



2012
ANNUAL CONFERENCE SESSION
Voting Information

GREAT PLANS *for the* GREAT PLAINS

■ The one-conference vote

The 2008 General Conference of The United Methodist Church 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 in spring 2011. A five-finger vote was taken at that time, generating additional momentum for becoming one new annual conference.

The Joint Called Clergy Session held this past January afforded clergy in all three conferences a chance to discuss and offer feedback to the Transition Team’s recommendation.

Additional laity listening sessions also were held this past January and February.

This information includes the one-conference motion that will be presented for vote at all three annual conference sessions. A single ballot with a single motion will be proctored during each conference’s session.

Kansas West meets May 23-25; Kansas East and Nebraska meet June 6-9. All votes will be held until counted Friday evening, June 8. The outcome of the vote will be announced Saturday, June 9, at 10:15 a.m. CDT, during Kansas East’s and Nebraska’s sessions. The announcement can be viewed via live Web stream at kansaseast.org/stream or umcneb.org/umstream.

■ The stage is set

We have a bold story to tell. God has great plans for the Great Plains. Our understanding of God’s plan is 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 conversations 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.

This information articulates the rationale for becoming one new annual conference and is a revision of a similar document distributed by the Transition Team this past January and February. Should one new conference be created, the technical work will continue.

The new ministry that emerges must be created, designed and implemented by the body of the new annual conference, not solely by the Transition Team.

The motion for vote at the three annual conference sessions will be printed on a half-page sized ballot and will include this wording:

“The Kansas East, Kansas West and Nebraska annual conferences will join together to form the Great Plains Annual Conference beginning Jan. 1, 2014. This will take place in accordance with the principles and guidelines outlined in the

The motion:

“The Kansas East, Kansas West and Nebraska annual conferences will join together to form the Great Plains Annual Conference beginning Jan. 1, 2014. This will take place in accordance with the principles and guidelines outlined in the 2012 Annual Conference Session Voting Information.”



Potter, Neb., sunset after a storm.



Downtown Wichita and River Walk.

2012 Annual Conference Session Voting Information.” (See the Principles & guidelines located on the next page.) The ballot also will provide space to write an explanation of the individual’s vote should a person desire to do so.

Should the vote pass at all three annual conference sessions, a resolution will be sent to the July 2012 South Central Jurisdictional Conference reading:

“Whereas, the Kansas East, Kansas West and Nebraska annual conferences have voted at their 2012 Annual Conference sessions to become one conference known as the Great Plains Annual Conference effective January 1, 2014.

Therefore be it resolved, that the South Central Jurisdiction does hereby authorize the creation of and does hereby establish the Great Plains Annual Conference, with the boundaries of the Great Plains Conference to be the boundaries of the present Kansas East, Kansas West, and Nebraska Conferences, and to be effective as of January 1, 2014.”

Should the vote not pass at all three annual conference sessions, the Transition Team will work with the conferences’ leadership and constituencies to consider all options, including that of asking the leadership groups in all three conferences to ask the SCJ this July for permission to act between now and the next Jurisdictional Conference should the three conferences agree on a plan.

“The church we have inherited is not the church that has always been — nor is it the church that will always be.”

Gil Rendle

■ Vision, values & priorities

Our vision is for a culture and a missional structure that embodies values and priorities that focus our mission on “seeking the welfare” for the great variety of mission fields we find in Kansas and Nebraska. Our communities are diverse — from open country gatherings, small towns and great cities to large and small university campuses and online neighborhoods.

We seek to bless God’s people of every language and ethnicity in our two states. As we seek to create one new annual conference, there are four priorities to guide our work; four strong foundations upon which to “build houses” in our mission field.

LEADERSHIP — Combining our three conferences creates a critical mass of both lay and clergy leaders to serve the variety of ministry settings found in our two states. Opportunities abound for us to learn from one another and to discover fruitful placements in which both leaders and congregations have opportunity to thrive.

CONNECTION — One new annual conference enables us to reinvent all of our connectional structures with an eye to 21st century missional opportunities and realities.

VISION — We seek to use the gifts of our bishop and conference leadership to cast a strong vision that guides and challenges our work.

LEVERAGE TECHNICAL ASSETS — This fourth priority for one new annual conference is to better leverage our technological assets to enhance our connection, create a larger presence in our region of the country and to better equip our local churches to do ministry.

As we create a new annual conference adapted to 21st century opportunities and challenges, we hold ourselves accountable to enduring Wesleyan values. In the spirit and vision of our founding leader, we seek to create a connection of ministries that are thriving in service to God, not merely surviving institutionally.

Our congregations and our connectional ministries must not be afraid to move beyond the status quo and into risk-taking creativity. We seek to be Spirit-led rather than stifled by our human institutions. We understand that our ministries must mirror the diversity of the mission field we are called to serve; that effective diversity must be more important to us than institutional uniformity.

We seek to boldly live our Wesleyan identity; moving forward as loyal heirs who take all that is best from our heritage and adapt and apply it to the challenges and opportunities God lays before us in this time and place.



The State Capitol Building in Lincoln.



Hay bales in rural Kansas. A common sight in both Kansas and Nebraska.

■ Timeline

May/June 2012	Conferences vote on one-conference proposal.
June 2012	Nebraska selects episcopal housing for Sept. 1. Transition Team meets to create a phased plan for implementation and next steps, assigns additional teams as needed.
July 2012	Common Table (Nebraska), Leadership Team (Kansas East) and Focus Team (Kansas West) approve plan and next steps. Jurisdictional Conference acts on one-conference petition.
Aug. 2012	Subgroups meet, including dream teams, technical teams plus teams for legal, structure, staff/personnel and finance.
Aug. 2012- March 2013	Groups and teams work toward goals, recommendations and implementation plans.
March 2013	Draft report/plans to three conferences for review.
May/June 2013	Three conferences meet separately, celebrate the past, and hear detailed future plans for discussion and feedback.
Aug. 23-24, 2013	Uniting conference held to approve structure, budget, leaders, committee members and Mission Shares (apportionments).
Jan. 2014	Implementation of one new conference and staffing plan begins.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts ‘... build houses and live in them; plant gardens ... take wives and have sons and daughters ... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.’”

Jeremiah 29: 4-7

■ Principles & guidelines

The following principles and guidelines will be invoked regarding administration, clergy benefits, designated funds and staffing as planning continues toward one new annual conference.

- No clergy person who is already retired or retires before Dec. 31, 2013, will receive a smaller amount of pension or health-care benefit than he or 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 are members of Kansas West as of Dec. 31, 2013, will continue to receive 100 percent of their spouse’s pre-1982 pension benefits, a benefit that is fully funded, regardless of whether the clergy person retires prior to or after the creation of a new annual conference according to General Board of Pension and Health Benefits plan rules.

- 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 clergy who retire after Jan. 1, 2014, (the date a new annual conference is created) from the Great Plains Annual Conference will receive pension and health benefits determined by a new, common benefit plan. The pension plan will be that voted into place at the 2012 General Conference. The health plan will be adopted at a uniting conference Aug. 23-24, 2013, and 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.

- All existing campsites and boards will remain intact, with camping organized under one camping oversight board for the whole area.

- All existing campus ministries will remain open, and local site boards will remain intact under one area campus ministry oversight board.

- With a positive vote for becoming one new annual conference, a staff transitions committee will be established to look at staffing for ministry, mission and justice work including an evaluation of office locations.

- In addition, a Council on Finance and Administration team

will be formed and tasked with devising a new Mission Share (apportionment) formula to be phased in over time, with increases and decreases in apportionments of no more than 10 percent annually. The formula will be sensitive to the former annual conference's practices, missional needs of local churches and the new annual conference ministries.

The Transition Team also discussed lingering questions about the decision-making process, clergy benefits and what it means to become a new annual conference.

Many have asked if any of the annual conferences are carrying debt. None of the conferences are in debt. Nebraska has some decisions to make about how it will fund health-insurance benefits for those who retire prior to Jan. 1, 2014. These decisions will need to be made whether or not the three conferences come together as one.

Others are asking questions about itinerancy and if pastors could be forced to serve outside their current geographic conference.

Kansas and Nebraska already operate with a modified itinerancy in all three conferences, as Bishop Ann B. Sherer-Simpson and Bishop Scott J. Jones have noted. Both bishops point out that today's appointment process takes into account input from the pastors. Having more pastors and more churches provides new opportunities to match pastors and churches for flourishing ministries.

A complete list of the lingering questions and their answers will be posted on all three conferences' websites mid to late April as a supplement to the full Transition Team report in the online versions of pre-conference workbooks for all three conferences. In addition, brief reports from each of the five dream teams and the two technical teams will be posted as part of the supplemental materials.

■ Episcopacy committees' resolution

Regardless of the results of the one new annual conference vote, some changes will be made as the three conferences become one episcopal area. The Nebraska/Kansas Area Episcopacy Committee and Episcopal Residence Committee, both comprised of episcopacy committee members from all three annual conferences, will present the following resolution at all three annual conference sessions:

"The Nebraska/Kansas Area Episcopacy Committee and Episcopal Residence Committee move that, beginning September 1, 2012, (a) the episcopal residence for the new Great Plains Episcopal Area be located in Wichita, Kansas,

during the next four years, and (b) the main office for the bishop of the Great Plains Episcopal Area be maintained in Wichita with adjunct offices in Lincoln and Topeka while a long-term plan is discerned."

The episcopal resolution will be voted on following the one-conference vote.

■ Dare to dream

Several dream teams are working to shake up how we think about doing mission and ministry in various forms. The Small Membership Church Dream Team sees exciting ways in which we can build a culture of connectedness, collaboration and vitality. The work of the Small Membership Dream Team is inspiring more intentional effort to share success stories and "what worked for us" case studies.

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 four to seven 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/Latino, Asian, African-American and other constituencies in our area.

Dream teams will continue to work on their areas of focus. Those wanting to serve on a dream team should make a request by emailing info@umcneb.org. Interested individuals will be connected with the chairperson of the desired team so that meeting schedules and emails can be exchanged.

■ 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.

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. Change is challenging with each of us responding differently. 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.

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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."

Related documents, reports and meeting minutes can be found on the conferences' websites under Nebraska-Kansas links.