

## July 2020 Laity Minute

What were you doing in 2004? Well, to take you back, the singer Usher had the most popular song, the last Oldsmobile rolled off the assembly line, the TV show Friends aired for the last time (I was so sad), Facebook was launched, and bread was .97 cents a loaf. History was made when Spirit and Opportunity landed on Mars.

But, the year 2004 was historic for the United Methodist Church, as well.

According to the Book of Discipline, “The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships.” (Paragraph 427.2). The Council is comprised of all active and retired bishops of the UMC and are not ordained but are clergy elected and consecrated to the office of bishop. They give general oversight of the Church and serve in a leadership capacity. (See <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/> for more information about the Council.)

Marjorie Swank Matthew made history as the first woman to be elected bishop in 1980. But we made history again in 2004 as the UMC saw the largest class of women elected to the Council of Bishops up to that point. The class included 6 women.

I have read the personal stories of many of the female bishops, past and present. It is intriguing to hear about their upbringing, previous careers, and educational pursuits. These stories are often indicative of how they govern and lead as bishops. However, their stories are not all about their personal lives.

*Women Bishops of the UMC: Extraordinary Gifts of the Spirit (2019)* by Rader and Crain offer another angle to the journey of UMW bishop. It is not about personal stories as you may have heard before. It is the story of how each woman bishop (1980-2016) was elected within the election process of the Church.

“That sounds really, really, REALLY boring,” you may be thinking. But, it is far from it! The election to bishop is political. It is spiritual. It is sometimes a time of anxiety, questioning or a test of faith for the individual “running for the office.” And for the 34 women in this book, this is the case and more. Journeys included heavy resistance in the way of extreme sexism and racism.

In 2004, with that largest group of women ever elected, we find the name of our own current bishop, Mary Virginia Taylor, also known as Dindy. One thing which caught my eye about her story was that in 2004, the Holston Delegation was interested in supporting her for bishop. Even after all the work she had done to that point, (committees chaired, ministries, leadership roles on all levels, etc.) she still asked, “Am I brave enough to do this?” This shows her humanness. It also shows the depth of her faith to move forward. After the 33<sup>rd</sup> ballot, Dindy was elected. She had to borrow a clergy robe for her consecration because she was not convinced she would be elected bishop in the first place and had not brought one.

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Bishops play a major role in the UMC. They are high profile and we see them often having to make tough decisions. We saw this during the closure of the churches earlier this year. If you are ever in the Washington D.C. area, you can find their main office across the street from the U.S. Capitol and the Supreme Court. I'm pretty sure if I ever sat in one of their meetings I would be a little star stuck. What in the world would I possibly say to Bishop Taylor if I got to sit and talk with her for a moment?

I'd say, "Thank you."

Peace!

Kelly

