

A Year with Sally Vonner

CEO reflects on her first year in office

by **AUDREY STANTON-SMITH**



Katie Pryor

United Women in Faith General Secretary and CEO Sally Vonner, fifth from left, visits with members at First United Methodist Church in Lafayette, Louisiana. Vonner's first year in office has included in-person visits with more than 2,000 United Women in Faith members throughout the United States.

On July 29, 2023, United Women in Faith CEO and General Secretary Sally Vonner celebrated her new position during an installation service at Lovers Lane United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas.

“My primary focus is to continue and expand the mission and reach of United Women in Faith as we put our love and faith in action to change the world,

and work to improve the lives of women, children, and youth around the world,” Vonner said a year ago. “I commit to lead with faith and trust in God, the support of the directors, the program advisory group, my colleagues, and most of all, the members of United Women in Faith.”

Since then, Vonner has visited more than 2,000 United Women in Faith members at their meet-

ings, at worship services, online, and onsite in the National Mission Institutions and other places where women are carrying out their mission of love in action.

“It’s been amazing,” Vonner said of her first year in office. “Just so joy filled, and it just inspires me all the more. I can see God’s movement among us, and that gives me hope. It’s easy to get distracted by what is happening

in the church and in the political world, but I keep returning to Proverbs 4:25. ‘Let your eyes look directly forward and your gaze be straight before you.’

“And you do that with the vision God’s given you, and I believe that God has given us a vision for our growth. If we can all work together on that collectively, we’re going to see big things for United Women in Faith. That’s my prayer. That’s my hope. And that’s what I’m aiming for.”

Vonner said that her travels within the last year and those that fill nearly every weekend on her calendar for the rest of this year are made to connect more deeply and personally with members.

“In my travels I have also witnessed that we as national leaders have more work to do in supporting the local, district, and conference levels of the organization,” Vonner said. “I’ve met so many members. One, just recently in Nashville, told me she’s too old to be the president of her unit, but she keeps leading because she wants the work to continue. She believes in what we do.”

To that woman, involved with this organization for more than 50 years, and others like her, Vonner offers advice.

“Age is relative,” she said. “Most of us, when we came into the organization, didn’t have gray hair. We may have it now. That’s the beauty of how you can grow and connect and be a part of this great movement. So, talk about why you are here and share those sto-



Sally Vonner exchanges a hug with a friend at the 2023 North Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

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ries with the younger women. If we could step back and just remember where we were when we were their age and engage with them at that level, that’s such an important kind of authenticity.”

Vonner recalled how she, as a young mother who had recently left the corporate world, would bring her children to the United Methodist Women’s meetings and to their volunteer work at

Dallas Bethlehem Center. “And those women would just love on my babies,” she said.

It’s a story she shares not only in smaller meetings but sometimes from the pulpit. Vonner’s theological education makes her an ideal guest speaker for Sunday morning worship, so when she travels, she is sometimes asked to preach. Always thinking of the organization she serves, Von-

ner requests donations to United Women in Faith's Legacy Endowment Fund in lieu of an honorarium. After all, it was United Women in Faith that helped her long before she worked for the organization.

"It didn't dawn on me when I received a United Methodist Women scholarship when I was in seminary that I would ever be here," Vonner said. "I never saw or even imagined how I would be using that degree now for the work I do for the organization—all the writing, the devotions, the reflections, the speaking engagements—all theologically grounded. So, it has paid off more than tenfold."

With each scholarship granted by United Women in Faith, Vonner remembers her own and reflects on the connections she made when she was in college.

"There is so much alignment with my sorority and with what United Women in Faith does," Vonner said. "Building with other partners is helping us expand our reach, so we are prioritizing that."

"I've had so many memorable moments this past year, and not just with members," she continued. "People approach me everywhere I go to tell me what a difference this organization has made in their lives."

For instance, one man at a partner agency gathering told her that United Women in Faith literally saved his life. Unable to breathe well and get help from medical personnel, he felt led to call



Sally Vonner (center) says it is simply part of her nature to roll up her sleeves and help with work projects as she visits NMLs and United Women in Faith units. Here she is working with members in Minnesota..



Sally Vonner, in yellow, visits the North Rampart Community Center in New Orleans.

the president of then-United Methodist Women. Help arrived immediately.

Another time, first responders told Vonner that the women attending a meeting where she was speaking had made a difference.

"The EMT said, 'Who are you women? Is this a nurses' meeting? You all likely saved her life.' ...

Another time, I was speaking at the legislative event in Texas when there was a commotion in the hallway," Vonner said. "Someone who went to close the door saw a person on the floor and asked for medical help. Six women leapt to their feet and went out the door into the hallway and tended to that young man. That's the power



Sally Vonner visits with children at an after-school program at the North Rampart Community Center in New Orleans.

that I see of the gifts among our membership.

“And that’s the beauty of this organization,” Vonner said. “We save lives in so many different ways—not just by the way we give and are in mission together, but the expertise and the gifts that are in the body, and that’s scriptural. That preaches.”

Wherever she goes, Vonner doesn’t hesitate to roll up her sleeves and put her own gift of helping to work, whether it’s filling food boxes for those in need or simply preparing for a meeting.

“If I want to help you set up tables and chairs, let me do it. That’s just a part of who I am,” said Vonner, who made time for this



Sally Vonner (back to camera) and a United Women in Faith member pause for a hug as they fill food boxes at the Dallas Bethlehem Center in Texas.

virtual interview during a layover in Nashville, Tennessee, on her way from a board meeting to the Southeastern and Northeastern jurisdictional meeting that took place just before General Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina. From there, she traveled to Alaska for a Western jurisdiction meeting.

“I am one of you,” she continued. “The titles are important, and I want to respect that, but I’m still Sally. I’m still the person you knew before I got this title. There’s just something about service that my parents instilled in us, and that’s just a part of who I am. That’s what keeps me grounded. If you put anybody on the pedestal, put God up there.”

Audrey Stanton-Smith is editor of *response*.