

Nebraska-Kansas Transition Team
Q & A
Compiled from listening sessions and e-mail feedback.

Q1. What is the process for becoming one annual conference? What steps need to be taken?

- A. First, the three existing conferences will be asked to express their support for creating one new conference during the 2011 sessions of the three annual conferences. The transition team will review comments and the will of the three conferences' members at a meeting in mid-June and begin working toward a proposal for the 2012 annual conference sessions.

During the next year the Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Transition Team will refine the proposal for the 2012 annual conference that may include permission to move forward with the creation of implementation plans for the new conference. Once the results of the three votes are known, the transition team will move forward with guiding the work of creating an implementation plan and timeline.

With a favorable vote, the Nebraska-Kansas Area Episcopal Transition Team will craft a resolution for the 2012 South Central Jurisdictional Conference requesting permission to form a new annual conference. By Discipline, Annual Conference boundaries are set by the Jurisdictional Conference. The Jurisdictional Conference must approve redrawing conference boundaries to create a new annual conference of Kansas and Nebraska.

Q2. Will all three conferences need to approve the move to one annual conference?

- A. Yes.

Q3. What happens if one or more votes no? How will that affect the relationships between the conferences? Is there a plan "B" if the idea of one annual conference fails? What is it?

- A. If one annual conference votes against moving to form a new annual conference, then the three conferences would likely not ask the Jurisdictional Conference to re-set conference boundaries in 2012 and the three conferences would continue to be separate under the leadership of a single bishop.

The three annual conferences will share a bishop beginning in September 2012 no matter the outcome of the vote on becoming a new annual conference. How a "no" vote would affect the relationships between the annual conferences cannot be predicted.

Q4. What's the timeline for creating one annual conference?

- A. A number of factors will contribute to the timeline for creating one annual conference.

The importance of our mission fields, transparency in decision-making and prayerful discernment will also influence our timeline. At the 2011 Annual Conferences, Transition Team

members will report and there will be a time of conferencing. After that, the voting members of each of the three conferences will participate in a “Five-Finger vote” to further the conversation about the recommendation of one annual conference and God’s plan for our future. All results will be sealed and reported simultaneously to all three annual conferences later in June.

At the 2012 annual conference sessions, the Transition Team will make additional recommendations about shared ministry in the states of Nebraska and Kansas. If Conference members of all three conferences approved one new annual conference in 2012, it also require ratification by the Jurisdictional Conference in July 2012.

Q5. If one conference is approved, what would need to happen to overturn the votes?

- A. Each year the Annual Conference meeting of any Conference may reconsider the decisions of a previous Annual Conference. However, once the Jurisdictional Conference votes to approve the boundaries of an annual conference, it would take another vote of the Jurisdictional Conference to change them again.

Q6. Would it be better to move toward one annual conference by merging the two Kansas conferences first?

- A. The Transition Team recommends the creation of one new Annual Conference with new vision and values. To first merge the two Kansas conferences would take time, funding and attention away from the vision of the new Annual Conference--with more people becoming disciples of Jesus Christ, more diverse disciples and more generations of disciples in more places and in more kinds of ministries in our world.

Q7. What venues would be large enough to house a combined annual conference?

- A. This is one of the many technical questions to be addressed at a future date. All three annual conferences have been examining potential locations for the existing conference sessions and have discovered that the number of locations that can accommodate groups of our size are limited and available in all three annual conferences. Limiting factors include hotel accommodations, size of the venue and cost for use of the space.

Possible locations include Salina, Kan., Wichita, Kan., Topeka, Kan., Leawood, Kan., Kearney, Neb., Grand Island, Neb., LaVista, Neb., Lincoln, Neb., and Omaha, Neb.

Q8. Where did the name Great Plains come from?

- A. The communications subcommittee of the transition team spent time in thoughtful consideration and developed the Great Plans for the Great Plains theme and logo for the work of the transition team. The name came from the geographic region in which Kansas and Nebraska are located. A name for the new annual conference will be determined as part of the process of implementation.

Q9. What lessons has the transition team learned from other Annual Conferences going through similar changes?

- A. The transition team has sought inspiration and reflection from the Susquehanna, Indiana, and Upper New York annual conferences. Lessons include the kinds of technical teams that were created and assigned to work on questions of structure, property distribution and pension and health benefits; the process followed for making recommendations and bringing recommendations to the affected annual conferences for votes, communication strategies, and the results and outcomes the conferences are experiencing.

Q10. Why do we have to become one annual conference to share resources across conference lines?

- A. Resources are already shared across Conference lines. Being one new Annual Conference will put a greater emphasis on utilizing our resources in our areas of priority rather than maintaining three structures.

Q11. How do we maintain identity in a large conference?

- A. Identity begins with a shared vision, purpose and values which the Transition Team is proposing at this Annual Conference. It is through our faithful discipleship in our mission fields that we will come to know others.

The leaders of our churches and conference will intentionally utilize prayer strategies for our future. There will be intentional events as the Clergy Gathering in January, 2012. A variety of communications will be offered to share information and insights. District Superintendents will continue their significant work with local churches and pastors particularly as it applies to the appointive process.

Q12. How will becoming one annual conference enhance leadership development? It seems that the number of leaders needed will be reduced, making fewer opportunities for leaders to serve.

- A. One Annual Conference will change the number of persons who are serving on the Conference level. However, one conference will reduce neither the number of leaders needed nor the opportunity to lead. Instead, it is a change that allows our leaders to serve in more effective and fruitful ways.

Episcopal Office Questions:

Q13. Who will be our new bishop?

- A. The assignment of bishops is done by the Jurisdictional Committee on the Episcopacy. This group meets to assign episcopal leaders every four years during the Jurisdictional Conference once all the new bishops are elected. Who will serve the new episcopal area as bishop will be determined by this committee in July 2012.

In 2012, the South Central Jurisdiction will have four bishops retiring from Arkansas, Louisiana, Nebraska and Northwest Texas-New Mexico. With the reduction in episcopal areas, only three bishops will be elected at the jurisdictional conference.

Q14. What will be the role of the bishop?

- A. Leadership, leadership, leadership. Leadership is now and will continue to be a primary focus of bishops all across the denomination. In a new, one-conference configuration, it is a goal to free the bishop of excessive administrative tasks in order to focus on lay and clergy leadership. The development of strong, capable leaders is imperative to the health and vitality of our local churches—large and small—in order to offer our congregations the best hope for developing powerful risk-taking mission and justice ministries. The bishop will remain the chief administrator of the episcopal area, and by moving to a single new conference, we enable the bishop to focus on one Cabinet, one structure, one set of priorities, etc.

Q15. How will streamlining by reducing bishops by five in the United States serve to meet more overseas needs for leadership?

- A. Support for the bishops of the United Methodist Church is provided through the Episcopal Fund, an apportionment from the General Church. By reducing the number of episcopal areas in the United States, money in the Episcopal Fund will be freed up to support the creation of new episcopal areas in places where the church is growing in the Central Conferences.

The Committee on Central Conferences has recommended the creation of one new episcopal area in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2012. The current budget proposal from the General Council on Finance and Administration does not include the creation of this episcopal area.

Q16. How will a bishop be able to establish and maintain relationships with his or her clergy over such a large area?

- A. The bishop of the new area will face this challenge whether there are three annual conferences or one new annual conference. How the bishop will go about establishing new relationships will be up to the bishop assigned to the Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area in 2012.

Q17. Are there other episcopal areas which cross state boundaries?

- A. Yes. There are several other episcopal areas that cross state boundaries. Alabama-West Florida (southern portion of Alabama and Florida panhandle), California-Nevada (northern California and northern two-thirds of Nevada), California-Pacific (southern California and Hawaii), Dakotas (North and South Dakota), Desert Southwest (small piece of California, Arizona and southern Nevada), New England (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island), New Mexico and Northwest Texas, Oregon-Idaho, Pacific Northwest (Washington and northern Idaho), Peninsula-Delaware (Maryland and Delaware), Rio Grande (New Mexico and Texas), Oklahoma Indian Missionary (Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma), Rocky Mountain (Colorado, Utah and Wyoming), and Yellowstone (Wyoming, Montana and a small piece of Idaho). These episcopal areas all cross state lines, and many include a larger geographic area than that of Nebraska and Kansas.

Q18. Have the other episcopal areas in the jurisdiction paid for the transition?

- A. The unaffected episcopal areas in the South Central Jurisdiction pledged \$10,000 each toward the work of transition for the Nebraska and Kansas areas. Those funds were paid to the three conference offices and expenses for the team and its work are being paid from these funds.

Q19. Will there need to be more staff in the bishop's office to help the bishop administer such a large area?

- A. Certainly the work of the bishop's office will be affected by increasing the number of churches and clergy the bishop oversees. Exactly what those changes might be are not known at this time. Recommendations regarding staffing levels and structure will be made by technical teams that will be appointed to work on these issues.

Clergy Questions:

Q20. How will clergy appointments and itinerancy be determined in a one new conference configuration? There is particular concern shared by young clergy regarding how affinities will be addressed.

- A. Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West already practice a modified itinerancy system. Future appointments will be made in a similar way as they have been. Much attention is already paid to affinities, working spouses and other special needs of our clergy. At the same time, the expanded conference offers more opportunity for different kinds of ministries in more places.

Q21. How will pensions be harmonized?

- A. Questions related to pensions require comprehensive discussions of our shared values and goals for our pension plans as well as thorough research of all of the technical issues. Our three Conferences provide pensions for our retired pastors in cooperation with the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits. There are currently discussions underway in preparation for the 2012 General Conference about the best way to provide benefits in the 21st century United Methodist Church that will affect our future plans.

A Joint Distributing Committee has been formed to study the compensation, health insurance and pension practices of each conference. In addition to the conference benefits officers for Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West, three people from each conference serve on this committee.

Q22. How will clergy supervision occur?

- A. Currently clergy supervision is achieved through district superintendents consulting and working with a congregation's Staff-Parish Relations Committee. Wholesale revisions of that process are not anticipated in a one conference configuration; however there are sure to be nuances that develop as a byproduct of change. Developing leaders will continue to be a primary focus.

Q23. How will credentialing be done? How will the Board of Ordained Ministry conduct business?

- A. The Board of Ordained Ministry will continue to seek exceptional clergy leadership to lead local churches and extension ministries into better effectiveness in the mission field. The composition of the board, meeting times, meeting places, and procedures will be determined by the conference, out of proposals submitted by a technical team of people from the three conferences. This team has not yet been formed.

A new Area Registrar position to facilitate the work of the three Boards of Ordained Ministry has been created and will begin working July 1. A full-time secretary also will be hired to assist the Registrar with paperwork to facilitate the candidacy process.

Q24. How will minimum salaries be affected?

- A. This is also a technical question that will be considered at the appropriate time. Minimum salaries and benefits is one of the principles of the iterancy of the United Methodist Church that will continue.

Q25. How will expectations be changed for clergy?

- A. The clergy who are serving as local church pastors will continue to be involved as spiritual leaders who help make disciples for the transformation of the world. There is and will be more emphasis on developing core competencies and characteristics throughout the clergy's life of service.

Q26. Does Nebraska have deacons? If so, how many?

- A. There is one deacon in full connection, one diaconal minister and three retired deacons.

Q27. How will the deployment of clergy be better served by being one annual conference?

- A. In smaller conferences, there is less opportunity for specialized gifts to be utilized where they are needed or for unique affinity needs in local churches and communities to be met. A larger conference with more churches and more pastors and lay leaders offers opportunities for persons to be deployed where their gifts and graces will be more helpful.

Q28. As dreams grow larger, what is the potential for lack of training and connection?

- A. In our world of rapid communication, training and connection can also be done through a variety of media. The need for community and spiritual nurture will continue to be a priority as we use all of the post-modern methods of communicating Christ's love.

Local Church Questions:

Q29. Churches have a diversity of needs (rural and urban). How would this be handled from one annual conference office?

- A. There are no specific plans for the number of offices in the new conference. Annual Conference Offices already offer resources and serve as referral agents. This will continue.

Q30. How do we maintain identity in a large conference?

- B. Identity begins with a shared vision, purpose and values which the Transition Team is proposing at this Annual Conference. It is through our faithful discipleship in our mission fields that we will come to know others.

The leaders of our churches and conference will intentionally utilize prayer strategies for our future. There will be intentional events as the Clergy Gathering in January, 2012. A variety of communications will be offered to share information and insights. District Superintendents will continue their significant work with local churches and pastors particularly as it applies to the appointive process.

Q31. How will becoming one annual conference directly affect the decline in membership and worship attendance?

- A. It is time for our conferences to be spending less time on survival and more time on discipleship making. Becoming one conference will focus our joint resources on disciple making. We will take the strongest programs and utilize their learnings to help other mission fields.

Q32. How will being one annual conference put more focus on the local church?

- A. The leaders of the new annual conference will spend more of their time focusing on more disciples, more diverse disciples, more generations of disciples in more places in our world rather than working to sustain a system that is not making disciples.

Q33. How will the local church benefit by becoming one annual conference?

- A. The local church will benefit by having unified leaders who want to help them make disciples in their specific mission field. While there are no promised budget reductions, resources can be used more efficiently.

Q34. What steps will be taken to ensure the small-membership, particularly rural, local churches are connected, resourced and included?

- A. The heart of the United Methodist Church in Kansas and Nebraska are the small membership churches. Through Districts and Clusters, there will continue to be connective programming and mission for all churches.

Q35. What will be the role of the small, rural church in a conference where technology will take a more prominent role?

- A. In some ways we have allowed our small churches to become technology "have nots" in an era when technology can enable small rural places to be "haves." In a single conference

configuration, the availability of technology in our small rural places will become a priority. At the appropriate time, a committee will be named to develop a strategy that will help even the smallest of congregations be technically connected to the wider church which in turn enhances our ability to be spiritually connected.

Becoming one annual conference gives us freedom to better leverage our communications and technological assets to create a larger presence in the mission field and to better resource the communication and technology needs of local churches.

Already new technologies are being used in both Kansas and Nebraska to bring training events to congregations over the Internet, eliminating the need for travel to distant locations.

Q36. Will we lose connectional ties to existing communities? How will we connect with new communities?

- A. As it is currently in all of our conferences, our connections and use of resources will be determined by our missional purpose.

Q37. How will we bridge the distance gaps?

- A. This is a genuine concern that is being wrestled with even within our current configuration. Even when the leadership of the new conference will be making those determinations, we know now that technology will be a key player in our connection. Currently, web meeting applications similar to Skype are being used for Cabinet meetings and to deliver some training events. The two Kansas conferences have installed video conferencing equipment in three locations across the state and Nebraska has access to an existing state-wide video conferencing system for conducting meeting experiences with a higher quality than available over the web.

Even though we know the use of technology is not the exclusive way in which we will bridge the distance gaps, it is good to know that some of the things we have been experimenting with will be useful in a larger geographical area.

Q38. How will we keep viable ministries in small communities?

- A. The Great Plains geographic area is mostly composed of small communities. One of the really exciting prospects that we have discovered is that by creating a new annual conference, we are tripling the amount of resources, particularly for small communities and their churches. We have envisioned workshops and cooperative ministries between churches that have great affinity yet are separated by great distances. Through the use of new technologies and efforts, we will find that we can help each other be more effective in ministry in our local settings. Ministries in small communities will have the opportunity not just to be viable, but to thrive under this new missional opportunity.

Q39. How will we extend ministry to the new generations while still ministering to the needs of the existing church members?

- A. This is a question that we wrestle with today. There are churches of all sizes in the Great Plains geographical area that have thrived striking this balance. These churches will become resources for the churches that are still struggling to find the way to be excellent to both existing members and those that ought to be reached.

Q40. What will change about the number of lay representatives to Annual Conference if we become one Annual Conference?

- A. The Book of Discipline 2008 paragraph 32 outlines the lay membership of the annual conference, which includes professing lay members elected by each charge. Each charge served by more than one clergy person may elect as many lay members as there are clergy members. Lay membership also includes diaconal ministers, active deaconesses, home missionaries under episcopal appointment within the bounds of the annual conference, conference United Methodist Men and United Methodist Women presidents, conference and district lay leaders, conference directors of Lay Speaking Ministries, the president of the conference young adult organization, the president of the conference youth organization, the chair of the annual conference college student organization and one young person between the ages of 12 and 17 and one young person between the ages of 18 and 30 from each district.

If there are fewer lay members than clergy members once paragraph 32 has been followed, then the annual conference can, by its own formula, provide for the election of additional lay members to equalize the lay and clergy membership of the annual conference. If it is determined that there is an inequality between the lay and clergy membership of the new annual conference, a formula will be determined to allow for election of additional laity to equalize the membership.

Annual Conference/District Questions:

Q41. Will access to the bishop and district superintendents be more restricted?

- A. Certainly with more churches to visit, pre-planning will be key in getting the bishop to attend local church events across the new area. At this time, there are 17 district superintendents serving the 17 districts of the Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West annual conferences and their churches and clergy.

Q42. How will the role of District Superintendent change?

- A. There is no current discussion about the role of the District Superintendents. District Superintendents are vital to the connectional and appointive issues in our local churches. There is ongoing denominational discussion about the role of District Superintendents and Districts.

Q43. How will annual conference be conducted?

- A. This is another technical question that will be addressed once a single new conference configuration is agreed upon. We do know that the use of technology and regional approaches to being connectional will be a big part of becoming one new area.

Q44. How many districts will we have?

- A. Among the ongoing vital discussions in the United Methodist Church is the role of Districts and District Superintendents. As the new episcopal area is developed, our shared mission field and needs will be included in the discussion.

In the current procedures of the United Methodist Church, the Annual Conference decides the number of districts and the resident bishop determines the boundaries in consultation with churches and leaders.

Q45. What will happen to existing conference staff? Will staff be let go or forced to move?

- A. Technical teams will make recommendations about the staffing levels needed to support a new conference structure and the ministries necessary to send passionate, effective and accountable spiritual leaders into the mission field to make more disciples of Jesus Christ in more places for the transformation of the world. Technical teams also will make recommendations on location of offices.

Q46. What will we lose by being one? How will we grieve the sense of loss we will face by becoming one annual conference?

- A. As we move forward with the processes of becoming one episcopal area and possibly one new conference, it will be important for us to dialogue often. Churches and leaders may experience loss of identity or control as they experience ministry in the new conference. While how we do that is a technical matter, the reality is that we will use various means of communication to achieve openness and transparency.

Congregations will be encouraged to meet together, talk, worship and pray. Strategies such as creating partnerships between congregations across previous conference lines is but one idea that will help create new community out of the former conference areas.

Q47. Will we lose mission projects?

- A. Rather than thinking of the potential for losing mission projects, the Transition Team has focused on how we can do more effective mission projects. All three conferences already have intentional work going on to evaluate, to streamline and to press for greater accountability across all ministry areas. We understand that regardless of the episcopal and conference configuration, our current economic times and demographics of our collective areas dictate that we do mission and ministry in new and different ways.

Q48. How will becoming one conference affect clergy and staff insurance?

- A. Health insurance plans for clergy and lay staff are selected by the conference boards of pension. Both Nebraska and Kansas West currently participate in HealthFlex, the denomination's health care plan administered by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois. Kansas East contracts with Humana for health insurance. The conference boards regularly put the conference's health insurance out for bid to find the best combination of benefits versus cost for participants and local congregations who foot the bill for clergy health insurance.

Regardless of how our Episcopal area is organized, there are anticipated changes in health insurance for clergy.

The Joint Distribution Technical Team will report the comparative technical facts to each Annual Conference but make no recommendations.

Q49. How will the leaders of the new Annual Conference be intentional about relationship—building across existing conference lines?

- A. Relationships are important for building trust and connection. Conference leaders will continue to look for opportunities to plan events that bring people from the three conferences together to learn and fellowship. In 2012, the three conferences will have a joint clergy orders meeting in Topeka where the clergy will have an opportunity to come together for learning and fellowship.

Q50. How will differences in process be ironed out, specifically for Board of Ordained Ministry, sexual ethics, etc.?

- A. Technical Teams will be formed with representatives of the committees responsible for these ministries in each of the three annual conferences to review what is being done in each now and how those policies and procedures may be harmonized for a new annual conference.

Q51. What will happen to conference property?

- A. The bishops, with the assistance of the Transition Team members, have already named members to an Asset Allocation Team that is beginning to develop a comprehensive list of conference properties and holdings. In naming members to this team, attention has been given to knowledge and expertise. This group will report directly to the Transition Team when it meets in April.

Q52. How do the conference's apportionment formulas compare? How will apportionments change?

- A. A technical team has been established that is researching the apportionment formulas of the three conferences. This team will provide a preliminary report prior to the annual conference sessions in May and June.

Q53. What is the financial status of the three conferences?

- A. A technical team has been established that is researching the assets of each of the annual conferences. This team will provide a preliminary report prior to the annual conference sessions in May and June.

Q54. How do we intentionally foster new relationships?

- A. This will be a process that will require personal as well as programmatic effort. Regardless of the final configuration of the new episcopal area, we will be co-workers in the ministry of Christ and His Church in the Great Plains geographic area. Within us there needs to be a desire to love and serve our new found neighbors. That said, we will begin to see how different committees and organizations will begin creating spaces where we will foster these new relationships. One of these events will be next year, in the form of a called meeting of the orders, where clergy from the three conferences will gather for worship, learning, and fellowship.

Q55. What financial advantages are there for moving to one annual conference?

- A. The financial impact of moving to one annual conference will depend upon a number of factors including number of offices, number of staff members, travel expenses, need for technology infrastructure improvements, pension and health benefits and many others. These issues will be thoroughly reviewed and disclosed once the variables have been worked out.

Q56. How can committees be effective over such great distances?

- A. There are other annual conferences that have larger geographic areas than those across Kansas and Nebraska. We will look to them to learn how their committees utilize face-to-face and technology to conduct meetings over great distances.

Q57. Will there be regional offices? Where will they be? Where will the bishop's office be? How will these questions be determined?

- A. Once a decision has been made regarding the number of annual conferences, then technical work will begin on determining the structure and configuration of offices. The conferences currently own office buildings in Lincoln, Neb., Topeka, Kan., and Wichita, Kan., and there are episcopal offices in Lincoln and Wichita. A technical team will work on this and make recommendations to the annual conferences for action.

Q58. What's the impact for United Methodist Men, United Methodist Women, youth ministries and others done on a conference-wide basis?

- A. If the decision to move to one annual conference is favorable, these ministry areas will be invited to begin working on imagining a new ministry in the new annual conference through the creation of technical teams to work on plans for creative and new ways of carrying out their missions.

Q59. How will becoming one annual conference enhance leadership development? It seems that the number of leaders needed will be reduced, making fewer opportunities for leaders to serve.

- A. One Annual Conference will change the number of persons who are serving on the Conference level. So another way to consider the change is that others will be able to focus on their local churches and clusters instead of also serving on the Conference level. We live in a time when persons are wanting to be more locally involved while being connected to the world, and this change can help more persons to live their discipleship.

Q60. Will there be a freeze on property disposal during the intervening time?

- A. Now is not the time to “wait and see” what will happen. Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West should continue to do the best job they can in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world even as great change looms on the horizon.

Q61. What’s the impact for existing area-wide ministries?

- A. Bishops Jones and Sherer-Simpson have invited area ministries to begin learning more about one another and getting to know one another during this period of transition. While these ministries have been discouraged from making decisions about how things will be structured or carried out in the new area, leaders are being given the opportunity to begin making relationships that will facilitate working together in the future.

Q62. How will the role of the Director of Connectional Ministries change?

- A. As the role of the District Superintendent has changed, so has the role of the Director of Connectional Ministries. Through a dialogue with the Bishop and the Personnel Committee, the role will be reviewed for the new Episcopal area as needed.

General/Jurisdictional Conference Representation:

Q63. What about representation within the jurisdiction?

- A. Representation within the South Central Jurisdiction is determined by *The Book of Discipline* (BOD) paragraph 514, “The number of delegates to which an annual conference is entitled shall be twice the number of its General Conference delegates.” The number of delegates to the General Conference is determined by the BOD paragraph 502. If we become one annual conference, the number of members to the episcopacy committee will be affected. According to the BOD paragraph 524 each annual conference will have one lay delegate and one clergy delegate. Currently, between the three conferences we have three lay delegates and three clergy delegates.