and am discerning my way through the ordination process.

This year's PANAAWTM theme was, "Dangerous Memories: Theologies in times of War and Healing." Living in the 21st century, we know all too well the realities of war and, perhaps know less about the dire need for healing in our communities affected by the war. Through this conference, I was reminded once again that within our ever-growing diversity and multi-ethnic churches in the UMC the different memories, histories, and understanding of war that affected us transnationally despite our existence together here in America as one body of faith.

As a young Asian American woman on the ordination track, the journey of discovering my true self in the image of God beckons for my constant awareness of the world around me in connection to the inner workings of faith. The various voices offered at PANAAWTM provided a space for me to grapple with the multiple roles that encompass my identity, particularly the critical intersections of race, theology and transnational history as I wrestled with how all of these factors exist silently within our congregations today.

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As a first-time participant, I felt empowered and welcomed to come and participate in this discourse with Asian/Asian American women who have long journeyed their own thoughts and spiritualties in their respective areas of ministries (academic institutions, churches, NGOs, etc). The sharing of their research and simply their life stories has encouraged me to recognize that these issues must continue to be in dialogue not only with each other but to the larger world that we engage in.