

GPconnect

Connecting United Methodists across the Great Plains

Winter 2017



Bishop Saenz shares some of his first impressions of the Great Plains Conference



Great Plains
UNITED METHODISTS

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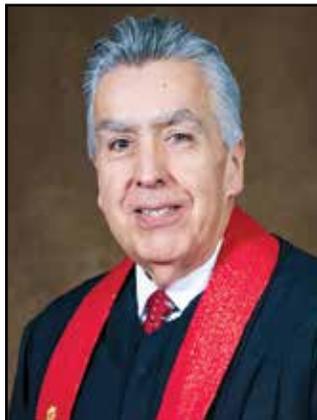
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Cover photos

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. recently completed visits to all 17 districts in the Great Plains Conference. In this edition, he shares some of his first impressions of Kansas and Nebraska. Read on pages 12-13.

Protection from the cold



Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.

I woke up in Lincoln, Nebraska, in mid-December and checked the temperature on my cell phone: 2 degrees with a wind chill factor of minus-17 degrees. The numbing effect of the cold temperature on my face was very real after only a few minutes outdoors.

I asked for advice from several experienced cold-weather friends and found that dressing in many thin, warm layers of clothing is a good practice. I've now stocked up on wool socks and long johns. I have a wool hat, several beanies, a wool jacket and a good pair of gloves.

One of the details in the birth narrative that caught my attention as I meditated on Luke 2:1-7 is, "She (Mary) wrapped him (Jesus) snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger." Maybe Mary used

many thin layers of clothing to keep Jesus warm on a cold night much like we use thin layers to keep warm during cold days. What if the strips of clothing Mary snugly wrapped Jesus in were symbolic of the humanity and its condition Christ wrapped himself in to redeem us from sin and death?

My devotional time led me to meditate on the incarnation of God in Christ. The pre-existent and eternal Christ of the cosmos clothed himself in the warm-blooded human flesh of Jesus within a specific social context and culture, and within a "brutiful" historical time marked by both brutality and beauty.

Christmas is about the inauguration of the new Reign of God, where God's power to destroy the power of sin and death is present and efficacious. Christ has come to give us his own life so that we may share in it

There is another place in Luke's gospel where Jesus is wrapped with cloth — his burial (Luke 23:50-56). Joseph of Arimathea, a righteous man, asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. He wrapped Jesus in a linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb.

As a child, Jesus is wrapped with strips of cloth. As a Savior, he is wrapped with a seamless linen cloth. The shredded cloth of humanity has been redeemed and made whole in Christ.

Friends, we are privileged to own warm clothes. It is by grace we have access by faith to the wrapping warmth of God's hope, peace, love and joy to face all days with courage. Many around us find themselves spiritually and socially cold and numb, tightly wrapped in fears and doubts, hopelessness, violence, aimlessness, abuse and injustice, experiencing alienation from God and neighbor.

In these cold months of winter, let us offer the wrapping of God's warm embrace and invite people out of the cold into God's warmth in Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ruben Saenz Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.



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

From your lay leader

Your Billboard Message Here...

“Know God... Know Peace”

If you've ever traveled along the I-70 corridor between the exit for my hometown of Manhattan, Kansas, and Topeka, you may have noticed this message painted on the back of an old, metal barn close to the highway. In addition to admiring the beautiful scenery of our two states, pondering road signs, messages and billboards is a fun way to pass the time when I travel across our Great Plains Conference. Whether I agree or disagree with the various philosophies offered, I love when folks reveal their deeply held, personal beliefs for all to see. I appreciate the personal conviction behind the message, as well as the courage of sharing such. (Actually, the first line of the above message reads, “No God... No Peace” followed by the line above.) But we're all free to take what resonates with us, and leave what doesn't.

So I wonder if you and I were to put our most meaningful, deeply held belief on a road sign for all to see, what would it be? A Bible verse? An inspirational bit of wisdom? A team logo? What would your message be?

We all carry with us our own words to live by and these may vary greatly among us. And yet at the heart of our Christian faith we each hold a few personal and foundational beliefs. The truth is we are already living out the message of our beliefs. We say it with our actions; we say it with our relationships with those around us, especially with the “least of these among us.” And lastly, we say it with our words. As a parent, my kids have occasionally reminded me that sometimes my words and my actions don't always match. Ouch.

The same holds true for our churches and how we minister to our neighbors in need. Our actions speak louder than any great sermon on a Sunday morning. Words matter, of course they do. We like the beauty and richness of words of faith. Yet of the many faithful servants I admire — it's their love expressed through action and kindness that teaches me the most about my faith. So, as I ponder my personal billboard message for 2017, I'll start with “Go, and spread the love of Jesus Christ. If necessary, use words.”



Courtney Fowler

Courtney

Courtney Fowler
Conference Lay Leader
facebook.com/greatplainslaity
@c24fowler

Note: The above quote is conflated and popularly attributed between two possible sources, St. Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa, both of which are disputed as the authentic origination.

Conference events are posted at greatplainsumc.org/events

Conference events

Jan. 13-14

Candidacy Summit, Salina, Kansas

Jan. 14-15

The One Event, Salina, Kansas

Jan. 18

Early Response Training, Ellis, Kansas

Jan. 18-19

Orders and Fellowship meeting, Salina, Kansas

Jan. 27-28

Beyond Conference, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Jan. 27-28

Lay Servant Opportunities: Basic and Methodist Heritage, Camp Norwesca, Chadron, Nebraska

Jan. 27-28

Encountering the Holy Spirit Conference, Camp Comeca, Cozad, Nebraska

Jan. 30-31

Great Preaching for the Great Plains: “Where is God in My Sermon?,” Topeka, Kansas

Feb. 5-10

Board of Ordained Ministry interview week, Topeka, Kansas

Feb. 11

Confirmation Rally, Lincoln, Nebraska

Feb. 17-19

United Methodist Men Rally, Camp Fontanelle, Nickerson, Nebraska

Feb. 21-22

The Rev. Tom Berlin Workshop, York, Nebraska

Feb. 25

Great Plains Lay Servant Ministries Committee meeting, Salina, Kansas

Feb. 26-28

Residency Retreat No. 4, Junction City, Kansas

March 6

Salina District Men and Boys Rally, Beloit, Kansas

March 24-25

Lay Speaking courses, Camp Lakeside, Scott City, Kansas,

March 26-28

Residency Retreat No. 5, Junction City, Kansas

March 27-28

Great Preaching for the Great Plains: “Where is the Human Condition in the Sermon?,” Topeka, Kansas



PHOTOS BY TODD SEIFERT
Pictures clockwise from upper left. Associate Lay Leader Oliver Green gives Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. one of the many tools for ministry presented during the celebration of assignment service. Pastor Cesar Garcia Rodriguez of Dietz Memorial (in Omaha) and Papillion UMCs and Miriam Peralta de Garcia provide Scripture. Drummers, including Wichita East District Superintendent Mitch Reece and the Rev. Kelly Karges from Trinity UMC in Grand Island, Nebraska, provide music during the start of the service. The Golden Angels dancers from St. Paul UMC in Lincoln, Nebraska, carry 17 candles representing the 17 Great Plains districts at the start of the service.



Bishop calls for

By **DAVID BURKE**,
communications coordinator

A call to further the mission that already has been started by Jesus Christ highlighted the formal introduction of Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. to the Great Plains Conference on Oct. 15.

"We have a lot of unfinished work to do," Saenz told several hundred clergy, laity, conference officials and guests at a service at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Lincoln.

Basing his sermon off John 21: 15-17, Saenz said the people of the church need to counter those walking away from the faith by giving them a "fresh encounter with Christ."

The church, he said, should take a greater role in fighting poverty, hunger, violence and injustice.

"We cannot stop at advocacy and legislation," Saenz said. "We need a fresh vision and a fresh encounter that calls us to that."

Saenz called on those in the conference to "build – not burn or destroy – bridges."

The Great Plains' new bishop, who comes from the Rio Texas Conference, said he enjoys "people watching" at airports and shopping malls, and sees

a cross-section of backgrounds and experiences.

"You love all these people," Saenz said of Jesus. "And I don't think I could," he said of human shortcomings.

To further develop Jesus' calling is to reach out to everyone, he said.

"We can do it with joy and excellence," Saenz said, "with a love of Christ and with a love of Christ's lambs."

"People of the Great Plains," he said, "we are not finished."

Saenz's 20-minute sermon received the immediate endorsement of the Rev. Anne Gatobu, who followed him on the program by offering a prayer for the new episcopal leader.

"People of the Great Plains," said Gatobu, pastor of the United Methodist Church in Ashland, Nebraska, "are we blessed or what?"

Likewise, those who heard Saenz's sermon – many of whom had met him for the first time – were impressed.

"I enjoyed his focus on social justice and how much he cares for the poverty-stricken," said the Rev. Jacob Cloud, pastor of the United Methodist Church in Hiawatha, Kansas. "I got to go on a mission trip with Bishop Saenz several weeks ago (to flood-ravaged areas of south central Kansas) and saw his passion for the needy and

that he was mucking out stuff out of houses right there with the rest of us. That shows leadership that I really appreciate from him."

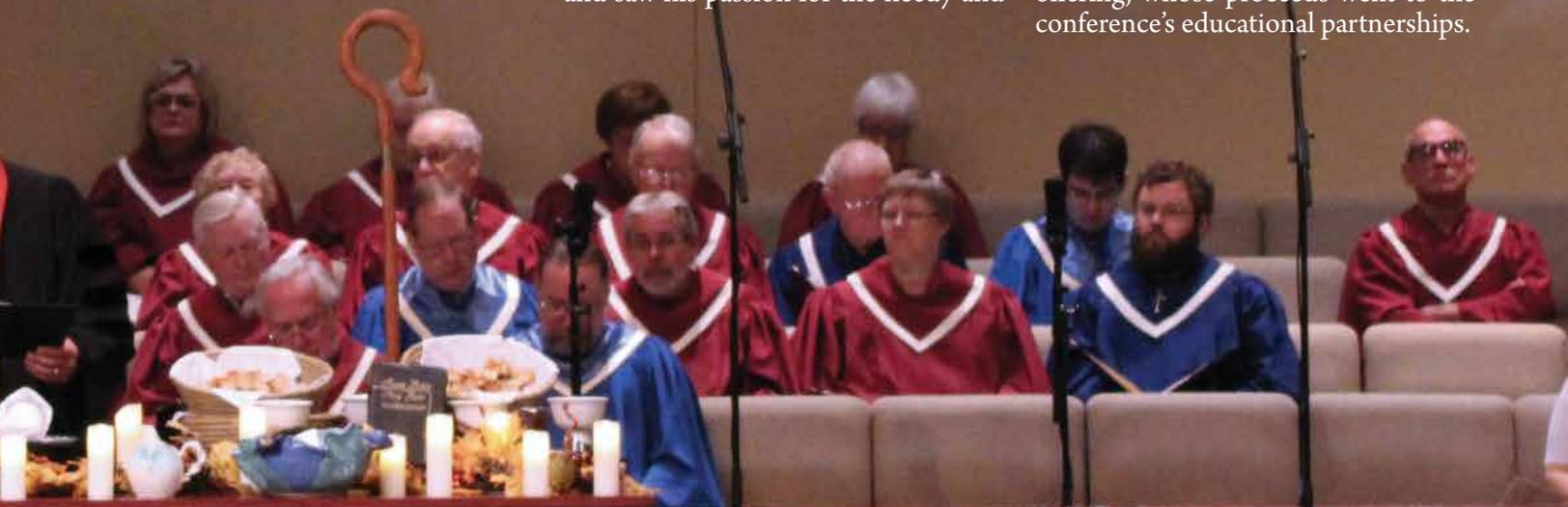
"I'm very pleased with what I heard today. I think he has a sweet heart. The work isn't finished, and the work is all of us," said Abby Henre, wife of the Rev. Robert Henre, pastor of Seward United Methodist Church in Nebraska.

The Rev. Ron Harris, pastor of United Methodist Churches in Aurora and Bradshaw, Nebraska, said he was impressed with the bishop, particularly his background that included owning his own jewelry store.

"I think it's interesting that he has a business background and a little bit of 'worldly' experience," he said. "I think that'll be a real blessing."

The 90-minute service included a communion served by Saenz and the district superintendents, as well as ceremonial presentations of a wooden pastoral staff, Bible, water pitcher, bread and cup, towel and basin and a stole, all elements of the bishop's leadership roles.

Music included a 30-voice choir from throughout the conference, a six-child choir from Seward and interpretive dancers who performed to the Lord's Prayer during the offering, whose proceeds went to the conference's educational partnerships.



Celebration of assignment service
work to continue

Poverty issues addressed in Lincoln workshop, panel discussion

By DAVID BURKE,
communications coordinator

Discussions and testimonials regarding gender, race, poverty and the environment were the focus of an event dubbed “For the Transformation of the World” Oct. 29 at First United Methodist Church in Lincoln.

A panel discussion about poverty highlighted the morning events, while the remainder were discussed in several workshops.

The event was presented by the Mercy and Justice team of the Great Plains Conference.

“You are truly friends of justice,” the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, general

secretary of the General Board of Church & Society, told the 60 participants. “I think you all should teach other annual conferences how to do this.”

In a talk preceding a morning panel discussion, Henry-Crowe said that the root causes of poverty have to be confronted.

“Racial and economic unrest has to be addressed and eradicated,” she said.

Henry-Crowe was joined on the panel by the Rev. Mark Holland, pastor of Trinity UMC in Kansas City, Kansas, as well as the mayor of the nearly 150,000-person city; and the Rev. Charlotte Abram, a retired United Methodist pastor active in social issues in Omaha.

Holland gave a history of Kansas City, Kansas, including both its steep

decline in population and sharp upturn in poverty levels and crime.

“We have pretty acute poverty in our city,” he said.

Alongside the increase in poverty comes a decrease in mental health services, he said. He called it a “chicken-and-the-egg” conundrum that worsens the situation.

“The scope of it is so overwhelming,” Holland said.

“We have an obligation as a people, as a community, to address the root causes of poverty,” he added. “Our role goes from direct service to advocacy.”

Abram said that churches need to be at the forefront of the fight against poverty.

“We can prayerfully stand up and stand with,” she said, “but also speak up and speak out.”

She refuted the counter to the Black Lives Matter protest by those saying that “All Lives Matter.”

“Historically, ‘all’ has not meant ‘all’ in this country,” she said.

“When people of faith acknowledge that, we acknowledge that we all can live together,” Abram added.

Henry-Crowe said six factors gauge the levels of poverty: education, fair wages, family planning, water, housing and access to goods and services.

All of the panelists agreed that race is a factor in poverty.

“We need to lead the conversation that racism is real,” Holland said. “We are fools not to address it head-on.”

Henry-Crowe said that The United Methodist Church has a long history in fighting poverty, back to John Wesley’s call for a “decriminalization” of poverty.

“It’s in our DNA,” Henry-Crowe said.

Afternoon workshops included talk about healthy families, by Gina Gile, pastor of Dakota City-Homer UMCs in Nebraska, and Pauline Muchina,

See **POVERTY** on page 8

PHOTO BY DAVID BURKE

Photos clockwise from upper left, the Rev. Kalaba Chali, Great Plains mercy and justice coordinator, gives a closing talk; the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, general secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, speaks to open the conference; Sebastian Sorensen leads singing at the closing worship service; and the Rev. Cindy Karges, Gateway District superintendent, introduces Henry-Crowe.



CONFERENCE RAISES ALMOST \$179,000 FOR 3 MISSION PARTNERS

By TODD SEIFERT, *communications director*

The Great Plains Conference has officially wrapped up its fundraising efforts for three mission partners, with the bulk of the money coming in prior to our celebration during June's annual conference session.

The effort raised \$178,883.08, split almost evenly, for the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference (OIMC), the Lydia Patterson Institute (LPI) and the Zimbabwe East Conference.

The \$59,627.71 raised for the OIMC will go toward an endowment meant to boost salaries for pastors in the conference, which has 6,000 members in 84 churches, five fellowships and a community center in Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas. Pastors in the OIMC are the lowest paid in the South Central Jurisdiction, so the funds are badly needed so Native Americans and other United Methodists in the OIMC can be served by the best-trained clergy possible.

Likewise, \$59,227.69 was raised for LPI, a school that blends academic excellence with Wesleyan theology and vigor in El Paso, Texas. The school serves as a beacon of hope for students, 70 percent of whom travel across the Mexican border each day to receive their education. Despite the largely impoverished student body, LPI reports an incredible 95 percent of its student move on to college, including some attending universities within the boundaries of the Great Plains Conference. Growth at LPI means the school is in need of more space and needs funds to make repairs and renovations on parts of its aging building.

Finally, \$59,227.59 was raised for the Zimbabwe East Annual Conference. Zimbabwe is one of the fastest-growing areas of the United Methodist Church. And with that growth comes a need for structure and a better way of synchronizing efforts of churches and the leadership needed to help local congregations succeed. The money raised in the Great Plains Conference for Zimbabwe will go toward the construction of the new Zimbabwe East Conference office, which is meant to serve as a communications hub to coordinate the many ministries taking place there.

The Great Plains Conference fell short of its goal of raising \$100,000 each for the three mission partners. But representatives from all three organizations thanked the conference for its efforts as Bishop Scott Jones, former episcopal leader in Kansas and Nebraska who now serves in the Houston area, presented them with letters over the summer. Money continued to be accepted through the late summer months to allow churches to finish campaigns they had set up within their congregations.

Another fundraising effort, to bolster upkeep and programming efforts at Camp Comeca, near Cozad, Nebraska, continues. Learn more about that campaign at www.greatplainsumc.org/campcomecacapitalcampaign.

OKLAHOMA INDIAN MISSIONARY CONFERENCE



LYDIA PATTERSON INSTITUTE



ZIMBABWE EAST CONFERENCE



POVERTY continued from page 6

director of the Healthy Families/Healthy Planet initiative by the General Board of Church and Society; race, led by Glory Kathurima, a member of the Norfolk, Nebraska, UMC; environment, led by Bonnie McCord, an ordained elder with the Chadron, Nebraska, UMC; and gender relations, led via Skype by Margi Ault-Duell, a longtime social justice educator who grew up in Kansas.

The Rev. Kalaba Chali, mercy and justice coordinator for the Great Plains Conference, said in closing that participants were on the road to do the right thing.

“You do care,” Chali said. “You want to walk humbly with God.”

Participants said they were encouraged by the panel discussion and the workshops.

“It was good to worship and reconnect with people working on common causes,” said the Rev. Sherry Sklenar, pastor of Pawnee City-Burchard-DuBois, Nebraska, UMCs.

“We absolutely loved the workshops,” said Wendy Kabler of Wichita, attending with her husband, Craig, as part of a delegation from Aldersgate UMC. “All the information that we learned and connections that we made were invaluable.”

“The environment workshop was incredible,” Craig Kabler added. “It was just enjoyable, with lots to learn. I’d do it again.”

The Kablers said the social justice team at Aldersgate would meet soon to map out its vision for 2017.

“This is another resource given to us,” Craig Kabler said.

The Rev. Sarah Marsh, of the Lawrence, Kansas-based Justice Matters and chairperson of the conference, said she was encouraged by the enthusiasm of the participants.

“We talked about systemic issues, we talked about problems in dealing with poverty in the community and we had a lot of great energy about the topics,” she said.

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PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Above, about 60 people attended the conference at First UMC in Lincoln on Oct. 29. Insert, The Rev. Mark Holland, mayor of Kansas City, Kansas, and pastor at Trinity UMC also in KC, the Rev. Charlotte Abram, retired clergy from Omaha, and the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, general secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, in a panel discussion.

Camp Comeca gets new focus to fit renewal effort



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

The Great Plains Conference has been raising money the past year to renew Camp Comeca. Part of that renewal effort includes a shift in mission for the facility near Cozad, Nebraska.

Through the end of November, the campaign had raised more than \$814,000 to help bolster an endowment to pay for upkeep at the camp and to make necessary immediate repairs. The shift in mission is meant, in part, to ensure the money raised is used as efficiently as possible. Discussions between conference officials, the camp's site council and Sara Shaw, the conference's coordinator of camping ministries, have led to a decision to shift Comeca's focus from focusing primarily on summer campers to serving as a year-round retreat center that also prioritizes campers in the summer.

It's a focus that uniquely fits the camp's stunning facilities. The Wilson Center houses a full-size gymnasium with a rock-climbing wall as well as a full-size indoor pool. The Overlook Lodge boasts 20 hotel rooms to provide modern accommodations for people who choose to use the facility.

"For me the shift will help us to focus on what we have at the camp and to use what we have for the glory of God," said the Rev. Joel Plisek, a site council member and pastor of First United Methodist Church in Gothenburg, Nebraska.

Both the Wilson Center and the lodge were made possible about 20 years ago with a generous grant from the Wilson Foundation. The many positive aspects the gift provided to the camp eventually led to unforeseen challenges.

"It almost happened overnight for Camp Comeca," Shaw said of the addition of facilities. "And what that meant was we had this tremendously generous gift from the Wilson family but we didn't know how to properly care for such a great facility, and we didn't have an appreciation for the costs associated with caring for such a facility."

Deferred maintenance led to the conference's effort to start the renewal campaign. Immediate repairs were needed to a sewage line, heating units and the pool that makes Comeca so attractive to campers and groups alike.

Even back when the facilities first opened, it was evident that Comeca had new possibilities for ministry.

"No longer was it a summer camp facility," Shaw said. "It was now a retreat facility."

The change in focus to operate as a retreat facility that also hosts campers will allow for the site council and conference to better market the strengths of the camp, Shaw said. The shift opens the camp up for more possible users, such as groups with United Methodist affiliations for retreats and even secular businesses and organizations.

"When people come to the camp, they will find a staff 100 percent dedicated to their experience as a retreat center," Shaw said. "They will experience radical hospitality."

That opportunity to serve groups also allows the conference to lend a hand by drawing on its staff knowledge and resources.

Shaw explained groups will be able to call Comeca with an idea for a retreat, such as for United Methodist Men or lay servants. The Overlook's hotel setup can be used for on-site lodging. The dining hall is equipped to handle large groups. And the Wilson Center provides for year-round recreation, regardless of weather. As an added service, the conference can draw on its resources to help groups secure speakers and other means of presentation to provide a quality experience for spiritual formation.

Shaw said the goal is to make Comeca a well-known, respected "safe and sacred space." That effort will be enhanced with the renewed emphasis of "stepping up" care and the appearances for both the Wilson Center and the Overlook Lodge.

Camp Comeca plans to offer discounts to United Methodist churches and affiliated mission partners. Plisek said the new mission will allow for booking secular clients as well for business retreats.

"When we get people to the camp, I believe they will leave with a better idea of what Christianity really is, about what we do, about Christian hospitality," Plisek said. "I believe Christ will make a positive impact on secular guests and on all who come here."

Small Wonders gathering



By **DAVID BURKE**,
communications coordinator

The schedule for the third-annual Small Wonders Conference listed an 8 a.m. Saturday worship on Oct. 8, but there was no sermon, no offering and only the slightest strains of an acoustic guitar.

Instead, the Student Center at Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina had various stations set up, where participants could create with paints or Play-Doh, write notes of forgiveness or sit in silent, reflective prayer.

Teresa Stewart, a Kansas City-based expert on small congregations, said her church has a quarterly “Art Sunday,” and “millennials go right for the Play-Doh.”

Reaching millennials was the focus of this year’s Small Wonders, where about 90 pastors and lay members learned about reaching those born between 1981 and 2001.

“What they want is real,” said the Rev. Nicole Conard, coordinator of young adult leadership for the Great Plains Conference. “They want to talk about real stuff.”

Citing the book “Generational IQ” by Hayden Shaw, Conard said that millennials want meaning, authentic relationships and teamwork in their lives and in their spiritual choices. But, more than in previous generations, they are looking less to religion and see church as irrelevant to their lives.

“Millennials want to be preached with and not to,” Stewart said in her

introduction to the gathering.

The Rev. Micki McCorkle, small-membership church coordinator for the conference, said that congregations of 100 people or fewer in average worship attendance best offer millennials the intimacy, authenticity, flexibility and empowering nature that they are seeking.

The conference’s clergy recruitment and development coordinator, the Rev. Ashlee Alley, said in the closing worship service that the best way to engage young adults was to show authentic hospitality; provide small group and/or mission opportunities; grow, identify, explore and use the gifts of the members; let young adults lead; and strengthen the church’s children’s ministry.

reaches out to millennials



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

Above clockwise from upper left: The Peterson Farming Brothers perform one of their ag-related parodies at the Small Wonders Conference on Oct. 8, 2016, at Kansas Wesleyan University in Salina, Kansas; A Small Wonders participant creates with Play-Doh; A Small Wonders delegate ties a written apology to a wire; Small congregations expert Teresa Stewart speaks. On opposite page: Small Wonders participants create an altar with items from their tables.

She quoted the theme song from the TV series “Cheers,” which includes the lyrics “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came.”

Musical entertainment for the Oct. 7-8 conference came from the Peterson Farm Brothers, three siblings from nearby Assaria, Kansas, whose farming-themed parodies of pop songs have become viral sensations on YouTube since 2012.

The brothers, two Kansas State University graduates and a current K-State student, have released 10 parodies — the first eight shot just from iPhones — and gave a sneak preview of their first original song, “Farming and Football,” which went public the next day.

They also discussed their Christian faith, and how it surfaces in their songs.

“We realize we were given a platform and wanted to use it the best we could,” said middle brother Nathan Peterson, 23.

Workshops about various topics in reaching young adults were conducted by the Rev. Guy Chmielecki, campus pastor and dean of campus ministries at Friends University, Wichita; Dave Brant, lay leadership development coordinator for the Great Plains Conference; the Rev. Kalaba Chali, Mercy & Justice coordinator for the conference; Gregory Reffner, a Southwestern College senior and worship team member; Alley and Conard.

Those attending the conference said

they felt energized by the presentations and the keynote addresses.

“It was exciting,” said the Rev. Emily Meckley, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Belleville, Kansas. “It didn’t have any for-sure answers, because there aren’t any, but it gives us great confidence in the Holy Spirit being with us moving forward.”

Condensing the advice, Meckley said, “Search them out, invite them and be hospitable.”

The Rev. Kim Shank, pastor of the United Methodist Church in Lyons, Kansas, said her takeaway was to “be creative and thinking outside what your normal is.”

“I feel very encouraged, but I think there’s a lot of work to be done,” said Shank, herself a millennial.

First Impressions

As Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. has met with church pastors and leaders in his first few months as episcopal leader of the Great Plains Conference, he's asked them three questions:

- What are some of your consensus, missional priorities?
- What are you celebrating?
- What is one thing that keeps your community up at night?

"The first question kind of gives me a demographic context of their ministry," explained Saenz, who came to the Great Plains from the Rio Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church.

"What are you celebrating?" helps me discern," he continued. "What is one way that God has worked that we're doing well

at, where we can continue to put more energy and focus and resources into it?"

The third question Saenz has sometimes paraphrased to "What are people worried about?"

The answers to those questions, Saenz says, has provided him with more insight to the people, churches and leaders of the Great Plains, and they have given him ideas to where the Great Plains might be headed during his time as its episcopal leader.

As he enters his first full calendar year as bishop, here are some of the impressions that Saenz has garnered in his first few months in office:

Focusing Efforts

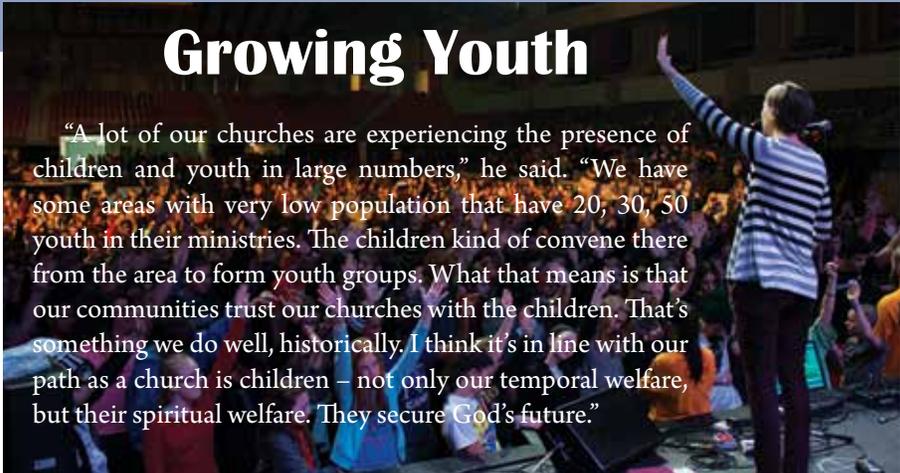
"One of the challenges that we have, and this is down to the local church and conference level, is that we can really diffuse our efforts, our energies, our attention," Saenz said. "We are really doing a lot, but where can we focus? I don't think we're doing that yet. Those engaged in ministries should continue doing what they're doing, until we agree with what is a consensual missional priority that is not necessarily a top-down initiative, but is marshalling what is already happening and helping it become clearer, more focus, then figuring out, 'What is the conference's overall strategy, and what we can do together to press this issue?'"

Geographical Differences

"There's an interstate bias, a rivalry that's happening," Saenz said of the Great Plains, which melded the former Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West conferences in 2014. "But there's an intrastate issue between west Kansas and east Kansas. The regionalism is still very strong, whether it's intrastate regionalism, interstate regionalism. It's very strong. Our work is, how do we create a 'superstate' identity that transcends intrastate and interstate dynamics, so we become the Great Plains Annual Conference. That's why I'm looking for that consensus missional imperative that's going to unify us. ...

"We're citizens of countries. We're citizens of states. We're citizens of communities. Counties, cities, towns. But our ultimate citizenship knows no bounds. That's also a supercitizenship. So how do we focus on what unites us in Christ rather than what divides us along state lines? It's lofty, it's a vision that helps us understand the new humanity that Christ has broken down."

Growing Youth



"A lot of our churches are experiencing the presence of children and youth in large numbers," he said. "We have some areas with very low population that have 20, 30, 50 youth in their ministries. The children kind of convene there from the area to form youth groups. What that means is that our communities trust our churches with the children. That's something we do well, historically. I think it's in line with our path as a church is children – not only our temporal welfare, but their spiritual welfare. They secure God's future."

The Next Steps

"Once we name the reality, then we can start to talk about our next steps. What's needed to ferment the new culture of the Great Plains?" Saenz asked. "That will show itself in very positive ways. This group of people and leaders in different places will start to mold and materialize. It won't happen overnight. It might take four years, it might take eight years. But it needs to happen if we're going to maximize our collective mission."

Pride in Denomination

"People here in the Great Plains area are deeply committed to the local church," he said. "They're deeply committed Christians, and they're deeply committed to The United Methodist church. They're proud to be United Methodists, which is a strength. The United Methodist Church in the Great Plains has a very credible witness in the community at large."

Bishop Saenz shares his observations from his initial travels across the Great Plains Conference

More Involvement

“Our United Methodist lay people are amazing,” Saenz said. “They have a wealth, a depth of life experience. Many of them have been successful in prior locations. They’ve led institutions of high levels throughout the state and the nation and even the world. They’re in our churches. Their resourcing is much more than what’s in their front pocket or wallets. Their resources are part of who they know and what they know, and how they can make connections to people who have limited opportunities. They help people envision a different life for themselves and for their families.”

Leadership

“There is an emergence of Certified Lay Ministers that are stepping up and offering themselves to be sent and to minister,” Saenz said. “They continue to sustain the United Methodist witness. If witnesses in those areas make a difference to the community, whether it’s supporting the community life or helping the community find strength or just connecting with each other, they do a great job.”

Continue to Change

“Every church needs to recast its vision continuously, because things change,” he said. “Every person needs to sustain their own spiritual life, and do that through the means of grace — and have a long conversation about what’s happening outside the walls of our churches. Talk to community leaders, talk to people that have a perspective on counties or cities or communities or areas. Gather the information needed to then discern.”

Lives and Livelihood

“I’ve heard things in rural areas that the price of commodities is low. Farmers cannot make a viable profit on their goods,” Saenz said. “Other areas, industries have moved out in western Nebraska, for example. A major outfitter is sold to someone else so there’s unemployment. The railroad system has laid off folks. There’s a sense of loss of population, loss of sustainable, wage-earning jobs. There are issues with methamphetamines and how it impacts the family system and the community system.

“I also heard of a lot of poverty that is prevalent in many, many areas. People are concerned about sustainable nutrition and health,” he said.

Spreading the Word

“It’s not just our acts of charity or mercy, but (saying), ‘Here’s our faith. Let us welcome you into the fullness of it, so you can appropriate for yourself the means of God’s grace: the strength, the guidance, the courage, the peace,’” Saenz said. “All of these gifts of God that have been made available to us through Christ and his life, death and resurrection.”

A Good Feeling

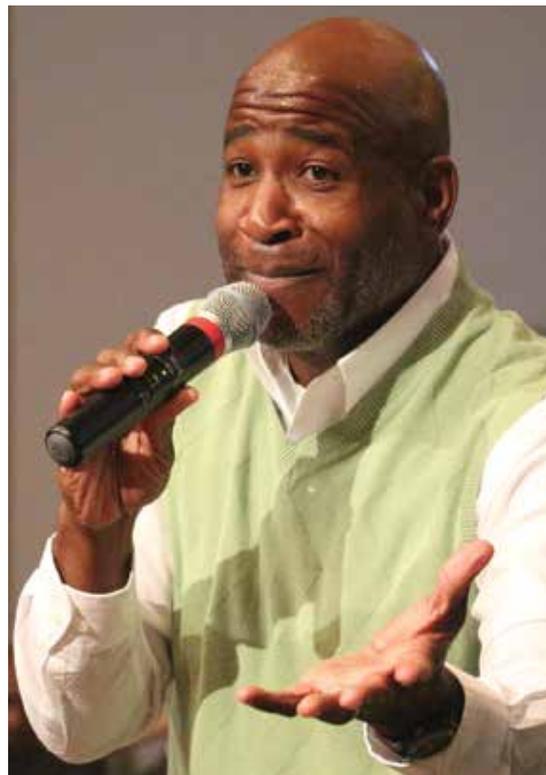
“I’m encouraged by what I’m hearing and what I’m seeing. I know that the missional alignment team of the former annual conferences and Bishop Scott Jones did amazing work in helping to create the Great Plains Conference,” Saenz said of his predecessor. “I’m grateful for the leadership that has stepped up to the task. I’m seeing signs that there is a yearning for ‘Where do we go from here?’ It’s a new season. We’re definitely not at the end of this season. We’re at the beginning of it. There will be a lot of conversations, a lot of discernment. Hopefully after this next year, we’ll be clearer about what the next step is that we’ll start taking together. We’ll begin to forge our identity as a new conference.”



Increasing Local Missions

“It’s happening in a lot of places, and it’s happening with a lot of intentional engagement,” Saenz said. “Some churches are going beyond the transactional ministries — where they’re giving things to people — and they’re getting more involved in mentoring relationships and other types of relationships that are really helping to cultivate trust and hope and new opportunities.”

New Saint Mark pastor wants to get back to basics



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

The Rev. Robert Johnson began at Wichita's Saint Mark United Methodist Church in mid-August, replacing the Rev. Junius Dotson, who was the church's senior pastor for 14 years before being named in April as general secretary of Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church, based in Nashville, Tennessee.

The 50-year-old is already familiar with Saint Mark and with Dotson. Johnson was twice a guest speaker at the Wichita church, most recently this spring when he was courted for the job in Kansas before ultimately being hired by then-Great Plains Bishop Scott Jones. Likewise, he's familiar with his predecessor: He and Dotson both attended Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas at the same time.

But Johnson says he differs in styles from his longtime friend.

"Junius is more of a CEO, corporate style of leadership," Johnson said. "My natural DNA is more relational. Some people call it older-fashioned style of leadership."

"I'm into spending time with people, visiting people. Hanging out with folks. I think that's important. To me, the strength of a church is in its relationships."

Even though the attendance at the two Saint Mark campuses is near 1,000 people a week, Johnson said it's still possible to develop individual relationships.

"You can't with everybody, but if you have relationships with your circle of influence, that will spread to others."

Born a Baptist

Robert Johnson was born and grew up in Columbia, Mississippi, a city of 6,000-plus near the Gulf Coast.

By the time he was 10 years old, he recalled, parishioners in the Missionary Baptist Church that he attended were

telling him "You're gonna be a preacher," and he started "believing that, and participating in stuff."

His church was socially active, starting the first Head Start program in the area and blooming into a multifaceted social service organization, building homes for the low-income and senior citizens in the area. It had a \$10 million budget by the time Johnson graduated college.

At 16, he "embraced the call" to ministry, and began speaking at youth gatherings through his time as a student at the University of Southern Mississippi.

While at college, he began embracing different denominations and their methods of calling pastors. It bothered him that the Missionary Baptists had their pastors accept the call one week and installed and ordained them at a church the next.

"It was about how well you could preach in that style of preaching," he recalled. "I saw myself doing a broader scope of ministry."

A United Methodist pastor who was mentoring him convinced him to change denominations.

"Not only do we believe, we affirm our pastors being educated. It's a requirement," Johnson was told.

"That was it for me," he said.

Experience

Johnson served for 10 years as associate pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church, a Houston powerhouse congregation whose pastor, the Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell, is nationally recognized as well as being a spiritual adviser to President George W. Bush. Caldwell even gave the video introduction of Johnson's appointment in June.

"I saw everything I thought of ministry" the moment he walked into Windsor Village, he said. "It was polished, it was professional, relational, spirit-filled, with a social conscience."

From there, he spent seven years as the founding senior pastor of NewWorld Church, a satellite of Windsor Village that promotes itself as “a community of love, hope, purpose and new beginnings.”

In 2014, he was appointed as senior pastor of Aldersgate United Methodist Church in College Station, Texas, the first time he'd led a church that wasn't predominately African-American.

“Aldersgate was a predominately white congregation, not intentional in being diverse, but it was very diverse,” Johnson said. “It was becoming more diverse, but we were not trying to go out and reach other people. It was just the culture that that church was. They created a worship culture there that was not racially bound.”

Diversification

Johnson counts Saint Mark — along with churches in Dallas, Houston and Atlanta — as one of a handful of flagship African-American United Methodist churches in the country.

“What I'm learning here is that the people here don't know that, which is interesting,” he said. “Among black United Methodists, when you talk about those churches ... Saint Mark is one of them.”

And while Johnson wants to keep Saint Mark's reputation intact, he also says that diversification is the key to strengthening and building the church.

“We have to see ourselves as a church and not ‘a black church,’” he said. “That means we've got to have a whole new way of thinking in our approach to things, so we're intentionally inviting to all the demographics of Wichita, because that's the way we can continue the legacy of having a positive impact.”

Saint Mark, he said, cannot survive as “just a black church.”

“We need to expand our concept,” he said. “We're very good at reaching out into the northeast Wichita community. In all of our marketing and communication with the city,

we've got to show diversity. We've got to do stuff that appeals beyond. I don't think you appeal to a Hispanic (for example), but you give something that's not limited to certain people.”

In town hall meetings with the Saint Mark congregation, Johnson asked questions including, “Where are we going?,” “Are we going to survive?” and “Are we going to be a vital congregation?”

The response to his ideas: “So far, so good,” Johnson said.

“Even if they don't like where they feel God's calling us to,” he said, “they know that's where we're going, and they affirm and say, ‘I'm ready.’”

Johnson said he also wants to reach out to more millennials, and part of the way to do that is for Saint Mark to become more active in social media. Until someone is hired to do that, Johnson is managing its Facebook and Instagram accounts.

“A lot of young adults believe that if you don't exist on social media, you don't exist,” he said. “And if you exist on social media, it comes across as if you matter.”

African-American millennials, he said, want something different from church than previous generations.

“We've got to add an additional worship or change things about the way we worship, especially with young African-American folks tend to be drawn to less volume, less performance and more into what they call authentic worship,” Johnson said.

“Their reaction is, ‘I want a church that doesn't look polished, that doesn't feel like everything is scripted out and planned,’” he added.

Change in attitude

Johnson's wife, Linda, is a senior financial manager for Shell Oil. When she explained that her husband would have to move and offered her retirement after 28 years at Shell, she was urged to stay on and telecommute, checking in to the Houston office in person once a quarter.

Their oldest daughter, Giselle, is a film student at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and was offered a job in Los Angeles by a movie company where she served as an intern. Youngest daughter Kayla, beginning her junior year in high school, was the toughest to sell on a move from Texas to Kansas. But she has acclimated well to Northeast Magnet High School in nearby Bel Aire, Kansas, finally declaring to her parents, “This was a good move for us. The church is great, we're all together more.”

Johnson's life took a change a few years ago, when he was feeling a bit nauseated and had a small blackout. After lab tests, he was told he had suffered three mini-strokes.

“Unless you looked at the MRI, there was nothing about my appearance to indicate that I had a stroke,” he said.

Johnson saw that as a wakeup call, resulting in a change in his attitude.

“The people who know me know I love to laugh a lot and have fun. I don't take myself too seriously,” he said. “I refuse to let us take ourselves too seriously.”



PHOTOS BY DAVID BURKE

On opposite page, the Rev. Robert Johnson preaches, on Oct. 9, 2016 at Saint Mark UMC in Wichita, Kansas. At left, Johnson greets parishioners. Johnson started at Saint Mark UMC in August.

BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS, LEARNING ABOUT THE MALAWI UMC

By **REV. MICKI MCCORKLE**,
small-membership church ministries coordinator

Chabadza is foundational to the partnership the Great Plains Conference has with Zimbabwe. Chabadza is about people coming alongside each other to share the work. You bring a hoe, and I bring a hoe to the field, and we work side-by-side. In laboring in this way, we get to know each other, build lasting friendships and make the work load lighter for both of us.

In the spirit of Chabadza, exciting conversations were conducted in October 2016 as the Revs. Saphirina Sign of the Zimbabwe East Annual

Conference; Micki McCorkle, coordinator of small-membership church ministries for the Great Plains Conference; Rick Bartlett, a Chabadza team member, met in Malawi to learn about the ministries of the Malawi Provisional Conference and build relationships in the name of Christ.

Geographically, Malawi is a small, landlocked country of 45,747 square miles in the southern part of the continent of Africa. Malawi's population is 16.36 million. To give some perspective, Nebraska and Kansas together are 159,698 square miles with a combined population of just fewer than 5 million people. The per capita GDP in Malawi is \$226.46, compared to \$53,000 in the United

States.

Joining us in Malawi from the Great Plains were two people from Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, and two people from the Tennessee Annual Conference. As a full team, we facilitated leadership development training with young people in the Malawi Provisional Conference. We gathered at the Madisi United Methodist Church in the central region for this event. Much energy was unleashed as young people shared their dreams of entrepreneurship and practiced some new methods of evangelism and outreach. We dug deep into United Methodism and then explored the meaning of discipleship as a way of life. The young people

led dynamic worship and devotional times.

After the training, Rev. Sign and I stayed for another week. We witnessed United Methodists living their Wesleyan heritage with courageous joy as they continue to strive for both personal and social holiness. On more than a daily basis, we participated with fellow United Methodists in Malawi in prayer and reading the scriptures. And we saw people give of their time, gifts and money to see new people reached with the gospel and communities made stronger through education, health and nutrition ministries, and sustainable farming. Methodists in Malawi of all ages are making financial sacrifices to start preschools and elementary schools in churches and to raise money for scholarships so students can continue their educations.

The young, rapidly growing United Methodist Church in Malawi is working hard to nurture disciples and credential pastors. There are about 25 UM pastors in the country, four of whom are ordained. The others are lay pastors or local pastors who chose to embrace God's call on their lives.

Currently, every pastor serves a multi-point charge/circuit. One pastor, Hastings Mbuzi — a former police officer who felt God's call to ministry — serves a circuit of 15 churches! Most pastors serve three to seven congregations, visiting each one every one to three months by bicycle or on foot. Some can take a bus between villages or have access to a motorcycle.

A key reason for the growth of the Malawi UMC is the strong leadership of the laity — especially young adults — who are bringing the Gospel to life through their actions, words and zealous commitment to Christ. Young people are doing outreach and evangelism through soccer games, Christian concerts and community gatherings. Lay leaders in the churches are organizing and leading section meetings — small, regional, weekly group meetings where people gather to study the Bible, pray for each other and their community, celebrate God's work in their lives, and help each other in times of need — in their towns and neighborhoods. Prayer, fasting, studying the scriptures, tithing and service to others are emphasized as part of the spiritual life of a United

Methodist Christian in Malawi.

The Zimbabwe Annual Conference helped initiate the spread of United Methodism to Malawi through mission outreach in 1987. Six Malawians were trained in Zimbabwe and went home to plant churches. The newly trained pastors started 12 churches in 1988, which have, in turn, planted more churches. As the Malawi UMC continues to grow and build toward being a full annual conference it recently formed a Board of Ordained Ministry, and is working to have a Course of Study school in Malawi. The provisional conference is already collaborating with the Presbyterian seminary in Blantyre to train UM clergy locally. And Rev. Sign, a pastor from Zimbabwe who worked with the late Rev. Mark Conard in the early stages of Chabadza, helped to train the new director of the Conference Council on Ministries and the Conference Council chairperson while she was there this October.

The United Methodists of Malawi appreciate our prayers as they continue to spread God's love and justice throughout their country. They are in prayer for us, too.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY REV. MICKI MCCORKLE

Photos clockwise from upper left: The Rev. Saphirina Sign and Pastor Siyileni Malinki. Siyileni is a pastor in Malawi serving six churches; Pastor Hastings Mbuzi, with his wife and youngest child; Hugo Ngwira with Sign. Sign is from Zimbabwe and represented the Chabadza partnership. Hugo translates as Saphirina preaches and teaches in English; children dancing during worship. Photo on opposite page: children at the leadership development training for young people in Malawi.



Extended cabinets kick off focus on vital congregations



About 750 leaders of The United Methodist Church, including more than 20 people from the Great Plains Conference, gathered in early November in Jacksonville, Florida, to start the new quadrennium focused on the mission of cultivating vital congregations to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough, president of the Council of Bishops, said the Council began planning and praying for this Extended Cabinet Summit nearly two years ago.

“This Summit grew out of the council’s commitment, forcefully stated in our 2012 Call to Action, to redirect the resources and energy of the denomination, including our own leadership resource, to increase the number of vital congregations throughout our global connection.”

Bishop Mike Lowry, Extended Cabinet Summit task force chair and episcopal leader of the Central Texas Conference, said the greatest thing that we as a denomination can be about together is building vital congregations.

“We state it in our Discipline and we believe it with both our hearts and minds that local congregations are where disciples are made,” said Bishop Lowry.

He said the task force wanted to present an experience done “with faithfulness and fruitfulness in a manner and style that lifted up the best of the Gospel, that was Christ-centered, that was excellent in its presentation and deep in its thinking.”

“We have observed that vital congregations are effective in developing principled Christian leaders, creating new places for new people, engaging in ministries with the poor and improving global health,” said Bishop Ough. “We have observed that conferences that are creating cultures of vitality have adapted their organizational and governance structures; they are guided by data and intentional missional outcomes; they are calling forth courageous, spirit-led leaders; they are helping existing congregations launch new mission-driven life cycles; they are starting new faith communities; they are learning to innovate.”

Ough said that nearly every annual conference is scrambling to innovate and help congregations and leaders adapt to rapidly changing mission fields.

“I’m just as excited about the future of The United Methodist Church today as I was when I entered in 1978 as a 17-year-old kid,” said Bishop Bob Farr of the Missouri Conference. “I see lots of islands of hope. I see lots of new

ministries, people doing creative things ... I’m very hopeful because of the local church and the work that local churches are doing in their mission fields.”

Bishop Sally Dyck of the Chicago Episcopal Area reported on the work of the four Areas of Focus and how they present missional opportunities for churches.

Some of the achievements over the past few years in the Areas of Focus include:

- Planting more than 500 new churches in the United States and nearly 1,700 new church and faith communities in the central conferences.
- Providing theological education in remote areas all over the world through the distribution of e-readers.
- Awarding more than 1,700 seminarians more than \$4 million in scholarships.
- Conducting experiential training for hundreds of mission-oriented members and leaders across the United States.
- Training United Methodist health boards across the continent of Africa.
- Distributing more than 2 million nets and impacting more than 4 million lives through Imagine No Malaria.
- Deploying more than 300 missionaries all over the world.

Bishop Lowry said that you can almost instinctively tell when you are in a vital congregation.

“You know it when you see it and experience it ... you can feel it. When you walk in and say, ‘Something’s going on here.’ What’s amazing about it is that it’s not limited to ‘in here,’ it goes out into the world so that a benediction of the worship service really is a sending ... and when you come to engage, you come to be a part of the mighty workings of God.”

On the final day of the meetings, Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr. of the Great Plains Conference assembled the extended cabinet members in attendance from Kansas and Nebraska to discuss next steps. More discussions about helping build vital congregations will take place over the next few months, and Bishop Saenz said his visits to the 17 districts across the conference have been helpful in helping him discern priorities for ministry.

Diane Degnan, director of public relations for the United Methodist Church, and Todd Seifert, Great Plains Conference communications director, contributed to this report.

College students Imagine What's

Great Plains young adults make up 10%
of attendees at Atlanta conference

By DAVID BURKE,
communications coordinator

Before he had his turn before 700 fellow college students at the Imagine What's NEXT conference in Atlanta on Nov. 4-6, Daniel Reffner admitted to some stage fright.

"It was very humbling, and it made me emotional," said Reffner, a senior majoring in religion and philosophy at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas. "I think it made me emotional because ... the spirit was clearly moving in that place. To know that I was communicating the love and the grace of God just makes me emotional."

A ceramic artist, Reffner talked about the connection between his faith and his pottery while on stage at the Tabernacle Theatre. Reffner, a Wichita native, spoke while at the potter's wheel, and in between his fellow Southwestern students — members of the Worship Outreach ministry program — performed praise and worship music.

"It was a really special moment to share that with all those people," said Reffner, who often performs musically



with Worship Outreach. "It was really powerful. To be in a leadership role in something that big was new for me."

While backstage, he said he began to grasp the magnitude of sharing his mission.

"I began to feel the weight of it," Reffner said. "It wasn't a burden, but it was like this awesome understanding of the responsibility and the gravitas of the task that was ahead of me. That was to share a testimony and be a witness to what God has done in my life through pottery."

"To be able to share that with people, 700 people, and invite them into that narrative to be transformed, the way pottery has transformed me."

The biennial gathering sponsored by the United Methodist Student Movement, NEXT brought 700 18- to 24-year-olds together — and about one-tenth of those were from the Great Plains. Two Southwestern students were also a part of the design team for the conference. Another Great Plains student, Wes Gately of Washburn University, was on the design team and was the on-stage announcer.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY NEXT

Pictured above: The worship leaders from Southwestern College. At left: Daniel Reffner crafts a pot during worship.

NEXT

The Great Plains delegation included students from the conference's four United Methodist colleges — Baker University, Kansas Wesleyan, Nebraska Wesleyan and Southwestern — as well as representatives from four campus ministries at state schools: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Kansas State University, Fort Hays State University and Emporia State University.

Nebraska Wesleyan was represented by 11 students, said the Rev. Eduardo Bousson, university minister.

"It was kind of cool to be with 700 other students from all over the nation," said Bousson, attending his second NEXT event. "It was a great opportunity for them to bond with each other, and bring some great experiences back to campus."

Bousson said he felt the Nebraska Wesleyan students benefited as much out of the ventures into Atlanta, sponsored by the General Board of Higher Education Ministries, as they did from the workshops and keynote speeches.

Students visited the Civil Rights Museum, the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr. and went to missions that worked with refugees in the Atlanta area.

"They didn't know as much about refugees and the experience of refugees before going to this breakout session," Bousson said. "To me it's fantastic, because we have tons of refugees in Lincoln. I'm planning to help them translate that experience and that passion that they had in Atlanta to apply it here on campus and the Lincoln community."

Bousson said the students "felt more called to have a faith that is also reflected in social justice. Not just personal piety, but social holiness."



Bishops announce intent for special General Conference

By UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE

Through an affirmative vote at their fall meeting in early November, the United Methodist Council of Bishops expressed their intent to call for a special session of the General Conference in either February or March of 2019.

The Constitution of the church provides that the Council of Bishops may call a special session of the General Conference possessing the authority and exercising all the powers of the General Conference. Business to be considered during such a session would be limited to the purpose defined within the call, which also would include the time and place.

The Council's action stops short of making the actual call for a special session, which is expected to come at some point after the Commission on a Way Forward begins its work. The commission was allowed based on a vote during General Conference in May. The vote for a show of leadership from the Council of Bishops came in a motion by the Rev. Mark Holland of Trinity UMC in Kansas City, Kansas.

The council's Executive Committee brought the recommendation to the full council for consideration and action after exploring the feasibility of meeting in either 2018 or 2019.

"A requirement that materials be in the hands of delegates at least 230 days before such a session makes it unlikely that the commission could complete its work in time to meet that deadline for a 2018 meeting, so 2019 seemed to us to be the best option," said Bishop Bruce R. Ough, president of the Council. "The purpose of broadening the timeframe to either February or March is to afford more flexibility in finding a suitable and available location."

Such a special session would be composed of delegates to the preceding General Conference unless a conference prefers to have a new election.

The Council received a report from the moderators of the Way Forward about composition of commission membership, a plan for the first meetings and a strategy for communication.

The Council also voted to approve a recommendation from the Executive Committee to initiate a conversational process among clergy and laity within annual and central conferences that would parallel the work of the Commission on a Way Forward. Each bishop would be free to structure the process and timeline according to the specific needs and context of their area, using some suggested questions as a starting point.

Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett and Bishop Al Gwinn, co-chairs of the Praying Our Way Forward Initiative, announced the second phase of the appeal, which involves each conference making a commitment to come together in prayer during a designated week. The effort was to begin Jan. 1 and continue into 2018. The first phase involved a commitment from bishops for daily prayer focused on the selection and initial efforts of the Commission.

She said they are inviting persons to pray daily for the church's effectiveness in fulfilling our mission of making disciples and for the outcome of the work of the Commission on a Way Forward, participate in their conference's week of prayer and fast weekly as they are able.

Bishop Gwinn said the Council is working in partnership The Upper Room, which has developed a website called umcprays.org. "The website features many tools and resources to help you to plan your week of prayer," said Bishop Gwinn.



Bishop Bruce Ough



Rev. Mark Holland

Members of Commission on a Way Forward

The United Methodist Council of Bishops has announced the membership of the Commission on a Way Forward.

The makeup of the 32-member commission is roughly comparable to U.S. and Central Conference membership.

The members of the commission are:

- Jorge Acevedo: Florida, elder, male
- Brian Adkins: California, elder, male
- Jacques Umembudi Akasa: Democratic Republic of Congo, laity, male
- Tom Berlin: Virginia, elder, male
- Matt Berryman: Illinois, laity, male
- Helen Cunanan: Philippines, elder, female
- David Field: Switzerland, laity, male
- Ciriaco Francisco: Philippines, bishop, male
- Grant Hagiya: California, bishop, male
- Aka Dago-Akribi Hortense: Côte d'Ivoire, laity, female
- Scott Johnson: New York, laity, male
- Jessica Lagrone: Kentucky, elder, female
- Thomas Lambrecht: Texas, elder, male
- Myungae Kim Lee: New York, laity, female
- Julie Hager Love: Kentucky, deacon, female
- Mazvita Machinga: Zimbabwe, laity, female
- Patricia Miller: Indiana, laity, female
- Mande Guy Muyombo: Democratic Republic of Congo, elder, male
- Eben Nhiwatiwa: Zimbabwe, bishop, male
- Dave Nuckols: Minnesota, laity, male
- Casey Langley Orr: Texas, elder, female
- Gregory Palmer: Ohio, bishop, male
- Donna Pritchard: Oregon, elder, female
- Tom Salsgiver: Pennsylvania, elder, male
- Robert Schnase: Texas, bishop, male
- Jasmine Rose Smothers: Georgia, elder, female
- Leah Taylor: Texas, laity, female
- Deborah Wallace-Padgett: Alabama, bishop, female
- Rosemarie Wenner: Germany, bishop, female
- Alice Williams: Florida, laity, female
- John Wesley Yohanna: Nigeria, bishop, male
- Alfiado S. Zunguza: Mozambique, elder, male

Moderators will be:

- Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball: West Virginia, female
- Bishop Kenneth Carter: Florida, male
- Bishop David Yemba: Democratic Republic of Congo, male

Need help reaching goals?

Church of the Resurrection launches website rich in resources

By TODD SEIFERT,
communications director

It's easy to recognize the success of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection. A congregation that started in a funeral home in 1990 is now the largest church in the denomination with more than 20,000 members worshipping on four campuses in the Kansas City area.

With such phenomenal growth in a denomination that has seen

Resources on ShareChurch are all aimed at helping renew local churches, expand ministries or help smooth the administration of congregations.

Hamilton said the effort is similar to one conducted for years by Interpreter Magazine, in which readers are asked to share strategies for ministry that work for them or their congregations.

"This is kind of that same idea," he said, "but now you can actually see the video or download the sermon series."

Hundreds of resources already have been made available, including

percolating for years.

Both Hamilton and Nixon acknowledge that most churches are not to the scale of Resurrection, but each of the resources are adaptable to the user's needs.

"This has been a real passion for us at this church to share the resource we have here in an efficient way to help lift up other churches," Nixon said.

Almost all resources are available for free, with some materials coming with a membership fee if churches want "real time" access to weekly sermons and graphics. Churches interested in these kinds of immediate resources can go to cor.org/sharechurch and click on "Partner Church" in the side navigation links or contact Jonathan Bell, who helps coordinate Resurrection's partner church ministry, at jonathan.bell@cor.org.

Materials are grouped by categories, such as sermon series, curriculum, training, creative graphics and podcasts, as well as by areas of ministry, such as adult discipleship, children's ministry, guest connections and mission.



steadily declines throughout the same time period, it's understandable that other churches would reach out to Resurrection's leaders for ideas, training and resources.

After years of providing those resources, Resurrection has developed a website — www.sharechurch.com — to make it even easier for clergy and lay leadership across the United Methodist connection and beyond to obtain resources to help their churches attain ministry goals.

"We've had this kind of vision since we started the church," said the Rev. Adam Hamilton, lead pastor and founder of Church of the Resurrection. The well-known author and speaker said one goal for the church since its inception was for it to be a "living laboratory."

entire sermon series, curriculum for small groups and Sunday school classes, tips for preparing for mission trips, children's ministry materials, congregational care how-to documents and even administrative forms.

"Our people here are so bought into this vision to be a resource to encourage and equip other congregations," Hamilton said. "Over the years, we've had more than 14,000 churches across the U.S. that have used one or more of our resources, so we began thinking of how we can make these tools accessible."

Hamilton credits Debi Nixon, a staff member who has moved to the role of managing executive director of ShareChurch, and others on the Resurrection leadership team with developing an idea that had been

The library of resources is expected to continually expand, both from Resurrection and from others. Nixon said in 2017, the plan is for ShareChurch to begin accepting submissions from other congregations.

Hamilton said the website fits into Resurrection's three-part mission statement:

- Be used by God to change lives.
- Be used by God to transform communities.
- Be used by God to renew churches.

"It's in our DNA to serve as a resource," Hamilton said. "We recognize that we don't have all the answers. That's why we want others to share their great ideas, so we all can benefit. There are a lot of people out there doing amazing things. By sharing, we can learn from each other."

Death notices

The Rev. Walter E. Bailey, 86, a retired clergy member, died Oct. 12, 2016. Survivors include his wife, Charlotte Bailey, and sons Dave Bailey, Ted Bailey, Ron Bailey, Tim Bailey and Don Bailey. Memorial contributions may be made to St. Paul UMC, 5410 Corby St., Omaha, NE 68104 or Nebraska Methodist Hospital Foundation, 8401 W. Dodge Rd., Suite 225, Omaha, NE 68114.

The Rev. John F. Bartleson, 80, a retired clergy member, died Sept. 27, 2016. Survivors include his wife, the Rev. Rose M. Bartleson of Visalia, California, and four children. Memorial contributions may be made to donor's choice.

Eleanor "Ellie" Marie Foster, 67, a retired clergy member, died Nov. 28. Survivors include her parents, Gerald and Ellen Hickman, and sisters Barbara Hickman, Patricia Perkins, Virginia Fuller and Marilyn Jarman. Memorial contributions may be made to New Zion United Methodist Church, WAYCO Children's Theatre or Wesley House of Pittsburg, Kansas.

Leslie Melvin "Bud" Heisz, 90, a retired clergy member, died Sat., Sept. 17, 2016. Survivors include his wife, Edith Heisz, and sons Kenneth Heisz and Keith Heisz. Memorial contributions may be made to Asbury Park, Good Samaritan Fund or Trinity Heights United Methodist Church Foundation Fund.

Mina Jean Johnson, 84, a surviving spouse of a clergy member, died Nov. 7, 2016. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Wendell Russell Johnson. Survivors include her children, Jennifer Johnson, JoBeth Minks, Jill Cobb, JonRobert Johnson and Dr. Jeffery Johnson. Memorial contributions may be made to University United Methodist Church, 1621 SW College, Topeka, KS 66604-2798 or Shriners Hospital Travel Fund c/o Arab Shriners, 1305 South Kansas Ave., Topeka, KS 66612-1332.

The Rev. Dwight Wilbur Kemling, 91, a retired clergy member, died Oct. 14, 2016. Survivors include his wife Ruth, children, Mark Kemling, Heidi Heidemann, Jon Kemling and Neal Kemling. Memorial contributions may be made to Trinity United Methodist Church, 7130 Kentwell Lane, Lincoln, NE 68516.

The Rev. Dr. Julian Miguel, 78, a retired clergy member, died Oct. 21, 2016. Survivors include his wife, Venus, daughter Nympha Miguel and son Julian Miguel Jr.

The Rev. Dr. Charles A. Moorner, 90, a retired clergy member, died Nov. 14, 2016. Survivors include his wife, Ruth Moorner, and children Lynn Moorner and Robert Moorner. Memorial contributions may be made to Saint Paul United Methodist Church Scholarship Fund, 225 W. Griggs, Las Cruces, NM 88005.

Sandra Sue "Sam" Patterson, 60, a clergy member, died Oct. 13, 2016. Survivors include her parents, Jim and Becky Patterson of Oshkosh, Nebraska. Memorial contributions may be made to the First United Methodist Church, Bell Choir, Habitat for Humanity or the donor's choice.

Leona Denise Winter, 89, a surviving spouse of a clergy member, died Sept. 5, 2016. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. William (Bill) Winter. Survivors include her children, Diana Joy Winter and Deborah Jean Winter. Memorial contributions may be made to Good Samaritan Fund at Aldersgate Village, 7220 SW Asbury Drive, Topeka, KS 66614 or Zion Cemetery Association of Truxton in Hawk Point, Missouri.



Nebraska United Methodist
Bike Ride for Hunger
www.numbride.org

**Registration for the 2017
NUMB Ride will open Jan.
16, 2017.**

**NUMB, a circle tour, will take place June 24 –
June 28, and will start and end in Wisner, with
overnights in Albion, Plainview and Ponca.**

**Visit www.numbride.org for more information
and the link to register.**

Conard remembered for leadership in Great Plains, Zimbabwe

By DAVID BURKE,
communications coordinator

The loss of the Rev. A. Mark Conard was felt by United Methodists in both the Great Plains and in an African nation where he helped establish a partnership.

“He was loved by both people in Zimbabwe and in the Great Plains Conference,” said the Rev. Kalaba Chali, Mercy and Justice coordinator for the conference.

“He will be missed by a lot of people,” Chali added.

A retired pastor and former district superintendent, Conard died Oct. 18, at a Wichita hospital. He was 68.

Funeral services were conducted Sunday, Oct. 23, at First United Methodist Church, Hutchinson.

Conard and his wife, Joyce, a retired nurse, celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary in August. She survives him, as well as three children: Jonathan (wife Melissa) of Sterling, Kansas; the Rev. Andrew Conard (whose wife, Nicole, is young adult leadership coordinator of the

Great Plains Conference), pastor of First United Methodist Church in El Dorado, Kansas; and Kristin Conard of Santa Cruz, California, as well as four grandchildren.

Conard had a 42-year career as a pastor — serving churches in Geneseo, Maize-Bentley and Wichita Pleasant Valley — before retiring in 2013 from First UMC in Hutchinson. He also served six years as district superintendent in the Salina District. Conard led delegations to the United Methodist General Conference and served on the episcopacy committee for the South Central Jurisdiction.

“Through many years of service to United Methodism, Mark Conard made a significant impact on the United Methodist movement,” former Great Plains Bishop Scott Jones, now leader of the Texas Conference of the

“He was inspired by the people of Zimbabwe many, many years ago,” said the Rev. Linda Louderback, Wichita West district superintendent.

Conard introduced a Chabadza covenant at the 2010 session of the former Kansas West Conference, and it was approved. He had made five trips to the African country, most recently with a delegation from the Great Plains in 2014, appearing at a convention of 50,000 people.

“Mark embraced the art of cultural differences,” said Chali, among those accompanying him on the trip. “He loved learning how to behave in a different culture.”

Chali recalled that in the 2014 trip, after the presentation of gifts from the Zimbabwe people to those in the Great Plains, Conard in turn gave them a present, unbeknownst to the rest of the delegation: a solar-powered cell phone charger.

“It wasn’t so much the gift — and Mark knew very well how to play this — he knew that when you travel to these places as a conference representative, you’re not there for you,” Chali said. “You’re there for all the laypersons, all the lay leaders, all the pastors and the district superintendents and your own bishop.”

Conard, Chali said, exemplified Jesus’ teachings.

“When I hear our discussions about ‘global church’ and a ‘connected church,’ Mark’s way of being a United Methodist Christian makes that tangible for us,” he said.

The Chabadza partnership, Conard said in 2014, planted Methodist roots in Zimbabwe by assisting local pastors and helping local churches grow.

“Many churches or circuits simply cannot afford to provide even minimal housing, and pastors and their families are sometimes left without a place to live,” Conard said at the time. “The idea of a Chabadza partnership is any kind of assistance is only extended to those with whom we have a relationship. It means coming

See **CONARD** on back cover



United Methodist Church, wrote in an email. “We should be grateful to God for his life and legacy among us.”

But colleagues are recalling his efforts to establish connections with the Great Plains and Zimbabwe conferences, through a movement called “Chabadza,” a Shona word meaning “come alongside.”

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alongside one another to help in a mutual way. It does not mean doing something for somebody else that they can't do for themselves.

"My rough personal estimate is any financial support that we are able to send has an impact at least five times greater than it would have in the states," he added.

The Zimbabweans bestowed the name "Mutendi," which means "shepherd" in Shona — the language spoken by about three-fourths of the country — on Conard.

"I am hurting," Simon Mafunda, lay leader for the Zimbabwe East Conference, wrote in an email to Louderback after hearing of Conard's death. "Mark was such a good friend. He was so passionate about Chabadza and had touched many lives in Zimbabwe, especially at Mutambara Mission Centre. Words fail me. May his dear soul find rest in eternal peace. His humility was just humbling. It was a real honor for me to share my life with him."

Louderback, who was also in the 2014 delegation, said Conard sparked her interest and mission for Zimbabwe.

"Somehow I feel like I've lost my leader," she said.

Louderback spoke of Conard's strengths, both as a pastor and a leader.

"He was a quiet leader, and he had a dry sense of humor," she recalled. "He had a fun way, and yet a serious way, of looking at life. It always involved Scripture and his faithfulness.

"He was always unassuming. He didn't try to get in the limelight, he just did by his very presence," Louderback added.

Both Chali and Louderback spoke of Conard as a human encyclopedia, knowing details about Zimbabwe and both states in the Great Plains Conference, down to geographic locations and pastoral changes.

"He had so much in his head," Louderback said. "I'm going to miss his quiet leadership, his faithfulness, his attention to detail."

"He enjoyed being a part of something that was so exciting," Chali said. "That was because of his ability to work with people of different theological perspectives. He was loved by liberals in the church; he was loved by conservatives.

"He acted as a disciple of Jesus, but also Jesus-like. That will be hard to replace."



Above at left, Mutasa-Nyanga District communicator Lloyd Chaukura accepts a gift from the Rev. Mark Conard for Chaukura's work on behalf of the Chabadza partnership in the district during a 2014 mission trip. Above at right, delegates from Zimbabwe bestow Conard with a gift during the 2016 Great Plains Annual Conference session. On page 23, during the 2014 trip, Conard poses with Christopher Matinha and Matinha's wife while holding Matinha's child named after Mark.

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