



**THE INSTITUTE FOR
RESEARCH, EVALUATION, FACILITATION AND TRAINING**

Enabling Presbyterian Women: Steps Toward The Future

PW Enabler Evaluation, Phase Two

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Executive Summary

*“Make PW something people want to be a part of.
It’s an excellent program and deserves to survive.”*

—PW member

The Churchwide Coordinating Team (CCT) Presbyterian Women (PW) Enabler Committee asked REFT Institute, Inc., to conduct the regular evaluation of the PW Enabler program. Phase One of the evaluation consisted of 60 interviews of PW Enablers and PW Moderators from 10 Synods. They identified strong examples of how Presbyterian Women Enablers are doing their work.

From Phase One telephone interviews, the research team identified several issues troubling the PW Enabler system. Phase Two, therefore, took up these issues. The second phase consisted of professionally facilitated, small group discussions held at the five Synod Gatherings. All Synods, except for Puerto Rico, were represented in either one-on-one phone interviews (Phase One) or small group consultations at Synod Gatherings (Phase Two).

Results from Phase One of the PW Enabler Evaluation were confirmed in Phase Two—i.e., the PW Enablers are experiencing similar challenges in every part of the country. In some Synods and Presbyteries, the system is perceived to be generally thriving (amid some non-participatory churches), while in others, the PW Enabler system is barely functioning.

For Phase Two discussions, a selection of 141 Synod and Presbytery PW Moderators and PW Enablers, as well as a handful of congregational PW Moderators were invited to participate. Participants were encouraged to brainstorm ways of surmounting the common obstacles PW Enablers, congregation PW groups, and PW as a whole, face.

Common challenges clustered into three categories:

1. Infrastructure
 - PW Enabler and PW Moderator Roles and Responsibilities
 - PW Enabler’s Limited Resources
 - Position Terms and Leader Recruitment
2. Communication
 - PW Enabler’s Communication with the Churches
 - Training
 - Communication throughout the PW organization
3. Membership Recruitment
 - PW image

The discussion groups yielded not only new ideas for resolving these challenges, but also best practices—techniques that are working right now. These tested techniques are included as Appendix C: The Future - Best Practices.

Infrastructure

Ironically, PW's complex infrastructure, carefully created to avoid the pitfalls of a national organization, may actually be hindering the organization. The PW Enabler's position—a critical link between PW leadership and local churches—is suffering in many parts of the country.

PW, at all the different levels, thrives or stumbles depending upon the natural leadership qualities and resourcefulness of those women willing to be PW Enablers and PW Moderators. Streamlining the leadership structure, providing training and resources, and enforcing accountability would make a significant difference in overcoming infrastructure-related obstacles.

Communication

Again, because it is such a large, dispersed organization, PW is unable to communicate effectively up and down the lines of the organization. Regular, formalized trainings, increased use of electronic communication and telephone, and a few consistent information elements at Gatherings could, however, have a significant impact on improving the communication process.

Membership Recruitment

PW leaders across the country are concerned about dwindling numbers of PW members. PW's image is consistently seen as an impediment to membership recruitment. Currently, PW seems to be defined broadly, ranging from "older women cooks" to "radical liberals."

PW is, therefore, poised to redefine itself and communicate its vision and purpose widely. Implementing a focused, structured campaign of redefinition at the local, Presbytery and Synod levels, reinforced by printed and Web-based materials and Gathering workshops, could strengthen PW membership substantially.

PW Leaders' Perspectives

Overall, PW leaders were eager to share both challenges and successful strategies with REFT and with one another. Those women active in PW are involved because of their passionate commitment to what PW means to them. In churches and Presbyteries where PW is not thriving, PW members view non-participatory women as the "other"; where PW is thriving, PW leaders see other Presbyterian women as valuable for whatever fresh perspective they might bring.

In all cases, PW Moderators and PW Enablers want to feel that Churchwide represents them and their particular Synod's perspective. The women interviewed seemed to feel more aligned with Churchwide and more enthused about PW if they had attended one or more Churchwide Gatherings. For many, though, there was a large disconnect between what they experienced at a PW Gathering and what they experienced in their own Presbyteries and congregations.

Whether or not the PW Enabler system is substantially altered as a result of this study, PW needs enthusiastic, consistently trained, and sufficiently resourced leadership throughout the nation.

Recommendationsⁱ

In addition to the solutions proposed by PW members themselves (as listed in the previous section), REFT proposes the following possibilities. These are offered with the intent of opening a discussion about improving the PW Enabler system and PW as a whole. They are a smorgasbord of possibilities rather than a linear directive. Perhaps some combination of these ideas can help create a future path for Presbyterian Women that will nourish its current members and attract new members.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure of PW would benefit from streamlining leadership positions, simplifying the reporting structure, and increasing accountability for reasonable duties.

1. *Streamline the Organization's Structure.*
 - a. Consider reducing the number and clarifying the roles of leadership positions in each Synod and Presbytery. As possible, develop overlapping leadership terms to facilitate mentoring.
 - b. Train a cadre of specialists to assist with new church development, conflict mediation, pastor resistance, etc.
 - c. Consider more efficient ways of transmitting PW information that does not rely primarily on individual volunteers.
 - d. Use temporary task groups, rather than primarily individual leaders to accomplish PW's planning and information dispersal needs.
 - e. Encourage the use of term limits. Synod PW leaders might provide the technical assistance for those confronting leadership transition challenges.
 - f. Develop ways that congregational PW groups provide greater input into national program development. This input could influence the selection of mission-giving projects or justice and peace issues.

2. *Provide Resources.*
 - a. Provide the resources needed for leadership training
Examples: Insert all necessary forms in the Appendix of the *PW Manual*. Make all forms available for printing from the PW Web site.
 - b. Provide the resources needed for covering the costs of leadership work.
Example: Provide PW Enablers and PW Moderators with long-distance calling cards, as well as stamped envelopes and postcards.
 - c. Develop an expectation that leaders charge for their expenses.
 - d. Train PW leaders in email and other forms of electronic communication. Perhaps send every new PW leader an easy-to-follow guide to setting up email and using it to communicate with other PW leaders.

- e. PW leaders should be able to draw from a variety of resources directed specifically at their types of contexts.

Example: A manual containing a particular infrastructure and set of approaches for rural Presbyteries, and a different set for urban/suburban Presbyteries.

Example: Supplemental materials could include a suggested structure and set of techniques for areas where there is (a) a large, young Presbyterian population, (b) a small, aging Presbyterian population.

3. *Perform Regular Evaluations.*

- a. Develop bi-annual local evaluations of elected and non-elected PW leaders
- b. Perform regular assessments of the activities and needs of congregational groups. Use these evaluations to develop work plans for PW leaders.
- c. Develop intentional celebrations and rewards for PW volunteer work, perhaps as a regular part of Gatherings.

Communication

Improved communication was the number one topic discussion group participants wrote about in response to the questionnaires' prompting them for the "one thing" they would want to tell CCT. Just as PW Enablers are encouraged to contact their churches more than once, in more than one communication mode, through more than one channel, so should the Churchwide PW office communicate with PW members in multiple ways at every level.

1. *Clarify the language used to describe PW.*

- a. Eliminate acronyms, and substitute these with more meaningful, short identifiers to avoid being considered a clique.ⁱⁱ
- b. Avoid "fluff" during trainings. Provide substance.
- c. Change the name of the PW Enabler. Many current members find it highly offensive;ⁱⁱⁱ therefore, it is likely that potential members do as well. "Liaison," "Support Person," "Resource Person," "Connector," and "Encourager" were all suggested as substitutes.

2. *Increase electronic communication.*

- a. Keep the PW Web site updated. By doing so, one creates an electronic culture and an expectation that needed information will be found on the Web site. All email links need to be viable and responsive to reinforce this culture.

Examples: All manuals and forms should be available for print and download; All calendar items should be current; ideally contact persons and addresses could be updated online.

Examples: Set up list serves or chat groups for various PW leadership positions (i.e., one for PW Enablers from around the country, one for PW congregation Moderators, and so on).

3. *Develop consistent, thorough training*
 - a. Institute a *traveling training team* to ensure appropriate, reliable, consistent leadership training in every Synod. This team should know about regional differences (including cultural attitudes, ethnic populations, geographical circumstances, economic circumstances, etc.)
Example: Training could include (1) PW 101—History, Purpose and Resources, (2) PW Moderator and PW Enabler Job Descriptions (from congregation to Synod), (3) PW’s Changing Faces (update on PW’s future), and (4) Basic Leadership Skills.
 - b. To ensure training reaches out sufficiently, implement a Train the Trainer curriculum in each Synod and distance-learning curriculum for “in between” times.
 - c. Audioconference trainings, or other distance learning media, could be implemented annually for each PW leadership position (congregation, Presbytery, Synod).

4. *Improve efficiency of non-electronic communication*
 - a. Bridge communication gaps with mailings from Churchwide to each Presbytery annually.
Example: Annual mailing could include a packet of information in a resistant container with all important dates and contact information that each local PW Church group would need.
Example: Each container could contain pre-addressed postcards for obtaining additional, specific information.^{iv} These would serve as easy ways for congregations to make contact with PW leadership, and thereby, provide PW leadership with feedback from the churches.^v

5. *Facilitate communication between leaders.*
 - a. Regular discussions of issues between like leaders.
Example: All PW Enablers in each Synod could meet informally once a year to support each other and share ideas.
Example: Each meeting could have a theme (e.g., supporting small PW Church groups, overcoming pastor resistance, etc.)
 - b. Regular sharing of ideas between like presbyteries (rural to rural, small church to small church, urban to urban, etc.)

Membership Recruitment

1. *Rethink the focus.*
 - a. If the goal is to enliven and enlarge PW, then think: “What do these unaffiliated women want from a church group?”
Example: Conduct formal or informal “assets and needs assessments” of church groups. (i.e., What do Church groups need in order to thrive?)

Example: Conduct needs assessments of non-affiliated women in churches. (What do women in the pew want from a women's church group?)

2. *Be flexible on the local level.*
 - a. Allow circles to form out of a particular group of women's needs, and let them form themselves rather than impose a set of rules upon them.^{vi}
 - b. Keep circle sizes relatively small, so everyone feels important to the group.^{vii}
 - c. Consider having circles dedicated to each generation of women, or for each set of interests the women want to emphasize. The groups could come together two or three times a year for special events.
 - d. Consider sponsoring "circles" or groups that are co-ed—for young couples, or for new parents, for instance.

3. *Connect with other Presbyterian women.*
 - a. The congregation PW can position itself as the one responsible in a church for reaching non-active members.
 - b. Meet with the local college women's networks, if applicable.

Example: Hold discussions that ask them what they hope to find among women of faith when they "graduate" from their college group and demonstrate the resources PW has to meet some of those wishes.
 - c. Solicit names of women between 30-45 years of age from all churches. Hold an informal Gathering just for them.
 - d. Encourage PW members to share "testimonials" with women at their churches about what PW has done for them in their lives.^{viii}

Gatherings

1. *Make good use of Gatherings.*

Use participants' time wisely, with attention to spiritual needs, practical instruction, intellectual stimulation and reinvigoration of enthusiasm.

 - a. Hold more cluster Gatherings to facilitate information exchange.

Example: A Synod or Presbytery leader could attend a cluster Gathering and make herself available as a resource and cheerleader.
 - b. Invite women of the pew to cluster Gatherings, Presbytery Gatherings, Synod Gatherings and Churchwide Gatherings. Make it worthwhile and inspiring for them.

Example: Offer a variety of spiritual and practical workshops geared at their interests.
 - c. Hold training sessions on electronic communication methods (e.g., email list serves and chat rooms, Web site design, audioconferencing, etc.)
 - d. Include structured mentoring opportunities for PW leaders to mentor one another.

Example: Older grandmothers can share wisdom with young mothers. Seasoned social activists can mentor more inexperienced, but passionate, women.

- e. Provide workshops about leadership skills and energizing your organization (which would be applicable to any organizational affiliation women might have).
Example: Train on public speaking, facilitating groups, the logistics behind event planning, conflict resolution, assertive communication, motivating others, organizational skills, etc.
- f. Provide a breakout session on being a PW leader
Example: Include a basic introduction to the organizational chart, to the various positions' responsibilities, to PW's purpose and history.
- g. Invite professionals from the PW community to share their knowledge.
Example: Writing a will, estate planning, managing investments, gourmet cooking.
- h. Be imaginative about the inclusion of spirituality.
Example: Share baptism stories, explore the different stages of devotion during different phases of life, feminist theology, Bible study sessions.

Suggestions for Action

- ◆ **SHARE.** Share the results of this report at all levels of Presbyterian Women to demonstrate transparency and open communication.
 - Example: Post the report on the Web.
 - Example: Send a hardcopy of the Executive Summary, Best Practices, and PW Web site address to every Synod and Presbytery CT
 - Example: Send hardcopies to all PW Enablers.
- ◆ **ENVISION.** Engage in a structured visioning process, including, but not limited to, the following questions:
 - Should PW transform its organization? If so, why and how?
 - How do PW Enablers support the purpose of PW? Are all aspects of the purpose equally important at this time? Should they be prioritized for planning?^x
 - How can communication be improved across PW?
 - Does PW need to attract younger women? Or can it serve as *the* group for women whose children are grown and/or who have retired?
- ◆ **DECIDE.** Decide what must be preserved about PW Enablers and what could fall away and not harm the essence of PW. Consider all recommendations methodically and select only those that seem both promising and related to the articulated vision.

- ◆ **SET GOALS.** Choose a workable time frame and identify clear goals, so progress can be recognized.
- ◆ **SHARE AGAIN.** Communicate with all PW members about PW's progress toward its goals and listen to feedback.

ⁱ The "Recommendations" and "Suggestions for Action" sections are repeated verbatim from the "Executive Summary."

ⁱⁱ Several groups agreed that the overuse of acronyms and obscure labels is alienating to outsiders. One new PW member said, "It's like a secret society, you know, where you have to know the correct words and terms to get in."

ⁱⁱⁱ In 12 out of 21 discussion groups, one or more participants brought up the need for a PW Enabler name change, if the position was to be retained.

^{iv} One postcard for each of the following: (a) indicating the PW Moderator/contact person received the information, (b) requesting an informal visit from a PW leader, (c) scheduling an installation or other formal visit, (d) requesting support materials, (e) asking a question about PW, (f) updating their own contact information.

^v As one PW Enabler said, "You send them [churches] stuff, and it's like a black hole. . . . You don't get any feedback on whether they got it or whether they threw it away."

^{vi} "While a few newcomers are content to join long-established groups, many more gain a sense of belonging by helping pioneer the new" (Schaller, 33).

^{vii} Schaller stresses the importance of using the appropriate techniques for each size group. Groups of seven or fewer create kinship ties and prefer their small group's closeness over incorporating outsiders. Middle-sized groups, on the other hand, require a charismatic leader, a task orientation and regular schedule in order to remain intact (pp.30-31).

^{viii} A video could be created with one or two women from every Synod sharing her personal reasons why PW is important to her, how it has changed her life, or how she felt about PW before and after her first Gathering, etc. In this situation, younger women could share their stereotype of PW and how it was diffused once they became involved.

^{ix} Schaller asks, "Should the women's organization in your congregation or denomination be organized *primarily* around missions or *primarily* as an advocacy group on behalf of women or *primarily* to be responsive to a variety of the needs of today's women?" (p.23)