

Great Plans for the Great Plains: A Vision

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

—Jeremiah 29: 11

What was it that Jeremiah saw?

Where the exiled community to whom he was writing perceived a tragic turn in their history, Jeremiah saw a **gift**. Where the exiles pulled their beards in grief and wrung their hands over their losses, Jeremiah imagined the hand of God inviting them to put their own hands and shoulders to work blessing their new home. “Search for me with all your heart,” God tells the people through the voice of the prophet, “and I will let you find me. Build houses and pray for the city where you are living.” God’s blessing is to be found even in the most unlikely places when God’s people turn outward from themselves and seek to bring his grace to their time and place in history.

Could God be telling United Methodists in Nebraska and Kansas something similar today? After inhabiting decades of bewildering change and organizational decline, is it possible that God has plans for a hopeful future for us if we seek to “build new houses” and to “plant new vineyards” to bless this time and place we inhabit today?

Imagine a United Methodist presence on the Great Plains where **more people** become disciples of Jesus Christ. Picture **more diverse disciples** and **more generations of disciples** in **more places** and in **more kinds of ministries** that bless and transform the communities of the Great Plains. Imagine re-energized United Methodists from the Great Plains living the Great Commission **globally** in partnership with Christians in Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere.

As far back as the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Nebraskans and Kansans have been linked together culturally, politically and spiritually. This is so not only because of geography but also because we share an overall Methodist ethos. Great Plains Methodists were born together in 1854 with the creation of the Kansas-Nebraska Mission District of the Missouri Annual Conference. Soon after, the Kansas-Nebraska Annual Conference was created, which lasted until 1860 when separate Nebraska and Kansas conferences were established. Since then, the development of our witness for Jesus Christ has been roughly parallel, first in growth and more recently in decline.

Our history reflects the general pattern of United Methodism in the United States. Over the last half-century, the need for executive leadership in the United Methodist Church has shifted as U.S. churches have diminished in number and membership, while our church has grown rapidly in Africa. Decisions were made at the 2008 General Conference intended to reduce the number of American bishops in order to free up funding for more African bishops.

In the spirit of that missional decision, each of the jurisdictions began working in good faith to implement this effort to rebalance our episcopal leadership.

Following a year of careful listening and study, the South Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops announced its intention to reconnect our two states into one episcopal area beginning in September 2012. This would enable our jurisdiction to do our part to support the growing need for bishops in Africa while right-sizing our own executive leadership at home. Bishops Jones and Sherer-Simpson then assembled a transition team of leadership from each of the three annual conferences in Nebraska and Kansas to study and make recommendations for how best to function as one episcopal area.

Recognizing that this process has its roots in a concern for the missional effectiveness of the whole church, the Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team believes that the Holy Spirit has opened a new door into God's plans for the future of ministry in our region. We believe that we have been given an unprecedented opportunity to create a new conference for a new century in a new episcopal area from the ground up. We believe it would be a serious mistake to miss the gift of being able to create a coherent organization for pursuing a unified missional strategy in our region of the country at this moment in history. We come to you recommending that our three annual conferences create one annual conference for our one episcopal area because it enables us to share expertise and resources with competent partners in ways that help us better adapt our current ministries to the altered landscape of 21st century ministry in the Great Plains.

Transitioning from three conferences to one conference will be difficult. We have established identities in the conferences where we are members. While we have many similarities, we acknowledge that each conference also has a distinct culture and way of operating. Indeed, a change in conference boundaries also means a change in our identity. But at our core, as United Methodists we find our identity in our God-given mission.

We offer five compelling, mission-focused reasons that move us to this recommendation:

- *One conference frees the Office of Bishop from performing internal management tasks in triplicate to be exercised more effectively for visionary leadership and adaptive change.
- *One conference allows us to reorganize internal structures to simplify decision-making and reduce bureaucratic barriers to best ministry. We can unleash the power of leadership *at all levels* to be exercised for more visionary leadership and adaptive change.
- *One conference gives us the opportunity to be proactive in re-inventing our connectional life as a whole. We know that our present course is unsustainable, declining in every measure related to people while rising in every measure related to finances despite the best efforts of good people

and good leaders. By creating one conference, we give ourselves maximum freedom to set a sustainable course for the future of United Methodism in our region.

- *One conference allows us to be more creative and adaptive in recruiting, training and deploying leaders of every kind needed for our area by creating critical masses in every ministry setting. In strengthening our leadership generally, we have the opportunity to exercise better leadership within the jurisdiction and general church as well.
- *One conference gives us freedom to better leverage our communication and technological assets to create a larger presence in the mission field and to better resource the communication and technology needs of local churches.

We recognize that organization is not itself the root of revitalization. Our goal is not to reorganize. Our goal is to re-vision what God wants of and for us. Our hope is that we catch a vision for God's work among us that re-energizes and calls us to respond in ways that enable rather than impede the leadership and witness of thousands of faithful United Methodists as we seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The Transition Team recommends the following set of motions to each of our annual conferences, praying that we, like Jeremiah, may see this moment as an invitation from God to put our hands and shoulders to work together for the blessing of the people to whom God has given us. It is in responding faithfully to that invitation that we see God's plans to give us hope and a future.

Great Plans for the Great Plains: A Proposal

Creation of a New Annual Conference

Motion 1:

The Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team moves that we create a single new conference encompassing the states of Nebraska and Kansas and authorize the Transition Team to bring a detailed implementation plan to the 2012 sessions of our three Annual Conferences.

Purpose and Vision of a New Annual Conference

Our new annual conference will reflect the purpose of an annual conference, which is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by organizing its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church, all to the glory of God." (2008 Book of Discipline, Paragraph 601)

Motion 2:

The Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team moves the adoption of the following vision statement for the conference encompassing Kansas and Nebraska: Our vision is to create a unified annual conference for the Great Plains for the purpose of sending passionate, effective and accountable spiritual leaders into the mission field and connecting local churches and outreach missions for accountability and support in the mission of making world-transforming disciples of Jesus Christ.

Vision Statement Definitions:

Send: *Send* means we deploy ordained clergy and other spiritual leaders, connecting people in powerful ways across the mission field to transform the way we live as individuals in community with God and one another.

Passionate: *Passionate* speaks to the vibrant and lively possibilities at home in quality leadership that can permeate the world to make radical change.

Effective: *Effective* signifies that the intent and purpose of our work matters. It matters enough that we are focused on impact, bold enough to consider new methods and brave enough to assess our efforts and the efforts of all sent to the mission field.

Accountable: When we say “*accountable*,” we mean that the annual conference holds the leaders sent to the mission field and the local churches accountable for engaging in ministry that produces good fruit, both in terms of healthy congregational relationships and robust growth, and also in terms of deep connections with the local community and the world. It means that we will seek to deeply understand needs and nuances of our mission fields, and, with care towards their gifts and graces, we will send leaders to be successful. We will send leaders with support, skill and assessment tools for success because bringing forth the transformation of the world demands such care of us.

Spiritual: *Spiritual* signals our unique calling within the world, to set to work honoring the sacred in all spaces and seeded within all people. We are not transforming the world because it is cost effective or to sell more products as a business leader might. We are sending spiritual leaders grounded in faith, rooted in God’s presence and active out of their sense of calling for the transformation of the world.

Leaders: *Leaders* are people with diverse gifts and graces who, through good stewardship and faithfulness, organize, facilitate, build and develop communities for ministry, whether it be accomplished through spreadsheet or sermon, legal review, property management or pastoral care. Leaders draw people into ministry.

Mission Field: *Mission field* is the ground of our engagement. It includes the local churches and their vividly transformed, richly rooted and broadly reaching members, and yet it is also beyond those local walls. The mission field is not bound; it is also the people we must meet in radically new ways to bring about the transformation of the world and to connect more deeply with the diversity of people beyond existing congregations of the United Methodist Church. As a connectional church, our mission field extends across plains and mountains, crossing oceans as we engage local people in global mission and world community.

Support: When we say “*support*,” we mean that leaders and churches work together in a collaborative spirit and through a meaningful organization that not only teaches and tools, assesses and holds accountable, but also shares struggles and celebrates joys together.

Support means that we will provide opportunities, tools and resources to develop effective leadership and facilitate growth. Support means we are stronger than any one church could be alone. We can weather the storms of life in the security of one another.

World-transforming: We are working to make the world *different*, a world that hums with the sweet sway of peace and celebrates God’s lively justice. We are seeking this change through the Wesleyan traditions that root us in a holiness that is, at once, deeply personal and yet profoundly social. Our tradition calls us to celebrate our diversity and yet live united in our common method, a method that calls us to embody our faith through reason, tradition, experience and our sacred scriptures that we might bring forth the reign of God.

Guiding Values of a New Annual Conference

As a new annual conference, how will we hold ourselves accountable to fulfilling our purpose? We will guide our work according to the five values listed below in Motion 3. Each value implies a set of standards by which we can measure the work of the annual conference and hold ourselves accountable.

Motion 3: The Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team moves the adoption of the following guiding values to identify our path into the future and to set standards for holding ourselves accountable to our vision.

Thriving ... Instead of Surviving

We are a people committed to a future that matters! We are done with “getting by” and “making ends meet.” We are ready to live boldly into a world that will be different because of our effort, work and energy. Growth and health, wonder and brilliance will be our branding. It will frame our work and offer a benchmark of success.

Our purpose calls us to work with passion to make effective change. It calls us to be churches for mission and purpose rather than people content to cover a salary or count the pennies until mission shares are paid. Our mission field requires us to be a people of action, accountable to the work of transformation rather than the work of upkeep and maintenance of buildings, structures and institutions. Our church calls us to be people focused on supporting effective and passionate leaders over systems of tenure. Our call is too important to keep ineffective methods in place for our own institutional comfort at the cost of our work for the transformation of the world.

Risk-taking and Creative ... Instead of Maintaining the Status Quo

We are open to the risky and vibrant ministry that is dynamic and fruitful. We will not judge ministry by its nature as inside or outside of “the box,” but rather we will assess its fruitful growth, its rich connections and its surprising depth. Creative ministry does not mean careless ministry or ministry that is different for the sake of difference. Creative ministry means that we will demand rigorous care and deep preparation to propel real change in our world.

Our purpose calls us to send effective leaders and to connect with the mission field that may reside within the walls of the local church just as much as it does in the communities

outside our stained-glass windows. This calls us to consider new models, to research our communities with great care and to be the people with the courage to be flexible and wise in our discernment.

Spirit-led ... Instead of Institution-driven

Over the course of time, we have become more focused on preserving the Church as an institution rather than viewing the Church as an instrument of God. John Wesley once said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.” In modern terms, many people today are concerned that “organized religion” has become more about the organization than religion. We will not put our structures, positions and individual power ahead of God’s calling. Instead, we will listen closely for the Spirit’s leading and follow that leading wherever it takes us.

Spiritual leaders are those who put the leading of the Spirit first. They put our God-given mission ahead of personal ambition. And at those times when, in their humanness, they and/or the churches they serve cease to follow the Spirit, mutual accountability and support from others will help to bring them back to our purpose.

Diversity ... Instead of Uniformity

Our picture of the Kingdom of God is one of welcome and wholeness. A “whole” community is one that welcomes all people, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 26-28) We recognize that part of God’s call for us is to reach every type of person “without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.” (Book of Discipline 2008, paragraph 4)

United Methodists in Nebraska and Kansas are mostly Caucasian, European in origin, physically able, older and richer than others in the region. While celebrating those who are part of our Church today, we will be more intentional in reaching the diverse population that makes up the mission field of our two states.

Wesleyan Identity and Spirit ... Instead of Denominational Confusion

United Methodists share a common heritage with Christians of every age and nation, grounded in and faithful to the apostolic witness, which is the root and standard of all valid Christian teaching. Our distinctiveness stems from an emphasis on “practical divinity”—the implementation of genuine Christianity in the lives of believers. As we teach basic Christian doctrine, we also teach intentional *methods* for putting faith and love into practice. (Book of Discipline 2008, paragraph 101).

We go forward as loyal heirs who adapt all that is best from our Wesleyan heritage to the challenges and opportunities of today’s mission field in Nebraska and Kansas. It is the proper role of the annual conference and its episcopal leader to support and hold accountable the leaders and congregations of our conference to our Wesleyan identity and spirit.

The Process for Creating a New Annual Conference

There are many creative ideas and important issues to be considered as we move forward into God's vision of Great Plans for the Great Plains. We must work diligently at matters of detail even as we seek to open ourselves to God's grand vision of our future. We will need the best contributions of wisdom, expertise and creativity from many more people as we work together to create a new annual conference with which to "build new houses" and to "plant new vineyards" to bless the Great Plains in the 21st century. It will be necessary to raise up a series of specialized teams whose purpose will be to guide our decision-making in a number of technical areas.

Two such technical teams have been created to date. The Joint Distributing Committee is studying the compensation, health insurance and pension practices of each of our current conferences. The Asset Allocation Team is compiling a comprehensive inventory of properties, holdings and institutional relationships as well as the apportionments formulas and budgets of the three annual conferences. Each of our conferences will receive an interim written report of these two technical teams at our 2011 annual conference sessions. Additional technical teams will be created to advise our conferences on other questions of organizational life as we move forward in stages to create a new annual conference.

The Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team's work began a year and a half ago with surveys and listening events in each of our annual conferences. We have talked with many people at district events, in committee meetings and over coffee or e-mail chats. We opened a Facebook page for receiving your thoughts and feedback in one place. In the near future, we will be asking some of you to serve on additional technical teams to help us create the best possible plans for the new conference.

Your thoughts and questions are a vital part of the ongoing process of discerning God's Great Plans for the Great Plains. After the March 13 webcast, the transition team will meet again April 7-9 in Topeka. Your feedback to our proposal will help shape the report we bring to the spring sessions of our three annual conferences.

"Search for me with all your heart," God told the exiled community in Babylon all those centuries ago. God invites the people of Nebraska and Kansas to do the same. God's blessings are to be found **whenever** God's people turn outward from themselves and seek to bring God's grace to their time and place in history. May we catch the Jeremiah vision for God's United Methodist Church on the Great Plains!

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