Monitoring Report by the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women for the Virtual Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering

This report provides a comprehensive look at the April 25, 2026, virtual Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering. Points of interest include gender reporting challenges, US-centric participation disproportional to worldwide membership, technical difficulties in a virtual world, and the impact of power dynamics.

Orienting

The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (GCSRW) is mandated by ¶2102 in The United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline* to function "as a monitor to ensure inclusiveness in the programmatic and administrative functioning of The United Methodist Church."[1] As such, GCSRW frequently monitors gatherings at all levels of the church, especially those at the worldwide level. The Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering is a prime example of a place to observe inclusiveness around who is serving and participating, and inversely, who is not present or missing. It is part of GCSRW's work to reflect these learnings back to the Church.

On Saturday, April 25, a virtual pre-cursor to the October 2026 Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering was held. This meeting was in addition to three webinars hosted in January, February, and March, on the topics of theology,[2] missiology,[3] and ecclesiology.[4] While the initial list of names and limited registration data[5] was released back on February 6,[6] this was the first occasion that participants were able to interact with one another directly.

[1] United Methodist Church. (2024). *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2020/2024*. United Methodist Publishing House.
[2] *"Love Boldly" webinar on theology*. (2026, January 24). Resource UMC. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from, https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/love-boldly-webinar-on-theology
[3] *"Serve Joyfully" webinar on missiology*. (2026, February 21). Resource UMC. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from, https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/serve-joyfully-webinar-on-missiology
[4] *"Lead Courageously" webinar on ecclesiology*
[5] *List of 2026 COB Leadership Gathering Participants*. (2026, February 6). Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2026/02/06/19/40/leadership-gathering-participants-2-6-2026.pdf
[6] *COB Leadership Gathering Participants Reflect Worldwide, Intergenerational Voices*. (2026, February 6). Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.umc.org/en/content/cob-leadership-gathering-participants-reflect-worldwide-intergenerational-voices

Initial Participant Data

The *List of 2026 COB Leadership Gathering Participants*[7] provides a limited snapshot into the breadth of participants, based specifically on Clergy and Laity designation, as well as Episcopal Areas and Other Designations. "Other Designations" identifies General Secretaries, Retired Bishops, and Long-Term Disability Designations. In addition to those designations, a demographic summary was provided. While a swath of aggregated data was provided and can be reviewed broadly, GCSRW particularly noted that the "Gender" category was unclear. For example, of the 287 registrants, only 9 self-identified as Female and 11 self-identified as Male. As a result, we are unable to report accurate gender breakdowns of the participants based on these numbers.

Other initial information of note includes a breakdown of participants according to Episcopal Area and Other Designation:

Designation	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas	94	33%
United States Episcopal Areas	172	60%
General Secretaries	14	5%
Long-Term Disability	1	0.003%
Retired Bishops	6	2%
Total Participants	**287**	**100%**

Interestingly enough, for the first time in history, the delegate count for General Conference 2028 will consist of "46% from the U.S. and 54% from Africa, the Philippines, Europe and concordat churches that have close ties to The United Methodist Church.[8]"[9] As the worldwide United Methodist Church continues to shift in this growth pattern, it is worth noting that the percentage of participants invited to the Leadership Gathering from the Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas makes up only about one-third of those invited.

Monitoring Begins

On February 9, 2026, GCSRW was invited to begin participating in the Leadership Gathering Design Team meetings. While given opportunities to advise the Design Team following that

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[7] *List of 2026 COB Leadership Gathering Participants*. (2026, February 6). Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2026/02/06/19/40/leadership-gathering-participants-2-6-2026.pdf

[8] Brooks, P.J. (2025, June 25). *United Methodist ecumenical relationships*. The United Methodist Church. https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodist-ecumenical-relationships

[9] Hahn, H. (2025, Nov. 12). *GC2028 delegate count marks historic shift*. UM News. https://www.umnews.org/en/news/gc2028-delegate-count-marks-historic-shift

February date, on April 14 it became officially clear to the agency that it would be allowed to monitor the virtual meeting scheduled for April 25. As such, across 11 days, GCSRW identified and trained 15 volunteer monitors, provided them with resources for additional learning, and prepared them as best as possible for the April 25 session. The monitors' monitoring experience ranged from none to very seasoned and two were GCSRW staff. Regardless of their level of familiarity with monitoring, this was a completely new process, and monitoring had never been done this way before.

The format of the April 25 meeting was intended to be 15 small group breakouts including roughly 20 participants each. On Tuesday, April 21, in preparation for the Saturday session, GSCRW received an initial list of registered participants broken out into their small groups. The agency did assist in reviewing those initial groups for best efforts at balance and diversity, based on Clergy/Lay status and Episcopal Areas/Other Designations. At that time, there were 175 registered of 287 total invited participants (61%). GCSRW took this information, and pre-populated its monitoring forms based on participants' names, and the aforementioned data. A monitor was then assigned to each group, while taking care to ensure that no monitor was in a room with their own bishop.

During the April 25 meeting, Stephanie Henry, co-convenor of the Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering, and Dr. Ashley Boggan, General Secretary of the Commission on Archives and History and member of the Design Team, both modeled self-identified introductions, and encouraged all participants to do the same during introductions in small groups. These actions were specifically intended to be helpful to GCSRW's monitors, for the agency to observe a clearer snapshot of those who are participating and serving in these conversations. As a best practice, self-identification helps avoid the likelihood that assumptions are made relating to a person's identifiers. The below identifiers are those that were recommended, based on a combination of historic GCSRW tracking terms, as well as other terminologies designated and utilized throughout The United Methodist Church and its agencies. For example, the General Commission on Finance and Administration utilizes the Race/Ethnicity identifiers below in its data collection.

Monitoring Identifiers	
Gender	Female, Male, Non-Binary
Race/Ethnicity	Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latine, Native American, Pacific Islander, White, Multiracial
Age	Youth (12-17), Young Adult (18-30), Adult (31-64), Older Adult (Over 65)
Status	Clergy, Laity
Disability	Yes, No, or as many specifics as you prefer to include

The intent was for voluntary, self-identified introductions to be made once by all participants, whereafter GCSRW monitors could utilize the data for observation at the October session, as well. Typically, GCSRW encourages providing optional registration identifiers which helps prevent participants from having to repeatedly self-identify verbally. In this case, GCSRW was not part of the initial surveying/registration process where this data might have been procured. It should also be noted that any such data is to be utilized in an aggregate way, primarily to track patterns of inclusiveness around serving and participating. It is never intended to be utilized to call out or identify specific individuals.

Response to UMC Global Survey 2026 Summary of Findings

As the April 25 meeting continued on, there were discussions relating to the *UMC Global Survey 2026 Summary of Findings*.[10] This information was presented for the first time, in a more detailed format than the above link. Throughout the presentation, our monitors and others observed the lack of gender and racial/ethnic data as part of the survey demographical information. It was also noted that only 12,292 survey responses were submitted worldwide, with 87.7% of them being from the United States.[11] Again, there are concerns here relating to proportionality of the makeup of the worldwide United Methodist Church. The majority of the respondents (71%) were also over the age of 55, while those under 35 made up 6.5% of respondents. This means that while every demographic group insisted that Youth and Young Adult Engagement is a top priority, Youth and Young Adult participation and perspective in the survey results was relatively non-existent. In addition to the above, it was also noted by monitors and participants that it was difficult to follow the data-heavy presentation and the speakers simultaneously. The hope is that in the future, having access to documents prior to an event would be helpful. This would provide more access for those with vision impairments or those who need translations to other languages.

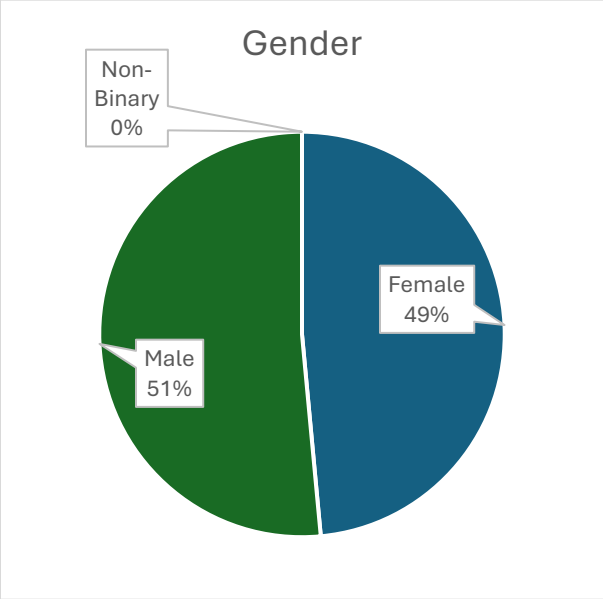
Small Group Breakouts

Following the survey data presentation, the meeting was set to proceed into breakout rooms. This is the moment where best laid plans got muddled. The initial 175 or so registrants had been pre-populated into their assigned breakout rooms. Since Tuesday, April 21, there were an additional 80-ish registrants for the virtual meeting, including GCSRW's 15 monitors. Due to a technical Zoom issue, those new additions had to be manually moved into their assigned

[10] *UMC Global Survey 2026 Summary of Findings*. (2026, April 25). The United Methodist Church. Retrieved on May 5, 2026, from https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2026/04/25/05/16/globalsurvey26_infographic_digital.pdf

[11] *UMC Global Survey 2026 Summary of Findings*. (2026, April 25). The United Methodist Church. Retrieved on May 5, 2026, from https://www.resourceumc.org/-/media/umc-media/2026/04/25/05/16/globalsurvey26_infographic_digital.pdf

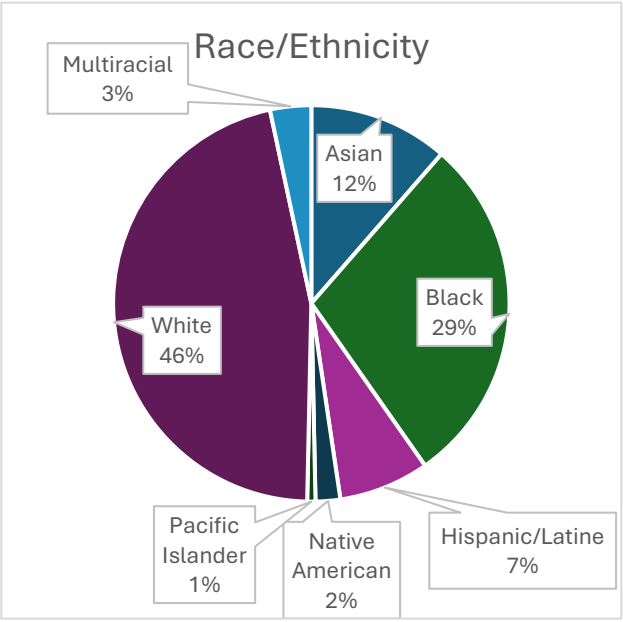
rooms. The sorting effort took nearly 15 minutes to complete. During those 15 minutes, each existing group had begun or even completed their introductions, including any self-identified information they wished to share. The problem was, not everyone was yet in the room, including our monitors who needed to document that information. As a result, GCSRW's monitoring efforts include incomplete reports and data. While GSCRW knows and understands that there is almost never a perfectly seamless monitoring situation, these limitations also prevent the agency from documenting a fuller understanding of those who are serving and participating along the way. Our limited data indicates the following:



Female	82	49%
Male	87	51%
Non-Binary	0	0%
Total	**169**	**100%**

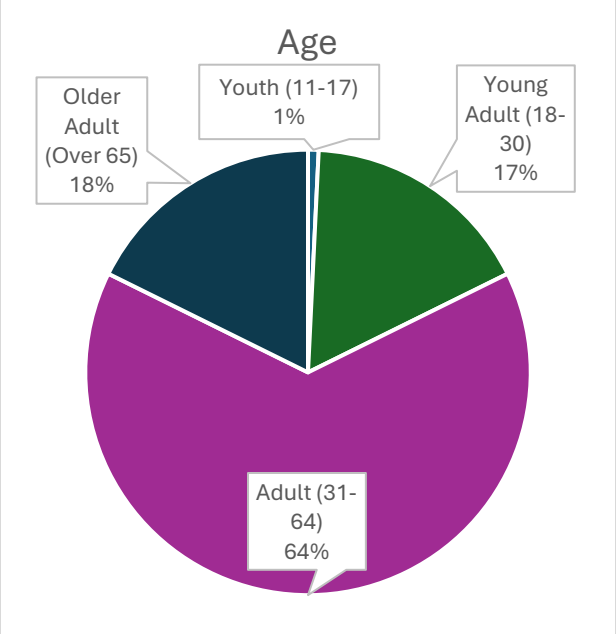
The Gender breakdown shows an almost even split between Female and Male. While GCSRW did not note any self-identified Non-Binary persons, there are several groups where the monitors missed introductions. It was observed in several different small groups that there was a specific dominance of males speaking or a specific dominance of females speaking. While an even split is often a positive indicator, in the United States, 58% of The United Methodist Church's Membership consists of Women.[12] Worldwide data is more limited on this indicator.

Asian	17	11%
Black	43	29%
Hispanic/Latine	11	7%
Native American	3	2%
Pacific Islander	1	1%
White	69	46%
Multiracial	5	3%
Total	**149**	**100%**



[12] *United States Region Membership by Gender*. UMData. Retrieved on May 6, 2026, from https://www.umdata.org/charts?jur=all&start=&end=

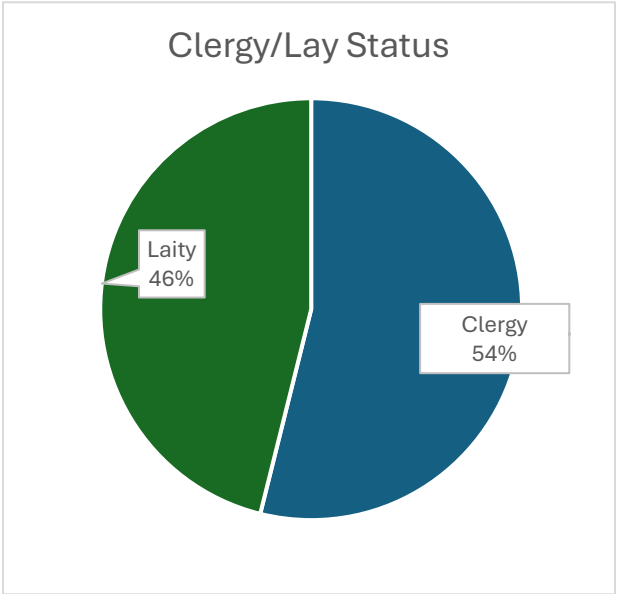
The Race/Ethnicity breakdown reflects the above totals, again, with the caveat that there are several groups where the monitor missed introductions. The largest self-identified group is White persons, followed by Black persons, then Asian, Hispanic/Latine, Multiracial, Native American, and Pacific Islander persons in that order. While not represented in this chart, there were documented reports around White persons dominating certain group conversations.



Youth (11-17)	1	1%
Young Adult (18-30)	22	17%
Adult (31-64)	84	65%
Older Adult (Over 65)	23	18%
Total	**130**	**100%**

This chart indicates the very low participation by Youth, followed by low participation from Young Adults and Older Adults. The majority of participants fall in the Adult category. It was mentioned in both the Survey Results and nearly every group that it is critical to increase engagement by Youth and Young Adults. Several monitors also observed that where there were Youth or Young Adults present, they introduced themselves but otherwise participated less than those in other categories.

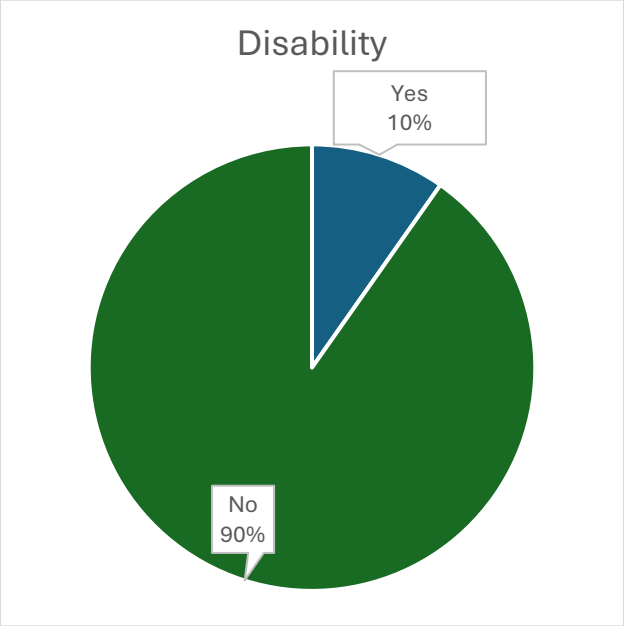
Clergy	104	54%
Laity	89	46%
Total	**193**	**100%**



Clergy/Lay Status is a near split, which reflects the overall initial registration based on the List of 2026 COB Leadership Gathering Participants.[13] That list indicates 56% Clergy and 44% Lay persons. To that end, across the worldwide connection, there are 48,951 Clergy, while there are

[13] *List of 2026 COB Leadership Gathering Participants*. (2026, February 6). Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2026/02/06/19/40/leadership-gathering-participants-2-6-2026.pdf

approximately 11,299,000 members.[14] That percentage closer to a representation of less than 1% Clergy as compared to Laity.

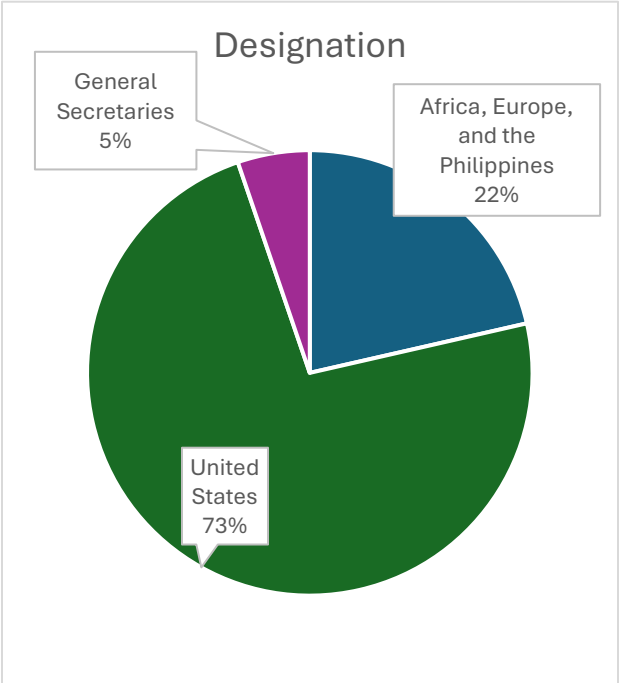


Yes	8	10%
No	74	90%
Total	**82**	**100%**

About 10% of participants self-reported disabilities. In certain groups, those participants felt comfortable privately sharing with the monitors what specific disability they had. During introductions, there was also at least one instance of making light of identifying a non-disability as a disability.

As a reminder, self-reporting for each of these identifiers is optional, which is why each category does not include the same number of totals. The monitors also noted several voluntary introductions regarding LGBTQIA+ identifiers, even though they were not included on the initial list of recommended identifiers. In the past, GCSRW has not explicitly monitored for this, but will consider including this as an additional optional identifier which participants can share in the future.

Participants from the Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas	45	21%
Participants from United States Episcopal Areas	154	73%
General Secretaries	11	5%
Total	**210**	**100%**



[14] *United Methodists At-A-Glance*. (2025, November). The United Methodist Church. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance

In addition to the voluntary self-identification process, GCSRW attempted to note participation in the April 25 session based on a person's Episcopal Area. Nearly three-quarters of participants were from United States Episcopal Areas. Further, all General Agencies are located within the United States, which necessarily indicates that the General Secretaries are functionally part of United States Episcopal Areas, as well. It should be noted that the total church membership for The United Methodist Church is more closely aligned with an even split than the percentages indicated on the chart above.[15]

There were a number of concerns across many of the small breakout groups relating to lack of representative voices from the Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas. Those who were present encountered frequent technical difficulties, including being randomly reassigned to small groups if they lost internet connection. It was specifically noted that The United Methodist Church should no longer be centralized around the United States, but most participants were from there. If this group is tasked with helping the church to envision its future iteration, there are many voices that are not present or participating. This should necessarily be considered as the in-person component of the Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering approaches.

The Future is Bright, with Growing Edges

Alongside the data and the technical aspects relating to a larger-scale event, there are often glimpses of an ideal world. Below you will find examples of "Best Practices" that were witnessed or experienced during the virtual meeting.

Best Practices

- Monitors felt welcomed once they arrived in a room.
- There were thoughtful, in-depth discussions around the questions posed to the participants.
- For the number of situations where issues of inequality or inequity were encountered, there were just as many observations of participants listening to one another with respect, consideration, attention, and genuine understanding.
- Many presiders made efforts to ensure that each participant had opportunities to share.

[15] United Methodists At-A-Glance. (2025, November). The United Methodist Church. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodists-at-a-glance

In addition to the aforementioned observations and data, GSCRW's monitors shared the following regarding participation and engagement, as well as feedback on the survey data that was being discussed in the small groups.

Participation and Engagement

- Participants who were assigned to a Zoom room manually did not enter the conversation at the same time as others, which limited opportunities to participate and serve.
- There were no set "rules of engagement" regarding who could speak when.
  - Several monitors observed that those from the US often began to speak whenever they wished, while those from Africa, Europe, and the Philippines typically raised their hand. Raised hands were frequently unacknowledged or unseen.
- Participants who were note-takers were limited in their conversational participation due to their roles as note-takers.
- Many technical terms, jargon, metaphors, and acronyms were utilized, making it a challenge for participants to understand and follow fast-moving conversations.
- Small Groups did not have access to the Survey Report that was presented, though they were asked to discuss it in breakouts.
- There was a general lack of representation from participants in the Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas.
  - Their voices were limited or missing, altogether.
  - There were significant translation issues, even in rooms with translators.
  - It was unclear whether participants who were off-camera had what they needed to fully participate. In his opening remarks, Bishop Saenz did encourage on-camera participation, if possible.
- When there were internet connectivity issues, losing connection often resulted in being assigned to a random breakout room. Participants frequently popped in and out of various rooms, indicated that they had come from a different room, then often said nothing else or did not introduce themselves.
  - These participants were noted to be primarily from the Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas.
- There were notes of concern regarding participants from the Africa, Europe, and Philippine Episcopal Areas obtaining Canadian visas for the in-person October meeting.
  - The lack of Canadian embassies in Africa is a significant challenge to overcome.
- A sense of power dynamics was woven throughout several small groups.

- Participants from the United States heavily dominated several conversations.
- Certain groups had 3 or more Bishops (up to 6, in one instance).
- Monitors noted that several Bishops had their title in their name on Zoom, while other participants had no title or designation at all.

❖ In nearly 40% of the small groups, Design Team members were either a Presider or spoke much of the time.
❖ There were no scheduled bathroom breaks.

Survey Results Feedback

❖ The 12,292 survey respondents make up less than 1% of the Church's membership. There was question as to whether this group should be relying on only those voices to steer the future of the Church.
❖ There is a lack of proportionality relating to The United Methodist Church's presence across the worldwide connection and where the survey results originated from.
❖ There were questions around why there were no gender or racial/ethnic demographic identifiers relating to the survey.
❖ There is a lack of clarity and/or consistency around age categorizations across the worldwide connection.

And yet, even with these struggles and uncertainties throughout the session, there was a strong sense of hope and optimism from many monitors and participants, alike.

Conclusion

Overall, it should be noted that a virtual event of this size and format had not been piloted before. The Design Team can only address and plan for what it envisions, which is why GCSRW can support those efforts through providing monitoring and sharing its results along the way. The in-person component of this meeting lies ahead in October, and all participants should consider the above data and reflect on how one's own self-awareness can facilitate change in a positive way to be more inclusive for all.

Data itself is only a set of numbers and other information. However, that is just part of the story. Data helps us better understand who makes up the United Methodist Church, who is participating and serving, and conversely, who is missing. Monitoring takes a significant amount of time and effort from volunteers and staff, as well as from all participants in the process. GCSRW is aware of the range of worldwide cultural contexts that provide for varying perspectives on this type of data work. That is one reason why providing self-identified

information is always optional. Even so, GCSRW reiterates the importance of understanding what equity and equality look like in action, and how monitoring can contribute to that.

One way to help streamline the monitoring process is to voluntarily provide these self-identifiers prior to events like the Virtual Council of Bishops Leadership Gathering. If this information is provided ahead of time, conversations will flow more organically and monitors will be able to better observe who is participating and serving. Another way to be proactive is to become familiar with GCSRW's Monitoring Toolkit.[16] As GCSRW is mandated to do this work, the agency is ready and available to assist with resourcing and training relating to monitoring efforts at all levels of The United Methodist Church. The time and efforts in collaborating with GCSRW in the early days of an event can help save trouble for all later.

GCSRW would like to thank its volunteer monitors for their willingness to serve in new territory with only a week of advance notice. Sheila, Sophia, Emily, Joscelyn, Joe D., Sylvia, Kelli, Joe K., Grace, Kalamba, Angel, Lorrin, Galen, and Gray, this could not have been done without you!

[16] *GCSRW launches new Monitoring Toolkit*. (2026). Resource UMC. Retrieved May 5, 2026, from https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsrw/home/content/gcsrw-launches-new-monitoring-toolkit