

Yellowstone Conference Futures Task Force Preliminary Recommendation

September 2014

FINAL VERSION

“A vital congregation is a congregation that makes disciples.”

In order to better help churches make disciples of Jesus Christ, we recommend the merger of the Rocky Mountain Conference with the Yellowstone Conference. We take seriously the need to enable churches to become vital congregations; and we recognize the difficulties that now exist because of the challenges that face a conference of our size with limited financial and human resources and shifting demographics.

Therefore, we seek to move the discussion in two ways: **how can we, as a conference, focus most on creating disciples of Jesus; and, what structures will be most helpful?**

Yellowstone Realities:

1. Leadership - clergy and lay

There is:

- a current and on-going crisis of pastoral leadership;
- an inability to staff conference boards, teams, committees;
- an inability to recruit – retirements are outpacing new clergy coming into our conference.

2. Finances

Over the past 12 years the cost per worship attendee to fund the local church budget has doubled, and that trend will only continue.

3. Attendance

Since 1974, attendance has declined 33% and is projected to decline by 50% within the next ten years.

We acknowledge that simply merging with the Rocky Mountain Conference would not necessarily address issues 2 and 3 from above, but it could address issue 1¹. There would be a larger pool to draw from for our essential teams, which in turn could lead to more productive work for this geographic area.

We recognize the central task of all churches is to nurture and develop disciples of Jesus Christ. A disciple is someone who is committed to "Being part of the body of Christ", "Becoming more like Jesus", and "Joining Jesus in ministry."

By being part of the body of Christ, we *expect*:

- people to actively cultivate practices of worship and hospitality,
- churches to provide opportunities for worship that are engaging and spirit led,
- churches to provide opportunities to practice creative and life-giving engagement with our neighbors.

By becoming more like Jesus, we *expect*:

- people to open themselves up to Jesus through prayer and other spiritual practices and to discern his will through the study of scripture, tradition, reason and experience;
- churches to model healthy spiritual disciplines and offer opportunities for personal growth through group studies and holy conversation.

Finally, by joining Jesus in ministry, we *expect*:

- people to live a life of service and generosity;
- the church to provide opportunities to be in service to the local community and the world;
- the church to provide meaningful opportunities for giving;

¹ A 2014 GCFA (General Council on Finance and Administration) Research Team Report studied 10 unifications where two conferences merged into a larger body. The report found with few exceptions, the membership and average worship attendance of merged conference was not affected by the merger and continued to decline along the national average. This is also true of the total number of churches and General Conference delegates for each merged conference.

However, a trend emerged when examining apportionments. The vast majority of merged conferences saw an increase in the percentage of apportionments paid. Many of the unified conferences saw actual dollar amount paid in apportionments and direct-billed pension and health benefits hold steady for approximately 5 years following the merger, after which they began increasing again. It appears that in most cases, cost savings made possible through unification were temporary.

- the church to be good stewards of tithes and offerings by engaging in life-affirming ministry.

We recognize that discipleship is a journey and that time and energy must be invested into lifelong development. We call on each church to celebrate progress made, no matter how small, and to continually inspire people into deepening discipleship.

With these expectations in mind, and having reviewed the current reality of:

- declining membership;
- declining attendance;
- diminishing monetary and personnel resources;
- and shifting demographics,

we propose the merger as an attempt to provide a more solid disciple-making structure that will nurture collaboration, shared resources and expertise, and hopeful and strategic transformation.

This is a preliminary report. Discussions with leadership in the Rocky Mountain Conference will be taking place soon, and we, as yet, do not know what direction those talks will go. Likewise, we are not at this time proposing specific structural changes that we believe might assist the local church in making disciples. Those specific changes to structure would be the result of conversations between Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone leadership.