

What Can I Do?

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What Leaders in the Interfaith Community Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

UTAH **WOMEN & LEADERSHIP** Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2020 gathering of 25 leaders within the local interfaith community. Religious and faith-based organizations are of vital importance to many individuals and families, and these leaders recognize the positive role they can have in the lives of Utah women and girls.

CULTURE

Utah is a state in which religion plays a particularly large role in the overall culture and in many aspects of everyday life. While the state has one dominant religion, the influence of all faith-based organizations can be felt as faith is often part of the general public discourse. Leaders in the interfaith community can make the most of this access by raising their voices on behalf of women and girls in the state. This can happen in the following ways:

- Affirm the inherent value of every individual (regardless of gender or any other factor); ensure the public messaging shared both within individual religious organizations and to the broader community is aligned with this core tenet: the innate worth of all persons.
- Identify paradigms surrounding gender within both the religious and larger community that may need to be challenged, upheld, or revisited.
- Share values and principles stemming from religious doctrines and practices that can positively influence cultural attitudes in terms of gender (e.g., all are called to serve, finding unity through diversity).

- Support the notion that women can play many roles and have diverse aspects of their identity; champion the potential for learning, growth, and achievement that is inherent in all women and girls.
- Celebrate the various types of work that women are engaged in, including both paid and unpaid work.
- Create clear messaging to men and boys that stresses the need to treat women and girls with dignity, respect, and fairness.
- Remain open to inspiration from many sources (spiritual and otherwise) that can help elevate women.

OPPORTUNITY

As one of the key touchstones to the broader community for many women (especially those who spend much of their time in the home), churches can be a powerful proving ground for leadership and growth. Religious leaders can facilitate this as they create opportunities for women and girls within their congregations as follows:

- Be willing to extend leadership opportunities to all church members, regardless of gender; ensure these roles are more than symbolic, and that women are truly empowered to act and influence.
- Resist the tendency to adhere to traditional gender roles in terms of activity, engagement, and leadership within church settings; invite women and girls to be involved in all aspects of the organization, depending on their individual interests, skills, and talents.

- Give girls the chance to plan, execute, and evaluate youth activities; allow them to succeed or fail and learn from their experiences; show appreciation for a job well done.
- Create abundant programming for youth that is free or inexpensive in order to allow girls from all different circumstances to participate.
- Raise awareness of church, community, education, civic, and professional opportunities for women, especially those who are home full-time and may lack ready access to seeing what is available.
- Demonstrate that leadership can take many forms; allow diverse congregants the chance to see themselves reflected in their leaders.
- Form women-only meeting spaces (in-person or virtual groups) where women can build relationships.
- Ensure that women and girls have access to positive role models and mentors who can help them see the possibilities and pathways ahead.
- Highlight examples of strong women leaders in scripture, religious history, and other sacred texts; inspiration comes by seeing the role that past women have played in their spiritual traditions.
- Welcome greater ethnic, racial, and cultural dialogue into congregations; invite all members to humbly explore and assess their own traditions for norms or practices that disadvantage or limit women and girls.
- Encourage intergenerational conversations; explore and emphasize what girls and boys can learn from women and men, and vice versa.
- Assess the unique situations of various congregants: religious communities include single mothers, women who are incarcerated, refugees, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and many others; these individuals face distinct challenges but can also share valuable experiences and perspectives with all members.
- Be sensitive to women and girls who have experienced trauma or abuse; stay informed about best practices for religious leaders in such cases, and ensure all members receive youth protection training where relevant.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Finally, interfaith leaders have a responsibility to reach out to the broader community, working with other faith-based institutions, nonprofits, educational organizations, and public agencies. This intentional collaboration can greatly benefit Utah girls and women as leaders do the following:

- Look for organizations with common interests and shared values (including entities focused on women and girls) to involve congregants in outreach; centers of worship can be the main connection to the community for many women, and churches with broad networks can expand women's opportunities.
- Capitalize on high profile events (e.g., National Day of Prayer) to give women the opportunity to be visible and powerful role models.
- Partner with social service organizations such as the United Way to ensure parishioners have access to necessary support and also to provide opportunities for community service.
- Involve all members in outreach, including with organizations that may not seem obvious for women's involvement; for example, women may discover new skills, talents, and interests while engaging with Habitat for Humanity, community gardens, Red Cross Disaster Relief, or Scouting.
- Stay open-minded when choosing partner organizations; new connections can be powerful and can also lead to healing and greater community cohesion.

PERSONAL GROWTH

As girls and women are given more opportunities to engage and lead within their organizations and elsewhere, they will naturally face challenges and self-doubt. Religious leaders can foster resilience and growth through these experiences as follows:

- Utilize proven methods for developing confidence and competence: give opportunity, allow for failure, encourage reflection, then repeat the process; girls and women are often socialized toward perfectionism, and this pattern can counteract that pressure.
- Invite the personal learning and growth that comes through vulnerability; model authenticity, humility, and resilience so women will feel free to question long-held assumptions and beliefs in order to move into greater knowledge and awareness.
- Reinforce self-esteem by taking an interest in girls and women within congregations; facilitate self-discovery through one-on-one conversations, listen to their stories, and be generous with time and attention.
- Recognize that girls and women will all go through their own individual faith journeys.

DIVERSE POPULATIONS

Religious leaders in the interfaith community have the opportunity and responsibility to work with individuals from all backgrounds, life experiences, and demographic groups. This presents a distinct challenge to serve and uplift in a variety of different ways. Leaders can benefit the lives of all women and girls within their realm of influence by doing the following:

- Be proactive in reaching out to individuals, leaders, and communities that are unfamiliar or foreign; with an open heart, strive to learn from others and adopt virtue wherever it is found.

CONCLUSION

Religious leaders play a key role in Utah, and they can do much to strengthen their congregants and the broader community. As women and girls continue to play increasingly larger roles within faith-based institutions, the opportunities to support, engage, and empower women will grow as well. This momentum will not only benefit women themselves, but also their families, neighborhoods, churches, communities, and the state as a whole.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • www.utwomen.org • uwlp@usu.edu

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