

Coming Together to Avoid the Glass Cliff

While there is much to be celebrated about the nomination of Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson as the UCC's next General Minister and President, the Antoinette Brown Society Leadership Committee is also aware of the numerous challenges and pitfalls our first female General Minister and President is likely to face. Some will be specific to this time and place but also this is a very common occurrence for women in leadership, especially those who represent the "first" in their role.



The phenomenon of "first woman" leaders being branded with the decline of their organization is a phenomenon called the Glass Cliff. The term "glass cliff" was coined by researchers Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam in "The Glass Cliff: Exploring the Dynamics Surrounding the Appointment of Women to Precarious Leadership Positions," published in 2004. In this groundbreaking study, Ryan and Haslam introduced the concept and the term "glass cliff" to describe the increasingly common occurrence of women being appointed to leadership positions during times of crisis or organizational decline.

When decline inevitably continues, increases even with new leadership, or even when the life of the organization ends completely, the newly appointed woman at the head of the organization is blamed. In these circumstances it is far too easy to ignore the pattern of decline which predated her leadership.

The United Church of Christ is facing significant challenges and decline. Decline in our congregations, decline in membership, decline in financial resources and more. This trend has existed for decades and far predates the service of Rev. Dr. Thompson. Without enough awareness, it will be tempting to blame past and future decline on the new vision, new ideas, new leadership, of Rev. Dr. Thompson. But with awareness, we can do better.

The work of leading the United Church of Christ, in this time and place, is immense in scope. There is much work to do, in all settings of the Church. The Antoinette Brown Society Leadership Committee, as part of our work, hopes to educate the Wider Church and community on the glass cliff phenomenon. Without such awareness, we risk withholding support for brilliant leaders who have been called for such a time as this.

We hope this will lead to more support around female leadership in all settings, and especially the leadership of Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson in her presidency, compassion for her journey, and support for the challenges ahead.

Please join us in prayer for powerful leadership, for our General Minister and President especially, and for all The United Church of Christ in all our settings.

-Rev. Courtney Stange-Tregear on behalf of the ABS Leadership Team