

GPCconnect

Connecting United Methodists across the Great Plains

Spring 2017

Renewed focus on the mission field



Also inside: Explore the conference website's new look

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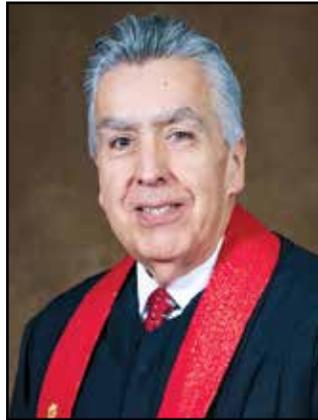
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Cover photos

A change in district superintendent appointments is part of a strategy to foster more clergy collaboration, empower the laity to more fully participate and to focus on each congregation's mission field. Read more on pages 12-14.

The Miraculous Option



Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.

A confirmand asked me at the Bishop's Confirmation Rally question-and-answer session in McPherson, Kansas, "If you possessed one superpower, what would it be and why?"

That was one of the easiest questions I've fielded in the past six months as bishop of the Great Plains. Without hesitation, I said I wish I had the power to transform the human heart and mind to love as God loves (Matthew 5:43-48).

Silence filled the room.

Then I said, the hope for the miracle of transformed hearts is a possibility. Jesus Christ alone transforms human hearts and minds that, in turn, reflect God's grace, peace, truth and love in a world that is many ways stuck and broken. That is why we offer people Christ!

Each day we see and hear of executive and legislative actions applauded by some and confronted with protests by others. Many people are experiencing social empowerment, and others are experiencing social disenfranchisement. Overall, people do not feel safe in this volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous world. The human family seeks for healing and peace for a ruptured world but cannot attain it on its own. I pray for the miracle that we as individual disciples and as a worldwide United Methodist Church can model for a world in tumult how to walk in Christ's way of unity and love.

Our sinful human tendency to advance our position — even if it means overlooking, impeding and subordinating the position of others — is strong. This human tendency can only be overcome by God's transformative grace at work in us and in the world. Following and learning from Jesus Christ on the way to the cross gives us hope and opens a miraculous option for the church and our world. At great cost, with divine love and resolute courage, Jesus healed the rupture in the divine-human relationship caused by sin through his suffering, death and resurrection. The self-giving love of Christ becomes our own lifestyle of love. Christ's love in us sets us free to see, recognize and reach out to those who experience spiritual and social death in our society and world every day.

The miraculous option we proclaim as disciples is not for a heavenly host of angels to descend from above and resolve all of our problems. Rather, the miracle we hope for and proclaim as a possibility and option is the one Christ opened for us through his suffering, death and resurrection. The miracle would be that God's love reflected by Christ's holy life would transform our prejudiced minds, closed hearts and clenched fists allowing us to welcome and talk with each other until we find a peaceful way forward together as neighbors, as the church and as God's world.

Now that would be a Easter miracle second only to the resurrection.

Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

El Vive! He Lives!



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

From your lay leader **Opportunities**

In the midst of the Lenten season, as we find ourselves making room for Christ in our life, it has always reminded me a bit of cleaning and decluttering — like spring cleaning, if you will. We set aside or get rid of that which keeps us from a closer relationship with Christ. Since my family would probably tell you that I'm not a very good housekeeper, this part is always more "metaphoric" for me. Instead, I find myself attempting to declutter some of my internal instincts and I pray for things like patience, peace, a sense of calm and a slower, less reactive instinct and the accompanying flow of words. All fine qualities I believe and pray will help me in my relationship with God. What do you find yourself praying for during Lent?

Recently, as I was picking my daughter up from school, I turned the corner in my car (a little too fast perhaps) and heard a really loud crunching sound and felt my car tire hit the curb quite hard. My daughter turned and looked at me and said, "Oh no, what does this mean?" Hearing the sound of my tire flapping, a lot of possible responses to this question went through my mind then as I turned the corner and pulled into a parking lot across the street. But I was also instantly reminded of one of my favorite quotes from the movie "Evan Almighty" — it's an excellent movie clip as well, I invite you to seek it out.



Courtney Fowler

"When we pray to God for patience, does God give us patience or the opportunity to be patient? When we pray to God for courage, does God give us courage or the opportunity to be courageous?"

Of the many things we may pray for, I'm guessing we don't have to look too far to see our many endless opportunities. Opportunities to be agents of peace, of patience, of grace, of forgiveness, of kindness, of joy, of hope and of love. As we see the world around us, in fact, opportunities abound. I hope during this season of Lent and the joy of Easter, we will all get to experience God in our vast, unlimited opportunities.

I shared this with my daughter as we pulled into the local library for some unexpected and peaceful quiet time — an opportunity and a gift.

Courtney

Courtney Fowler
Conference Lay Leader
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Conference events are posted
at greatplainsumc.org/events

Conference events

March 31 to April 1

Spring Training, Wichita, Kansas

April 7-9

Healing Seminar, McCook, Nebraska

April 8

Early Response Training, Wichita, Kansas

April 21-22

Connecting Council, Lincoln, Nebraska

April 23-28

Academy for Spiritual Formation,

Schuyler, Nebraska

April 24-26

Appointive Cabinet, Wichita, Kansas

April 27-29

Congregation Care training,
Leawood, Kansas

April 28-29

Healthy Congregations Retreat,
Junction City, Kansas

April 28-29

Spring Training, Lincoln, Nebraska

April 28-30

UMW Spiritual Retreat, Alma, Nebraska

April 28-29

Advanced Lay Servant Class,
Palmer, Nebraska

April 29

Early Response Training,
Wichita, Kansas

May 1-2

Ready to Retire Seminar,
Wichita, Kansas

May 11-12

Board of Ordained Ministry meeting,
Lincoln, Nebraska

May 27

Cowboy Trail Bike/Walk for UMM
Missions, Norfolk, Nebraska

June 7-10

Great Plains Annual Conference, Grand
Island, Nebraska

June 7

100 Club Dinner and Auction, Grand
Island, Nebraska

June 12-16

Great Plains Licensing School, Lincoln,
Nebraska

June 23-24

Candidacy Summit, Lincoln, Nebraska

June 23

UMM Golf Scramble, Galva, Kansas

June 24-28

NUMB Ride for Hunger,
starts and ends in Wisner, Nebraska

Ice storm can't freeze out spirit of The OneEvent



PHOTOS BY RACHEL MOSER

By **RACHEL MOSER**,
communications coordinator

Freezing rain and ice may have hurt The OneEvent's attendance, but not its spirit.

The OneEvent had roughly 1,100 youth and adults registered, but thanks to an ice storm about 200 were able to attend the event Jan. 14-15 in Salina, Kansas. The Great Plains Conference's

largest youth event featured worship, messages, breakout sessions and other activities. Youth from across the conference look forward to this event each year. However, many of the youth who had to travel long distances chose not to attend because of a large ice storm predicted to hit the Salina area Saturday night. And hit it did.

Adjustments were made. The

Saturday night schedule was shortened, three breakout topics were cancelled, and several events were livestreamed. The livestreaming helped about 80 percent of those registered who were unable to attend take part in the event in some form. General sessions, a breakout session and the comedic trio 321 Improv were all livestreamed, and some seminars were recorded to be posted on the Great Plains website. Leaders were also told ahead of time what some activities would be during general sessions so they could set it up on their end as well.

"We encouraged groups to come to Salina if they felt it was safe for them to get there," said Shane Hinderliter, local church youth ministry coordinator for the Great Plains Conference. "We let the group leaders know some of the activities we'd be doing on the stage (during the livestream) so they could have their groups participate as well."

For those attending, the smaller number of attendees meant better seats and less wait time to pay ga-ga ball, 9-square and go through the blowup obstacle course. The energy in the sessions and activity room was still as high as it had been in previous years.

The Amp It Up Worship praise team kicked off the event followed by I Am They, a worship praise team from Carson City, Nevada. General sessions featured inspired messages from Phil and Heather Joel and comedic action by 321 Improv. The Rev. Ashlee Alley led a breakout session for juniors and seniors titled "Is it God Calling?" while Ground Zero Master's Commission led two sessions: "Worship is Life" and "The Force Can Awaken." After supper on Saturday, the youth — and several cabinet members — danced along to music by DJ Promote until Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. spoke to the crowd.

Several of the youth noted that this was their first time attending the event, and they said they were having a great time. Favorite activities ranged from the concert by I Am They to Ground Zero Master's Commission's session "The Force Can Awaken."

"We're working on plans for the 2018 OneEvent," said Hinderliter. "The theme is 'Dead or Alive?' based on James 2:17."

Let the excitement for next year start building.



Campus ministers switch colleges for a day



By **DAVID BURKE**,
communications coordinator

In sports parlance, the Rev. Kevin Hopkins and the Rev. Ben Hanne each played “away games” on Feb. 15-16.

Hopkins, campus pastor at Baker University, delivered the sermon during Wednesday morning chapel services at Southwestern College. The next day Hanne, Southwestern’s campus pastor, returned the favor with a sermon at Baker during its Thursday morning chapel.

It was a homecoming of sorts for Hopkins, who was pastor of neighboring Winfield Grace from 2005 to 2010, but Hanne’s first visit to Baker in Baldwin City, Kansas.

Both of the Kansas schools are supported by the Great Plains Conference and The United Methodist Church.

Each spoke from the week’s lectionary, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, with Hopkins’ equating Paul to an upset parent and Hanne leading with an anecdote about his own cat, who preferred the easier-to-digest “wet” food over what she had been fed.

“Jesus is always pushing people out of their comfort zones,” Hopkins told the Southwestern students.

“Each one of you is called to do something magnificent in the world around you,” Hanne told the Baker chapel attendees. “And it’s asking you to do it as an adult.”

To the best of the knowledge of the campus pastors, it was the first time a “pulpit swap” had taken place between the two college ministries.

Hopkins approached Hanne with the idea over the summer, and it was finalized in November as both were riding in a bus with their students to the Imagine What’s NEXT conference in Atlanta.

Both said they were energized by the new surroundings and new students.



“It’s the same glory that I get out of any time I work alongside colleagues,” Hanne said. “It’s a reminder that the work we do is greater than just the single place we serve at.”

Hopkins added that the experiment showed “we’re not isolated in what we

do. We’re putting together our efforts for higher education across the state.”

Both Hopkins and Hanne had served in church ministry before becoming campus pastors, and both had familiarity with the college missions.

“I knew there was an immense complexity of the job and the number of hats I had to wear,” said Hanne, who served on campus ministry boards. “Yet there nothing that prepared me for actually stepping into the role.”



Hopkins said he had been teased by other pastors for getting to take Sundays off, but he counters that he still prepares a weekly sermon — and has to be prepared for Bible studies, small group sessions and counseling well past 10 p.m.

“It’s a different world,” Hopkins said.

The biggest challenge as a campus pastor, both said, is the constantly rotating members of the congregation.

“It’s the changing nature. Every year you basically start over,” Hopkins said.

“Things reset at semester in a way I never thought they would,” Hanne said. “If you build up momentum in the fall, there is no guarantee that after Christmas break that it’ll jump back that way.”

Both were pleased with the exchange, and want to see it go beyond Baker and Southwestern.

“We’re talking to other campus ministry people to see if we can’t expand it in the future,” Hopkins said.

PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Pictured at top, the Rev. Kevin Hopkins (left) and the Rev. Ben Hanne talk to Baker students. At left, Hopkins pray with each other during Southwestern’s chapel service.

Neighboring at center of SoCe Life



UMC pastors among those that started nonprofit to build connections

By **DAVID BURKE**,
communications coordinator

What seems like a simple goal of knowing your neighbor is the centerpiece of SoCe Life, a 3-year-old Wichita-based nonprofit co-founded by two ordained ministers from the Great Plains Conference.

“The thing that sums it up best is being good neighbors,” said the Rev. Adam Barlow-Thompson, who started the group with his wife, the Rev. Ashley Prescott Barlow-Thompson, and friends Matt and Catherine Johnson.

The Barlow-Thompsons and the Johnsons met in a small group with a desire to have a deeper connection with their faith, Adam said.

They formed an intentional community based on prayer,

hospitality and justice in March 2014. Before long, three of them started a folk trio (Catherine is the manager/roadie) called Brutal Bear.

Eventually the Barlow-Thompsons moved across the street from the Johnsons, who had lived in the south-central area of Wichita since 2008.

“We have felt really called to be here, and just have a certain love for the neighborhood and for our neighbors,” Matt Johnson said.

Hoping others would feel that same sense of neighborhood, they started SoCe (shorthand for South Central) Life as a nonprofit in March 2015.

“We began knocking on the doors and interviewing people in the neighborhood in August of 2015,” Catherine Johnson said.

Getting to know the people of their

neighborhood — which they define as a 2 square-mile area of Wichita from Kellogg Avenue to Pawnee Street, and the Arkansas River to Washington Street — has been the primary goal of SoCe Life.

Approximately 10,000 people live in that area, which encompasses about 50 city blocks.

The neighborhood has a reputation for drugs, human trafficking, prostitution and homelessness, the SoCe organizers say, with higher rates of poverty and unemployment and lower rates of high school graduation. It is a transient population, they say, with more renters than homeowners.

“This neighborhood is kind of seen by what it lacks,” Adam Barlow-Thompson said. “We wanted to kind of turn that on its head, because we

were really amazed how terrific our neighbors were — and how many resources in our neighborhood had not been mobilized. We were kind of treasure hunters for all that, so we could make the neighborhood stronger.”

The first step was to recruit “block connectors,” who would interview those on their street.

“We find one person on each block to just get to know the people on their block, on both sides of the street, and find out what they like to do — what they’re passionate about, what skills they have,” Catherine Johnson said.

“And then we look for connections,” she continued. “We’ve found there are people who have a skill or an interest, but don’t know that anyone else in their neighborhood are into that.”

So far, connectors have particularly struck a chord with gardeners.

“We can give those people the opportunity to come together, to share their knowledge,” Catherine Johnson said. “It sometimes helps people find employment, for people who are looking for a job.”

It’s also helped create SoCe Life’s first signature item, 3-foot by 3-foot, 2-foot tall garden boxes as a way to build community by sharing the healthy food they’ve grown.

It’s also — no surprise to the neighbors who’ve started a band — created its own music appreciation society for listeners and jammers.

“What’s happening is you’re getting to know people in your neighborhood,” Matt Johnson said. “We’re changing the story arc of the neighborhood, from ‘This place where I feel isolated or alone’ to ‘I know Alex around the corner, who’s a percussionist.’”

Adam Barlow-Thompson added, “A lot of our neighbors are scared of people because they’ve lived into the stereotypes of the neighborhood. They look at the guy with long hair and tattoos and think, ‘I don’t know what to think of that guy,’ but finds out he just wants to play bass, sit down and chat, and he’s a good person, just like everyone else.”

The skills don’t have to be intense — sometimes connections are made by pairing someone with a vehicle and spare time with a neighbor who needs a ride to a medical appointment.

The outreach also has branched

out into yoga classes and other means of getting together with common interests.

“We keep hearing about these amazing neighbors. You knock on the door, and you never know who’s going to be there,” Catherine Johnson said. “We’ve found people extremely skilled and extremely enthusiastic about what we’re doing. They have no idea these people live in their neighborhood.”

SoCe Life’s headquarters is a small storefront on Gilbert Street in Wichita. Funding for the program has come from grants that pay for salaries and rent.

Although one of the programs is an “inspiration night” with interactive devotions, the founders say having a church is not in the long-term plan.

“What we want to be is like Wesley in the beginning, not out to start a church but out to call for a revival within the church,” Adam Barlow-Thompson said. “Our particular piece of that is a revival around neighboring. We think it’s biblical, theological and practical, and it’s achievable for the people who are just coming to regular old United Methodist churches, no matter where they are.”

Adam Barlow-Thompson was assigned to SoCe Life by the Great Plains Conference after serving a church in Derby, Kansas. Ashley Prescott Barlow-Thompson is children’s ministry director at College Hill UMC in Wichita. Matt and Catherine Johnson attend a United

Methodist Church in Wichita.

Although the SoCe Life building is in the shadow of a former United Methodist Church, Adam Barlow-Thompson said he sees the group as asking questions of the church more than following it without question.

“We see ourselves as prophetically calling on the church to re-engage the neighbor,” he said. “Over and over again, we have churches coming to us and say, ‘We don’t know how to do outreach’ and ‘We don’t know anything about the people who live next to our church.’ We’re kind of helping them re-engage their neighbor in that literal sense.”

In the interview setting, he said, the church isn’t mentioned.

“If you’re neighboring for church growth, people don’t want you at their front door,” Adam Barlow-Thompson said. “It’s really about discipleship. When I’m a disciple, I go out and be a good neighbor and love my neighbor.”

Matt Johnson said the neighboring movement is about bringing out the best in individuals.

“If the conversation is built around ‘What are your skills?’ and ‘What do you love to do?’ you’re reconnecting with the original goodness that God planted inside of them,” he said. “That’s a conversation that people really enjoy. People get really excited. If a person loves to cook and you ask them about that, they light up.”

“I think that’s the spirit. That’s God shining through.”



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Above, neighbors gather for a meal at SoCe Life in Wichita, Kansas. On opposite page, SoCe Life is headquartered in a brightly colored storefront in Wichita.

A chance to reshape



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Above Brian Hehn, director at The Center for Congregational Song, leads worship. Clockwise from upper left on page 9, Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., addresses clergy; clergy share their opinions; the Rev. Paixao Baptista leads worship; and clergy share their entrepreneurial ideas in a “speed dating”-type format.

Bishop Saenz challenges pastors at Orders & Fellowship

By DAVID BURKE, *communications coordinator*

When Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. was assigned as episcopal leader of the Great Plains Conference, he was given a notebook with facts and figures about the two-state region: A whopping four pages.

It wasn't nearly enough of a description of the 1,000-plus churches, clergy and laity in the region, but the bishop has begun to fill in the gaps in his first 4 ½ months as the leader of the Great Plains.

“I'm hopeful. I'm excited,” Saenz told 600-plus clergy at his first Orders & Fellowship gathering, Jan. 18-19 at the Bicentennial Center in Salina. “I know we have the resources. I know we have the people. I know we have the passion.”

In a segment of the Orders & Fellowship that Bishop

Saenz dubbed “Observations, Findings and Musings,” he talked about the next steps that could be taken by the Great Plains Conference, made possible by the unification of the Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West conferences in 2014.

“This is an opportunity to think of how we should reshape the conference,” he said.

The continued unification of the conference, Bishop Saenz said, needs devoted leadership at all levels, as well as highly committed clergy, laity and congregations.

Churches, he said, need to increase their spiritual formation and learning groups, as well as their missional engagement within the community.

A vibrant candidacy process system is essential,



Bishop Saenz said, as well as strong leadership of district superintendent assignments, or DSAs, and certified lay ministers, or CLMs.

Bishop Saenz said the annual conference session each of the next four years would focus on main tenets of John Wesley and his witness:

- 2017: Knowing and Loving God.
- 2018: Proclaiming Christ.
- 2019: Serving Others, especially the poor and marginal.
- 2020: Seeking Justice.

He said the conference needs to optimize on its strengths, including the historic ways that the United Methodist Church has been relevant to the community – including

schools and hospitals; expand the Wesleyan witness throughout the boundaries of the conference; promote knowledge-sharing and collaboration among churches; and enhance the service relationship of the conference and district teams with local churches.

With Christ-centered leadership, he said, fruitfulness could be measured in quantifiable outcomes such as average worship attendance, professions of faith, baptisms and active persons.

Bishop Saenz stopped short of making any official commitments for the conference for the next four years.

“The concrete is not set. The concrete is still wet,” he said. “My question is, ‘How are we going to accomplish the mission?’”

Orders & Fellowship to spark new ideas

By DAVID BURKE, *communications coordinator*

Thinking outside the proverbial box to attract new and younger disciples of Jesus Christ was an overriding theme of this year's Orders & Fellowship gathering, Jan. 18-19 at the Bicentennial Center in Salina, Kansas.

More than 600 clergy from across the Great Plains heard ideas for entrepreneurial ministry from the Rev. Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean and what young people want in worship from the Rev. Dr. Stephen Cady.

Transformational & Entrepreneurial Disciplining

Orders & Fellowship January 18-19, 2017
Bicentennial Center • Salina, Kansas

'Entrepreneurial Moment'



PHOTO BY DAVID BURKE

The Rev. Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean makes a point during one of her teaching times during the Orders & Fellowship clergy gathering.

Young people discontented with their church is nothing new, said Dean, professor of youth, church and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary. It's what prompted a 33-year-old Martin Luther, whom Dean dubbed a "medieval tech nerd," to print and distribute his thoughts that led to the Protestant Reformation.

She encouraged modern-day pastors to "flip the church

on its head a little bit" in ways to accomplish their ministries. That includes, she said, flipping the script to where youth ministry leads the way and is the "research and development arm" of the church.

In one of many illustrations of successes from across the country, Dean pointed to a youth ministry that began from an associate pastor on the East Coast. After a cut in pay, he began working for a fisherman to earn extra money. Youth in the church began to fish with him, and eventually the church paid him to fish – as well as mentor and guide the young people in both spiritual and rod-and-reel techniques.

"Loves makes us inventors," Dean said.

Other ministries that have spawned from an entrepreneurial spirit, she said, include:

- Mowtown, a teen lawn care service in Washington state that feeds the spiritual lives of youths as well as gives them a work ethic and a sense of ownership in the business.
- A church that opened its own Subway franchise in its building to help young people gain job experience.
- Try Pie, an Iowa youth development program in which half the time is spent in devotion and the other in making pies that are sold at area events.
- Pres House, a campus ministry at the University of Wisconsin where enough money was raised through service projects to build a new dormitory on campus.
- A church-sponsored food truck that comes to area events, filling spiritual needs as well as menu orders.

gathering aims



PHOTO BY TODD SEIFERT

The Rev. Dr. Stephen Cady explains his research involving youth and where they feel like they encounter God.

Sense of community

The last time many people in the former Kansas East Conference saw Stephen Cady, he was wearing his trademark Superman T-shirt and carrying a yo-yo.

“I left those at home,” said Cady, senior pastor at Asbury First United Methodist Church in Rochester, New York, “just to show you that I have grown.”

Cady brought with him the results of his doctoral thesis, primarily asking young people what bores them about church and if they feel like they’ve experienced God in the worship settings.

“Parents and leaders know how miserable their young people are,” Cady said.

Teens, Cady said, love their youth group and perceive God’s presence there – but feel “extremely disconnected from the rest of the conversation.”

One-hundred percent of the young people surveyed, Cady said, dread the sermon the most in the worship setting. Secondly, he said, young people don’t feel like they have a connection with other church members or clergy, with the exception of the youth minister.

“They’re willing to forgive a bad sermon,” Cady said, “if you take the time to get to know them.”

Cady gave two secular examples that the church could use to connect with young people:

The Burning Man Festival, a gathering of young people that has developed into its own culture with a Bohemian spirit of togetherness and teamwork.

Improv Everywhere, a comedy group that pulls non-

offensive pranks, including (shown in videos at Orders & Fellowship) an impromptu wedding reception for a couple getting married at the city hall in New York and a Little League baseball game that was supplemented with dozens of fans, cheerleaders and major-league quality TV coverage.

Cady, a native of Olathe, Kansas, will return to expand on his findings at the Great Plains Annual Conference session June 7-10 in Grand Island, Nebraska.

Eight workshops offered during Orders & Fellowship included “How Your Church Can Turn a Hare-Brained Idea into a Sustainable Ministry” and a question-and-answer session with Dean; “Generational IQ,” led by the Rev. Nicole Conard, coordinator of young leadership development for the Great Plains Conference; Mentor Training, conducted by representatives of the Board of Ordained Ministry; “Searching for Unicorns,” on finding youth ministry staff, by Shane Hinderliter, youth ministry coordinator for the conference; basics of live streaming and social media, by the Rev. Bill Gepford and the Rev. Melissa Gepford, from Tonganoxie UMC in Kansas; and “The Church’s Song,” led by Brian Hehn, Dallas, director of the Center for Congregational Song.

Hehn also led worship in two days of the Orders & Fellowship gathering, delving into world music and leading the congregation in John Lennon’s “Imagine.”



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

An attendee Facebook Lives during the 2017 Orders and Fellowship meeting. The Rev. Bill and the Rev. Melissa Gepford demonstrated Facebook Live in their workshop. The Gepfords offered two workshops, one on livestreaming worship services and the other focusing on social media best practices.

Focused on the

Districts sharing superintendents, peer-to-peer learning are part of system meant to bolster Wesleyan witness

By **TODD SEIFERT**,
communications director

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. and the cabinet announced during the early months of 2017 a change in district superintendent appointments as part of a strategy to foster more peer-to-peer collaboration among clergy, to empower the laity to more fully participate in the sharing of the Wesleyan witness and to focus ministry squarely on the mission field for each congregation.

The shifts, which involve some district superintendents watching over multiple areas, are meant to help the more than 1,000 Great Plains Conference churches innovate to focus on the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by leveraging the connectional strengths of the United Methodist Church within our geographic boundaries.

The opportunity for a shift in the structure of superintendent appointments arose in part as the result of the retirement announcements for the Rev. Kay Alnor in the Great West District, the Rev. Jim Akins in the Hays District and the Rev. Dr. Linda Louderback in the Wichita West District. In each case, no replacements will be named, with superintendents for adjacent districts helping with supervision and other leadership needs once the retirements take effect July 1.

In addition, in March the bishop announced the Rev. Kibum Kim would return to the local church, leaving the Parsons District superintendency

vacant.

Superintendents the Rev. Cindy Karges of the Gateway District and the Rev. Eldon Davis of the Elkhorn Valley District will oversee the Great West. Superintendents the Rev. Dee Williamston of the Salina District, the Rev. Don Hasty of the Dodge City District and the Rev. Dennis Livingston of the Hutchinson District will oversee Hays. Wichita East District Superintendent the Rev. Mitch Reece will oversee Wichita West. And Five Rivers Superintendent the Rev. David Watson will oversee Parsons.



“The mission field is always shifting, and so must we,” Watson said. “This new and emerging system for collaborative ministry will help us to proclaim the unchanging Gospel in the most effective ways possible. It will utilize our best resources — clergy and committed laity — to join hearts and hands together in providing a continuing Wesleyan witness for Christ.”

The mission field-based system enables district superintendents to function as the chief missional strategist for the entire ministry of their assigned areas, as set out in

the Book of Discipline (§ 419.1), said Bishop Saenz. In addition to all other disciplinary responsibilities, as chief missional strategists, district superintendents will serve as connectors, coaches and encouragers that will harness the gifts, graces and potential of leaders and churches to ensure faithful and effective ministries throughout their districts. Pastors and churches will collaborate in peer groups to launch new ministries, share best practices and share knowledge to increase the number of vital congregations. Laity will be called upon to employ their spiritual gifts, skills and competencies in all forms of ministry that will extend the Wesleyan witness across the Great Plains Conference.

Reece said the shift to the mission field of each local church takes us back to the denomination’s Wesleyan roots, when the passion to introduce people to Christ resulted in the formation of all our local churches.

“Today many of our congregations find themselves doing good ministry but struggling to reach new people with the living water of Jesus Christ,” Reece said. “This system provides a means for pastors and congregations to partner together to pray, discern, explore and become better empowered to reach their local mission field.”

Back to Our Roots

Bishop Saenz said this return to Wesleyan roots depends on the commitment from laity across the Great Plains Conference.

“This would not be possible without the enormous and largely untapped potential of more than 100,000 active laypersons in our Great Plains

e Mission Field

Conference,” Bishop Saenz said. “Our laity has a beautiful Christian experience and witness to share that will bring life, light, hope, healing and peace to a dark and broken world.”

Louderback said this new system would empower laity to provide leadership and to serve as the hands and feet of Christ in their communities and beyond.

“This will give the opportunity to lay people to offer more of their gifts and graces instead of just expecting the pastor to do things,” she said. “The pastor can’t do everything well when he or she is spread so thin. Both clergy and laity have to be open to new things — to think outside the box. We have to have conversations.

And, of course, we have to listen. We can’t be afraid of change. We have to be willing to say ‘It’s not about me.’”

Indeed, Louderback continued, the purpose for the church is not just to care for those who participate in worship but to extend the love of Christ beyond church buildings and to share the message of hope with people of all ages who have yet to hear it.

“It’s like the old crank phones we used to use compared to the phones that now we carry in our pockets,” she said. “The message is the same. The challenge is the same. We still are supposed to be making disciples of Jesus Christ.”

The shift does create some concerns. Gary Kilgore, Parsons District lay leader, said his initial reaction to news about the Parsons and Five Rivers districts sharing a superintendent included concern for district superintendents tending to large areas. Ultimately, he said, the laity will have to do its part to spread the message of hope provided through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But people

may need help learning how to achieve that goal.

“You would think every Christian would be equipped to talk about their faith, but that isn’t the case,” Kilgore said.

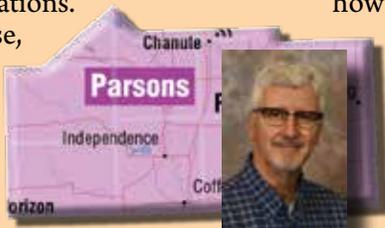
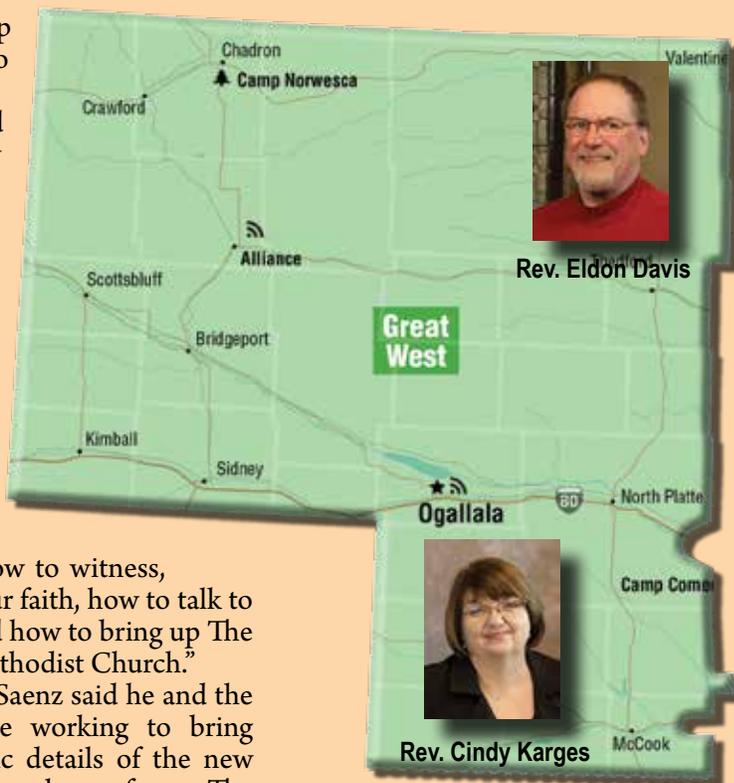
“When we talk to our friends and neighbors, what do we say? The average laity needs to be trained on how to witness, how to spread our faith, how to talk to people and how to bring up The United Methodist Church.”

Bishop Saenz said he and the cabinet are working to bring the specific details of the new system into clearer focus. The conference is using as a starting point the strategies employed by the denomination’s founder, John Wesley, and enhancing the original framework of class meetings and circuit riders by incorporating strategies used in the Great West District in recent years. Such efforts include elders, local pastors, deacons, certified lay ministers and lay leaders being organized into regional networks to uplift each other, share best practices and encourage missional strategies.

Expected Outcomes

District superintendents working across current boundary lines said the emphasis on the mission field should have positive effects for their current districts as well as the entire conference.

“This will help us be more



Rev. David Watson



Rev. Mitch Reece

intentional about listening to one another,” Hasty said. “Working on a team of three in the Hays District will give me an opportunity to learn and reflect on what I do in the Dodge City District. That will make my ministry deeper and richer there through collaboration and the sharing of ideas.”

Those ideas then will be shared with other congregations in the conference so pastors and laity can discern how best to fulfill needs in their communities by understanding how similar issues have been addressed elsewhere.

Williamston, Salina DS who, like Hasty, will now assist with the Hays District, said the shift will help the Great Plains Conference innovate by sharing ideas and by using the gifts and graces of United Methodists to foster a movement.

See FOCUSED on page 14



“I’m excited because I see this as an adventure, and we’re all on the journey together,” she said. “It may not be perfect at first, but God will lead us and equip us as we go. We will experiment with new things as we work together.”

Livingston, the Hutchinson DS who will now assist with the Hays District, said the peer-to-peer model should deepen and multiply points of connection among clergy and congregations. He said the shift has the ability to transform the culture of the Great Plains so United Methodists in the region view the conference territory more as a cascade of connected mission fields and not siloed congregations spread across two states.

“Clergy will be connected in new ways that spread ministry and responsibility outward to other clergy and laity,” Livingston said. “Also

exciting is that there is actually a plan taking shape, and the appointive cabinet has jumped fully on board.”

Davis, the Elkhorn Valley DS who will help in the Great West, said this shift to a mission-field-focused model hearkens to the churches recorded in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. The peer-to-peer component of sharing best practices and providing encouragement will allow the conference to tap into the experts the church already has.

“When I worked in the mental health field, when things would happen locally, the thinking was we needed an expert to come in. And you had to be from at least 120 miles away to be an ‘expert.’ But we often already had the expert there,” he said. “In this case we already have the expertise in our communities. And we already have the Holy Spirit working with us.”

Bishop Saenz said pastors will continue to provide the ministry of Word, Sacrament, Order and Service in local congregations. But their role will begin to shift and expand as they live into becoming the chief missional strategist for their own communities and region while leading their congregations. This means more and more congregations will begin shifting from a focus on institutional maintenance to becoming more of a missional movement in the Wesleyan way of leading people into a deeper love of God, proclaiming Christ, serving others, especially the poor, and seeking social holiness and justice.

“Our broken world desperately needs to see the love of Christ,” Bishop Saenz said. “People need to know there is hope in this life and in the life to come. Our Wesleyan roots prepare us to be the light in the world, but as Jesus instructed us in Matthew 28:19-20, we must share that light with our families, friends and neighbors – our entire world.”

Watson, Five Rivers DS, said he believes a cooperative ministry with a strong lay-clergy partnership is the most effective way to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“I believe we are piloting an exciting new — yet old — framework for mutual ministry, based on our Wesleyan heritage of empowering and equipping lay folk for living out their calling right alongside the clergy,” he said. “Everything old is new again, it seems. Vinyl records and the Wesleyan Witness: the future began yesterday!”

PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Above, the Rev. Dr. Linda Louderback, retiring district Wichita West district superintendent, and the Rev. Dr. Dan Flanagan, retiring DS from the Missouri River District, listen to a devotional at a recent cabinet meeting. At right, Bishop Saenz and the Rev. Nancy Lambert, clergy excellence director and assistant to the bishop, contemplate the conference’s plans.



Livestreaming widens audience for discussion of church vitality

By DAVID BURKE,
communications
coordinator

Whether it was in person at First United Methodist Church in Wichita or through a screen throughout the Great Plains Conference and beyond, clergy and laypersons heard the plans of Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. on Feb. 25.

While Bishop Saenz laid out plans for “Leading Vital Congregations” in front of about 200 people at First Wichita, many others in the two-state region joined in the viewing and discussion during the live-streamed workshop.

“This is kind of the reality of where we are today,” Bishop Saenz said as he began a two-hour, 15-minute session.

Bishop Saenz, whose children and grandchild live in Texas, said the technology has become more of a reality to him after he moved to the Great Plains this summer. The bishop and his wife, Maye, gather their family for virtual get-togethers online.

“It kind of fills the heart to see somebody’s face,” said Saenz, who began his session by taking a selfie with the audience at First Wichita and checking in through social media.

Bishop Saenz said he wanted to give clergy and laity an “awareness of the current reality,” as well as discussions of church vitality and



PHOTO BY DAVID BURKE

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr., speaks at the 2017 Orders and Fellowship. Saenz recently shared plans for “Leading Vital Congregations” that incorporates the reality and helpfulness of technology.

“courage to take the next steps.”

Those watching from outside Wichita were invited to create dialogue through email and texting.

Among those watching online were the Rev. Patrick Broz of Kingman United Methodist Church in Kansas, who invited United Methodists from Kingman County and nearby to his church to watch.

“Through technology now we can regionalize,” Broz said.

After the Wichita session, those gathered at Kingman stayed to discuss issues in churches and how each could work alongside each other, Broz said.

“How do we work together to build up the kingdom of God

in the Kingman area?” he asked.

The Rev. Linda Louderback, Wichita West superintendent, said she was pleased with both the content and the communication of the bishop’s discussion.

“He laid out some beginnings on how to build a vital congregation,” she said.

The distance learning will continue Saturday, April 29, with a session on attracting and retaining young people, with the live presentation taking place at another joint Wichita East-Wichita West districts training event in Wichita. This fall, conference communications director Todd Seifert will lead a session on communicating and marketing for local churches.

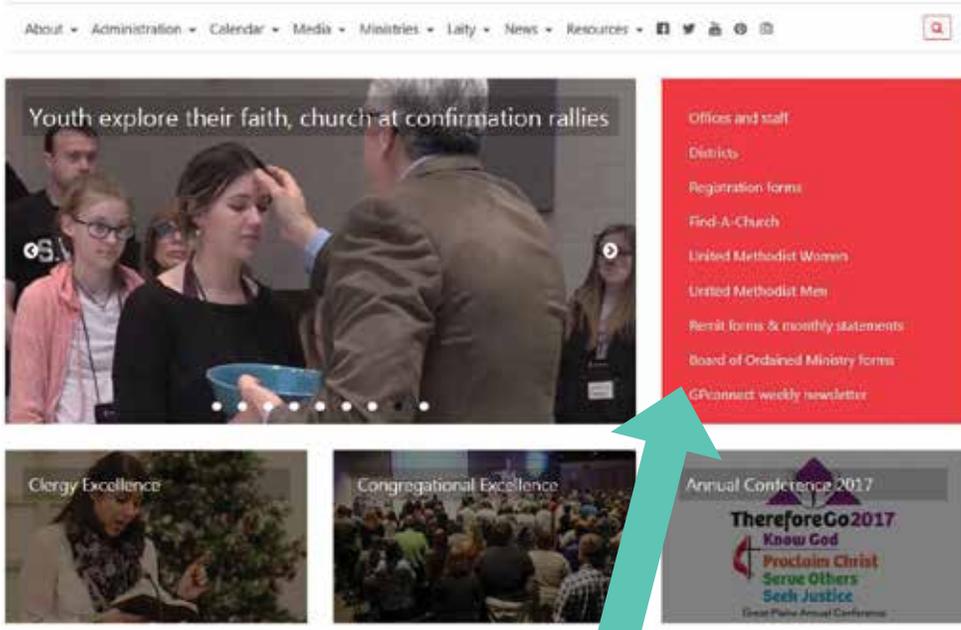
View video at
[www.greatplainsumc.org/videodetail/
saenzchurchvitality-7683806](http://www.greatplainsumc.org/videodetail/saenzchurchvitality-7683806).

Fresh, new look online

The Great Plains Conference launched a new design for its website — www.greatplainsumc.org — in February with a goal of making it easier to find the information you want. Let's take a brief tour.

Homepage

www.greatplainsumc.org



The home page features a carousel with featured items. We could have as many as 10 items cycling through the window at any given time, so check it out from time to time to keep up to date on news from the conference, the worldwide United Methodist Church or from the secular world.

Under the carousel, you'll see rows of boxes, with three portals to a row. These help you navigate to the interior portions of the website, from the upcoming annual conference session to our clergy and congregational excellence teams to disaster response. These may change from time to time, depending on where we are in the year of the life of the annual conference.

In the upper portion of the home page, you'll see a red box with links to often-sought-after items. These include pages about our offices and staff, our church locator and pastor roster. You'll also find links to remittance forms and monthly mission share statements, subscriptions to the weekly GPconnect email and pages dedicated to the United Methodist Women and Men.

Also at the top of the page, you'll see links with drop-down menus to our various sections. A new one, labeled "laity," now appears in the top navigation bar.

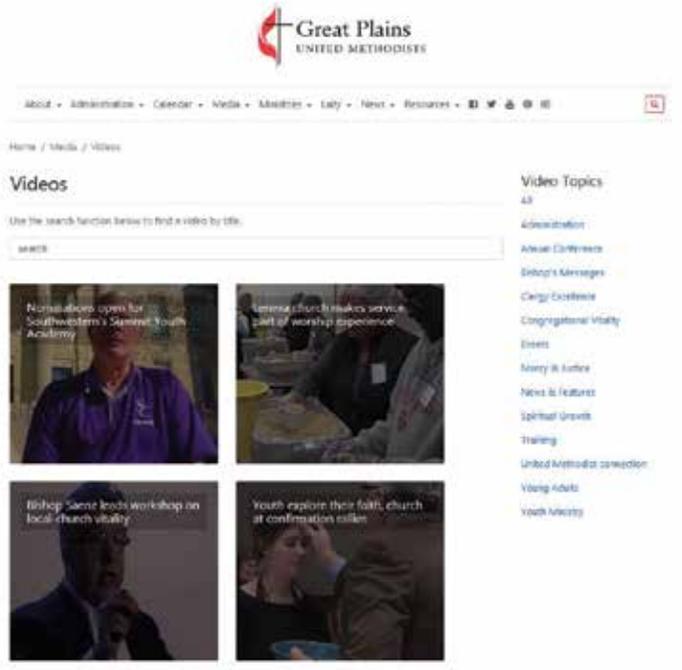
Photos

www.greatplainsumc.org/photos

Do you need a photo to illustrate your sermon? How about a background image to use for your hymns or scriptures in worship? Click on the "media" link in the top navigation and click "Photos." This will take you to the conference's Flickr galleries. You are free to use any images from our galleries, as long as the images are not sold or placed on products to be sold.

Videos

www.greatplainsumc.org/videos



Also in February, the conference upgraded its video player. Now, you can type in key words to search for videos you want to see. Or you can click on a topic in the right navigation to look through only videos on those subjects.

Besides the search function, also new is our ability to link to stories and PowerPoint presentations or other documents that accompany videos. This is especially the case with videos in the “training” category.

We have loaded videos in reverse chronological order dating back to the 2016 annual conference session, with more videos to be added from our archives as time allows.

GPconnect

www.greatplainsumc.org/subscribe



Our weekly email newsletter publishes each Wednesday and contains information about training, special events, messages from the bishop and much, much more. To get it in your email inbox each week, you just need to accept a

free subscription. We don't sell your email addresses to marketers.

Toward the bottom of the home page, you'll find a button that says “subscribe.” Click it and fill in your information. We'll email you the newsletter each week.

Local Church Toolbox

www.greatplainsumc.org/toolbox

Browse by Category



This feature has been on our website for more than a year, but we need your help to make the content there as useful as possible. Go to the toolbox page and click on the icons at the bottom of the page.

Simply click on one of the icons that matches up with your area of interest. Or, maybe you have something to share that has worked for you and from which others may benefit. Let's use “dynamic worship” as an example. If you have an idea for dynamic worship – either something you've seen or that you do in your church – click the icon. When the page comes up, click the “submit your story” button. Type in your idea and submit it. A conference employee will review it and will call if we have any questions prior to posting your idea.

The toolbox is updated as often as we receive submissions, so don't be bashful. Help yourself by looking for ideas in the toolbox. Help others by contributing to the toolbox.

Laity

www.greatplainsumc.org/laity

This is our newest section. It features details about the Lay Servant Ministry program – definitions of certain designations, blogs written by lay servants, contact information for district directors, annual report documents, links to resources and upcoming training opportunities, complete with registration forms.

Check back regularly for enhancements in this new section of the website.

... but wait, there's more.

Social Media

Want to stay up to date on the news and engage with others across the Great Plains Conference and beyond? Then “like” our Facebook page and follow us on Twitter.

These popular social media sites are our two primary means of reaching out between the Wednesday GPconnect weekly emails.

It's easy. Create an account and then go to the following pages and follow these instructions:

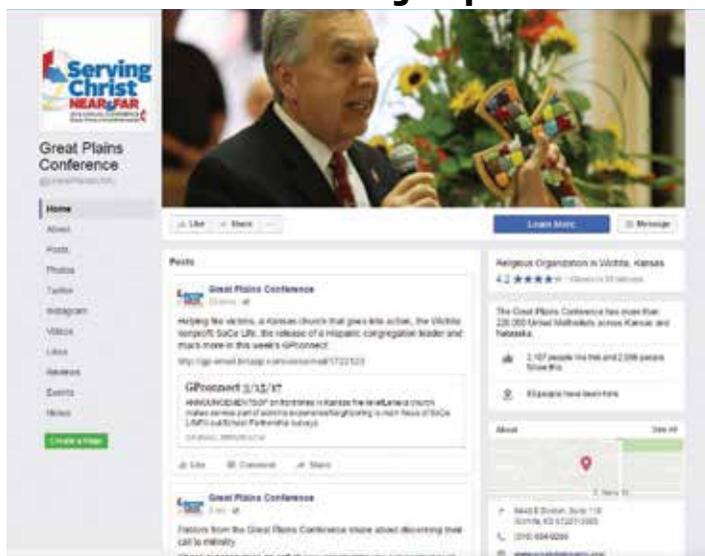
Facebook — www.facebook.com/GreatPlainsUMC — Click the “like” button.

Twitter — www.twitter.com/GPUMC — Click the “follow” button.

We also have pages for Pinterest and Instagram.
Join in the fun and stay informed at the same time!

Facebook

www.facebook.com/greatplainsumc



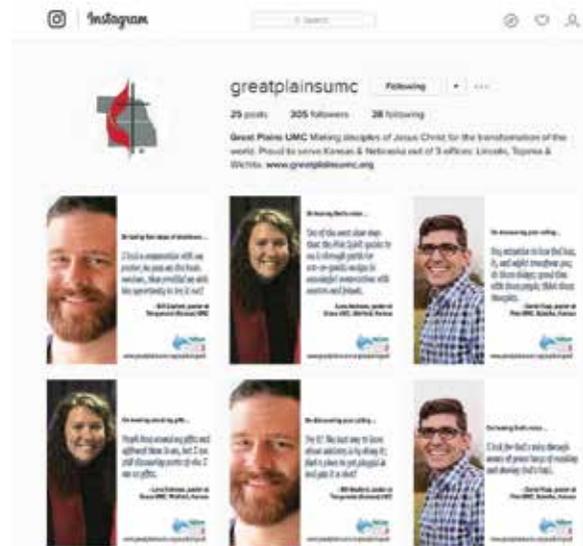
Twitter

www.twitter.com/gpumc



Instagram

www.instagram.com/greatplainsumc



Pinterest

www.pinterest.com/greatplainsumc



Kansas churches working with fire victims

By DAVID BURKE,
communications coordinator

With prayer, financial help and hands-on labor, United Methodists are responding to the devastating fire damage that has struck south-central and southwest Kansas.

"It's been amazing what everybody's done," said the Rev. Rick Branson, pastor of Ashland UMC.

Called the largest wildfire in state history, it burned 600,000 acres – with more than 500,000 of those in Clark and Comanche counties. Fire spread to as many as 23 counties.

The Rev. Hollie Tapley, Great Plains Conference disaster relief coordinator, said financial aid has been given to several families in Clark, Ford and Reno counties.

Fire destroyed approximately 30 homes around Ashland, Branson said. One of those belonged to

his parishioners, Mark and Eva Gardiner, which also lost "thousands and thousands of cattle," the pastor added.

"They have the Cadillac of the breed," Branson added.

Yet, Branson said, sorrow over the loss of their livestock and livelihood didn't shake the couple's belief in God.

"They were just so grateful. They did our liturgy in church," he added. The March 12 service was attended by U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran, as well as the Rev. Don Hasty, Dodge City District superintendent.

The service became emotional at times, Branson said.

"We just shared for God moments where we've seen Him all through this experience," he said. "In each and every disastrous thing, it could have been so much worse."

The lone fatality from the fire, Branson said, was a trucker who got on the wrong path and couldn't escape.

"Everybody's well, nobody's injured" in the area, he said. "We're just sending up praises for that."

The women of Ashland UMC served food to first responders 24 hours a day all week at the school gym and cafeteria, which was set up as a shelter.

Trucks of food and water, including a truck full of hamburgers, hot dogs and chicken patties sent by Tyson Foods, helped feed the workers and those at least temporarily without homes.

At Protection UMC, one family lost its house, said the Rev. Wayne Stephens. An offering for them was taken March 12 at its Sunday service.

The usual 50-minute services turned into an hour-and-a-half as those attending shared their experiences, he said.

"A lot of people just got to talk," Stephens said. "Several people had life-and-death situations. Some people got lost in the smoke and miraculously got out. Several of my church people had fire that came right up to their house – it jumped over and didn't touch the buildings or the house.

"It's just miracle after miracle," he added.

Stephens said it was heartwarming to hear of calls being heeded for hay for the surviving cattle, put out by a local feed store. Farmers from as far away as Vermont sent hay to their Kansas counterparts.

"They wanted their hay to be here," Stephens said. "Everywhere you see in Comanche and Clark counties, there's hay trucks rolling."

Stephens said he has tried to provide spiritual and emotional support to the first-responders by attending their counseling sessions.

"They really took a beating emotionally," he said. "The dispatchers had to tell people calling in that there was no one else to send. People had to watch their houses burn or their cattle burn up. It's very emotionally charged, the whole situation."

Stephens said the outpouring of support and assistance has been beyond anyone's expectations.

"There's been nothing like this," he said. "The response has been overwhelming."

How to Help

Anyone wanting to make a donation in the Great Plains Conference can do so through their church, with a check payable to the conference. The number on the remittance form should be #975. Those outside Kansas and Nebraska can address checks to the Great Plains Annual Conference, P.O. Box 4187, Topeka, KS 66604. In the memo line of the check, write #975, Disaster Response Fund.

NEW CHURCH INCUBATORS JUMP INTO GREAT 'SHARK TANK' PLAINS'

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

It didn't have the dramatic lighting, the billionaire panel nor the life-changing financial offers, but the spirit of the TV series "Shark Tank" seeped into the Great Plains Conference on Feb. 28.

As part of the Planter Incubator in the New Church Development program of the Great Plains Conference, 10 individuals or pairs made pitches — a la the popular

the conference. "We have to be creative in how we ask for money."

Set up at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, the 10 were divided into three groups: Kansas City area, Wichita area and Nebraska.

"The panels were a means to give people feedback," Stanton said. "There was a process to refine their plans, to learn from entrepreneurs."

Stanton said it also helped presenters think in new ways.

"This is an opportunity for us to have pastors and laypeople working from an entrepreneurial mindset, and making pitches in order to move us forward," he said. "Maybe not extremely different ways of thinking — I think a lot of people think entrepreneurially — but for us as a church, for us to move forward behaviorally. To behave entrepreneurially is a different animal."

Among those making a pitch to the Great



PHOTO BY DAVID BURKE

The Rev. Andrew Conard, pastor of First United Methodist Church in El Dorado, Kansas, makes his pitch during a "Shark Tank" session in February at Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas.

business competition reality show — for new church starts or other plans.

Panels including pastors, laity and businesspeople who evaluated the pitches and asked questions as potential investors in each project. Several in each group were veterans of church planting.

"The idea of developing either an innovation out of an existing congregation or starting a new church, like an entrepreneur, just has to be essential today," said the Rev. Nathan Stanton, New Church Development coordinator for

Plains "Sharks" was the Rev. Andrew Conard, pastor of First United Methodist Church in El Dorado, Kansas.

Conard said he was pleased with the process.

"It helped potential planters learn more specifically about what a new church start might look like," he said. "My hope would be that it would give them more specific ideas about what might be possible."

Although there were neither "winners" nor "losers" that day, "there are a couple of plans that are moving on," Stanton said.



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

From top, Steven Blair makes his pitch in “Shark Tank”; the Rev. Justin Jamis, of the Kansas State-Wesley campus ministry program, shares his idea.

The cabinet is aware of the plans being proposed, he said, and must sign off on any of the proposals.

Starting a new church, Stanton said, is similar to starting a new business.

“There are a lot of parallels in terms of sustainability,” he said. “If something isn’t on its feet 3 ½-4 ½ years into it, and it’s not paying for itself, the likelihood that it ever will goes down drastically.

“You have to fight to make it work, like an entrepreneur,” Stanton added.

The “Shark Tank” session was part of the regular meeting of the Incubator group. Participants heard from the Rev. Adam Hamilton, founding pastor of Church of the Resurrection.

“Adam spent a couple of hours talking about leadership development, the Church of the Resurrection story and really cultivating relationships and an environment where there’s a necessity for large giving, and how you approach high-level donors,” Stanton said.

Also speaking to the group for the second year in a row was a Church of the Resurrection donor who had given multiple millions of dollars to the Leawood church, Stanton said.

“They shared their perspective on how you approach them and the information you need to have, how you need to be prepared,” he said. “Making an impact in the community, you really have an opportunity to share your vision.”

Stanton said it helped the incubators refine their goals in stewardship and fundraising.

“It allows them to recalibrate what it means to ask for money,” he said. “When you don’t have a congregation already, what does it mean to raise funds outside?”

Death notices

The Rev. Roy Jay Brotton, 84, a retired clergy member, passed away Jan. 11, 2017. He was preceded in death by his wife, Geraldine Brotton. Survivors include children, Rodney Brotton, James Brotton and Deb Carsten. Memorial contributions may be made River Cross Hospice Care of Bartlesville or Heritage Villa of Bartlesville in care of Ryan Mortuary, 137 N. 8th, Salina, KS 67401.

Mildred Emma Havel Engstrom, age 95, a surviving spouse of a clergy member, died Jan. 14, 2017. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Frank Engstrom. Survivors include daughters, Joanne Fernandez, Sarah Jones, Kaydene Engstrom and Paula Chu.

Phyllis Evelyn Birrer Frary, 100, a surviving spouse of a clergy member, passed away Jan. 22, 2017. She is preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Arthur Frary; and son, Deryl Frary. Survivors include daughter, Sherilyn; and daughter-in-law, Janice.

Dr. Glenn Froning, 86, the husband of a retired clergy member, passed away Jan. 29, 2017. Survivors include his wife, Lynne Froning; and daughters, Teri Foley and Sharon Phillips. Memorial contributions may be made to Saint Paul UMC in Lincoln, Nebraska.

The Rev. Gregory F. Hall, 65, a clergy member, died Feb. 15, 2017. Survivors include his wife, Cindy Hall; and children, Travis Hall, Cullen Hall and Aime Hennings. Memorial contributions may be made to Fremont First UMC, Nebraska Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) or Dodge County Humane Society.

The Rev. L. Robert Holbrook, 95, a retired clergy member, died Jan. 14, 2017. Survivors include his wife Pearl; children, Dr. Gerald Holbrook, Jeanne Skybrook, Barbara Muenchau, Andrew Holbrook and Patricia (Dan) Terpstra; and step-children, Linda Christensen, Vickie Leu, Peggy Speck and Robert Leu Sr. Memorial contributions may be made to the family for later designation.

The Rev. K. F. Kaleuati, 68, a retired clergy member, died Jan. 6, 2017. He is survived by his wife, Sandra Jean; and daughters, Margaret Ann Kaleuati and Karen Michelle Kaleuati. Memorial contributions may be made to the donor's choice.

Dorothy "Dottie" Forinash Knetsch, 69, a retired clergy member, died Dec. 27, 2016. Survivors include her husband, Piet Knetsch; and daughter, Shivaun Hickman.

Patricia Jean (Murray) Osborn, 83, the spouse of a retired clergy member, died Dec. 28, 2016. Survivors include her husband, the Rev. Chester Osborn; and children, Phillip Osborn, Susan Osborn and Douglas Osborn. Memorial contributions may be made to Trinity Heights UMC Foundation in care of Petersen Funeral Home, 215 N. Main, Newton, KS 67114.

Judith "Judy" E. (Dikeman) Pinkerton, 77, the spouse of a retired clergy member, died Dec. 27, 2016. Survivors include husband, the Rev. Fred Pinkerton; and children, Randy Pinkerton, Rus Pinkerton, Rob Pinkerton and Tim Pinkerton. Memorial contributions may be made to Church Youth Ministries in care of Webb-Shinkle Mortuary, P.O. Box 325, Clearwater, KS 67026.

The Rev. Alvin H. Smith, 85, a retired clergy member, died Saturday, Dec. 17, 2016. Survivors include children, Joleen Widman, Bethanne Topolski, Paula Juza, Amy Moreau and John Smith. Memorial contributions may be made to Friedens United Church of Christ, 339 N 4th St., Seward, Nebraska 68434 or Okay Cemetery, rural Monroe, Nebraska, for Perpetual Care Fund, in care of Zabka Funeral Home, 410 Jackson Ave, Seward, NE 68434.

Betty Stubbs, 89, a surviving spouse of a retired clergy member, died Feb. 2, 2017. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Arthur Stubbs. Memorial contributions may be made in Betty's name to Truth Christian Academy, PO Box 621961 Littleton, CO 80162.

Miriam Louise Weber, 89, a retired diaconal minister, died Dec. 28, 2016. Survivors include her siblings, Marjorie Moore and Richard Weber. Memorial contributions may be made to The Good Shepherd Fund at The Village or any of the United Methodist churches she was a member of, in care of Overton Funeral Home, 501 W. Ashland Ave., Indianola, IA 50125.

ADVOCACY continued from page 23

At lunch, the attendees dined with their representatives in the Kansas House and Senate, asking them their stance on the issues and what they think are the biggest concerns in the 2017 Legislature.

In Nebraska, approximately 200 people attended the Nebraska Ecumenical Legislative Briefing Day. The annual event featured workshops on immigration, human trafficking, LGBTQ concerns, juvenile justice reforms, mental health access, advocacy tips, ecology of farming and the human toll taken by alcohol abuse in White Clay, along the Nebraska-South Dakota border.

"In Nebraska, we have such a small legislature that your voice can be heard, but you've got to know what you're talking about," said Ruby Thelander, a member of the briefing day's planning team.

The best-attended workshop of the day focused on immigration issues, presented by Darcy Tromanhauser, immigrants and communities program director for Nebraska Appleseed, a nonprofit group that works to help immigrants relocate and become contributing members of their communities.

"Nebraska has a long, proud history of immigration. If you look across our state in the summertime, you see festivals celebrating cultures and nationalities from around the world," she said.

United Methodists play key roles in advocacy



PHOTO BY DAVID BURKE

By **TODD SEIFERT**, *communications director*; and **DAVID BURKE**, *communications communicator*

United Methodists from across Kansas and Nebraska learned about political issues from a faith-based perspective as they took part in legislative briefing days in the two states.

In both cases celebrating 42 years of educating the public on issues of concern for people of faith, the two events featured speakers and basic instructions on how to advocate for issues of interest, regardless of the person's point of view. Also in both cases, the United Methodist Women played pivotal roles both in getting the effort started in the 1970s and continuing it through this year.

And in both cases, the effort resulted in the joining of lay persons, experts and advocates — Feb. 11 at Christ United Methodist Church in Lincoln and Feb. 12-13 at First United Methodist Church in Topeka.

View video at
www.greatplainsumc.org/videodetail/nelegislativeday-7565565.

In Kansas, the annual Legislative Event for Advocacy in Faith, or LEAF, brought more than 110 women — and a few men — to hear the event's keynote speaker, Judge Ardie Bland, a Kansas City, Missouri, municipal court judge who has tried to divert a growing prison population by unorthodox sentences such as having the convicted write essays.

Bland said the number of people in jail in the United States for burglary, assault, robbery, murder and rape — about 700,000 — is less than the 720,000 incarcerated for lesser crimes.

"Is that really justice?" Bland asked. "Are we really seeking justice if those numbers match?"

While on the bench, Bland established a truancy court and a veterans' treatment court, as well as someone to monitor mental-health related convictions.

Bland said he looked to the biblical examples of Moses, David and Paul, those who had criminal reputations before they became believers.

"God didn't throw any of their lives away," Bland said. "He turned them into better people."

Bland said he is seeking methods through the bench to curb the homelessness problem in Kansas City.

"Crime goes down when the homeless have a place to stay," he said.

A panel discussion (pictured above) of "Advocacy Talking Points" featured Judith Deedy, of Game On for Kansas Schools; Larry Weigel, a Manhattan-based financial services agent who has become a Medicare advocate; Amanda Gress, director of government relations for Kansas Action for Children; and Jessica Stephenson, a program specialist with the International Rescue Committee.

Game On for Kansas Schools, Deedy said, encourages transparency and distributing information about educational funding in the state.

"We encourage people to get off the sidelines and get in the game," she said. "We work very hard to unspin the spin."

Gress said Kansas Action for Children is busy defending the state safety net for the estimated 122,000 children in the state who are living in poverty.

She said she had hopes for Senate Bill 95, which would "make the safety net work better and reach more kids."

Stephenson said that under President Barack Obama, an estimated 110,000 refugees would have been allowed into the country in the current fiscal year. Under the Trump administration, that number has been cut to less than half, 50,000.

"Now more than ever, we need your support," Stephenson said.

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'Go-to guy' poised to become a top conference leader



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

Long before he was hired as treasurer of the Great Plains Conference, Scott Brewer's reputation preceded him.

The son of two longtime Nebraska United Methodist pastors, Brewer was a self-described "campus radical" at Nebraska Wesleyan University, involved in both student government and the student newspaper while earning degrees in sociology and anthropology.

"Back in the day, Bishop (Joel) Martinez, back when he was the bishop of the Nebraska Conference, used to joke that he kept \$100 in his desk drawer to bail me out of jail," Brewer, now 39, says with a laugh.

"It's kind of funny now to be in administration, when I gave administrators a pretty hard time for a lot of years," he added. "I think it's God's pretty amazing sense of humor and justice all at once."

But Brewer's reputation was also a good one. He kept in contact with the Great Plains Conference, and was the person in-the-know in the office of the General Council on Finance and Administration.

"There were a variety of different people there, and you're supposed to call different ones for different purposes," explained the Rev. Gary Beach, treasurer and director of administrative services. "Both (former) Bishop (Scott) Jones and I learned a long time ago that if you wanted a quick response and a response that was helpful, you contacted Scott Brewer directly, and he would get you the right answer.

"He's our go-to guy," Beach added.

After officially starting Jan. 1 with the Great Plains, Brewer will replace Beach upon the latter's retirement July 1.

"There's still a lot to learn," Brewer said. "I don't think that will ever probably stop."

The son of the Rev. James S. Brewer and the Rev. Carol Roettmer Brewer, he grew up throughout the state, living in Beaver City, DeWitt, Kearney, Gibbon, Fremont, Lincoln and Waverly.

Though never feeling the call to ordained ministry himself,

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he worked in the GCFA for 12 years, first in Chicago and then in Nashville. He then worked for a year and a half as the associate general secretary of administration and finance for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, also in Nashville.

Brewer praised the Great Plains for what he called clearing the biggest hurdle — its 2014 unification from three conferences into one.

"The folks here really gave blood, sweat and tears in the transition. They worked very, very long hours," Brewer said.

"I've seen other conference unifications that have gone very poorly. I think part of the reason why the conference is as healthy as it is right now is because on many of those key administrative tasks, we didn't drop the ball," he added.

A welcome change in the move from Nashville to Topeka is the commute. Brewer said he spent seven hours a week on the road to and from the GCFA and GBHEM offices. Now, he lives a mile away from the Topeka office — and has even pledged to walk to and from work during Lent.

"I got seven hours of my life back," he said.

His wife, Allison, is a former special education teacher. The couple has a 4-year-old daughter and a 1 ½-year-old son. Allison is an Omaha native, and the move put all of the children's grandparents within a day-trip driving range.

"It's nice for that to be routine," Brewer said. "That's really, really important to us."