



GREAT PLANS *for the* GREAT PLAINS

■ Background

The 2008 General Conference mandated that each United States jurisdiction eliminate one episcopal area by Sept. 1, 2012. The South Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops decided in 2009 to create a Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area, effective on that date.

Since that time, a Transition Team comprised of laity and clergy from Kansas East, Kansas West and Nebraska has been listening and learning together, formulating a plan for how the three conferences can come together as one episcopal area. Through this process, the team is recommending creating a new annual conference within the new episcopal area.

“Great Plans for the Great Plains: A Vision” was presented at each annual conference’s session this past spring. A five-finger vote also was taken at that time, moving the momentum for one annual conference forward.

The annual conference discussions provided more feedback from United Methodist members, clergy and constituents from across the three conferences. While there is momentum for one annual conference, there are still many who have questions.

Technical and dream teams have been formed to help sharpen our vision for ministry as one episcopal area and potentially one new conference.

This document describes and recaps the Transition Team’s recommendations. It is intended as an informational document for discussion and for the gathering of additional feedback.

■ A bold vision

We have a bold story to tell. God has great plans for the Great Plains. God’s plans are rooted in Jeremiah’s story, with God at the center to guide us through change. The United Methodist Church is in a seismic shift — from a focus on membership to discipleship. You’ve seen the statistics about decline, challenges in funding, priorities set around leadership

and accountability and more. Yet, despite what some describe as trying times, we are living and telling a vibrant story. Transformation is happening.

We are answering the bold question that faces us: “How are we to be the church in this area we call the Great Plains?” Since the beginning of this process, the Transition Team and people from all three conferences have been engaged in a conversation and prayer about how to best organize for ministry in our states. At the same time, they’ve been telling bold stories of revitalization in its many forms. If we are to thrive, there is so much more to do.

The Transition Team is grateful to all who have shared their valuable insights through written feedback, phone calls, web-streaming events and conversations. After listening and reflecting, the Transition Team remains true to its conviction that becoming one new annual conference holds the best hope for us to be the church we are called to be.

This document outlines the Transition Team’s major recommendations for becoming one new annual conference. The proposal will be presented for vote to all three conferences during the spring 2012 annual conference sessions.

The Joint Called Clergy Session and upcoming listening sessions scheduled in all three conferences are intended to provide forums for more feedback and opportunities for discussion. The Transition Team proposal will be finalized during its March 1-2 meeting, in Manhattan, Kan.

■ Recommendations already announced

The following recommendations were announced in October. The recommendations are the result of many months of meetings and ad hoc groups providing information as well as ongoing feedback to presentations and informational sessions.



Typical Great Plains sunrise near Imperial, Neb.



Downtown Topeka, Kan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Name the new episcopal area the Great Plains Area.
- Name the new conference (should it be adopted) the Great Plains Annual Conference.
- Locate the episcopal residence in Wichita, Kan., through 2016; use 2012-16 as a time to determine where the residence should be permanently located. A “bishop in residence” location will be established in Lincoln, Neb.
- Establish a staff transitions committee to look at staffing for mission, including evaluation of office locations.
- Keep all existing camp sites open and existing boards; organize the camps under one camping oversight board.
- Keep all existing campus ministries open and existing boards; organize the campus ministries under one campus ministry oversight board.

■ What do we gain from becoming one conference?

There are four compelling benefits for becoming one conference within the new episcopal area.

1) LEADERSHIP

Lay members of our congregations say, “Send me a great pastor.” Pastors say, “Send me to a great congregation.”

Excellence in both clergy and laity leadership is key to a dynamic mission and ministry future.

A single Board of Ordained Ministry (BOM), alongside an appointive process that more intentionally matches pastors’ gifts and ministry expertise with affinities for specific ministry settings, are pinnacle benefits of becoming one new annual conference.

Establishing one new conference creates a critical mass of clergy who can move across the entire episcopal area. We already operate in a modified itinerant appointive system. The appointive process will continue to be a mutual conversation between pastors, churches and appointive cabinet. A united BOM will see that credentialing, including standards for commissioning, ordination and licensing, are consistent across the area. Lay and clergy partnerships are critical to our congregations.

2) REINVENTING CONNECTIONAL LIFE AND BREAKING BARRIERS

During listening events, it became clear that people are interested in the kinds of efficiencies one conference can offer. This is a matter of system-wide stewardship — deploying resources and leaders with excellence, nimbleness and great fruitfulness.

Neither the number of leaders nor the opportunities to lead will diminish as one new conference. Becoming one new conference takes us out of our comfort zones and forces us to rethink leadership and group structures, in addition to refocusing our strategies.

Moving from a three conference bureaucracy to a single conference structure will create fertile ground for new thinking and innovative ministry and administrative ideas.

3) A BISHOP FREED FOR VISION

Creating one new annual conference enables us to better utilize the gifts of the bishop. One conference frees the bishop of management tasks in triplicate. One conference will empower the bishop to set the vision for the entire region. If the focus of the bishop is ministry and innovation, the attention of the conference will be more focused on ministry. We are less likely to fall into the lure of maintaining a “status quo” approach to the mission field. The local church will be more likely to see the impact of efficient and effective leadership.

4) TECHNOLOGY FOR REGIONAL MISSION

Becoming one conference will enable us to redeploy funds and resources in more productive ways. Creating one conference enables us to better leverage our communication and technology assets. The goal is to have a greater presence in the mission field and to better resource the communication and technology needs of local churches. When it comes to technology we must walk away from the days of the haves and have nots. Technology will enable all of us to manage time and distance in more positive ways.

Deployment and training will be key factors in the success of technology across both a new episcopal area and a potential new conference.



Omaha, Neb., taken from the Missouri River side.



Satanta, Kan., representative of our many rural communities.

■ Dare to dream

Several dream teams have begun work to envision how a new annual conference might enable us to improve our faithfulness and fruitfulness in the Great Plains Area. Given the need to adapt to the dramatic changes around us, we think becoming one conference offers many ministry opportunities. The dream team approach enables us to address opportunity where it exists.

The Small Membership Church Dream Team sees exciting ways in which we can build a culture of connectedness, collaboration and vitality. We expect a greater focus on the development of lay and clergy leadership for those congregations.

A dream team focused on ministry with young people has forwarded ideas on how a new conference can give more attention to youth events, training of youth leaders, training and coaching of youth workers and the development of a 4-7 year design for local church youth ministry.

A dream team focused on racial/ethnic persons recognizes the spiritual value of diversity both in leadership development and in our mission field. We are experiencing opportunities for increasing ministries with Native American, Hispanic, Asian, African-American and other constituencies in our area.

■ How will I fit in a new conference?

Change is challenging with each of us responding differently. Regardless of whether or not we become one conference, all three conferences are facing dramatic change — the seismic shifts mentioned earlier are a reality for all our congregations. We must all find our places as we answer God’s call.

We have to remember that change is constant. The change we face today is not the first nor the last time that God’s people are called upon to adjust to new realities. As consultant and author Gil Rendle says, “The church we have inherited is not the church that has always been — nor is it the church that will always be.”

The church exists for God’s purposes and not for our own personal preferences. The most important thing we can do in this transitional period is to let God use us to form a bridge between the church of the past and the church of the future.

We invite all to keep the focus on the vision of Jeremiah 29:11, as we continue to discern how best to “build houses ... plant vineyards ... and seek the welfare ...” in the time and place God has given us.

■ How will we revitalize?

Structure alone will not revitalize our church. Revitalization happens when we focus our energy outside the walls of the church rather than on the inside.

Congregations must seek new and better ways to serve their communities and the connection must seek new and better ways to innovate and strengthen its support of local churches. We will be strengthened by new faith communities, connectional ministries and more viable and user-friendly technology.

The Transition Team believes one new regional conference will help us move our energy into outward focused ministry.

REBALANCE OUR CONNECTIONAL LIFE

A new entity offers the opportunity to streamline cumbersome processes and make us more nimble. By rebalancing our priorities we will be better equipped to create new faith communities and serve the ones we have.

NEW PEER PARTNERSHIPS

Kansas and Nebraska share many parallel demographics, economic patterns and settlement histories. Our commonalities are often greater along north-south rather than east-west alignments.

Forming one new conference enables the creation of peer partnerships between western Nebraska and Kansas congregations, and similar peer partnerships in our central and eastern regions.

Revitalization of local churches happens when congregations discover new ways to get outside their walls in their own communities.

Peer partnerships will enhance this process by creating relevant new and imaginative conversations between churches who find themselves in parallel ministry settings.

■ Mission shares, benefits and staffing

A vote for one new conference will empower a Council on Finance and Administration Team to devise a new mission share (apportionment) formula to be phased in over time. The new formula will invoke changes in such a way that no church will see more than a 10 percent change in any one year. Additionally the new formula will be sensitive to the current annual conferences practices, missional needs of local churches and annual conference ministries.

PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES REGARDING CLERGY BENEFITS, DESIGNATED FUNDS AND STAFFING

•No clergyperson who is already retired or retires before Dec. 31, 2013, will receive a smaller amount of pension or healthcare benefit than he/she is currently receiving.

•Nebraska clergy who retire before Dec. 31, 2013, will continue to receive retiree health insurance in accordance with policies as of July 1, 2012, using the funds currently in escrow. This will continue as long as funds last and as long as churches in Nebraska are willing to pay a separate mission share to support the benefit.

•Kansas West surviving spouses of clergy who retire before Dec. 31, 2013, will continue to receive 100 percent of their spouse's pension pre-1982 benefits. This will continue as long as money currently in escrow lasts and as long as churches in the bounds of the former Kansas West Conference are willing to pay a separate mission share to support this benefit.

•All funds, including endowment funds, given to an annual conference before Dec. 31, 2013, and designated for one or more particular purposes will be used for those purposes. This includes designations that require funds be used within the geography of the conference that raised the funds.

•All persons retiring after Jan. 1, 2014, (the date that a new conference is created) from the Great Plains Annual Conference will receive pension and health benefits determined by a new, common benefit plan. This plan will be adopted at the uniting conference to be held in the fall of 2013 to take effect Jan. 1, 2014.

•Conference staff whose positions are altered, eliminated or transferred due to the formation of a new conference can count on fairness and generosity.

•These principles will hold insofar as they are consistent with the "Discipline," state and federal law and the General Board of Pensions.

■ Into the future

The United Methodist Church is a 10-million member Wesleyan movement spanning the globe and daily impacting and transforming lives in innumerable ways.

The new Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area includes 229,523 members of that movement working to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

It is critically important that we recognize the sense of loss that accompanies change. We all will have some grieving to do about things that will no longer be the same as in the past.

It is equally vital to recognize and embrace the new opportunities that come with change. New possibilities will open with God leading us to new pathways. We must be and live the change we want to see in the church.

The transition team believes it can be done best as one new annual conference.

■ Timelines and feedback

TRANSITION TEAM (TT) RECOMMENDED TIMELINE

- March 1-2, 2012 TT finalizes one-conference recommendations.
- May/June 2012 Conferences vote on one-conference proposal.
- June 2012 Nebraska selects episcopal housing for Sept. 1.
- July 2012 TT, assigned teams and common tables continue refining the vision and mission focus of the new conference and develops structure, staff and building usage plans.
- Jurisdictional Conference acts on one conference petition.
- May/June 2013 Three conferences meet separately, celebrate the past, and hear detailed future plans for discussion and feedback.
- September 2013 Uniting conference held to approve structure, budget, leaders, committee members and mission shares (apportionments).
- January 2014 Implementation of one new conference and staffing plan begins.

FEEDBACK

More opportunities for listening and feedback are available in each of the annual conferences. Sessions are:

KANSAS

- Jan. 22 Ness City UMC, 3-5 p.m.
Jan. 28 First Chanute UMC, 10 a.m.-12 p.m.
Jan. 28 First Topeka UMC, 3-5 p.m.
Jan. 29 First Wichita UMC, 2-4 p.m.
(Will be webcast — live.firstwichita.org)

NEBRASKA

- Feb. 19 Cozad First UMC, 3-4 p.m.
Feb. 25 Lincoln Conference Center, 10:30 a.m.-12 p.m.
(Will be webcast — www.umcneb.org, "UMstream" link)

This document represents the work of the Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team with contributions from various sub-teams including: Writing, Asset Allocation and Joint Distribution. Contributions were also made by the dream teams. Dream teams have been assigned to work on strategies and recommendations for small membership churches, clergy/young adult, youth, technology and racial/ethnic concerns. Editing and layout provided by the Nebraska and Kansas communications departments.

Reports and meeting minutes can be found on the conferences' websites under Nebraska-Kansas links. Email info@umcneb.org to offer more feedback or to ask additional questions.

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"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."