



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 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?

Decisions at the 2008 General Conference and subsequent College of Bishops meetings have placed in front of us an opportunity to ask these questions and search for answers. After nearly two years of prayer, discernment, listening, studying, and working together, the Nebraska-Kansas Area Transition Team believes that it is time for us, like Jeremiah’s first hearers, to let go of trying to recreate memories of past fruitfulness as if they would work for the situation we find ourselves in. Instead, let’s move toward new possibilities of a working future and remember well those great moments that worked in the past. It is time for us to turn our eyes from institutions and practices that served us better in the past than they do now. It is time to turn, instead, toward God’s promises, God’s plans, God’s vision, and the people God calls us to serve. We believe God is leading us now into a new way of being. It is our responsibility to follow.

I. Our Current Reality

Part of the Transition Team's task was to assess the current state of United Methodism in Nebraska and Kansas. We were already aware that our conferences were struggling, but our steady decline has now become much clearer.

Consider that since 1968 United Methodists in Nebraska and Kansas have:

- Decreased membership by more than 170,000 people, more than 43%
- Decreased attendance by 52,000 people, more than 36%
- Decreased the number of local churches by 180, more than 14%

At the same time the states have increased in population by more than 800,000.

We have no doubt that God will preserve the Body of Christ. The sustainability of the Church is not at issue. But we also have no doubt that our current way of organizing as a church is unsustainable. There are many reasons for this decline and there are many measures of church health that are not captured in these statistics. No matter how we consider any of these other factors, however, it is simply undeniable that we are headed down a slow but steady path towards death.

But we should not be afraid of death. In Matthew 16:25 Jesus says, "[T]hose who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Perhaps we have been living as much for **Our** church as we have for **Christ's** church. Our faith teaches us that in death we have an opportunity for new life. We should be afraid of comfort, safety, and timidity, not death, for we are a resurrection people! As United Methodists in Nebraska and Kansas we have reached a moment in time when we have a clear opportunity to choose between comfort in our old structures or a renewed focus on our reason for being.

The 2008 General Conference changed the formula for assigning bishops so that beginning in September 2012 each of the five U.S. jurisdictions would have one fewer bishop. The College of Bishops of the South Central Jurisdiction decided to accomplish this by uniting our two states into one episcopal area. As a result, just over one year from now Nebraska and Kansas will share one Bishop. It is important to remember that this is a choice that has been made for us. We cannot undo this decision. This means that the status quo is not an option. There will be change in the organization of our conferences. The question that we must answer together is what kind of change will take place.

While this may not have been a choice that we would have made on our own, the Transition Team believes that this decision actually opens a new door to 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 of history.

We come to you recommending that our three annual conferences create one annual conference for our one episcopal area because the process of creating a new annual conference will help us better adapt our current and future ministries to the altered landscape of twenty-first century ministry in the Great Plains.

II. The Timid Option: Slow Death

One new annual conference is not our only option. We could choose to retain our current three-conference structure, combine two conferences, or even explore creating additional conferences. In fact, each of these possibilities came up at some point in our conversation. While each of these arrangements has its own unique advantages and disadvantages, there is one very clear limiting factor that all of the options share. When one bishop presides over multiple conferences, administrative redundancies and ministerial inefficiencies are unavoidable. For example, the Bishop will have to work with three separate staffs, three different budget systems, three conference mission statements, three visions, three sets of goals, and three groups of committees. Any area-wide initiative would have to work through a threefold bureaucracy. Additionally, leadership and resources that could be used for ministry would be used instead to manage this redundancy. It is conceivable that each of our conferences could choose to streamline our structures to some degree, but we already could have done so. The evidence of history is that we would rather choose the timid option of minimal change than make more radical, yet more beneficial, changes. Choices such as these have helped to contribute to the slow but steady march away from relevance. We are making fewer disciples, transforming the world in smaller ways, and showing less fruit than ever before.

“[T]he price of not making deep change...is the choice of slow death...”

- Robert Quinn, Deep Change

The General and Jurisdictional Conferences have mandated that we restructure into one episcopal area. That is the minimal amount of change required. The Transition Team believes that restructuring alone is insufficient. Each of our conferences has restructured in the past and arrived at the same results – continuing down the path of slow death. If we want to be the vital church that we are convinced God wants us to be, then we must refocus on the mission that God has set before us. It is time to die to ourselves and the current form of organizing United Methodist ministries in Nebraska and Kansas so that we can live for the purposes that God calls us to.

III. The Bold Option: Deep Change

After two years of work, discernment, study, worship and listening, the Transition Team unanimously believes that God desires that we move past mere reorganization and into deeper change including creating a single, new annual conference in the states of Nebraska and Kansas. We emphasize the need for a new, not merged, conference. Merging existing structures into one annual conference is not deep change and is not what we need. “Merging” language

suggests that we do the same things we've always done, but do them more efficiently. Doing more efficiently what we should no longer be doing is not a step in the right direction. The language of creating a new annual conference reminds us that our intent is to carefully and prayerfully consider all aspects of ministry so that we can answer the call that we hear from God. God calls us to be bold. God calls us to take ownership again of God's mission in the Great Plains, to catch God's creative vision, to be a new people for the people of Nebraska, Kansas, and the world.

God calls us to look with care at the functions of each of our structures in light of God's mission for us. This will be difficult. We will likely find that some ministries that we deeply love must be put aside. We might be led to create new ministries in previously unfocused areas. To allow God's mission to guide us is bold, uncomfortable as it may be. To allow God's mission to show us when something can be blessed, thanked, and retired is bold.

The Transition Team believes that such bold change should be guided by values that offer a structure of missional accountability. Such values should imply objective and/or subjective standards by which we can measure the work of the annual conference and hold ourselves accountable. In the creation and living out of a new annual conference, we propose using the following values as our guide:

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 empowered by God. Growth and health, wonder and brilliance will be our branding. It will frame our work and offer a benchmark of success.

God calls us to work with passion to make effective change and 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. God's call is too important to keep ineffective methods in place for our own institutional comfort at the cost of God's work for the transformation of the world.

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

We are open to 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.

God 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. We must consider new models, research our communities with great care and be 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 God’s purpose.

Diversity ... Instead of Uniformity

We see God’s kingdom as 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 make disciples “without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition” (*Book of Discipline*, 2008, ¶14).

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. This can only be done by simultaneously continuing our commitment to small and large churches in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

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, ¶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.

IV. Four Mission-Focused Reasons for a New Annual Conference:

Taking into consideration the goals stated above, we believe that there are four clear and compelling reasons to create a new annual conference.

1. Leadership:

Lay members of our congregations say, “Send me a good pastor.” Pastors say, “Send me to a place with good lay leadership.” Creating one conference creates a critical mass of clergy with particular gifts that can then be better matched with ministry settings. Moving toward one annual conference with a renewed clarity of mission and vision enables us to hold pastors and lay people to higher standards and accompany these expectations with continual training, formation, and accountability.

2. Reinventing Connectional Life & Reducing Bureaucratic Barriers

Creating one annual conference with renewed mission and vision invites us to look at current structures and ask of each, “Is this the best way to serve God’s mission in Nebraska and Kansas for the 21st Century?” In listening events, it became clear that people are interested in the kinds of efficiencies one conference can provide. This is a matter of system-wide stewardship: deploying resources and leaders with excellence, nimbleness, and an eye toward the greatest fruitfulness. 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.

3. Bishop Freed for Vision

Creating one annual conference allows us to better utilize the gifts of the Bishop. One conference, rather than three, frees the Bishop from performing internal management tasks in triplicate and allows him/her to provide the visionary, spiritual leadership our churches and pastors need and deserve.

4. Technology for a Regional Mission

Creating 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.

V. Together, Where Do We Go From Here?

The Transition Team brings to you our strong conviction that God desires us to move past mere reorganization and into deeper change including creating a single, new annual conference in the states of Nebraska and Kansas; therefore, we want to gauge your support for creating a single, new conference encompassing the states of Nebraska and Kansas. The Team aims to be both transparent and inclusive of your feelings and wisdom. What our church needs is to discern together the will and direction of God. Holy conferencing will help us to find and

pursue God's will.

At 2011 Annual Conference Gatherings

Following the presentation of the Transition Team report and a time of conferencing, voting members of each Annual Conference will participate in a "Five-Finger vote" to further the conversation about the recommendation of one annual conference and God's plans for our future (see attached sample ballot). This is a gauge, not an ultimate decision-making device, meant to extend the conversation. All results will be sealed and reported simultaneously to all three annual conferences.

After the Annual Conference Meetings

The Transition Team will meet June 13th in Topeka, Kan., to review the results of the Five-Finger vote. This will help form the agenda for this and future Transition Team meetings.

Over the next year, Technical Teams and Dream Teams will meet to address specific areas of concern. Teams that are already or in the process of being formed are:

- **Technical Teams**

Technical teams address areas of concern that need analysis and technical solutions. These are matters that must be resolved prior to creating a new conference but that should not require a rethinking of how we do ministry.

- The Joint Distributing Committee is studying 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 apportionment formulas and budgets of the three annual conferences.

- **Dream Teams**

Dream teams are groups that will explore how ministry could be as one new conference. These teams could (but do not) exist in our current structure. Creating these teams now will help remind us all that we are envisioning a new way of doing ministry in a new conference. They also will help us keep our purpose at the forefront of our minds as we consider structure and staffing for a new conference.

- The Small Church Dream Team will explore how smaller churches can effectively share the Gospel across rural, suburban, and urban settings in both states.
- The Youth Ministries Dream Team will examine how youth ministry is changing in today's culture and provide ideas for comprehensive youth ministry at the local level and beyond.

Each technical and dream team will have members from each of our current conferences and a variety of ministry settings. More teams of both types will be created as the need is discerned.

Annual Conference 2012

The Transition Team is thoroughly convinced that God is guiding us to move past mere reorganization and into deeper change including creating a single, new annual conference in

the states of Nebraska and Kansas. Creating a new, single annual conference will foster an environment more conducive to doing the further work of deep change to which God calls us for missional fruitfulness. Therefore, the Transition Team intends to move that we create a new annual conference in the states of Nebraska and Kansas, which will be voted on at each annual conference meeting in 2012 and, if approved by all three conferences, ratified by the Jurisdictional Conference in July 2012.

Additional motions of both technical and adaptive nature will also be presented. These motions will provide for some of the logistics for living as one episcopal area (such as area offices, bishop's housing, etc.) and provide guidance for our continued journey towards one conference.

After Annual Conference 2012

Regardless of our action this year or next year, we will become one episcopal area in September 2012. We anticipate that the process of becoming one conference will not end in 2012. We are committed to creating the new conference as soon as possible but acknowledge that it will still take some time before the birthing process is complete.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

The last two years of working together as your Area Transition Team has been a rewarding experience. We have enjoyed learning about each other, discovering commonalities in our lives and ministries, and growing in our understanding of God's will for us. We believe that what we have experienced as individuals also will be true for the annual conferences and states that we represent. Nebraska and Kansas United Methodists have much to learn from each other. We share much in common, both in culture and in ministries. We also share a common need to rediscover the calling that God places on our lives. We affirm that there are United Methodists across our states who are leading ministry as well as they know how. The world is indeed different because of their presence. But we imagine that those ministries could be even more fruitful. We also imagine that in those places where ministry is waning, and unfortunately this is the case in the large majority of our settings, God's work through the United Methodist Church can be renewed, even resurrected, into a better future. We look forward to serving God together as one annual conference until God's greatest plans for us come to pass!

Report submitted by: The Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team, Mr. Tom Watson, Chairperson*

*See following page for a complete list of team members and contact information for each respective member.

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One New Annual Conference

The future's in your hands!

What is a "five-finger vote?"

What our church needs is to discern together the will and direction of God and extend the opportunity for holy dialogue. The five-finger vote is a way for us to understand where we are in the collective acceptance of an idea or process.

This method has been a useful tool of discernment and holy conferencing for the Transition Team. May you also find it useful and fun.

Why a five-finger vote?

The Transition Team wants to gauge your support for creating a single, new conference encompassing the states of Nebraska and Kansas. The Team aims to be both transparent and inclusive of your feelings and wisdom. Please participate in this vote, making any corresponding notes on the reverse side, that together, we might hear God more faithfully.

How to participate in the five-finger vote?

This is a gauge, a meter, not an ultimate decision-making device. Please check the corresponding box of the hand/explanation that most fits with your current level of support for forming a single, new conference. Simply put, do you believe God is leading Nebraska and Kansas in this journey and that God can best use us as one conference?

Please check the box below of the hand that most closely represents your position on becoming one new conference. Pages and tellers will pick up your vote. All votes will be stored until all three annual conference sessions are complete. Votes will be aggregated with an announcement on the results available in mid-to-late June. There is a comment section on the back of this sheet. Your comments are equally important to the process.



"I am in full support of becoming one conference."



"I am supportive of becoming one conference, however I have a few questions."



"I am supportive of becoming one conference, but I have many questions."



"I am opposed to becoming one conference, but am not willing to halt the process."



"I am opposed to becoming one conference as it is currently presented."

Your comments regarding a proposed new
Nebraska-Kansas Annual Conference are very important.

Write your comments next to the hand representing your position on becoming one annual conference.










