

## Mountain Sky Outlook

September 2014

**“MERGER? Who? What? When? Why? How? *IF?* A proposal to strengthen ministry for Jesus Christ”**

### **MERGER? WHAT?**

This week, leaders of the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conferences received a recommendation to enter into a serious conversation about merging these two conferences into one. This idea has been whispered since before anyone can remember. But both conferences have always had hesitations: The area is so vast and the distances too great. Would we lose the distinctive identities of the two conferences? And so the conversations never went very far, but the whispers continued around the edges.

You may remember that when I became your bishop in 2008 I became aware of this ongoing question: should we merge? And so I called together a joint task force that led us on a path that strengthened relationships between the two conferences:

- The Denver Episcopal Area became the Mountain Sky Area in 2012, marking a new collaboration and emphasizing what is common between the two conferences.
- One district superintendent oversees churches in Wyoming from both conferences.
- Two staff persons serve both conferences in the areas of communications and congregational vitality.
- The two conferences have worked more closely together for training, clergy recruitment and deployment, and professional development.

Now, whispers around the edges have become an elephant that is not only in the room, it is sitting down for tea.

You may have some questions...

### **WHO?**

**Who would this affect?** The recommendation is that Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Annual Conferences, which have been a single episcopal area and served by one bishop for many years, become a single annual conference.

**Who made the recommendation?** The Futures Task Force of the Yellowstone Annual Conference.<sup>1</sup>

**Who would be affected?** Organizationally, the 400 churches and their lay and clergy leaders, as well as the elected and employed leaders of the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone conferences.

**Who will decide whether merger is a good idea?**

- As your bishop, I will appoint a Transformation Team of leaders from both conferences to decide whether to bring a recommendation to the annual conferences.
- Any recommendation from the Transformation Team would be considered by both the Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain Annual Conferences.
- The Western Jurisdictional Conference has the final decision about any change in conference boundaries.

#### **WHEN?**

*IF* the two conferences were to move toward merger, it would be a deliberate process that would take time. The working group might bring a preliminary report to the 2015 annual conferences. Annual Conferences could adopt a recommendation in June 2016 that could be considered at the Western Jurisdictional Conference in July 2016. If a plan involving changes to conference boundaries was approved it would take at least two more years to fully implement.

#### **WHY?**

To strengthen United Methodist ministries for Jesus Christ and the transformation of the world across the states of Montana, Wyoming, the two churches in Idaho, and Colorado and Utah. In recent years, through joint cabinet work, shared training opportunities, collaborative planning for annual conference sessions and annual church conferences, and two new area-wide staff positions in communications and congregational vitality, the two conferences have begun to experience the benefits to both conferences of sharing vision and resources. Bishops at least as far back as Roy Sano in the 1980s have experienced the strain of overseeing two annual conferences with separate offices, cabinets and budgets, separate program emphases and

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<sup>1</sup> Clergy: Rev. David McConnell, Bozeman MT, First UMC; Rev. Debbie Schmidt, White Fish, MT, UMC; Rev. Jeremy Scott, Director of Vital Ministries, and laity: Margaret Novak, Chester, MT; Doug Morton, Great Falls, MT; and Alice Swett, Buffalo, WY and staff: Rev. David Burt, Yellowstone Director of Connectional Ministries.

initiatives. Yellowstone has especially struggled to bear the administrative burden of a complex annual conference organization as its membership, attendance, clergy and volunteer and staff resources have been stretched thin over the years. Rocky Mountain also is experiencing long-term decline, though it does not yet have the same sense of urgency about the future. In recent years, conference mergers have occurred in New England, New Jersey, New York, Indiana, the Dakotas, the Great Plains (Nebraska and Kansas), and Texas.

### HOW?

*If* the two conferences develop a proposal to merge, and *if* the Jurisdictional Conference approves such a proposal, the specifics of “how” will be worked out by leaders from both conferences. Gil Rendle, from the Texas Methodist Foundation, who has helped many conferences consider their options for the future and has helped guide several recent mergers, will work with us in the weeks and months ahead as we explore the possibilities.

### WHAT I THINK

Gil Rendle reminds us to be *purpose*-driven, not *preference*-driven. Hopefully, we will all be able to set our *preferences* aside in order to pursue our *purpose* – *God’s purpose*. *If* we could more effectively make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world as a single conference in a more missional way, we should do it. *If* we could be more fruitful as separate conferences, we should not merge.

United Methodists in this great region have a rare opportunity to choose and shape an intentional future that focuses on opportunity rather than scarcity and survival, and to be deliberate about moving forward in a way that promotes life-giving ministry in partnership with Jesus Christ. Alan Roxburgh taught us to ask, what’s God up to? And how can we be part of it? I hope these two conferences will continue to seek a future with hope together, aligning their combined resources to strengthen ministries that make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Please pray with me that we might hear God’s leading and follow.

**PRAYER:** *God, help us know how to be fruitful ministers of your gospel in Jesus Christ. Give us wisdom to know your will and courage to do it. Strengthen your purpose in us so that our preferences fade away. AMEN.*