

# GPconnect

Connecting United Methodists across the Great Plains

Fall 2016



*In this edition of GPconnect:*

***Bishop Saenz begins his ministry in the Great Plains  
Churches tailor ministries to their communities  
How the conference responds to disasters***



Connecting United Methodists across the Great Plains

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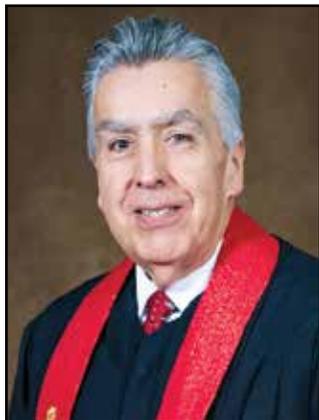
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## Cover photo

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., is consecrated as a bishop at the end of the South Central Jurisdictional Conference. Read more about Saenz on pages 12-15, and more about SCJC on pages 10-11.

# Bishop eager to get started in the Great Plains



**Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.**

God's beloved in the Great Plains,

Grace and peace.

Now just a few weeks into my new role as your bishop in Kansas and Nebraska, I wanted to pause for a moment to tell you how honored and excited I am to be your episcopal leader and partner in the mighty works that God has in store for all of us in the Great Plains Annual Conference.

I am doing my best to learn quickly about the many aspects of our two diverse states and the opportunities we have for a wide variety of ministries as we work together to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to live out the lessons our Savior taught about mercy and justice for all of God's children.

Many organizations aspire to change the world. But very few have all the elements required to offer the fullness of life, hope and healing to a volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous world. Friends, the church can and does have that transformative power through Christ.

As the people of The United Methodist Church of the Great Plains, we will continue to teach about Jesus' love for all and the message of hope that comes through his resurrection. Together, we will work to embody God's good and tangible gifts of healing, liberation, salvation and caring in the neighborhoods surrounding our churches, in our communities and throughout our world.

Please know that I will prayerfully and joyfully offer you my best and most meaningful efforts toward the great kingdom work before us, as I know you will offer yours. Please pray for the work that is at hand, for your pastors and for the laity who serve as the hands and feet of Christ in today's world.

Again, it is a great honor to join you on this next phase of your journey. I look forward to getting to know more about your ministry settings, the many aspects of mission work in which you are engaged and about God's people in the Great Plains.

I am looking forward to meeting many of you in my travels, which will include visits to your districts. And all are invited to a celebration service at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 15, at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. For those of you who can't attend in person, I invite you to watch the livestream broadcast online at [www.greatplainsumc.org/livestream](http://www.greatplainsumc.org/livestream).

Thank you for your prayers and for the warm welcome I and my wife, Maye, already have received.

Paz,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ruben Saenz Jr.", written over a white background.



**Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.,  
Resident Bishop  
Great Plains United Methodist Conference**

*From your lay leader*

## ***What makes a great leader?***

During the fall months, and particularly this time of change and transition, I always find myself reflective and grateful for the past year. It remains a privilege to represent the laity of Kansas and Nebraska. One area of reflection for me has been on the subject of leadership, and the many attributes and qualities that make for great leaders, as well as their call to lead. The church is like any other organization that needs effective leadership.

In our current popular election season, we are overloaded with examples and opinions of an unlimited amount of potential character traits that may be either necessary or disastrous to effective leadership, depending on your point of view. As a concerned citizen, I absorb them all. But the Bible also gives us many examples of improbable leaders who were called and equipped by God. Yet we would most likely remain skeptical of their leadership abilities. The qualities they offered then would today seem otherworldly: compassion, forgiveness and love of neighbor.

What kind of leader would that be? What's a concerned voter to do? Fortunately, at least in the church, our tradition of discernment, whereby we invite God's moving spirit into the process, is useful in guiding us through these very waters.



Courtney Fowler

As the chair of the Great Plains delegation to General Conference, I've spent a considerable amount of time in discernment this past year, along with many others. So it's with a huge amount of excitement and hope that I welcome our new episcopal leader, Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., to our Great Plains family. I'm inspired by the calling of Jesus Christ on his life and his warmth and compassion for those around him. I'm also inspired by his lovely wife, Maye, and the overwhelming support of his entire family as they all answer God's call to this new role. They too spent time in prayerful discernment as a family, as they contemplated a life change.

And the more I think about it, I just marvel at the fact that we all invited God's guiding spirit into this process and I'm grateful that through our mutual discernment, God led us to one another. God is good!

*Courtney*

Courtney Fowler  
Conference Lay Leader  
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Conference events are posted  
at [greatplainsumc.org/events](http://greatplainsumc.org/events)

## ***Conference events***

**Oct. 1**  
From Fellowship to Faith to Following,  
Iola, Kansas

**Oct. 2-5**  
Residency Retreat No. 1,  
Junction City, Kansas

**Oct. 4-5**  
PAUMCS fall meeting,  
Lincoln, Nebraska

**Oct. 7-8**  
Small Wonders Conference,  
Salina, Kansas

**Oct. 11-12**  
Experiencing Excellence (PCM)  
training, Great Bend, Kansas

**Oct. 12**  
Experiencing Excellence (PCM)  
training, Columbus, Nebraska

**Oct. 15**  
Celebration with new bishop,  
Lincoln, Nebraska

**Oct. 21-22**  
Lay Servant Ministries course retreat,  
Camp Comeca

**Oct. 22**  
Camp Norwesca's Oktoberfest Party,

**Oct. 27-28**  
Board of Ordained Ministry meeting,  
Abilene, Kansas

**Oct. 29**  
For the Transformation of the World:  
The Great Plains talks poverty, race,  
gender and environment,  
Lincoln, Nebraska

**Nov. 1**  
Leading Out of Drama,  
Wichita, Kansas

**Nov. 3**  
Leading Out of Drama,  
Grand Island, Nebraska

**Nov. 13-15**  
Residency Retreat No. 2,  
Junction City, Kansas

**Nov. 19**  
Bishop's Round-Up Against Hunger,  
Lawrence, Kansas

**Nov. 24-25**  
Thanksgiving, offices closed

**Dec. 4-6**  
Residency Retreat No. 3,  
Junction City, Kansas

**Dec. 23-26**  
Christmas break, offices closed

The sound of sewing machines fills a corner of the downstairs of what has become known simply as The Outreach Center of First UMC in Columbus, Nebraska.

It's Tuesday morning, the traditional gathering time of women who put their gifts of sewing to use in a ministry that extends far beyond the congregation.

Lois Athey, who the women consider to be their "fearless leader," works at one long table with Jan Carskadon to measure fabric as Bev Weil works at another table pinning together material to be sewn into one of the Methodist Quilters group's latest projects. In the adjoining room, four other women — some members of First UMC and others who are part of a Lutheran congregation in town — are operating sewing machines.

Each participant has her own space — a welcome change that came with the move of The Outreach Center from a strip mall positioned behind the McDonald's restaurant in town at the highly visible intersection of 33rd Avenue and U.S. Highway 30. Now, The Outreach Center is in the former

evangelical free church at 3602 16th St.

"We love this," Athey said. "We have lots of room."

The Methodist Quilters' experience mirrors that of other groups who used the former Outreach Center space in the strip mall. Though grateful to have a place to gather, the group had grown frustrated with having to set out their crafting materials and then having either to put it away in cramped quarters or take them home because of having to share the facility with the youth group, a food program for schoolchildren and other activities.

Now, the 15-year-old group has dedicated cabinets for its materials and equipment to make bibs for Veterans Affairs hospitals, blankets for newborn babies, quilts for Epworth Village and Camp Fontanelle, and gowns for children in Third World countries, among other projects.

These are the kinds of mission-oriented purposes for which the congregation intended to use the space when it purchased and renovated the building.

## 'The Right Way'

The Rev. Cindi Stewart, now in her third year of ministry at Columbus First UMC, said the new Outreach Center fits well with the strategic plan the congregation has been crafting and shaping for more than a year.

"The people here really saw a vision for outreach," she said.

Already ingrained in the local church's culture, outreach became an even bigger priority as programs with which the church is involved blossomed in the nearly 5,000-square-foot strip mall space.

One example is "A Place at the Table," a food-distribution ministry aimed at school-age children who have little or nothing to eat on the weekends, when school is not in session. The effort, started by the church's Missions Committee about five years ago, at first served fewer than 200 younger kids.

Tom Lutjens, who volunteers with "A Place at the Table," said the food ministry now serves more than 300 children of all ages. The move to the more than 21,000-square-foot building means there is a vastly larger area for staging the bagging of food.

"The biggest benefit for us is there is so much more storage space. We get a

# Prayer guides Columbus church's journey to new outreach center

By **TODD SEIFERT**,  
communications director



lot of food at various times, so having a place to store it and then put it to use is a big advantage," Lutjens said.

Such a ministry fits into the church's strategic plan.

"We started with prayer, and God provided," Stewart said.

The pastor said a task force worked to determine what to do with The Outreach Center and its various ministries because of a pending deadline to either renew or cancel the lease at the strip mall. When the non-profit Rainbow Center moved from the former Evangelical Free Church building, it provided First UMC an opportunity to move away from renting a facility to purchasing its new Outreach Center location for a relatively low cost of \$396,000.

"We started with a task force and then moved to a study committee to make sure we had considered the possibilities," Stewart said. "Eventually, a building committee completed its work to lead to the purchase of the facility. Clearly, we still have a lot of work to do, but I think we did this the right way."

The building opened in 1961, meaning it is structurally sound but in need of renovations and upgrades. Two kitchens are being refurbished. Carpet has been donated, and a small army of volunteers has done everything from fixing up bathrooms to changing light fixtures to painting walls. Stewart said the focus remained on ministry throughout the process.

"The most powerful

thing about this process is that it is rooted in prayer," she said. "That sounds simple. We're church people, right? We push and say prayer is important, but how often do we really do it? This is truly one of the most spiritual processes I have ever seen."

## Big plans

Now that the new center is open, the congregation is getting to work making it available for the community to use. The American Red Cross conducts its weekly blood drive in the multipurpose Community Room. Organizations already have approached the church about using space such as the spacious Aldersgate Room for large-gathering meetings.

And the youth group has carved out about half of the basement for its various activities.

"We had no doors, so literally, you could hear what every group was doing or discussing," Sarah Borgman, Christian Education director at Columbus First UMC, said of the former facility.

The youth area boasts a full kitchen, a game room, a music room and three classrooms — one each for the senior-high (grades 9-12), junior-high (grades 7 and 8) and middle-school (grades 5 and 6) participants. When youth activities restart in September, the approximately 60 kids who take part each week will have considerably more room for their fun activities and to learn more about their faith.

The Rev. Seong Lee started as the associate pastor in July. His office was intentionally placed at The Outreach Center to provide an opportunity for ministry with people

who use the facility during the week.

"We want this to be a place for the community to use as much as possible," Lee said. "This building has a lot of big spaces, and it has a lot of possibilities."

The community will continue to have chances to see what those possibilities may be. The church celebrated an open house in July, and a formal dedication ceremony was scheduled for Sept. 25.

Preparations also were under way to start a contemporary-style worship service, called "Ignite," to take place at 6 p.m. Sundays.

And everyone has a role to play in making the final preparations. Athey and the Methodist Quilters even have a role in the contemporary worship setting, merging two ministry tasks that typically don't go together. The quilting group has been tasked with replacing a worn curtain that serves as a centerpiece for the backdrop in the stage area.

"There is still a lot of work to be done," Athey said of the work completed to this point. "But you have never seen such hard workers before. This has been wonderful."

And with the pieces just about in place, the focus has shifted from fixing up a building to putting it to use for the community the church serves. While the new location, nestled in a residential area, may not be as visible as it was at the strip mall behind a popular fast-food restaurant, Stewart said the new home for The Outreach Center offers new opportunities.

"We can reach into our neighborhood to meet needs," she said. "The benefit is now we are in the heart of the mission field."



# EMPORIA

By DAVID BURKE, *communications coordinator*

# UMMC

# FOOTS

# BILL

# FOR

# SCHOOL

# SUPPLIES

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FIRST UMC, EMPORIA, KANSAS



Thanks to the local United Methodist Church in one Kansas community, many children already can cross a major item off the list of back-to-school chores.

First United Methodist Church in Emporia is

providing school supplies to the approximately 4,500 students from pre-K through high school this fall.

“It has evolved into the whole district,” said the Rev. Jeannie Jensen, senior pastor.

The program began as part of the initiative by Great Plains Bishop Scott J. Jones several years ago to delve into church-school partnerships. It became a partnership in fundraising alongside the church’s capital campaign, Jensen said.

First UMC has worked with key staff members in the Emporia schools to find out what was most needed by students in the district, which includes one high school, one middle school, six elementaries, a learning center and an early childhood center.

“It’s a partnership that has been growing slowly,” Jensen said.

A mission outreach team worked with the school for cases such as a student who didn’t have shoes or a young family whose apartment had caught fire, she said.

But having school supplies overwhelmingly

became the greatest need.

“It seems like they never had enough (three-ring) binders,” she said. “They kept breaking them and losing them, and a lot of (the money for) that came out of the teachers’ pockets.”

Money also was initially provided to help pay for graphing calculators for high school math students.

“It’s a very expensive item, and many of the students could not afford them,” said Jensen, whose church paid for 200 of them.

After buying supplies for high-schoolers for the 2015-16 school year, the church is expanding for this year into all age levels. The church’s Serve Team is asking for monetary donations rather than the items themselves.

“We won’t turn it down,” Jensen said, “but we felt like we could do a lot more if we get monetary donations and then do some very careful shopping.”

One member of the Serve Team negotiates with a local store and is able to buy in bulk to get a better bargain, the pastor said. The items will be distributed in August when school starts.

Even though big-box stores offer drastic discounts for back-to-school items, Jensen said she hopes it can spark a “pay it forward” effort to contribute elsewhere with the money that might have been spent on pencils, paper and crayons.

“Hopefully they’ll find some other way to support the community,” Jensen said. “Hopefully it’ll inspire them to think of other ways in which they can contribute.”

# Flip-flops, socks help disadvantaged in Hutchinson

By DAVID BURKE, *communications coordinator*

It started as a way to add color to the exterior of First UMC in Hutchinson, Kansas. But the results have become a simple, yet effective, outreach to the community.

Since the spring, church members have strung flip-flops and socks on the trees and bushes in front of its building in downtown Hutchinson, available to anyone who needs the footwear.

The project, church member Deanne Martin said, began as a way to brighten the landscape of the church.

"I was just brainstorming a way to add some color to the outside of the building," said Martin, who works for a graphic design company. "It was just getting near Easter time and the thought went to Easter eggs and bushes."

But once she got approval from the church council and saw there were, indeed, takers for the flip-flops and socks outside the building, "I just didn't want to stop it at Easter," Martin said.

"It just grew from there," she said.

It began with church members donating the items, and grew to other members of the community. Vacation Bible School students from Trinity UMC in Hutchinson even came over to help stock the trees.

Martin and other church members talked to agencies in town that serve the disadvantaged and assured them that there would be those interested.

In its first few months, more than 350 items have been given away so far, Martin said. There is a low-income housing area near the church, as well as facilities where the poor can learn new trade skills, and she said she thinks that's who is using some of the socks and flip-flops.



Martin stocks the tree on Sunday afternoons.

"Oftentimes by mid-Monday, everything's gone," she said.

Anecdotal evidence has shown that there are a number of people taking the items and not just one person for his or her own gain, she added.

She and other church members are open to suggestions for other items, she said. One member had a surplus of two-dozen flyswatters that he donated.

"We put them in the tree, and they disappeared," Martin said.

First UMC is using the tree as a springboard for other projects. At its VBS in late July, children painted boxes for new mini-lending libraries that will go on church property.

The local Salvation Army has offered to donate socks, but the church has made the decision to stick with new socks and flip-flops, Martin said.

"These are new, which kind of makes them special," she said. "We've had a good variety of all kinds of sizes and colors and shapes, so it really helps them do a little shopping if they want to."

The Rev. Jeff Slater, First UMC pastor, says he hopes the project expands to make those in need aware of the food pantry at the church.

"What we've seen clearly, though, is how it's opened people's eyes to the need," Slater said. "I don't suppose we'll ever know how many we've helped, though there is evidence that many have received flip-flops and socks."

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FIRST UMC, HUTCHINSON, KANSAS



By **TODD SEIFERT**, *communications director*

A college student's dream has turned into a young adult's reality. And the result is ConnectionN Point, a ministry that joins campus ministry at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a neighborhood that in some ways desperately needs the services this new opportunity provides.

Beth Menhusen lives near the East Campus at UNL, a neighborhood that is among the lowest in terms of household income in Nebraska's capital city. She would pass by the then-shuttered former Faith UMC building near the intersection of 33rd and Starr streets and think about the mercy and justice ministries that could be conducted out of such a facility. Faith was closed not because of any structural issues but because of dwindling attendance as it merged with two other congregations to become New Hope UMC.

But attendance at one Monday evening campus ministry gathering came at just the right time and at just the right place. The campus minister, Pastor Michelle Chesnut, was leading worship along with a special guest who helped with the music that night: Blue River District Superintendent Bill Ritter.

Ritter was the guy who held the keys to that former Faith UMC building that had captured Menhusen's imagination.

"She shared with me her vision of a mission location at the former Faith UMC," Ritter said. "I was so impressed that this young Christian looked at this location and saw the opportunity to serve God. Beth definitely understood that the calling and purpose of United Methodist churches is to make disciples of Jesus Christ."

ConnectionN Point now houses a food pantry for struggling UNL students, an after-school mentoring and tutoring program for children at two elementary schools, a clothing closet for professional dress to help people look appropriate for job interviews and a place for Bible study.

"My goal is to get college students involved," said Menhusen, who earned a degree in nutrition and dietetics, and who is now starting seminary classes through Illiff School of Theology based in Denver. That involvement means providing some help to college students when needed and then using the skills those students have to help the surrounding community.

First, a building that had been sitting without

activity since 2012 had to be revitalized. And that's where two churches with ties to the project — Christ UMC and Saint Paul UMC — stepped up. Menhusen is a pastoral intern at Christ UMC, and campus minister Michelle Chestnut is based out of Saint Paul.

"This is part of our DNA at Christ Church, to be involved in outreach, so we're excited to have the opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ," said the Rev. Richard Randolph,

who is lead pastor at Christ UMC in Lincoln and a pastor with a long history of leadership in mercy and justice ministries.

A small army of volunteers from both churches, as

well as Trinity UMC in south Lincoln, cleaned the building, made repairs where necessary, and hauled out loads of trash and materials that wouldn't be put to use in the new outreach center.

To get the word out about the new ministries, Menhusen and others spoke to neighborhood associations, visited with resident assistants at UNL dormitories and spoke to leaders at the Center for Civic Engagement on the college campus.

Randolph said ConnectionN Point could serve as an example for living out faith in Jesus in the 21st century.

"I truly think this is the best, most interesting time to be in ministry in 500 years," Randolph said. "We all know about the problem of numerical declines experienced by The United Methodist Church as well as other denominations. But problems can also provide opportunities to be creative and explore new forms of ministry, to re-examine what it means to be a church. I believe that ConnectionN Point is a model for this creative re-thinking of Christian discipleship."

## New ministry aims to make 'ConnectionN' between college students, community

PHOTOS BY TODD SEIFERT

A cookout Aug. 27 at ConnectionN Point offered an opportunity for the community to get to know its new neighbor, a church turned into a mission outreach center that focuses on the needs of the people near the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus.





# Rejoice in the Harvest



South Central  
Jurisdictional Conference  
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



July 13-16, 2016 • Hyatt Regency Wichita • Wichita First UMC



# South Central Jurisdictional Conference break-down

By **TODD SEIFERT**, *communications director*

The South Central Jurisdictional Conference set a record for the number of ballots needed to complete its election of bishops, but after 35 attempts, the delegates who attended the event in Wichita, Kansas, had completed their work. Along the way they passed a resolution related to human sexuality, took a proactive approach to a potential decline in the number of episcopal areas and enjoyed a worship-filled concert.

The South Central Jurisdiction — comprised of annual conferences in Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana and New Mexico — convened July 13-16. Delegates had to elect three episcopal leaders to replace retiring Bishop Janice Riggle Huie of Louisiana and Bishop Robert Hayes Jr. of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference (OIMC), as well as fill a vacancy in the Rio Texas Conference.

## Bishops and Assignments

The Rev. Ruben Saenz Jr., director of connectional ministries and the Missions Vitality Center for the Rio Texas Conference, was elected on the third ballot. Based in San Antonio, Texas, he was considered a key point person to the bishop and cabinet. He is credited with helping lead efforts in new church starts and for addressing issues of generational, social and systemic poverty. He also created a computer-literacy program targeting single mothers who were unemployed after factory shutdowns so they could enter the job market and earn a sustainable wage.

A second bishop was elected on the 21st ballot, when the Rev. James “Jimmy” Nunn won election. He had served as director of mission and administration for the Northwest Texas Conference. He also held roles as director of church development and lead efforts to plant new churches as well as recruit young and diverse clergy to the conference.

On the record 35th ballot, delegates elected the final of three new bishops when they cast ballots for the Rev. Robert “Bob” Farr. He served as director of congregational excellence for the Missouri Conference. He also pastored a restart urban church in the Kansas City, Missouri, area and is known for leading churches with large increases in worship attendance. The Rev. David Severe, executive director for the jurisdiction, said the previous record for ballots was 31.

Assignments by the Episcopacy Committee were:

- Arkansas** – Robert Mueller
- Central Texas** – Mike Lowry
- Great Plains** – Ruben Saenz Jr.
- Louisiana** – Cynthia Harvey
- Missouri** – Robert Farr
- North Texas** – Michael McKee
- Northwest Texas and New Mexico** – W. Earl Bledsoe
- Oklahoma and OIMC** – James Nunn
- Rio Texas** – Robert Schnase
- Texas** – Scott Jones

## Annual Conference Alignments

Delegates chose to take a proactive approach toward a potential downsizing in the number of episcopal areas by endorsing a plan to give the College of Bishops authority to act related to what has been called “Mission 21.” The decision is a preventative measure to avoid an intense time crunch in case the 2020 General Conference requires the South Central Jurisdiction to reduce its number of episcopal areas by one. The approval does not mean a reduction is imminent. But the concern is that a decision by the worldwide church in May 2020 would only give the jurisdiction a few months to act. The vote allows the bishops and a team they assemble to plan in case such a change is needed.

Initial plans outline changes to annual conference boundaries along what is being called the “missional option” in Texas and New Mexico based on cultural affinities, equitable workloads and a balanced financial base.

Under the Mission 21 plan, some possible unifications could include:

- The Houston and southeast Texas areas.
- The Dallas and northeast Texas areas.
- The San Antonio and western Texas areas.
- The Fort Worth area stretching west to include New Mexico.

## Human Sexuality Debate

Mere minutes after social media posts indicated the election of an openly gay bishop in the Western Jurisdiction, Great Plains Conference lay delegate Dixie Brewster made a motion from the floor to seek a declaratory decision by the United Methodist Church’s Judicial Council as to the validity of such an election.

After debate and a failed motion to table the initial request, delegates voted 109-84 to approve the request to the council. The delegates, bishops and observers gathered in the center of the plenary room after the vote to pray for people hurting as a result of the ongoing debates over human-sexuality issues throughout the denomination.

Prior to the vote, two factions at different ends of the debate each introduced resolutions and worked together to craft language calling for a middle ground.

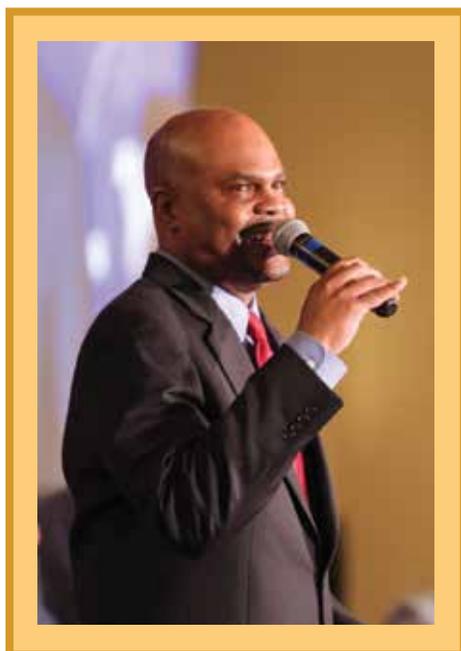
The combined resolution thanked the Council of Bishops for its proposal at General Conference in May to create a special commission to discuss the issues and for unity “across the spectrum of convictions on these matters to pray for the formation of that commission and its work.”

## Celebration and Worship

The jurisdictional conference featured an Area Night concert with Grammy award-nominated gospel musician William McDowell and his band, along with a 182-voice mass choir comprised of United Methodists from across Kansas and Nebraska.

Crafted to be a celebration of the host city, Wichita, and to introduce the community to the United Methodist Church, the event helped raise money via T-shirts and ticket sales for two Wichita-area ministries:

- **United Methodist Open Door** – The food pantry and homeless shelter in the area is going through an expansion project.
- **GraceMed** – This ministry provides health care in many forms to people in need, and it is expanding into the Topeka area.



PHOTOS BY GREAT PLAINS COMMUNICATIONS

From top: Great Plains Conference delegates await to hear the name of their new bishop, newly elected bishops; Ruben Saenz Jr., James Nunn and Robert Farr are celebrated during the consecration services; the Rev. Junius Dotson leads worship, Great Plains delegates during a plenary session. Page 9, top from left: the choir sings during the Area Night concert; Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. and Maye react to the wild cheers from Great Plains delegates upon hearing his assignment announcement; Bishop Robert Hayes Jr. shares a laugh on stage. Page 9, bottom from left: newly elected Bishop James Nunn receives his episcopal pin; the Saint Mark praise band opens worship; newly elected Bishop Robert Farr receives his episcopal pin.

# X's and O's

## Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.'s game plan has included time as teacher, coach, businessman

By **DAVID BURKE**,  
*communications coordinator*

Before he got the call into ordained ministry, the Rev. Ruben Saenz Jr. was a high school teacher and assistant football coach.

And even though he's been away from the gridiron and the classroom for more than 28 years, the new bishop of the Great Plains Annual Conference still keeps some of those same philosophies from his coaching days as a pastor and church leader.

"One of the crossovers of that is development," he said, in the echo of his new Wichita office. "Everybody can be developed to increase their performance and strength and capacity. The same works for discipleship – how can we develop discipleship?"

"Looking at taking an athlete from Point A to Point B and the process it takes to get them there, and then providing the structure and the encouragement and the guidance — that fits into discipleship in the very same way," Bishop Saenz added. "Where are you now? Are you where you need to be? How can we help you get there?"

Those who have worked with the new bishop in the Rio Texas Conference — joyful for his new position but saddened at losing their friend and leader — say that teacher/coach philosophy has remained strong with him.

Among those is Diana Phillips, a former mental health counselor whom Bishop Saenz encouraged to enter the ordained ministry.

"When I had all these things bubbling in my head but I couldn't quite paint a picture ... I would call Ruben up



and say, 'Hey, I need a whiteboard session.' And it was like he had all the time in the world. I would just start talking about something I was doing in ministry or a committee — just things I dreamed about.

"I'd just start talking about it, and he would take out his whiteboard and his markers and create a map, make a picture of what was in my head," she recalled. "It was so helpful, because I could move forward on it then. Whenever you're serving with him, he's able to take what is happening in the room and paints a picture of it. It's very visual, very powerful, and it's like a roadmap of where you're headed."

Bishop Saenz says he delights in mapping out the X's and O's for anyone with which he speaks.

"I'm a visual person, and I like to see things," he said. "The whiteboard

is very helpful to get a picture. That's what vision is all about. What is the picture you're trying to obtain?"

As an assistant coach, he was in charge of strength and conditioning, making sure players were at their peak performance levels.

He says there are parallels to clergy, laity and churches.

"If we do this well, we're going to have fewer injuries, we're going to perform better," Bishop Saenz said. "At the end of the season, it's who's got the healthiest players."

"If you have all kinds of injuries during the season, and you have a shadow of the team that you started out with, you're probably going to succumb to a stronger team because you're dilapidated," he added. "Clergy develop healthy churches. How can we develop the capacities and missional mindset of churches

so they can be better?"

### **Caring, insightful**

Interviews with friends and colleagues of Bishop Saenz from the Rio Texas Conference all agree on a picture of him as a caring, thoughtful leader who weighs all of the pros and cons before making a decision.

"Ruben is very caring, and I think he's a listener," said Abel Vega Jr., director of outreach vitality for the Mission Vitality Center of the Conference, of which the bishop was a key leader prior to his episcopal assignment.

"But he's also very discerning ... and has the ability to bring people together and have a sense of strategy and direction," Vega added. "We're just proud to see his journey and where it's ended up."

The Rev. Laura Merrill, a district superintendent in the Rio Texas Conference who is becoming Bishop

# of ministry

Saenz's successor there, said she became a fan when he first spoke to a group that led to the unification of two conferences.

"He was very calm, had a calm way about him. He was listening. He was not anxious," Merrill recalled. "And it was an anxious group. We had only begun to know each other.

"On that day, I remember thinking, 'He looks episcopal to me.' That was the very first time I met him, and that's what I thought," she added. "He's innovative. He's a big-picture, creative thinker. He's always kind of a step ahead thinking of what might be."

The senior pastor of the Bulverde United Methodist Church in San Antonio, the Rev. Ralph Mann, began his position in 2011 at the same time that Bishop Saenz started his position with the Rio Texas Conference.

"I have encountered him in interesting situations and situations where tough decision have to be made. He is a deep thinker. He puts a lot of thought into it," Mann said. "And he's extremely fair."

Mann said he's seen the bishop's visual thinking come into play — but with sticky notes rather than a whiteboard.

"In his first office ... he'd have a big window that had mini-blinds in front of it. He would pull that up and put up sticky notes — that's a part of his thought process. Looking at it from the outside, you see all these yellow things on the window, and you wondered what that was," Mann said. "He'd use sticky notes for structure, to think, to process. And when someone walked in his door, he'd just put the blinds down."

Mann's church recently welcomed back Bishop Saenz's son, Ruben III, as associate pastor for youth and young adults.

"The whole family is just wonderful," Mann said. "They're a delight, very much in love with the Lord, wanting to give everything to the Kingdom."

Through Saenz's encouragement, Norma Pollard went from being a church secretary to the associate pastor of a United Methodist Church in Edinburg, Texas, for the past 10 years.

"He's an original," Pollard said of her mentor. "He's what I call a Type-A personality to the third power. He is very focused, very driven. He is a visionary. When he goes on quote-unquote 'vacation,' it's always like, 'Dear Lord, let's see what he comes back with.'

"He definitely is led by God. It may not be what people see that as the road that should be taken, but it's because he's seeking after what God is calling him to do. And it works out — it goes, it happens, and doors open," she continued. "He's a tremendous person. He can be a very intimidating person, because he's listening to every word you're saying and taking it in. He listens before he speaks."

## Texas, educational roots

Ruben Saenz Jr. was born 55 years ago — his consecration service July 16 fell on his birthday — and grew up in Rio Grande City, Texas, the first of two sons of Ruben, a 52-year veteran educator, and Olga, a longtime special education teacher.

Rio Grande City, just north of the Mexican border with a population of nearly 14,000, was far more integrated than its neighboring towns.

"In my world, the Coopers and the Smiths and the Andersons were just like us," Bishop Saenz said. "There was no difference."

That perspective changed when Ruben Jr. and his family moved to Austin, Texas, so his father — who went on to become a high school principal, district superintendent and a community college dean — went on to doctorate studies at the

University of Texas and brought his family.

"I didn't know that I was Hispanic until I was 12 years old," he said.

Bishop Saenz tells of being shunned on the classroom and the playground, with classmates not wanting to touch the kickball after "a Mexican touched it."

But he is not Mexican. He's a seventh-generation American.

"My ancestors have been living north of the Rio Grande since the early 1700s," he said. "They were a part of Texas before Texas was Texas."

He saw the prejudice continue in college at Stephen F. Austin University where, as a freshman who rose quickly to become the starting offensive tackle for the Lumberjack football team, teammates wouldn't grip his hands as a show of unity in the huddle.

"We don't hold hands with people like you," he was told.

"In my mind, although I was perceived differently, I never saw myself as 'different' or 'less than,'"

Bishop Saenz said.



See  
BISHOP  
on page  
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## Groundbreaking

Although Bishop Saenz is the only Hispanic name in the College of Bishops for the South Central Jurisdiction, he is not the first Hispanic in the region: Bishop Joel Martinez served the former Nebraska Conference from 1992 to 2000.

Although he is proud of his heritage, Saenz would rather have the reputation of “a bishop who happens to be Hispanic” rather than “a Hispanic bishop.”

“When I hear something like ‘You’re a Hispanic,’ it’s a diminishment of who I am as a person,” Bishop Saenz said. “Immediately people want to categorize me here or there, and project their biases and prejudices on me because I’m Hispanic.”

He even turned down a conference job in Texas as director of Hispanic ministry because he felt that it pigeonholed him.

“That’s been my struggle over the years,” he said. “People want to define me, but I need to hold on to the definition of who I am. Hopefully it’s a theological definition.”

Church leaders, he said, often tried to put him in “little boxes” because of their preconceived notions, even pleading for him to join committees on immigration.

“I care about Hispanic ministry,” Bishop Saenz said. “But I also care about discipleship and finance and congregational development. I can do that and understand it, but don’t say, ‘You’re Hispanic, so immigration is your main force here.’”

That has shaped who he is today, he said.

“My need to be self-aware is probably higher than another person’s need to be self-aware because I have to be conscious all the time about where I am,” he said. “I’ve had to learn how to navigate different contexts depending on where I am. It’s a skill that I’ve had to pick up, especially in the Methodist church.”

## Higher education

Bishop Saenz, whose younger brother is a high school principal, continued the family tradition

of education for six years, teaching emotionally disturbed high-schoolers.

“You have some people who have internalized their own unworthiness,” he said of his former students. “They have accepted limits for themselves and believe things that have been told about themselves. Part of my hopes for the future was to release them from those conceptions about who they were told they were, to help them see for themselves.”

For Bishop Saenz, “It wasn’t about teaching reading or writing – it was about helping people find their own sense of worth.”

“You have to know their state of mind, with a perception of how they view the world,” he said. “And that’s a part of it.”

## Business, and almost law

In between his time in education and the ministry, Bishop Saenz was a businessman.

He and his wife, Maye, began a business selling gold chains and accessories in Rio Grande City that blossomed into a full-fledged jewelry store with two locations before they sold it after nine years.

That experience, he said, helps him today as a bishop.

“You’re always having to understand where the market is,” he said, “and how to make constant adaptations to your business plans in order to stay viable.”

“Sometimes you find yourself reinventing yourself, or diversifying yourself to take your business in new ways, to expand your market,” Bishop Saenz added.

Through customer relations, he said,



he learned how to deal with people from all walks of life.

“That’s important in any business, how you sustain your customers and how you communicate with them. You’re constantly learning, building the infrastructure to sustain growth,” he said. “As your business grows, you need more and more people, more specialized tasks and roles in training for people you’re adding to the culture of the company. Putting all those systems in place from the ground up really counts.”

Looking for a change in his life, he considered law school.

“I was going to be an attorney, but the call was in,” he recalled at a news conference after his election as bishop in July. He heard God’s voice say, “I want you to be an attorney for Me, but I want your case to be before the people.”

Bishop Saenz gave his life to Christ as a 17-year-old at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes gathering in Estes Park, Colorado. Long before considering ordained ministry, he was already very active in his local church.

“I did about everything I could possibly do at a local church level, from spiritual formation to leadership to you name it,” he said. “But there was a growing sense that I wasn’t doing enough, that God wanted me to do more.”

## God’s will

From the moment of his election to his first week in the office of bishop and beyond, he has insisted that it’s not his own will that has made him an episcopal leader in the United Methodist Church.

“Throughout the years, various people at various times said to me, all the way from when I began seminary ..., ‘One day this may happen,’” he recalled in July. “I think of it as drops in a sponge. The first 100 drops are really insignificant, but after a while the sponge gets heavy with water, and it becomes saturated.”

“It was the affirmations of many people that I’ve been in relationship with over the years that has led me to say, ‘If other people see these gifts and graces in me, maybe God has asked me to offer myself to this

# Meet Bishop Saenz

**Pronounced:** “Signs”

**Born:** July 16, 1961 in Rio Grande City, Texas, the oldest of two sons born to Ruben Sr. and Olga Saenz

**Education:** Bachelor’s degree in secondary education and teaching, Stephen F. Austin State University; master of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees from Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

**Wife:** Maye (pronounced “MY-uh”); “She’s my best friend,” the bishop says — married Aug. 22, 1981

**Children:**

- Aaron Gabriel Saenz, senior pastor of Valley Praise in Harlingen, Texas (Rio Texas Conference); wife Iris, district minister assistant, El Valle District (Rio Texas)
- Christina Mari Coats, special education appraisal assistant for Pearland, Texas, schools; husband Matthew Coats, master data specialist for Sysco in Houston
- Ruben Saenz III, associate pastor at Bulverde UMC in San Antonio (Rio Texas); wife Christina, nursing student (expecting the bishop’s first grandchild, a boy, on Nov. 8)
- Isaac David Saenz, a junior at University of Texas, pursuing a degree in communications-broadcasting

**Hobbies:** Movies with his wife (prefers espionage, detective/whodunits and “underdog” movies, including the “Rocky” series); fishing and golf with his sons (but mostly while he’s on vacation); past hobbies — including woodworking, jewelry making and painting — have proven too time-intensive for his current job, he says



position.’ It wasn’t planning.”

Those who have worked with him say they couldn’t think of a better person for the job.

“He has this really lovely sense, professional sense, business-minded,” Merrill said. “He’s a businessman. He knows how to get things done, but at the same time he has this very profound respect and compassion for the poor and people of color and folks who don’t run in that professional business circle. He gets that. It makes him able to live in a couple of different universes, as it were.”

“It seems he has stepped into situations wherever he’s been assigned or appointed, to look at the possibilities,” Vega said. “Sometimes when you look at those possibilities, it will lead you to disrupt the status quo. I think there’s a lot of character in just navigating through that — anywhere from being a bridge-builder to bringing

people along in conversations. But also not being afraid to state the truth about the situation, to calm people to a higher place.”

Pollard calls herself a “cheerleader” for Bishop Saenz, especially admiring his work after a scandal in the Rio Texas Conference that forced the resignation of the previous bishop.

“He really became the spokesperson for us, the comforter, the guider,” Pollard said. “I remember telling him that I would never have wanted that to happen to anyone else, however, I think it provided us and Ruben the opportunity to see even more so his leadership abilities, and the humbleness and genuineness of who he is.”

Mann said he was excited to see new opportunities for Bishop Saenz, but knows it won’t be the last time to see his colleague — the Saenzes’ first grandchild is due before the end of the

year, and “I already know I’m gonna have to share in the baptism of that boy with a lot of other preachers.”

“I think you’ll be blessed by his presence there. I know he’s excited about being there,” Mann said. “But you’re gonna have to give Maye a good coat because she’ll get cold in the winter there. We’re south Texas people.”

PHOTOS BY TODD SEIFERT

On page 12 and 13: Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., and wife Maye, at the Great Plains Welcome Breakfast after the South Central Jurisdictional Conference in Wichita, Kansas. On opposite page: newly elected Bishop Saenz receives his episcopal pin by Bishop Michael McKee of the North Texas Conference. Pictured above: Bishop Saenz with family after being elected as a bishop. From left, Ruben Saenz Sr., Matthew Coats, Olga Saenz, Christina Coats, Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., Maye Saenz, Ruben Saenz III, Christina Saenz, Iris, Saenz, Aaron Saenz and Isaac Saenz.

# Great Plains crews help

By DAVID BURKE, *communications coordinator*

Mother Nature is always a force to be reckoned with in the Great Plains.

But in the aftermath of storms in the summer of 2016, staff and volunteers from the Great Plains Conference were quickly on hand to provide assistance, guidance and prayer — and to help in the rebuilding effort.

That was the case with two disasters that hit Kansas this summer — August and September flooding in Mulvane, just south of Wichita, and a tornado that struck Eureka, about 75 miles southeast of Wichita.



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

At left, the Rev. Lora Andrews and a crew from Southwestern College arrive to help. Center, the Rev. Hollie Tapley, disaster response coordinator, comforts Lencie Price. At right, volunteers and emergency management personnel help Dan Cleaver, in the red T-shirt, remove the walls of his kitchen.

On at least two occasions, floods ransacked Mulvane, a town of 6,000 that straddles the Sedgwick and Sumner county line.

An Aug. 19 downpour dumped as much as seven inches of rain on the town in two hours. Storms returned Sept. 8-9, with flooding so severe that schools had to be cancelled.

The Rev. Hollie Tapley, disaster response coordinator, said 168 homes were registered as damaged by the American Red Cross.

At least 150 flood buckets — five-gallon buckets with cleaning supplies for short-term relief compiled by United Methodists across Kansas and Nebraska — were distributed to Mulvane victims.

“They’re phenomenal, the response to those flood buckets,” Tapley said.

Besides the United Methodist efforts, crews from Lutheran Disaster Services and Team Rubicon assisted those whose homes were damaged by flooding.

“People have been very gracious, very opening to our teams,” Tapley said. “It’s been a great, positive experience for everybody all the way around.”

The Mulvane flood aftermath has improved the communication between the United Methodists and the Red Cross, Tapley said.

“This experience has been good for us, working together with them,” she said. “We’re looking at how we can do it

better the next go-around.”

Among those helped were Dan and Stephanie Cleaver, who experienced severe damage to a house they had just purchased in July.

“We’ve just been going after it ever since, doing as much as we can,” Stephanie said. “The volunteers have been just amazing.”

Tapley and the volunteer Early Response Team members helped remove several layers of flooring in the house, completing most of the task by Sept. 3.

Stephanie Cleaver said she was “very, very grateful” for the help she and her husband received after the damage to their house.

“I’m taking all the volunteers’ names down, and we’re going to have a barbecue for them once we get settled in,” she said. “It’s good payback.”

Also appreciative was Lencie Price of Mulvane, whose husband and two daughters had just moved back into their house after the August floods when they were hit again in September.

Price contacted the American Red Cross, who put her in touch with Tapley. Tapley summoned help at the Prices’ house, and gave comfort to the part-time school substitute teacher, down to an emotional hug.

“If it hadn’t been for Hollie and her white horse, good Lord,” Price said. “She came out and did an assessment of the house and has been so much help. It’s been amazing.”

## Floods in Mulvane

# in storm-damaged areas

A charred foundation, gnarled trees and piles of metal siding are all that remain on Scott Howard's property, northwest of Eureka, Kansas.

His 9½ acres suffered some of the worst damage of EF3 and EF2 tornadoes that hit Greenwood County on the night of July 7.

"The tornado came in and turned the house into toothpicks," Howard said. "Threw everything everywhere all over my property and other people's property."

Among the first to arrive at the scene was the Great Plains Disaster Response ministry. Wearing neon green T-shirts, volunteers from across Kansas and Nebraska pitched in to help Howard, as well as others in Eureka.

"These guys are awesome," Howard, a retired motel building contractor, said of the crew working on his property. "I've had more strangers show up to help me than you might think. It's very nice. It's good to realize that not everybody's concerned with everything else in the world."

The crew from the Great Plains, led by Tapley, remained a constant presence on the property for the rest of the month.

"I was thinking it would be six or seven months — or maybe the rest of my life — cleaning this up," said Howard,

who has another house in New Mexico and was uncertain at the end of July what his plans might be.

"It was depressing losing (the house), but it was also depressing looking forward to the future," he added. "These guys ... really helped me out a lot, shaved months and months off of my work."

In the first days after the tornado, Tapley and the Disaster Response ministry were in town helping tarp roofs, passing out water, Gatorade

and snacks, and providing emotional and spiritual care to many of the 33 homeowners who suffered damage to their property.

The two tornadoes hit 168 homes. Of those, 34 were destroyed, 24 suffered major damage, 40 minor damage, and 71 others were affected in some way.

Among the volunteers was Elvie Aikens of Wilsey, Kansas, working with her husband, Charles, to clean up the area.

"We're told to help other people, help our neighbors. So we do this periodically, whenever we can," said Elvie, who kept a lighthearted approach while working.

"We enjoy being out and meeting other people," she said. "This is our way of ministry."

## Tornadoes in Eureka

PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Below, rubble in a basement are all that's left of Scott Howard's property near Eureka, Kansas. Insert, the Rev. Hollie Tapley, center, disaster response coordinator for the Great Plains Conference, works with volunteers.



# Parties in Rev. Meyer case reach resolution

*On Aug. 1, the parties involved in the complaint against Rev. Cynthia Meyer met to have conversation about the possibility of a just resolution. The parties worked for 12 hours and made a good-faith effort to find common ground. At the end of the day came to the following agreement:*

Recognizing that neither the Church nor the Great Plains Annual Conference is of one mind, that the 2016 General Conference has created a special commission to look for a way forward, out of a mutual desire to avoid the harm and trauma of a trial, and in accordance with Paragraph 363.1 (c) of The 2012 Book of Discipline, the parties related to the matter of the judicial complaint against the Rev. Cynthia Meyer agreed to enter into a process seeking just resolution with the assistance of third-party facilitators.

The following persons gathered on August 1, 2016 and made a good faith effort to reach agreement: Cynthia Meyer, James Darby, Kevin Nelson, Scott Jones, David Bell and Bruce Woner. The conversation was facilitated by Stephanie Anna Hixon and David Anderson Hooker of JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation.

The parties acknowledge the following:

a. "A process seeking just resolution may begin at any time in the supervisory, complaint, or trial process. If resolution is achieved, a written statement of resolution, including any terms and conditions, shall be signed by the parties and the parties shall agree on any matters to be disclosed to third parties. A just resolution agreed to by all parties shall be a final disposition of the related complaint." Paragraph 363.1(c) of The 2012 Book of Discipline

b. "A just resolution is one that focuses on repairing harm to people and communities, achieving real accountability by making things right in so far as possible, and bringing healing to all parties." (See Paragraph

363 and Paragraph 2701.5 The 2012 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church)

c. The "aspirational resolution" approved June 4, 2016 by the 2016 Great Plains Annual Conference sessions encourages a process seeking just resolution.

d. The Committee on Investigation held a hearing June 21, 2016 and voted to refer charges related to the complaint matter to a trial. In light of Judicial Council Decision 1296 the Committee



PHOTO BY TODD SEIFERT

**The Rev. Cynthia Meyer hugs her first district superintendent, the Rev. Phyllis Garrett, while they and the Rev. David Livingston, a close supporter, walk out of the conference office in Wichita. Meyer had a meeting with Bishop Scott Jones, former bishop of the Great Plains Conference in March.**

was convened giving attention to relevant paragraphs of The 2008 Book of Discipline pertaining to The Committee on Investigation. A trial date has been set for August 24, 2016 and Bishop Alfred Gwinn has been selected to preside over a trial. The Committee on Investigation was made aware of the intent to enter into a process to seek just resolution and Bishop Gwinn has been consulted about the same.

Out of these efforts, the following provisions have been agreed to in

resolution of the charge against the Rev. Cynthia Meyer:

Rev. Meyer will go on involuntary leave of absence as of September 15, 2016 with permission of the Executive Committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry.

Rev. Meyer's credentials will remain as they are up to 90 days following the close of the next General Conference. During that time, she will be on involuntary leave of absence and may not perform the duties of an Elder. She will not be appointed but she can be hired by any church or church agency to perform functions equivalent to those of a lay staff person. Within 90 days of the adjournment of the next General Conference, Rev. Meyer will:

1. End her leave of absence and receive an appointment; or,
2. Take advantage of any provisions made possible by the next General Conference; or,
3. Complete the trial process.

If General Conference approves some new structure which would allow Rev. Meyer to be in good standing within some aspect of that new structure, then her full status would be restored immediately in anticipation of the implementation of that structure.

On September 15, 2016, Rev. Meyer will receive a cash payment of exactly thirty-seven thousand dollars (\$37,000), approximately equivalent to one year's compensation in her present appointment.

It was a desire on the part of the respondent to include in the agreement a response from the Church towards pastoral/educational work within the Great Plains Annual Conference; however, acknowledging the impending transition in episcopal leadership, the parties encourage the Great Plains Annual Conference to engage in plans for deep pastoral/educational conversation across the annual conference.

Rev. Meyer will attach a faithful witness statement to this agreement.

No portion of this agreement shall be confidential.



PHOTO BY TODD SEIFERT

The Rev. Cynthia Meyer had about 100 supporters on the cold day in January 2016, at the conference office in Topeka. Meyer met with Bishop Scott Jones, former Great Plains Conference bishop, for the first time after she announced she was in a homosexual relationship.

## The Rev. Cynthia Meyer's statement of faithful witness and hopeful resolution

*"After 25 years of leadership in the United Methodist Church, I recently chose to do what some may deem unthinkable: I came out as a lesbian to my small-town Kansas congregation.*

*The disconnect between my gay identity and my church's policies has distressed me for many years. I've long recognized and now assert that it's past time for the denomination to change. It's my time to share my story as a part of that change.*

*By treating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer members as "less than," the United Methodist Church turns faithful people into victims rather than celebrating all as beloved children made in the image of God. The church has lost countless gifted members and leaders by not valuing the sacred worth in everyone."*

I wrote these words in January 2016, for publication in conjunction with the sermon I preached to my Edgerton, Kansas United Methodist congregation on Epiphany Sunday, January 3. A charge was filed against me for violating the Book of Discipline, asserting that I am "a self-avowed practicing homosexual." None of my actions or statements have met the standard required for charges or punishment on these grounds. Nonetheless, as required, I have participated fully in all processes required following the charge, including efforts toward just resolution, a hearing with the Great Plains Conference Committee on Investigation, and finally the lengthy, intense process facilitated by JustPeace, which has resulted in the attached agreement.

When I spoke my truth in January, my hopes were many, including that of joining with other bold spirits in advocating for the UMC to better follow the way of Jesus, the ways of justice, love and full inclusion, particularly for those often marginalized, judged, and harmed. I acted, then and now, out of love for and commitment to the United Methodist Church. I'm honored to have joined in action with so many faithful UMs striving for the betterment of the church they love, even as it excludes them, fails to live into the covenant made to them in baptism, denies them the right of holding their weddings in UM church sanctuaries and forbids their open service as clergy.

These injustices continue, because the 2016 UM General Conference chose not to remove discriminatory policies and practices from its Book of Discipline. The denomination is now in a liminal moment, filled with possibility. Even as I accept this agreement, recognizing it as a resolution to the charge against me, not a just response, I move ahead in hope. I hope that the UMC, through a fully representative, inclusive commission, then a focused General Conference, will intentionally, prayerfully remove all discriminatory language and practice from its Book of Discipline. Then the Church may welcome the gifts of all who are called and gifted for ministry and all members may receive all the graces and services of the church, including marriage in their sanctuaries, performed by their UM clergy.

I continue to live in hope, even as I seek new ways to live out at least part of my calling, while I am forbidden for administering the sacraments and other duties and ministries of ordained elders.

*As we ended our thirteen hours of conversation and negotiation on August 1, I added this to my notes from the day: "I've signed away my right to live out my calling – to be most fully who God has called me to be – I hope only for a time. My heart is broken, yet I trust that God will work through even this for good. Through this small act of reconciliation, this act of hopeful love, may greater reconciliation come in the UMC. Harm continues to be done, even through this agreement. This doesn't get us to justice, but perhaps it bends the arc just a bit closer." I pray it may be so.*

# How the Great Plains Conference interns spent their summer\*



By **DAVID BURKE**, *communications coordinator*

Like many other interns in the Great Plains Conference this summer, Briana Hutton is leaving her mark on the church where she served.

Her mark, however, is physically larger and more public.

An art major entering her sophomore year at Sterling College in Kansas this fall, Hutton has created a mural for the side of the Life Support Center at New Covenant UMC downtown Wichita.

Hutton and the Rev. Cathy Holley, pastor of New Covenant, drove around the Delano neighborhood of Wichita, where the church has its storefront home, to get ideas for its mural.

“When we were driving around looking at murals, she really liked the geometrically designed ones,” Hutton said. “So I kind of chose that.”

## INTERNSHIP LEADS

Holley, who admits she has no artistic talent, had considered a mural on the side of the building for years, she said. That was sparked after witnessing a man who had left the tavern on the other side of the church, talking on his cellphone, hanging up and wiping away tears.

“I thought, ‘We need something out here in this space to remind people that God is here,’” Holley said. “I knew nothing about painting murals or designing murals. I didn’t even know who to start a conversation with.”

The two worked together to use an adaptation of Joshua 1:9 — “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” — for the mural. With a gray background,





\* Results may vary. These images are not inclusive of all the work the interns accomplished over the summer. Some focused their ministry in one city or church, while others traveled the conference and even the country. Also, more images are on page 23.

## TO CHURCH MURAL

a series of triangles decorates the mural, creating a lion's head on the far right side.

"I wanted it to be something that the whole church could do, not something the summer intern came in and painted and left," she added.

Some church members have been skeptical about their abilities, Hutton said.

"Everybody comes, and they're like, 'I don't know if I can paint anything,'" she said. "It's hard, but you can do it because it's God's work."

Even uncompleted, Holley and Hutton said the project already has made an impact in the neighborhood. One man drove by and offered use of a projector to help Hutton with

the outline. A local company donated a scissor lift.

"Other people from the neighborhood have stopped. People from the bar have stopped by," Holley said. "It's had an impact on the whole neighborhood already."

The project also has impacted the life of Hutton, a native of Scott City, Kansas, who suffers from severe arthritis throughout her body.

"It's been really hard and taxing these few weeks," Hutton said. "But for some reason, every time I get up on that scissor lift to work on the mural I'm fine."

"The pain goes away," she added. "It's a God thing."

The project, and working this summer at New Covenant, have been "amazing," she said.

"I've very much discerned my call" into ordained ministry, Hutton added.



# Death notices

**The Rev. Loyd Jay Bliss, 96, and Patricia A. Haning Bliss, 89**, retired clergy and spouse, died June 10 and 11, respectively. Survivors include their children, Linda Kline, Susan Bliss and Bill Bliss. Memorial contributions may be made to United Methodist Committee on Relief, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1520, New York, NY 10115.

**Bernice M. Boilesen, 92**, the widow of a retired clergy, died Aug. 15. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Lester Boilesen. Survivors include her children, Eugene Boilesen and Susan Boilesen. Memorial contributions may be made to Aldersgate UMC, 8320 South St., Lincoln, NE 68506.

**Marjorie L. Bruning, 97**, the widow of a retired clergy, died June 14. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Keith Bruning. Survivors include children, Leslie Bruning, Peter Bruning, Maelyn Toelle, Keitha Thomson and Myra Nicolaus. Memorial contributions may be made to First UMC, 1023 1stx Ave., Nebraska City, NE 68410.

**Lillian Joan Bush, 77**, wife of a retired pastor, died Aug. 13 in Wichita. Survivors include her husband, the Rev. Jim Bush; and children Cheryl Harris and Steven Kassin. Memorial contributions may be made to Caring Hands Humane Society in care of Petersen Funeral Home Newton, Kansas.

**Mikael "Mike" Karlsson, 46**, spouse of a clergy member, died in late June. He is survived by his wife, the Rev. Ruth Karlsson. Memorial contributions may be made to Released and Restored, P.O. Box 22962, Lincoln, NE 68542.

**Margaret L. "Peggy" Minner, 94**, widow of a clergy member, died Aug. 3. Sh was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Gaylen Minner. Survivors include her children, Larry Minner and Linda Weber. Memorial contributions may be made to Wichita Presbyterian Manor in care of Petersen Funeral Home, 215 N. Main St., Newton, KS 67114.

**Versa Lee Sims, 84**, wife of a retired clergy member, died Aug. 18. She is survived by her husband, the Rev. Cato Sims Sr.; and children, Denise Walker, Bob Sims, Cato Sims Jr., Naomi Cole, JoAnn Sims and Rosie Sims.

**Eugene Victor Solomon, 94**, a retired clergy, died July 26. He is survived by his wife, Virginia; and children Meredith Collins and Anita Christensen. Memorial contributions may be made to the Red Bird Mission in Beverly, Kentucky, and may be left with or mailed to Countryside Funeral Home, 101 N. Highland St., Chanute, KS 66720.

## Eco team receives 'Cool Congregation' award



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE REV. CAROL WINDRUM

A different kind of "offering" brought to church each Sunday at First UMC in Omaha, Nebraska. LeighAnne Scharp brings her food scraps to church before worship.

The Eco Team at First UMC in Omaha, Nebraska, was pleased to learn about winning an award for its work toward a sustainable future. Interfaith Power and Light, a national faith based environmental group, awarded five congregations a "Cool Congregations" award. Interfaith Power and Light also has statewide chapters in Nebraska and Kansas.

Over a year ago, the FUMC Omaha Eco Team developed a plan to help educate the congregation on everyone's own complicity in global warming and to learn about the impact of disposing food in the trash. Food waste in landfill creates methane, which is 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide for warming the climate.

The team enlisted the help of worms for this educational process. About 80 families at First UMC bring their food scraps each week to church and place them in a barrel for pick up for worm food. This is a different kind of

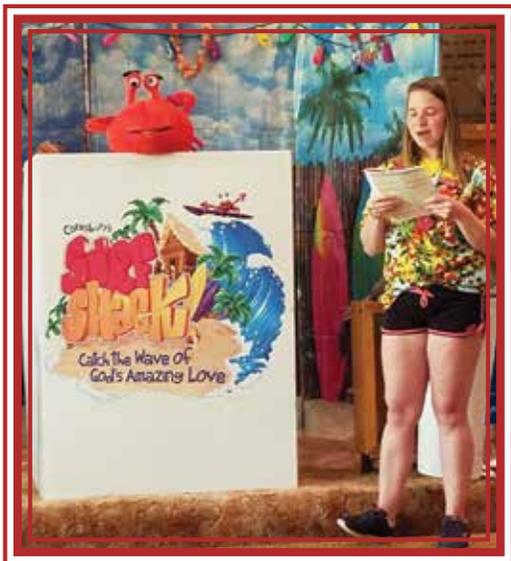
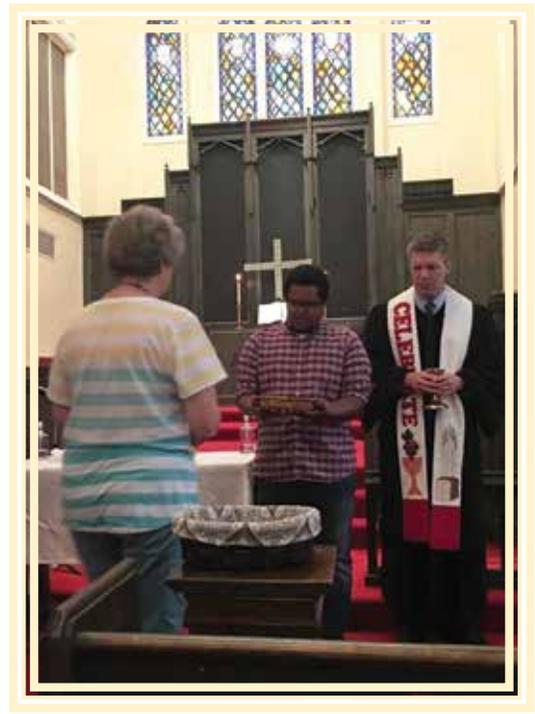
collection than most churches do on Sunday morning.

Weekly, weCompost picks up the food scraps to be delivered to hard working worms, ready and willing to do the work of turning food trash into rich top soil. weCompost is an Omaha company that collects food waste and employs (uses) worms to produce worm castings.

One woman, who is over 80, and collects food scraps from her condo neighbors reported, "This is such a fun way to make the world a better place." Another gentleman was amazed at how much less trash they have for pick-up. He said that after recycling and no food scraps, their family just didn't have much they were throwing away.

With an original goal of 50 families the team is excited by the 80 families collecting and sharing their food waste.

Over the past year, First UMC has collected over a ton of food waste, saving (approximately) five tons of CO<sub>2</sub> from going into the atmosphere.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY INTERNS

Clockwise from top: Interns enjoy crafts at the closing retreat held for all conference interns at Camp Comeca; Jesse Gichuru, pastoral leadership intern, during a service at First UMC in El Dorado, Kansas, with the Rev. Andrew Conard; Micah Corps interns with Nebraska Congressman Brad Ashford at his office in Washington D.C.; VBS intern presenting "Surf Shack." From story insert on pages 20-21 from left: an artist's rendering of pastoral intern, Briana Hutton's, mural, Hutton and volunteers work on the mural. On page 20 from left: VBS intern demonstrates with VBS attendees; pastoral leadership intern, Greg Reffner, plays a song on his last Sunday at Harper (Kansas) UMC. On page 21 from left: interns enjoy the closing retreat; Micah Corps interns learn about the land institute.



**Bishop Scott Jones  
thanks the Great Plains  
in a farewell video.**



GPconnect, news and information for Great Plains United Methodists.



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## **Celebration of Assignment**

The Great Plains Conference will host a Celebration of Assignment service for Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 15, at St. Mark's UMC, 8550 Pioneers Blvd., in Lincoln, Nebraska.

This setting will provide for a worship-filled experience and will be followed by an opportunity to welcome our new bishop and his wife, Maye, to the Great Plains. A light lunch will be served during the fellowship time following the service.

The worship service will be broadcast via livestream on the conference's website, [www.greatplainsumc.org/livestream](http://www.greatplainsumc.org/livestream).



**Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.  
greet the Great Plains in  
English and Spanish videos.**

View the videos at [www.greatplainsumc.org/bishop](http://www.greatplainsumc.org/bishop).