

response

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Circling Up to Protect Maternal Health

The Circle Up circle of United Methodist Women in Austin, Texas, takes action for maternal and child health.

by **TEGRA SWOGGER**

United Methodist Women has been supporting maternal health since its founding in 1869. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as we do ourselves, and the sacredness of mothers and children

is central to the Christian faith. Today, Circle Up, a new circle of the United Methodist Women at First United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas, has been involved with supporting legislation to improve maternal health in Texas, even hosting an event earlier this

year that was attended by state representatives and their staff.

Turning conversation into action

In early 2017, the United Methodist Women of the First United Methodist



Courtesy Tegra Swogger

Members of the Circle Up circle of United Methodist Women at First United Methodist Church of Austin, Texas, visit with State Representative Celia Israel, center, and her staff. Israel attended and spoke at the Brunch and Learn About Maternal Health event hosted by Circle Up.

Church were on a mission to bridge the gap between generations. Though younger women were members of the church, they weren't members of United Methodist Women. Darcy Hamre, founding member of Circle Up, was at the time not yet a member of United Methodist Women and agreed to meet with the church leadership to discuss how United Methodist Women could bring together all generations of women in the church.

The answer: By turning conversation into action. The younger generation did not yet know the social justice roots and global advocacy work of United Methodist Women. The church's United Methodist Women went back to these roots to make noise for causes for women, children and youth in and beyond the church walls. They hosted a poster-making party for the local Women's March, focusing on the importance of women's rights bringing us all together.

The party was a huge success, bringing in women of all ages and political backgrounds from across Texas. The United Methodist Women wanted to continue this unification after the march as well. To keep the momentum going, a meeting was held with the unit president and other members along with members of the church's Mercy and Justice Team. A new circle was born, with a clear directive to have fewer meetings and with a narrower focus on impactful, purposeful calls to action. This new circle was intended to make United Methodist Women more accessible for women in their 20s, 30s and 40s in the middle of careers and raising young children but stilled called to advocacy and social justice.



Courtesy: Jebra Swogger

Postcards created for the Circle Up United Methodist Women's postcard writing party, which shared statistics about the current state of maternal health in Texas as well as recommendations on how to solve problems. Participants then filled in the back with either personal stories or prompts urging legislators to help mothers in Texas.

Maternal and child health

"We decided that younger women would be more likely to want to get involved if we were working together for a common cause: advocating for change and making a difference in our world," said Emily George, founding member of Circle Up. "We chose maternal and child health because it is an issue that affects everyone. We all know mothers, have mothers, know children and are mothers of children ourselves. In an effort to narrow our focus, we began to read about maternal and child health in our own community."

Whitney Thurman, another Circle Up founding member, contacted local health-care professionals already actively addressing the issue of maternal mortality to speak during First United Methodist Church's recurring Social

Justice Sunday series, bringing the issue to United Methodist Women members (and the congregation) where they are on Sunday mornings. Thurman then involved Kaycee Crisp, and they proceeded to enroll seven other women from the church congregation to create the first generation of Circle Up. They invited women from a variety of professional backgrounds who all had one thing in common: They are all mothers, some with their own traumatic birth or postpartum experiences. They recognize how privileged they are to have had access to quality health care, paid leave, supportive partners and so much more that helped navigate pregnancy and new motherhood.

This was a driving force of the initiative—to consistently lift the voices

of those who are not so fortunate, and the centerpiece of their advocacy efforts is equitable access to care for women of color. Black women are more than three times more likely than white women to be impacted by maternal mortality or morbidity, regardless of education level, socioeconomic status or any other qualifier.

Once the circle had formed, it was time to take action. In the summer of 2018, the first Circle Up meeting was held, and the main focuses of the initiative were hammered out. These were expanding access to equitable health care, improving the accuracy of data collected about maternal deaths, implementing evidence-based care and deepening efforts to understand the racial disparities in maternal health outcomes.

It was quickly decided that in order to make waves, the circle needed to enroll the larger power of United Methodist Women. When it comes to policymakers, one of the biggest ways to make a statement is to lead with numbers, so Circle Up began with the whole unit of United Methodist Women at First United Methodist Church. Thurman gave a presentation to unit leadership, which received unanimous approval to continue on to the district. With the district's approval, Circle Up continued on to the conference leadership, gaining momentum and enrolling more and more United Methodist Women members in the state interested in working together to make a difference for mothers across Texas.

Time for action

Because of its proximity to the state capitol, First United Methodist Church boasts a sizeable number of members

with legislative and policy experience. This direct line to policymakers led to the decision to stagger and diversify approaches to making legislative changes for maternal health. At this point, Circle Up had impressive membership numbers behind them and had begun to make strategic alliances with other organizations, so now it was time to take action.


In November 2018, Circle Up hosted a postcard party in order to enroll United Methodist Women members from the Capital District and reach out to legislators about getting maternal health on their radar for the upcoming legislative session. The Circle Up team designed postcards containing statistics about maternal health in Texas as well as suggested actions lawmakers could take to address the issues. At the party, participants wrote personal notes on the back of the postcards as they participated in a guided discussion about the importance of prioritizing maternal health.

After that, members of Circle Up partnered with other United Methodist Women members to visit different legislative offices to discuss what was being done to promote maternal health in anticipation of the upcoming state legislative session. Members also attended committee hearings, where they met and made strategic partnerships with women from other community-based organizations. What became abundantly clear was that there were already a multitude of organizations doing this work in Texas, most of which centered around or were led by women of color. Circle Up members quickly decided that the best course of action for the group was to follow, support and echo groups like the Black Ma-

mas Community Collective, Texans Care for Children and the Texas Women's Healthcare Coalition.

When the current legislative session started, Circle Up hosted a "Brunch and Learn About Maternal Health" event to connect legislators from the state senate and house of representatives with a panel of maternal health policy experts. Staffers from over 50 different legislative offices came, and State Representative Shawn Thierry, who has her own personal experience with maternal morbidity, gave an impromptu speech about her plans to prioritize maternal health during the 2019 legislative session. Texas State Representatives Celia Israel and John Bucy III were also in attendance, giving the event great traction on both social media and the local CBS news.

Currently, Circle Up is collaborating with a variety of legislators who are drafting and have filed bills that would improve maternal health. Members have drafted and submitted Op-Eds for local papers and filed written testimony to the senate finance committee, and we continue to track proposed legislation during the ongoing legislative session and are persistently watching and waiting for any opportunity to get the word out about maternal mortality and morbidity.

Join us in our work! You can find us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/CircleUpUMW](https://www.facebook.com/CircleUpUMW) and Twitter at [@CircleUp_UMW](https://twitter.com/CircleUp_UMW), and learn more about United Methodist Women's End Maternal Mortality campaign at unitedmethodistwomen.org/maternal-child-health. 

Tegra Swogger is a member of the Circle Up: United Methodist Women for Moms circle at First United Methodist Church in Austin, Texas.