

South Central Jurisdiction Prepares for 10 Bishops in 2012; Nebraska-Kansas to Become New Episcopal Area

DALLAS – United Methodists in Nebraska and Kansas will share a bishop beginning in 2012 under a reorganization plan announced today by the South Central Jurisdiction’s College of Bishops.

Nebraska and Kansas currently each have a bishop. The South Central Jurisdiction will move from 11 bishops to 10 in 2012. Four of the United Methodist Church’s five U.S. jurisdictions will lose a bishop in 2012 due to a 2008 decision by the denomination’s top legislative body, the General Conference.

“We are announcing this decision at this very early date to provide as much time as possible for the conferences most directly affected to plan for their future together,” said Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe of the Dallas Area, president of the jurisdiction’s College of Bishops.

The jurisdiction includes United Methodists in eight states: Arkansas, Louisiana, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

The process of bringing the three annual (regional) conferences in the two states under one bishop will begin with the naming of a transition team, Bledsoe said. Each conference will name seven persons to the team.

The conferences in the new Nebraska-Kansas Area have broad flexibility to determine their ministry in the two states, Bledsoe said. The conferences will make the final decision on details of the transition.

“This decision creates an opportunity for new, creative ways to serve Jesus Christ,” Bledsoe said in a webcast announcing the decision. “We believe self-determination is a key value in this process, and how they serve Christ together will be something they will decide.”

Bishop Ann Sherer-Simpson, the bishop in Nebraska, said the decision to bring the two states together was “thoughtfully and prayerfully made by the College of Bishops.

“Our task now, as Nebraskans and Kansans, is to discern the best way to implement this decision,” said Sherer-Simpson.

Bishop J. Scott Jones, leader of the two conferences in Kansas, said the College of Bishops weighed many alternatives before deciding on the new Nebraska-Kansas Area.

“I am convinced that there are real possibilities for new approaches that the leaders of Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West need to consider together,” Jones said.

“The important questions will be answered by the leaders of the three annual conferences over the next several months, and then discussed at the annual conference sessions in 2010,” Jones added.

As one demonstration of their support for the conferences in the new episcopal area, bishops in the jurisdiction’s other areas have each committed to raise \$10,000 to help cover costs for the transition, Bishop Bledsoe said.

The College of Bishops began discussing and collecting information leading to the decision in June 2008, just a few weeks after the General Conference decided to reduce the number of bishops. They held meetings and conducted listening sessions across the jurisdiction to hear from laypersons and clergy.

One of the key elements in the process was an 18-page report prepared by the Rev. Dr. Lovett Weems, director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C. Dr. Weems is former president of United Methodist-related Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri.

Dr. Weems’ report analyzed demographic data and projections, bishops’ workloads, and reported on a survey of laity and clergy that was conducted as part of his research.