

“Fanning The Flame”

President’s Message
2009 WNCC UMW Annual Meeting

Presented by Amy Johnson
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Scripture: II Timothy 1:5-7 (NIV)

I have always liked this particular version (NIV) of this scripture passage. One version says to stir into flame, but the NIV says to “fan into flame.” I can relate to what it means to fan into flame. My grandmother had a small wood stove in her living room and, although she had central heat, she loved to sit beside her stove. She would put her kindling in the stove and light a small fire and wait, as she called it, to “catch up,” to fan into flame.

I have shared with you before that I was raised in the fire department. My dad joined the volunteer fire department when I was three years old. This year, he is celebrating 54 years of service with the fire department – and now you know how old I am!

My husband and I were married one week and he joined the fire department the next week. He really wanted to get in good with his father-in-law!

When I had a sweet, little baby girl, never in my wildest dreams when I was dressing her in frilly dresses did I think she would ever grow up to become a firefighter. But when she was 15 years old, she joined the cadet program at the fire station. With my husband working nights, if they had a call, I would have to stop what I was doing and take her to the call because she didn’t have a driver’s license!

And then she met a firefighter from another fire department. They’ve been married for five years.

My little two-year grandson just doesn’t have a chance. He’s going to be a firefighter as well. He can be in his bed at night and, if the fire trucks come past their house, he will lay there and make the “oo-oo, oo-oo” sound of the sirens.

He can count quite well for a two-year-old. But one day as they were driving down the road, Dylan counted, “1, 2, 4, 9.” My daughter scolded him, knowing that he knew how to count. One day, they were at the fire station, out in the bays where the trucks are. We are Station 27 and our trucks are 127, 227, 327, 427, etc. However, our firefighters don’t use the whole number when referring to the trucks. Dylan looked at the fire trucks and pointed to “1, 2, 4, (and you guessed it) 9.” The fire department has taught Dylan some new math!

Fanning the Flame. I've thought a lot about Mrs. Parker and Mrs. Butler – the two women who had gone with their missionary husbands to India and witnessed firsthand that women were unable to obtain medical care and that young girls were not being educated. They came back to America with a fire burning in their heart – a fire that women in the United States could make a difference in the lives of women and girls in India. We know the story of that first meeting in March of 1869. This handful of women were indeed bold and courageous. This was a time in history when men were in charge of everything, including the church. I'm sure there was opposition to their plan to send a woman doctor and teacher to India. But today, 140 years later, we celebrate how they fanned the flame in their hearts to form the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church into what has evolved into the present-day organization of United Methodist Women.

(Run POWERPOINT presentation)

As we celebrate another “milestone” anniversary, it makes me wonder what UMW will look like in another 20 or 25 years or in another 140 years. Now if I had to draw a portrait of what I thought this picture might look like on a canvas, it would be more abstract than anything else. I can't draw – have trouble drawing a circle using a quarter. But I think it would be a collage, because so many things make up our mission work. Let me share with you what I think the picture may look like.

We begin with a blank canvas because we do not know what tomorrow will bring...it's there waiting for us to color the picture. And think about the colors you would use...our world is not just black and white, for all races and cultures make up our world – so we would need to use many different, vibrant colors.

While we live in a changing world and the faces of mission may change, one thing remains the same. God is in the center of our work. So I would put **praying hands** and an open Bible in the center of our canvas. To know God...we must have a spiritual transformation within us before we can transform the world in which we live.

Next I would add the **Scales of justice** – for UMW stand up, and speak out on issues that affect the oppressed, the poverty-stricken, the children....those who need an education, health care, childcare.... and the list goes on and on. I would also place **pen and paper** (or our computers for e-mail) for corresponding with our legislators – letting them know our stance on issues.

I see a **School bus** – for our emphasis on education.

And I see **buildings** – schools, hospitals, day care facilities, residences for abused women - all of these buildings representing places of ministry operated by United Methodist Women.

And I see **\$\$\$ signs** – for we must have the needed funds in order to do the work – to build the facilities – pay the missionaries, provide training...and the list goes on and on.

And I see **Classrooms** – **classrooms** where UMW come together each summer in the Schools of Christian Mission to grow spiritually through the Bible study, to learn about other cultures in the geographic study, and to learn of current world situations in the general theme study.

Books – Reading Program is a valuable resource to educate and inform us – to develop a deeper understanding of the world around us...

I see the **world** – for we are a global organization – mission reaches beyond the four walls of your church...we are all one in Christ. We are Sisters With a PURPOSE.

And I see a collage of **faces** – faces of women, children, and youth – faces of those struggling to provide food and shelter for their families – faces of children who are sick – faces of youth struggling to go to school and make a life for themselves – a life better than what they have experienced.

A **border of linking hands** – for it takes all of us – to reach around the world and make it a better place in which to live.

But, the future of United Methodist Women and how bright our flame will burn is really up to you – the local units. It's what you do in the local units that makes mission possible.

You are the artist here. For you are free to paint your own picture and to choose your own colors as to how you will fan the flame and make the Purpose of UMW come alive. And forget all that business about having to stay in the lines. **The seven deadly words are: “But, we’ve always done it that way!”** Be creative.

How bright is your flame burning? How bright is the flame of your local unit burning? I've seen many fires during the years. I've seen fires that are all smoke and no fire. For example, a pile of wet leaves...a lot of smoke.

There are the grease fires. They can do a lot of damage, but when you put a lid on the fire, the fire is snuffed out. That reminds me of when someone presents a new idea and are really enthused about the project, only to have their fire snuffed out when those words “we’ve never been done it that way before” are said.

And there are the raging fires...those that are so hard to put out. About two years ago, my home church burnt to the ground. It was the first cool night and the heat had been turned on for the first time. A faulty furnace created a fire that went up into the attic. When the United Methodist Men arrived at the church the next morning for their breakfast, smoke was coming out of the eaves. By the time the fire department could get there, the attic and roof were in the flames. The fire then got between the brick siding and the old clapboard siding of the 1800's, and they had to bring a trackhoe in to tear the building down in order for the fire to be put out. And, just last week, the raging wildfires in California. That's the kind of fire I'm referring to.

I've come to the conclusion that we need to be arsonists! We need to go back home and set some fires under some people in our local churches...to fan the flame and tell the story of mission.

From our beginning in 1869, millions of women have responded to God's call through their individual commitments to Jesus Christ and our shared PURPOSE as women organized for mission. Women have given tirelessly of themselves through prayer and possessions as they share God's love. Billions of dollars in financial aid and material resources have been provided to women, children, and youth around the world. It is my prayer that the flame of United Methodist Women will continue to burn bright and strong as we continue the legacy of women organized for mission.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord, we give you thanks for our foremothers who dared to forge a new path...one of women organized for mission. We give you thanks for those who have served so faithfully throughout the years in our mission institutions. We give you thanks for the membership of this great organization and for the many ways in which they have shown their support, whether it by through prayer, through participation in hands-on mission projects, speaking out on justice issues, or giving of their financial gifts. We ask for your continued blessings on United Methodist Women. May you lead, guide, and direct us in all that we do. May we always give you the praise and the glory. Amen