

Editor's Note: In October of 2009, the South Central Jurisdiction Council of Bishops voted to eliminate one Episcopal area in response to the 2008 General Conference mandate to do so. It was determined that the Nebraska and Kansas areas should become one. Implementation is to begin in 2012 with a transition team currently assigned to determine the best way to merge Episcopal areas. The team's first meeting was in Topeka, Kan., on Nov. 22, 2009. Its second meeting was in Lincoln on Feb. 12 and 13, 2010.

Asking the right questions

By Kathryn Witte

LINCOLN—"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Bishop Ann B. Sherer-Simpson opened the Friday, Feb. 12, Episcopal Area Transition Team meeting with a reading from Isaiah 43.

She then reflected on an experience from a trip she took to Mozambique when she was serving as bishop of the Missouri Conference. She told a story about a boy who was part of a group that came to worship along with many other groups, in order to offer the best of the fruits of their labor to the Lord. (What we might call a Lord's acre celebration.) The boy's group's harvest had not been substantial and after some distress on the part of the group, the boy said, "Can't you offer *me* up to the Lord? I would like to serve God in the ministry."

The entire worship community of that Mozambique church came together during that service and celebrated his commitment to the work of the Lord. Sherer-Simpson noted that each of the people in the room came with a commitment to the Lord to create something new.

The Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle, senior consultant for the Alban Institute, was to have facilitated the weekend meeting, however, snow storms on the east coast kept him at home in Pennsylvania. The Rev. Dr. Jesse Foster, director of Christian leadership development for the Nebraska Conference, accepted the offer to facilitate the weekend's work in collaboration with Rendle. Foster is new to the Nebraska Conference staff, having just begun his role in a newly created position on Jan. 1 of this year.

Foster led the group in team building and kept the agenda moving. Foster, in conjunction with a 30-minute teleconference presentation by Rendle, framed the weekend's work by encouraging the group to focus on adaptive change rather than technical change. Addressing the concern that people in the three conferences want immediate answers to questions such as "Where will the Episcopal Office be located?" the group decided to embrace the concept of adaptive change.

In his book "Leadership Without Easy Answers," Ronald A. Heifetz presents the need for adaptive change in cases where the problem or challenge is definable, but a clear cut answer is not readily available. Or, when the definition of the problem or challenge is not clear and clear-cut technical answers are not available. Technical change is more mechanical—a known solution for a known problem.

During the 30-minute teleconference, Rendle reminded the group that they could view these changes from only a technical perspective. Whenever a system doesn't know what to do, it does what it does know how to do. He said, "If we only do technical work, we will only get what we already have." Adaptive leadership guides people towards asking questions that will make us learn things in new ways, Rendle continued.

"How do we stop controlling so that there is room for the Spirit of God?" Rendle asked. Adaptive change makes room for new things to happen and it fosters positive conflict, leading to creativity. Rendle asked the group not to run ahead by identifying a question and then looking for the answer. He pointed out that we often frame a question to go with an already identified solution. He also encouraged the group members to not be representative of their annual conference, but to think instead of the combined new area and its missional "big picture."

Finally, Rendle encouraged the Transition Team to "extrovert" its work from the very beginning and enable ways to receive feedback.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Foster handed out graphs of the combined demographic figures of the three conferences. In large part, the three look very similar—all show declining worship attendance and membership. Each conference has a large number of small churches and all three had added at least one 900-plus member church. Small group work followed, with each group identifying cultural and environmental, denominational, conference and local church factors that have contributed to the shared statistics. The groups rotated to discuss the factors and then sorted the list into factors that were in either our direct or indirect control.

BOOK DISCUSSION

Following Friday night dinner, the group reconvened to discuss Phyllis Tickle's book "The Great Emergence." The book had been assigned to spark discussion. Tickle takes on the task of reviewing the major turning points, or "great" events, in the life of the Christian church. Her contention is that every 500 years or so the church goes through such a transformation.

The Rev. Debra McKnight, associate pastor at First UMC in Omaha, Neb. said, "The reformation of the church required a literate laity, this change required clergy to be brave enough to be open to discussion and questions." She went on to say that we have to trust

people enough to have dialogues that are complex, in biblical narratives and the world around us, clarifying and making tangible places for us to grasp onto.

The Rev. Eduardo Bousson, from Washburn Campus Ministry, in Topeka, Kan., said the book made him ask, “What is our story, what is our common story?” He went on to say that we have prescribed educational materials, but that on a regional level we need to adapt to change, that we need to review what it means to be United Methodist. He said that he liked the context of the book, but wondered how to teach to it. “I loved this, but needed to adapt it.”

The idea of describing ourselves as a tribe emerged during the discussion. The Rev. Jan Todd, pastor at Pleasant Hill UMC in Topeka, Kan., said, “I saw that we had tribes, however our tribes were not well defined.”

Nancy Brown, lay person from Stanley, Kan., commented, “Once we know what our tribe is, I believe we have to follow up with the adaptive question of how we fit those tribes into a global family. How does that tribe relate to the world?”

Discussion continued around determining metrics of success, the ability to define affinities across a broad geography, and more. Heads nodded around the idea that new ways of ministry have to be created; just saying “UMC” is not enough anymore.

Kansas Bishop Scott Jones said, “The ideas of creating new ways of ministry are where we have to turn our energy.” Later he asked, “What do we do as an annual conference to get out of the way (of doing things differently)?”

It was noted that any church that has been transformed sees initial decline. Attendance is recognized as a trailing indicator. “We need a leading indicator,” said one group member.

The Rev. Wayne Alloway, senior pastor at St. Mark’s UMC in Lincoln, Neb. pointed out that successful corporations follow a compass rather than a road map, noting that they are more flexible. “Figure out where ‘true north’ is and let local churches get there; and then tell how you’re reaching ‘true north,’” continued Alloway.

Brown, who compiled biographies from members of all three conferences said, “We bring different experiences and legacies, we are the church, we are all those things we describe ourselves as, but every one of us is representative of God’s church. We are not Kansas East, West and Nebraska, we are God’s people.”

Friday evening closed with a recap of questions and affirmations and a closing prayer by the Rev. Janet Maxwell, Parsons District superintendent, from Parsons, Kan.

TEAM STEPS UP ADAPTIVE WORK

On Saturday, Jones opened with a review of adaptive versus technical change and the idea of creating a “holding environment” for the annual conferences, where adaptive change can take place.

Foster led a short presentation on how people sometimes confuse area for growth with potential for growth. He said, “For example, if you’re not good at something, your potential for growth is not as high as your area of growth.” He said if we focus on what we don’t do well, our overall improvement in performance is limited. “Focus on our strengths,” he concluded.

Foster led a trust-building exercise where four people sat on chairs, then leaned back on each other in order to provide enough support so that the chairs could be taken away. “The chair is a trick that demonstrates how everyone is needed in the process to provide trust and support,” instructed Foster.

Small group work followed with both technical and adaptive questions resulting. Technical questions were passed around and collected. Adaptive questions were discussed and prioritized by four groups.

What will the new Episcopal area be called? How will the role of the director of connectional ministries change with a mobile bishop? These were but two of the nearly 75 technical questions raised.

The four small groups developed five adaptive questions and were then asked to rank them.

Top-ranking adaptive questions from each group included:

- What is the relationship between institutional care and disciple making?
- What structure makes the best use of time, resources (people and money) to support and create local churches in making disciples of Jesus Christ and to extend the body’s capacity to transform the world?
- How do we define ministry areas in ways other than geographical boundaries?
- What’s the purpose of the annual conference? What is the role of the district superintendent?

The next steps for the team include reading the book “Caught in the Middle: America’s Heartland in the Age of Globalism” by Richard Longworth, for discussion at the April meeting. All three conferences will prepare and present 20-minute presentations to inform each other of their identity, ministry strengths and demographics, sort of a “DNA snapshot.” The Revs. Gary Beach and Jan Todd will present Kansas East. The Revs. Debra McKnight and Charlotte Abram will present Nebraska and the Revs. Gary Brooks and Pat Ault-Duell will present Kansas West. In addition, Alloway will prepare a report on the writings of Lyle Schaller and Bill Eassam, as they pertain to the Transition Team’s work.

Tom Watson, Nebraska lay leader, was confirmed as the chair of the group. He will work with the bishops and the consultant on agenda preparation, work with respective conference staff on meeting preparation and will act as the group’s spokesperson.

When asked about the outcome of the second meeting as its chair, Watson responded with this statement, “This was the first substantive meeting of the transition team and we spent important time worshipping together and getting to know something about each person and our conferences. We realized right away that the three conferences are far more alike than different. The bulk of this meeting was devoted to identifying the most important questions to be answered as we approach operating as one Episcopal area. Future meetings will be devoted to finding the answers to those questions. We were encouraged by both Gil Rendle and Jesse Foster

not to let ourselves concentrate only on what are termed 'technical questions,' those problems to which an identifiable, known solution can be applied, but to work on questions that deal with and require 'adaptive change.'"

Jones sent the group forth, reading from Ezekial, Chapter 37, on dry bones coming to life. Ezekial was used by God to put new life into things. Jones said transformation is messy, slow and something that God does, but we all have a part in it. "I'm leaving here enthusiastic. I think we're asking the right questions. I think we're open to what the Spirit will want to do. We will be in much better shape in 2012 than we are today," he concluded.