

Team begins to hone in on mission field, big questions

By Lisa Elliott Diehl, Kansas Area communications director

WICHITA, Kans. – The Nebraska-Kansas Episcopal Area Transition Team held their third meeting in Wichita, Kans., April 6-7.

It was decided that team members will be invite clergy and laity from the three conferences to join the conversation at the Annual Conference sessions this May and June.

The team has formed three subgroups to work on a communication strategy for their work, defining the mission field and identifying the questions a plan for the new episcopal area must address. Some of those questions will be asked at the three conference sessions, and clergy and laity will be asked to respond and take those questions back to their local congregations.

“The fun part about this is actually that we are in a moment where all across our connection and denominations in North America, people are trying to learn what no one can teach them,” said Gil Rendle, the consultant working with the transition team. Rendle, a United Methodist minister, is former senior consultant and seminar leader at the Alban Institute. He is now senior consultant for Clergy and Congregational Excellence for the Texas Methodist Foundation.

“We’re in a time when the old ways don’t work and we have to teach each other along the way,” he said.

Rendle encouraged the team to continue to move slowly and methodically, working on the adaptive questions because, as the adaptive questions are answered, the answers to the technical questions will be clear as well.

“Our United Methodist Church, along with other mainline denominations, are going through a paradigm shift,” Rendle said.

A paradigm is the framework by which we understand things. Once we have adopted a paradigm, if the information we receive doesn’t fit, we throw away the information.

Rendle invited the group to consider Edwards Deming’s simple system theory for manufacturing. In the system, these are inputs, the nouns or resources needed to produce a product, throughputs, the verbs or activities needed to transform the resources into a product, and output, the difference to be measured or the product produced.

In a for-profit world, this is simple, Rendle said. Both the input and the output are money and are easily measured. For non-profits, this is more difficult.

“Non-profits do not know what they produce or what they are trying to produce,” Rendle said. “When systems don’t know what their outcomes are, they measure their inputs and their activities. We’ve all had pastors who measured all they put into the system, hoping something would come out the other side.”

We measure how many, how often and how much. These are all inputs and activities, he said. In the church, we measure membership, average worship attendance, professions of faith and baptism. Rendle argued that these are inputs and throughputs because we still aren't clear about what our output, a disciple, looks like.

"If we get clear about the outcome, it instructs about what we need to get there," Rendle said. "If you're going to have a functional system, you have to learn how to build it backwards. What's the outcome of an episcopal area?"

Rendle said the denomination began its own paradigm shift when General Conference changed the denominational mission statement to "making disciples for the transformation of the world." This shifted the United Methodist Church's outcome from members to disciples.

The old UMC paradigm defined outcome as more members, satisfied clergy and satisfied congregations.

"We wanted more people, and we wanted those already in the system to be satisfied in the church," Rendle said. "We did everything possible to satisfy the people in the congregation so there was no discomfort."

But when you shift the paradigm, there's no way to go through it without people being dissatisfied. The key to change is learning how to appropriately dissatisfy people in the system in order to bring them along with the change, Rendle said.

"Measures are a difficult part of the conversation," Rendle said. "In the first paradigm, the mission field is not in the equation. When that paradigm started, the mission field was outside the country. We've come to a time when the mission field surrounds our churches. Part of your task is to look at what the mission field looks like in the episcopal area. If you're not connected to the mission field, it doesn't matter what you measure."

The team also discussed the role of long pastorates in facilitating change in the local church. Long pastorates are uncommon in the denomination because the old paradigm focused on producing satisfied churches and satisfied clergy.

"Churches that became break-out churches had to have the same pastor to move from decline or plateau to break-out. It happened after the eighth year of the tenure in the local church," said Rev. Wayne Alloway, pastor at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Lincoln, Neb. "That's very enlightening to me as I look at our denomination. There are very few who are appointed to the same church for that long."

Rendle said looking at appointments as a career ladder to be climbed or viewing the discomfort that comes with transition as bad contribute to shorter pastorates.

Facing opportunities as a region

For this meeting, team members read “Caught in the Middle,” a book by Richard C. Longworth, that takes a look at the changing economy of the Midwest.

“You probably saw that Kansas and Nebraska aren’t really the Midwest that he was talking about,” Rendle said. “Part of the reason I was taken by this book is because of his insistence that, when in a global market, you have to learn to respond as a region. That’s what I want you to think about.”

In the book, the author asserts that states operate as hives of warring interests. The primary tool against this behavior is communication.

“One of the things that Longworth talks about is that the leader needs to be honest about the reality the organization is facing and honest about the opportunity that is before us.” Rendle said.

Rev. Eduardo Bousson, Washburn University campus minister, said he was intrigued by the concept of the new Midwesterner, what Longworth calls the growing immigrant population.

“This is something that’s happening, and we’re not seeing it,” he said. “New people are coming into our towns, and we don’t see them.”

Rendle noted that the Kansas West Conference has the term “radical hospitality” in its vision statement. But North American hospitality is very different from the model of Biblical hospitality. We typically invite people into our homes to enjoy things the way we like them. The Biblical model invites people to come in and do what they need to do.

“When we begin to speak of ethnic communities, how do we help develop leadership so they do what they need to do?” Rendle asked. Longworth’s theme is that immigrants are a necessity. “In United Methodist land, the immigrant populations are the unchurched.”

Rendle said he intends to push the team as the members continue to meet to identify the new episcopal area’s client.

On the second day, Rendle had team members self-select and split into three task groups. The first task group, which includes the two bishops, was assigned the task of identifying the questions that the plan for a new episcopal area should address.

“I think we’re at a point where can at least start shaping this,” Rendle said. “What would a draft of an episcopal area ministry look like? And I do mean draft. A draft is always to be held lightly, so know going in that you are invited to make a draft that might be changed.”

The second group was asked to discuss what this Nebraska-Kansas area would look like as a mission field.

“In some sense, we’re still at the point we were last night. Where do you want to focus your attention and energy -- on the institution or on the mission field? This is not new work for your conferences individually,” Rendle said. “But what would it look like if you looked at that data as an area?”

The third group was asked to consider what information needs to be shared with the three annual conferences and how to share that information.

“One of the issues here is that you need to engage the people in your annual conferences and help them to shape a question before you give them an answer,” Rendle said.

The teams were given a little more than an hour to work on their plans and then report to the whole group.

The draft work group focused on developing questions that should be answered by the plan. The group asked how team members could start conversations around the connections between the conferences during the upcoming conference sessions, and how the two areas might discover what the connectational mission is. They wondered what kinds of groups each conference had that should start meeting together to begin discovering what kinds of ministry could be done together.

Rev. Janet Maxwell, Parsons District superintendent in the Kansas East Conference, reported on behalf of the mission field work group.

“The result is that our group has agreed to meet again in August,” Maxwell said. “And between now and then, we have assigned people from our group to talk to people in our annual conferences who do demographic research for us about specific information we’d like to have.”

The mission field team wants to paint a picture of current reality and projections for the future to develop a picture of the mission field.

Bousson reported for the communications work group. The team built an outline for annual conference presentations, understanding that the work of the two other groups will be important in determine what the final report looks like. However, one component should be some provocative questions to help congregations and clergy begin to struggle with the same issues with which the team is wrestling.

Jones said the draft plan team will provide some key questions for that part of the report.

The next meeting of the Transition Team will be Oct. 1 and 2 at the United Methodist Campus Ministry at Kansas State University. The team’s assigned reading will be “The Starfish and the Spider” by Ori Brafman.