

2015 Annual Conference
Great Plains Conference United Methodist Church

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The Great Plains Conference began as a Conference on January 1, 2014. Prior to that time we were part of the Nebraska Conference. The Great Plains Conference was formed by the combination of the Nebraska Conference, Kansas West Conference and Kansas East Conference. The Plan of Organization for the Great Plains Conference was approved at a Uniting Conference of clergy and lay delegates from each of the legacy conferences in August, 2013.

The Book of Discipline (which is basically the rules and regulations governing the United Methodist Church) gives the purpose of the Annual Conference as “The purpose of the annual conference is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God.” The Annual Conference is the fundamental body of the United Methodist Church beyond the local church.

The members of the Annual Conference include all the clergy within the Great Plains Conference and lay members elected from each charge. Each charge/church elects a lay member for each clergy person serving the charge. Additional lay members are included in the membership of the Annual Conference because of their positions or as provided for by the Conference rules. Two examples are the Conference Presidents of United Methodist Women and United Methodist Men. There are an equal number of clergy and lay members.

The 2015 Great Plains Annual Conference was held June 9 – 13 in Wichita, KS. Rev. Scott Shreve and DeLynn Hay represented Waverly First United Methodist Church. Esther Hay is also a member of the Annual Conference in her role as President of the Great Plains Conference United Methodist Women. The theme for this year’s conference was “Though many, One.”

There are many ways that could be used to describe Annual Conference. The basic components of Annual Conference might be fellowship/celebration, worship, and business.

The fellowship part of conference takes place throughout the conference as members interact with each other, reconnect with friends, and make new acquaintances. There are also events that enable the fellowship during the

conference; I participated the Laity Meet and Greet (clergy held a separate event), Methodist Federation for Social Action dinner, United Methodist Women Dinner, and Mission lunch.

The conference provided several opportunities for worship. Each day opened with a worship service and/or a teaching presentation. On Wednesday Bishop Jones preached discussing unity. The offering as a part of that service was for our mission partnerships with Haiti, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. The Thursday and Friday morning presentations were made by Stephanie Hixon, Executive Director of the Just Peace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation in the United Methodist Church. Her presentations focused on the importance of handling conflicts, treating others with respect, and that conflict transformation includes understanding ourselves and being aware of how we engage others. She closed with reading from Matthew 28 the story of the women finding the tomb of Jesus empty and stressed the importance of holding to faith in times of trauma and pain saying "Don't be afraid, you will see Jesus."

A memorial service was held on Thursday to recognize clergy and spouses who had died during the past year. Bishop Bruce Ough of the Dakotas-Minnesota Episcopal Area was the preacher. He emphasized God's presence among us in times of joy and sorrow. He closed with the question "Is the Lord among us, or not?" The answer from those present was a resounding "Yes." The offering from this service went to the United Methodist Global Aids Fund. Bishop Ough also preached for the ordination service on Friday evening when seven new elders were ordained. The Bishop's focus for this service was "unity." The offering from the ordination service was for the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, Lydia Patterson Institute, and the Zimbabwe mission project.

The Saturday morning worship service was led by youth participants in annual conference including a youth praise music group. The offering was to support the Youth Service Fund.

Michael Tulley Director of Music Lincoln's Trinity UMC provided the leadership for music in the sessions and worship. Music was provided by the Asbury UMC (Wichita) Praise Band, Praise Band Nueva Evangelica (Garden City), St. Mark UMC Choir (Wichita), and the Wichita West All-District children's choir.

The business portion of Annual Conference is a key part of the gathering to ensure that the functions of the Great Plains conference are carried out and that available resources are wisely used by the Conference. The conference workbook provided advance information on the business items to be addressed. Some of the business items required action while others were simply reports and updates from various boards, commissions, agencies and groups. Some highlights from the business discussions include the following.

A capital campaign was approved to raise \$994,000 for Camp Comeca near Cozad to repay loans and address critical infrastructure needs. A three mission campaign to raise \$100,000 each for the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area, Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, and Lydia Patterson Institute was approved.

Reports were received from various Conference boards, commissions, agencies, teams, mission agencies, and affiliated universities and seminaries. . Some of the reports were written only while others were presented for action. Each of the conference areas of ministry (Clergy Excellence, Congregational Excellence, and Mercy and Justice) reported. The presentations included information on pensions and health care, minimum compensation, episcopal residence, nominations for various conference groups, and several others. The Council on Finance and Administration provided updated policies along with the Treasurer's report. The 2016 conference budget of \$15,799,134 was approved; the 2015 budget is \$16,036,373.

A total of 24 resolutions were presented to the annual conference for consideration. These resolutions called for various actions within the conference. Nine of the resolutions were approval of church closings which were all in Kansas this year. Other resolutions addressed equalization of lay and clergy membership of annual conference and health insurance for clergy.

This year's annual conference addressed seven petitions. If a petition is adopted, it is forwarded to the General Conference for consideration. Three of the petitions addressed investments by the UMC General Board of Pension and Health Benefits in companies with fossil fuel interests. None of these petitions were approved. Three of petitions addressed the election of Bishops. A primary concern addressed by these petitions was geographic diversity of Bishops within the South Central Jurisdiction. These petitions were approved.

The petition that generated the most discussion was titled "Acknowledgement of Diverse Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality." GPconnect (the Conference newsletter) summarized the petition as follows; "would strike references of homosexuality as being incompatible with Christian teachings and would eliminate restrictions against practicing homosexuals being certified as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in the church. It also would lift restrictions on United Methodist pastors conducting same-sex marriages and would lift restrictions on annual conferences and United Methodist agencies from providing funding to homosexual-related caucus groups and similar agencies. The petition would eliminate the performance of same-sex marriages from the list of offenses that would initiate a church trial. The petition was approved by a vote of 496 – 363.

Bishop Jones in a statement released June 16, 2015 shared, in part, the following. His entire statement can be found on the Conference website at <http://www.greatplainsumc.org/news>

“On June 13, the Great Plains Annual Conference passed a petition to General Conference entitled “Acknowledgement of Diverse Beliefs Regarding Homosexuality.” The petition was thoroughly discussed by many people with clear and cogent views expressed on both sides. The debate was forceful and mutually respectful. The conference’s petition will ask the Church’s General Conference to make changes in six parts of the Book of Discipline. It would recognize the diversity of beliefs about homosexuality and allow same-gender marriages and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexual persons.

It is important to understand that the adoption of this petition by a majority of the members in attendance at the Great Plains Conference does not change the official teaching or the rules of the denomination. It expresses the desire of those who were present and voting at the Great Plains Conference session. Changes such as these can only be made by delegates from across the United States and around the world at the General Conference which will meet in May of 2016. The action taken by the Great Plains Conference is a request to the world-wide governing body to consider those changes.

Nothing about our current doctrine or discipline has been changed. United Methodist clergy are not permitted to perform same-gender marriages and such ceremonies may not be held in our churches. The Church’s teaching on the practice of homosexuality remains unchanged and can be found in paragraph 161F of *The Book of Discipline, 2012.*”

In some ways the most important business of the Annual Conference was the election of delegates to General Conference and Jurisdictional Conference. The General Conference is the governing body of the world-wide Methodist Church and meets May 10-20, 2016 in Portland. Jurisdictional conferences are held to elect Bishops for each of the geographic regions of the United States. The South Central Jurisdictional Conference will be held in Wichita, KS in July, 2016. Clergy members of the conference elect six delegates to General Conference, six delegates to Jurisdictional Conference, and three alternates. The lay members of the conference elect the same number of delegates. The total Great Plains delegation consists of 30 individuals and all them attend both General and Jurisdictional Conferences. Esther Hay of First United Methodist Church was elected as a delegate to Jurisdictional Conference.

Summaries of the Annual Conference in the Conference newsletter (GPconnect) along with photographs, videos and the conference workbook can be found on the Great Plains Conference website.

<http://www.greatplainsumc.org/annualconference>

June 17, 2015