



September 14, 2006

Making Disciples, Making a Difference

Nebraska United Methodist Conference
Discipleship Plan

TRANSFORMATION BEGINS IN THE HUMAN HEART

We are called to change the world! Transformation begins in the human heart when it is confronted by the amazing grace and boundless love of God in Jesus Christ. Change occurs when we help make disciples of Jesus Christ who are passionate about making new disciples who can transform our world. Change must be created by dynamic leaders who demonstrate servant leadership as God effectively works through them as modeled by Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Bible, God worked through strong leaders to guide the way for believers. The need for strong leadership is as relevant today as it was in Old Testament times. A renewed spirit in our local churches and in the hearts of our clergy and lay leaders will empower the Nebraska Conference in achieving its vision.

However, even the most skilled leadership and the most compelling vision will not propel us into God's preferred future unless we have a passion for ministry. Cultural shifts in our country and in our world have affected all of society and have caused us in many cases to lose focus on our ministry to help make disciples. We have tended to focus on maintaining the institution rather than on changing the hearts of people.

It is time for a shift from maintenance to growth, with intentional focus on lay and clergy leadership. Leaders who can guide us on a pathway to a preferred future for the Nebraska Conference of being both faithful and fruitful in making disciples, who make a difference.

Our souls still long for dramatic and purposeful change that leads to the transformation of lives and the inauguration of the reign of God in our midst.

THE HOLY SPIRIT TO GUIDE US

The Disciple Making Team (DiscipleMakers) was created by action of the 2005 Annual Conference. Their task was to develop a proposal for the better use of people and resources toward the goal of making disciples, who make a difference—laity and clergy in ministry together to be used by God for the transformation of the world.

The team is comprised of 27 members, led by Bishop Ann B. Sherer and assisted by three members of the conference staff. Our team began its work immediately following the Annual Conference Session and has worked steadily since that time to study the current situation, re-state our vision, focus on our mission and purpose, identify areas in which change is needed, and establish areas of priority. We have worked as a team and in subset work groups of the team on a regular basis. Rooted in prayer, relying upon the Holy Spirit for guidance, and strengthened by worship together, we have been in continuous contact with each other as we developed the various facets of this proposal to be submitted for adoption at the 2006 Annual Conference Session.

A RICH TRADITION

The local church is the missionary focal point for the advancement of God's reign in the world. Nebraska has a rich United Methodist heritage filled with many stories of faith, innovation, love, justice and mission-stories of transformation. The earliest Methodists in Nebraska were circuit riders moving from settlement to settlement, inviting persons to know Christ and live in Christian community. From the very beginning we have offered Christ with radical hospitality and invited persons to live in ways that make a difference in the world.

For example, in 1879, two attorneys funded by the Methodist Church represented the Omaha Tribe's Chief Standing Bear. The trial resulted in a United States District court ruling by Judge Elmer Dundy that Native Americans are "persons within the meaning of the law" and have the rights of citizenship.

Nebraska United Methodists' heritage includes many such firsts. In 1888, Angie Newman was the first woman to be elected as a local church delegate to General Conference. The book *Flames on the Plains* by Bishop Don W. Holter provides many stories communicating the Nebraska Conference's history, a history told through the stories of people whose lives were transformed by a personal relationship with God and each other.

In more contemporary times, we have learned that in many of our communities The United Methodist Church is part of the town's infrastructure and provides vital outreach to the people in the community and surrounding area. In addition to worship, the local church is a focal point as a place where people gather together around community issues. The United Methodist Church in these communities is often used for ecumenical purposes, and to extend the church's outreach to members of other denominations, as well as to persons who would otherwise not have contact with the church.

We are called to be the "circuit riders" of our day, inviting people into a personal relationship with God, and live out the ministries of justice and compassion.

CURRENT REALITY

United Methodist churches in Nebraska received about 1000 confessions of faith in new church starts over the past 15 years, while church membership as a whole declined in rapid numbers. What this means is that we have focused more of our time, energy and resources on maintenance than we have on reaching people who are far from God. We have lost much ground for the reign of God, as these statistics indicate:

- From 1970 to 2004, membership in the Nebraska Conference decreased by 42%...this is a loss of 61,517 people (from 145,854 to 84,337).

- From 1970 to 2004, average worship attendance in the Nebraska Conference decreased by 28%...from 50,580 to 36,369 per week.
- In 2004, 26% of the United Methodist Churches in the Nebraska Conference did not receive one new member (103 of 400 churches).
- The average age of a clergy person in ministry in Nebraska is 54 years of age, and we have only four ordained elders under the age of 35.

The Nebraska Conference has been in a long, sustained and dramatic decline. Population shifts have brought a new concentration of people into some areas of the state. Along with population shifts, the influx of immigrants is having a significant impact in our state. Nebraska has never been more diverse than it is right now. Attrition, especially in our small churches, reflects the attrition in the rural population as a whole—our small towns are aging and so are our clergy members and our churches.

It's time for intervention. The good news is that there's ample opportunity to help make disciples who make a difference, as expressed in the following statistics (statistic taken from *Percept* studies and other demographic sources):

- The 2005 population for Nebraska is 1,746,803.
- Approximately 1.1 million people in Nebraska have somewhat or no faith involvement in 2005. (The number of Nebraskans with "no faith involvement" (people who don't claim a church) is 491,000 or 28.1%; the number of Nebraskans with "somewhat of a faith involvement (people who might go to church on Christmas or Easter but not the rest of the time)" is approximately 592,000 or 33.9%).
- 209,279 Nebraskans said they have a United Methodist preference (of these about 84,000 are members).
- Cultural, ethnic, language, and socio-economic diversity have always been a part of life and ministry in Nebraska. Our diversity is increasing at a much-accelerated rate. Demographic trends indicate Latinos may comprise 20% of Nebraska's population by 2025.
- Generational marketing studies tell us that Millennials (those individuals currently ages 0-25) are seeking spiritual meaning and are eager to help others.

The fields are ripe for the harvest!

The question is:

"Is the Nebraska United Methodist Church relevant in this changed environment?"

OUR MISSION

Biblical Mandates

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:19-20

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Matthew 25:37-40

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'"

Matthew 22:36-40

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Luke 4:18-19

The mission of the Nebraska Annual Conference is:

Making Disciples, Making a Difference

Our mission begins with seeking God's Word on the matters of mission, vision, and values, through prayer, searching the Scripture, knowing our culture, and applying the heart for the lost and the practice of spiritual accountability in small groups from our Wesleyan heritage.

Our mission becomes sharper as we shift from a focus on preservation to a focus on leadership, that guides us to develop healthy, growing churches.

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004 (§120) says, "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." (Also see §121-122.)

Our charge is to love the lost, the least and the last as much as God loves them.

OUR VISION

Our vision is to be a conference full of dynamic churches sharing and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, marked by these signs of vital discipleship:

- **Radical hospitality;**
- **Heartwarming worship;**
- **Risk-taking mission and justice work;**
- **Vital faith formation and prayer;**
- **Gracious generosity; and**
- **Connectional joy and commitment.**

This vision for the Nebraska Annual Conference sees local churches of all sizes moving toward vitality, growth and faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

A dynamic church is compelled to invite people through ministries of evangelism, worship, mission and justice to know and serve Christ. It is one where people want to participate because it meets people's deep spiritual longing and draws more and more people to God's message.

A dynamic church grows deeper in its faith in God and more engaged in its service to Jesus Christ. A dynamic church will see an increase in first time professions of faith in Christ, more people engaged in mission and justice work, people growing towards tithing, and pride in being a part of a community of faith.

**Anticipated Fruits for determining whether we are achieving our vision are presented later in the document.*

CORE VALUES—THE CONTEXT

Core values are the bedrock of our beliefs as United Methodist Christians in Nebraska— the basics to which all of us can say “yes.” Inside our church circles they may appear ordinary and routine. However, when placed in the context of the culture in which we live, with its divisions between people, its focus on wealth and power, and its fascination with consumerism and self-promotion, these are radical ideas and call for urgency.

Stating our core values reminds us we are to be fundamentally transformed and transforming. We are disciples living out these values as servant leaders to make an immediate difference in Nebraska and in the world.

We believe that God, through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, offers grace and salvation to all persons. Central to our beliefs are the following core values.

OUR CORE VALUES

- **We value** every person. Every person is of sacred worth, created and made in the image of God.
- **We value** the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, sent to bring redemption and salvation to the world.

- **We value** the Holy Spirit that dwells within and among us to empower us for ministry.
- **We value** ministry in all parts of our conference—rural and urban. We value the heritage and potential of small membership churches.
- **We believe** the Word of God is made flesh and dwells among us in Jesus the Christ, and is revealed to us through Scripture, reason, experience and tradition.
- **We value** the calling of each person to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to make disciples in his name.
- **We value** our Wesleyan heritage as a covenant community that lives out both social holiness and personal piety.
- **We value** the ministry of all believers, lay and clergy, as we serve together to transform the world.
- **We value** differences as we seek richness in diversity and integrity in inclusivity.

LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED TO FULFILL OUR MISSION AND VISION

The Nebraska United Methodist Conference mission, “Making Disciples, Making a Difference,” comes to life in the local church. To empower congregations to carry out this mission we must focus our energies on leadership development. The need for strong lay and clergy leadership is the driving force propelling this proposal. The Nebraska Conference must provide for significantly improved leadership opportunities for both laity and clergy members, offering the impetus and the tools for revitalizing local churches and starting new ones.

Strong, visionary clergy and lay members are key to achieving a strong, vital mission and ministry in the Nebraska Conference—making disciples, making a difference. Developing the leadership is the challenge we face. The four components of leadership development in the Nebraska Conference include:

- The development of effective clergy leaders.
- The development of effective lay leaders.
- Implementing an effective Certified Lay Minister program.
- Implementing new models of mutual accountability for congregations and clergy.

Clergy and lay people with well-developed leadership skills are best suited to help the Nebraska United Methodist Conference achieve its Disciplinary* mandates--to equip local churches for ministry and evangelism and to help provide a connection beyond the local church.

Effective leadership will chart the way toward revitalizing churches, starting new ones, reaching younger generations and welcoming new members of our communities. Effective leadership will engage us in mission and justice work, will challenge us to affect systemic change and will guide us in finding ways to help and liberate the oppressed.

** ¶601 in The 2004 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church states, “The purpose of the annual conference is to make disciples for Jesus Christ by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God.”*

Leadership Development Components

Developing Effective Clergy Leadership

Effective leadership will have more impact on making disciples who make a difference than anything else we do. Revitalizing existing churches and starting new churches where disciples are growing and making a difference in the world will not happen unless we focus on effective leadership. We need formation for clergy leaders on two levels: spiritual formation and leadership formation.

Signs of a vital clergy person:

- has a vital personal spiritual life.
- has an excellent ability to preach, teach and lead worship.
- is self differentiated (is emotionally secure, and can stay connected to people without getting emotionally enmeshed or distant).
- empowers and equips laity for ministry, mission and justice work.
- is a Spirit-driven visionary.
- practices stewardship.
- models the signs of discipleship in personal life and in public ministry.

Spiritual Formation

Each of the pastoral orders will organize and monitor covenant groups. The role of the orders will be defined and implemented. Covenant groups will typically include members from different orders within the church; district superintendents will have their own covenant groups.

Each person serving in a pastoral role will participate in a monthly covenant group focused on accountability for spiritual vitality and growth. Covenant groups will be open to all orders.

The conference will provide funding and enhanced opportunities for continuing education and spiritual retreats.

Leadership Formation

The conference will provide funding and enhanced opportunities for continuing education and leadership training courses or seminars on various aspects of developing organizational vitality. The concepts of a "Leadership Skills Incubator" and a "Congregational Development Academy" are ways this strategy may be expressed.

Pastors and local churches will create a discipleship plan that will be periodically reviewed with the district superintendent. Pastoral leaders will be held accountable for progress toward achieving this plan.

Developing Effective Lay Leadership

Dynamic lay leaders are truly the ones making disciples who make a difference in the Nebraska Conference. Lay leadership development must include a mentoring program for emerging leaders, especially youth, young adults and people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Lay leadership development must also focus on both spiritual and leadership formation. Particular attention will be given to Nebraska's Latino population in light of that demographic segment's predicted growth in Nebraska.

Signs of an effective lay person (disciple):

- has a vital personal spiritual life.
- is actively involved in the life of the church helping to build a community of faith.
- participates in at least one small group and provides leadership for others.
- practices stewardship.
- is Spirit-filled; able to share their faith in God with others.
- models the signs of discipleship in personal life and in public.

Spiritual Formation

Conference-wide opportunities for spiritual formation are being identified and put together in a way that will offer a continuum of spiritual formation experiences. These opportunities must be appealing and understandable to lay members of the conference and delivered with a high level of quality so that the Holy Spirit may move freely among us.

Leadership Formation

New leadership activities will be developed to fill areas not addressed by current programming. Sufficient financial and human resources will be made available to train and to provide ongoing spiritual, financial, educational and technical support to individuals interested in lay leadership.

A concept called "Leadership Nebraska" is currently being researched and developed to help lay members offer leadership development opportunities in their own communities and congregations.

Certified Lay Ministers and Mentors

Providing pastoral leadership to all Nebraska United Methodist churches continues to be a priority. Every church is important and valued. Small churches, both urban and rural, are vital instruments of God's action and require strong leadership.

Opportunities will be created for potential lay ministry prospects to experience ministry under the guidance of experienced clergy in a hands-on setting, and to consider the role of a Certified Lay Minister as defined in ¶1272 of *The 2004 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*.

The new program of Certified Lay Ministers is a methodology for providing strong leaders in every congregation. Laity will be screened and trained to serve in pastoral roles as Certified Lay Ministers. They will be supervised and mentored by an elder or local pastor who will arrange for regular celebration of sacraments. A Certified Lay Minister will be trained in a local church or cluster setting through a curriculum provided by The United Methodist Church.

New Models of Evaluation and Accountability

District superintendents will communicate the vision of dynamic and growing churches throughout the Conference. District superintendents will consult, support and work with local churches in developing their discipleship accountability plan. Strategies to be developed in the following areas:

Recruitment

Cooperate with the Board of Ordained Ministry in screening and developing persons entering full-time ministry in the Nebraska Annual Conference, with special attention given to ethnic and gender diversity.

Development

Cast and communicate to leaders the vision of the Nebraska Annual Conference for dynamic churches.

Visit each church at least one time per year (other than Church Conference) to clarify vision and assist in developing ways to become a more dynamic church.

Deployment

Ensure the delivery and matching of great pastors to suitable churches (i.e., churches with a passion and plan to make disciples, making a difference).

Support

Provide learning and support systems for clergy.

Assessment

Assessment will provide accountability of the performance of clergy and lay leaders in developing and implementing a congregational plan for disciple making that supports the mission, vision, and values of the Nebraska Conference. Assessment will be by reliable and valid assessment tools to be developed in a verifiable way.

Assist those clergy who are consistently unable to perform in ways that are effective, to identify and move to other work/ministry areas for which they are more equipped.

MEASURES OF EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY-BEING BOTH FAITHFUL AND FRUITFUL

EFFECTIVENESS

Anticipated fruits have been identified in many areas to help determine the effectiveness of our leadership-building efforts. Additional benchmarks still need to be identified and developed. Using the Six Signs of Discipleship as a base, plus information gathered through the conference's annual data collection, the following measurements/benchmarks will help determine our success in creating dynamic churches. These anticipated fruits are attainable through new vision, dedication to our purpose, prayerful consideration in the development of individual church discipleship plans, and mutual support between laity and clergy and between churches and the conference.

Vital clergy and lay leadership is key to any congregation exhibiting the Six Signs of Discipleship.

SIX SIGNS OF DISCIPLESHIP AND THEIR ANTICIPATED FRUITS

1. Radical hospitality

Hospitality is radical in both the invitations extended and the creation of places for God's people to belong. Radical hospitality includes time and effort spent outside our church buildings inviting the unchurched to worship. The marks of successful hospitality are listed below.

- Church is a welcoming, warm and inviting place.
- The church/congregation has a discipleship plan to attract and retain disciples.
- The church reflects the diversity in their community and is intentional about inclusiveness.
- The church is intentional in offering programs for children and youth.
- Unchurched people in the community will be prayed for and personally invited to worship or to another church event as outlined in the church's discipleship plan.
- The church will see an annual growth as outlined in their church's discipleship plan.
- The church will have activities directed at relieving poverty, liberating the oppressed and addressing social justice concerns in the local community and in the world as outlined in its discipleship plan.
- The Nebraska Conference realizes the establishment of new churches and worshipping communities at an increasing rate in accordance with the conference's growth plan.
- Members of all congregations are in community, connected to one another through the traditions and structure of The United Methodist Church, as well being connected through their own joy and commitment to Christ and the church.
- The United Methodist denomination's promise of "open hearts, open minds, open doors," is consistently delivered to every guest and member of the church.

2. Heartwarming worship

Worship should be culturally relevant, theologically sound and life transforming. Every church should offer a heartwarming worship service that has the following characteristics.

- Worship that is invigorating, inspiring, encouraging and challenging.
- Provides the opportunity for all to experience varied forms of worship.
- Worship should help create an environment that contributes to increases in average weekly worship attendance in accordance with the church's discipleship plan.
- Research and employ methods of worship preferred by younger generations.
- The Nebraska Conferences realizes an average worship attendance increase from 36,000 to 50,000 by 2016.

3. Risk-taking mission and justice ministries

Mission and justice work are natural manifestations of a deep faith in Christ that is expressed in acts of mercy and acts of justice. Mission, justice and advocacy efforts will address the systemic issues as outlined in the The United Methodist Social Principles. Risk-taking mission and justice ministries evidence themselves in the church in the following ways.

- Every church/congregation will have local and global mission and justice components in its discipleship plan.

- Greater focus on teaching and living out The United Methodist Social Principles and the teachings of John Wesley on social holiness.
- Nebraska congregations will increase acts of justice while sustaining acts of mercy.
- Nebraska churches/congregations realize significant increases in people engaged in hands-on mission and justice projects.

4. Systematic faith development

Discipleship grows people intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, physically and relationally so they may assist in the discipling of others (servant leadership). Systematic faith development includes time and effort outside of our church buildings inviting people to join small groups sponsored by congregations. We have systematic faith development when we can identify the following:

- The church/congregation helps people to live God's gift of life more fully.
- The church/congregation engages people in regular daily prayer/quiet time as outlined in the church/congregation's discipleship plan.
- The church/congregation participates in college and young adult ministries, including campus, retreat and camping ministries as outlined in its discipleship plan.
- The church/congregation has a vital children's ministry including mission, Christian education and camping as outlined in its discipleship plan.
- Youth are engaged in ministry and mission, have a good Christian education and are encouraged to participate in camping as outlined in the church/congregation's discipleship plan.
- The church/congregation develops small groups in racial and ethnic communities as outlined in its discipleship plan.
- Nebraska churches/congregations realize an increase in average weekly Sunday church school attendance from 13,000 to 25,000 by 2016.
- Nebraska churches/congregations realize an increase in average adult small group attendance from 18,000 to 25,000 by 2016.
- Anticipated fruits for growth in children, youth and young adult participation in mission and ministry in the local church, plus benchmarks for them reaching beyond the local church, are developed in each congregation's discipleship plan.

5. Gracious generosity

Generosity is measured by a commitment to move towards tithing the first fruits of our financial resources as well as of our time and energy. Churches marked with gracious generosity will demonstrate the following:

- The church will have a stewardship program as outlined in their church/congregation's discipleship plan—for immediate needs and the need of future generations.
- The Nebraska Conference realizes an increase in average per capita giving from \$510 to \$1,000 per member by 2016.

6. Connectional joy and commitment

Connectional joy is our deep sense of connectedness with others in our church, our community, our conference and our world. It is demonstrated by cooperative efforts with other United Methodists in advancing the mission of the Church. "Connectionalism" is the thread that holds us together as a denomination—it enables us to do more together than we can as individual congregation members. Connectional joy and commitment will be demonstrated in our churches by the following.

- Where all members are involved in the local congregation as part of The United Methodist Church and the community it serves.
- The church/congregation creates an environment where members of all ages are inspired and motivated to be in mission and ministry beyond the local church.
- As churches/congregations we celebrate our differences and diversity, reaching out to people who are not like us—both locally and globally.
- The Nebraska Conference reaches the goal of 25 new churches added to the connection by 2016.
 - Three of the new churches will be multiracial/multicultural congregations.
 - Four of the current Hispanic-Latino worship communities charter as congregations and four more Hispanic-Latino worship communities be established.
 - Establish a new African-American worshiping community in Omaha.
- Participation in local, district, conference, jurisdictional and general conference mission, ministry and legislation are core membership activities.
- The Nebraska Conference realizes 100 percent apportionment giving to the general church by 2016.

Accountability

A discipleship plan, as a leadership tool, for churches/congregations and clergy will be formally implemented to guide and focus the work of the church. Each local congregation will be asked to develop, adopt and implement a plan for achieving the Six Signs of Discipleship. The discipleship plan enables each individual congregation to set its own benchmarks for success. The plan is to be tailored to each church's unique situation and representative of the congregation's aspirations, expectations and commitment to make disciples who make a difference.

Our bishop, district superintendents, pastors and lay leadership are accountable for leading and equipping local churches to develop, implement and assess their discipleship plans.

A SUPPORTING STRUCTURE

Making disciples happens in local communities with members of local churches. The Nebraska United Methodist Conference understands that clergy and laity leadership need support and resources from the conference to ensure the development of local ministry plans.

A new supporting structure for disciple making is needed in the Nebraska Conference in order to realize our new vision and strategic priorities. This supporting structure is a long-term approach to providing sustained, active ministry among our existing and future United Methodist churches. This approach is sensitive to being both faithful and fruitful stewards of our human and financial resources. The approach is also sensitive to the needs of all sizes and locations of churches.

Six districts with six district superintendents are recommended for implementation by July 1, 2007. Six full-time administrative assistants are also recommended for implementation at that same time. Both will be full-time conference staff with benefits.

Each district shall implement a trained conflict resolution (mediation) team, made up of both clergy and laity, to be available to local churches upon request of the church and assignment by the district superintendent.

A six-district model* will result in:

- District superintendents serving more as coaches and consultants rather than administrators.
- Greater availability of and accessibility to district superintendents for leadership development.
- Accountability and leadership development through the cabinet.
- Greater use of technology to achieve efficiency.
- Strong and effective lay leadership development.
- More effective use of financial resources (no cost savings, but a shift toward more effective expenses).

**The Book of Discipline (§415.4) reminds us that the annual conference sets the number of districts, and the bishop in consultation with the leadership establishes the district boundaries.*

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

TECHNOLOGY

Technology is an essential component for building an infrastructure to support the mission and vision. A conference-wide technology plan will enable the Conference to perform at high levels and with efficiency.

CONFERENCE STAFFING

Bishop Sherer has assigned a task force to evaluate staff needs in parallel with the *Comprehensive Proposal for Change*. Doing mission and ministry in new ways will require a review of how staff is deployed to support and equip local churches in the Nebraska Conference.