

The following text is a transcript of the South Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops webcast held on September 18, 2009, at 12:00 p.m. CDT.

[BISHOP BLEDSOE]

Dear friends, I bring you greetings in the name of Jesus Christ.

I am Bishop W. Earl Bledsoe, and I'm privileged to serve as the president of the College of Bishops of the South Central Jurisdiction, and to represent the College with this very special announcement.

You may be aware that the 2008 General Conference directed the College to deploy ten rather than 11 bishops in our Jurisdiction beginning in 2012.

Your College of Bishops has taken this task very seriously, with great deliberation and discernment. We started this work informally during the 2008 Jurisdictional Conference, and continued on a more formal basis for the next year, leading to this announcement.

We requested and received responses and ideas from delegates to the 2008 South Central Jurisdictional conference.

We sought input from laity and clergy across the Jurisdiction through conversations in each annual conference.

We listened to many suggestions.

We studied statistics and demographics related to the jurisdiction.

We discussed various alternatives at length.

And we have prayed together about the mission of Christ in order to guide us to discern the best course for the future of the United Methodist Church in this jurisdiction.

So beginning in 2012, we will deploy one bishop to a new Nebraska-Kansas Area.

This decision creates an opportunity for new, creative ways to serve Jesus Christ, and to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world for generations to come in these two states.

Now while these changes will not take place until 2012, we are announcing this decision at this very early date to provide as much time as possible for the three conferences most directly affected to plan for their future together.

We believe self-determination is a key value in this process, and how they serve Christ together will be something they will decide.

We believe announcing our decision now offers the greatest possible opportunity for the leaders of these three conferences to confer together, and to discern how best to organize and align their ministries.

While the leaders of the new episcopal area will be charting their course, this decision affects every conference, and every congregation of this jurisdiction in some way. We are in a shared ministry throughout this jurisdiction.

That is why each bishop has pledged \$10,000 from his or her area to help support the costs of this transition.

This funding will help share the costs for meetings, strategic planning, and to bring in resource persons to help move the process and foster a smooth transition.

We are partners, brothers and sisters in Christ, and in ministry. We are in this together, connected to one another by the love of the risen Christ.

Our Wesleyan heritage connects us. It is a vital strand of our DNA, linking every member, every congregation, every conference, and every jurisdiction.

United Methodists in our eight states – Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska are connected to more than 10 million brothers and sisters in Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and across the United States.

Our connection is a special gift from God.

Joining me today on this special webcast are the bishops from the areas most affected by our decision – Nebraska and Kansas.

I welcome Bishop Ann Sherer of the Nebraska Area, who will be followed by Bishop Scott Jones of the Kansas Area.

[BISHOP SHERER]

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Nebraskans are the innovative people who responded to the early circuit riders who trod across the plains.

We created freedom options through the Underground Railroad. We moved alongside Standing Bear as the courts finally affirmed his full humanity. We sent Angie Newman to General Conference 16 years before a woman was seated. And we asked for the leadership of such great bishops as Noah W. Moore, Jr. and Bishop Joel Martinez. We are a dynamic, risk-taking church.

The more I think and pray about these changes, the more excited I become. The three conferences and the Area Task Force will discern where we believe God is leading us.

The decision to assign, in 2012, one bishop to the Nebraska-Kansas Area 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.

Nebraskans are open to learning and open to adaptive change. We have been learning together and implementing significant changes over the last five years.

We are focused on local churches where disciples are made. At our Common Table for Ministry, we are focused on leadership development, congregational formation and transformation, and risk-taking mission and justice work. We are pioneers in Rethinking Church. We will be dedicating our new Conference Center on October 11.

I pray that the pioneering spirit will continue to move among us as we engage in this opportunity to work with the Kansas conferences to develop a new episcopal area.

A Task Force from Nebraska and Kansas will work out the details. Seven transition task force members will be named from each conference. Our Common Table will nominate and confirm those members. They will be ready to serve when this team convenes in November.

As we move forward, there will be many opportunities for you to share your concerns and dreams with me and with the Task Force.

On September 19, as the Common Table meets, they and I will have a one-hour interactive video conversation with Nebraska United Methodists at 10 a.m. Central time. Access details are on our Web site and in each district office. I will be doing more listening as I visit all six districts during the last two weeks of September.

I am so proud of every one of our United Methodists in Nebraska and every one of our churches. You are pioneers in spirit. You are pioneers in ministry. You are faithful and fruitful followers of a loving God, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

[BISHOP JONES]

Bishop Bledsoe has told us of the decision to implement the changes in our jurisdiction that were mandated by the 2008 General Conference. We will have 10 bishops beginning on September 1, 2012.

It means change – significant change – for persons in three conferences in Kansas and Nebraska.

While change is never easy, it is one of the constants in life. It is also when God opens up new possibilities for ministry. My prayer is that the people of the three conferences will see this change as an opportunity to envision mission and ministry in a new way.

I participated in many conversations about how best to implement this redeployment of bishops. We considered lots of ideas, and I believe we reached the best decision we could.

For whoever is assigned as bishop of the new area, it will stretch her or him. But 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.

A change like this brings lots of questions. Unfortunately, there are very few answers right now.

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.

Over the next few weeks, the leadership committees in the three affected conferences will be meeting. Bishop Sherer and I anticipate that these three groups will name members to a Transition Team to guide the process of establishing the new episcopal area.

Our College of Bishops has made this decision early in the quadrennium in order to give the three annual conferences the maximum amount of time to think creatively about how to live into this future.

On behalf of the two Kansas conferences, I want to thank the bishops for their willingness to seek money from each of the other episcopal areas to help fund the expenses of the transition. That will enable us to obtain the best consulting help we can find to guide the process.

Over the last five years in Kansas there have been significant efforts made at strengthening our mission and ministry in four areas: revitalizing existing congregations, starting new churches, ethnic minority ministry and student ministry.

I think all of these efforts, including the Kansas conferences' Bridges to the Future capital campaign, will provide Kansas with a strong foundation for this new future.

[BISHOP BLEDSOE]

Thank you, Bishops Sherer and Jones. Your leadership will play an important role in the discernment and transition process for the new Nebraska-Kansas Area.

God has blessed us with your leadership, your entrepreneurial spirit, and your commitment to making disciples for the transformation of the world.

I know you – viewers and listeners – probably have many questions about this decision and where we are headed as a jurisdiction, and for those of you in Nebraska and Kansas, as a new episcopal area.

We have tried to anticipate some of your questions. Click on the FAQ button on this Web site, for some answers.

Other answers, of course, will come through the transitional discernment and planning process.

I thank you once again for joining us today, and I want to close with a special prayer:

Lord, be with us through this journey.

Give us strength. Give us courage.

Open our minds and our hearts to do your holy will.

I ask your blessings on the people of Nebraska and Kansas as they begin this transition.

And I ask your blessings on those who serve you in this jurisdiction.

Through Christ our Lord, our risen Savior. Amen.