
ASKING THE CRITICAL QUESTIONS

IMAGINING A MISSION-SHAPED FUTURE FOR THE MOUNTAIN SKY AREA

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INTRODUCTION

What would a renewed spirit of Wesleyan vitality look like in the contemporary mission field of Colorado, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming? What would it take to better equip local congregations to fulfill their primary calling to *make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*? What would we need to embrace, and what would we need to let go of, to make this a reality?

These are the questions that are at the foundation of the Mission-Shaped Future work. Two teams of laity and clergy from both the Yellowstone and Rocky Mountain conferences have been praying over and wrestling with these questions for several months. They join a line of different teams who have looked at our combined area and asked the question, *can we be more together than we are apart?*

The Mission-Shaped Future Team One made a bold statement:

We believe that the United Methodist denomination holds the best core values of any Christian faith tradition. Our churches are filled with believers in a Wesleyan Christian theology. We desperately want to love the world around us and share our understanding of the Christian faith. One that is accepting and loving. One that invites questions and creative thought. One that believes ALL humans have sacred worth.

The affiliated and the unaffiliated will experience Wesleyan Christian values through people not buildings, actions not meetings, relational not institutional activities, connections not committees. We will serve outwardly, not inwardly, by open expressions of love and understanding with both tangible and intangible gifts.

They also articulated well the priorities for moving forward:

The Purpose of the new annual conference will be achieved by aligning resources (funding, people, programs) first and foremost according to these priorities:

- 1. Renew and establish vital congregations;*
- 2. Develop leaders who are gifted at empowering local churches and laity in the Church Mission; and*
- 3. Establish new faith communities to meet the needs of our unique Mission Field.*

It is critically important that the conversation about creating a new conference in the existing area of Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone begin with an exploration of our current circumstances and the opportunity provided by doing something new. We present here an attempt to do just that. This document takes an intentionally broad focus and does not make recommendations about any particular strategies. The time for strategy work will follow quickly, but for that work to be as fruitful as possible, we first seek to claim as clearly as we can our guiding principles and values.

To guide this work we started with a series of questions aimed at exploring who we are now and who we can be together.¹ The first four of those questions are:

1. Who are we, now?
2. Who is our neighbor, now?
3. What does God call us to do, now?
4. In order to address God's call, what principles will we follow in the next three to five years?

If we choose to move forward with the process, the following questions will guide us as the conversation continues and expands:

5. What would it look like in three to five years if we are faithful and fruitful in our call?
6. How will we do it? (The adaptive and technical changes necessary)
7. How will we measure our progress along the way?

A team of laity and clergy from both conferences has worked diligently to offer some possible answers to questions 1-4 above. We worked to use all the tools at our disposal and have diligently sought the Holy Spirit's guidance in our work. In the end, we came to a hopeful place about what is possible if we pursue the work of creating a new annual conference.

*"I want the whole Christ for my Savior, the whole Bible for my book,
the whole Church for my fellowship and the whole world for my mission field."*

- John Wesley

¹ Adapted from *Doing the Math of Mission*, by Gil Rendle 2014. p. 83-92.

1. WHO ARE WE NOW?

As United Methodists in Colorado, Montana, Utah and Wyoming, we are mountain people and plains people, we are rural and urban, and we are increasingly ethnically diverse. Many of our areas are growing as new populations discover the advantages of living where we live, while other communities are diminishing as industries change and opportunities decline. Our geography is as vast as it is beautiful. No single culture defines us; our diversity is our identity.

United Methodists, as with the Evangelical Association, United Brethren, and Methodists who came before us, are an important part of the religious landscape in our area. We have a history full of proud moments and heroic individuals, along with many examples where we failed to live up to the standards Christ set for the church. We do not run from any part of our history, but instead realize that it all adds up to us. We are the church of Brother Van and Father Dyer, and also the church of Sand Creek.

Today we are not immune to the challenges that Christianity faces across the Western world. Society has shifted away from the church and we can no longer pretend to be the bedrock of our communities in the way we once were. Certainly isolated pockets of the “good old days” may exist here and there, but the overall trend is undeniable.

After careful analysis of where both conferences have been and need to be, it is clear that as God’s people, change is needed to continue spreading the Word. Our vast geographic region provides myriad opportunities to learn and grow, given the diverse population in our communities, yet we find ourselves crumbling at the edges without a distinct purpose or theology to which we can connect.

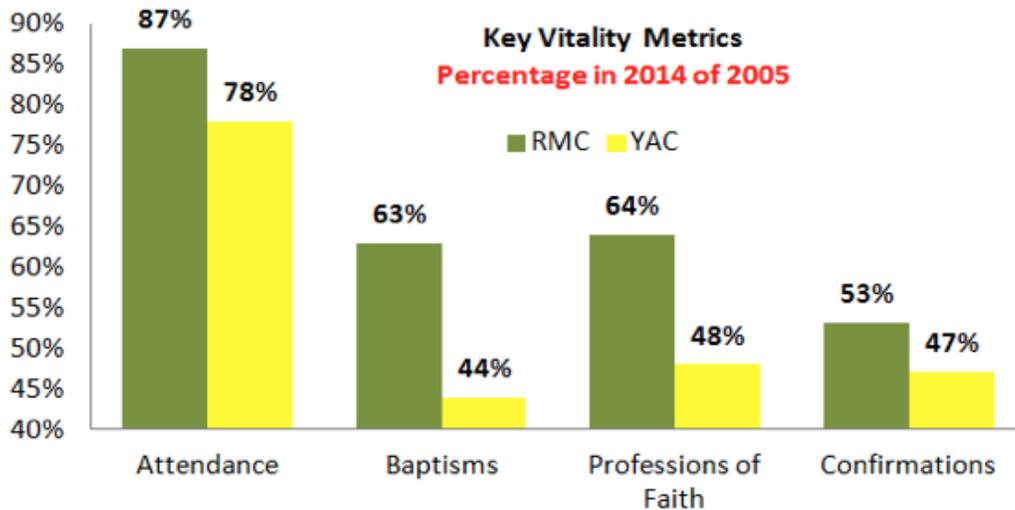
We urgently need to change the fundamental structure of our conference, to improve both efficiency and vitality in the life of the local church. We are struggling to bring new life into the church, just as we are failing to keep regular attendees involved. Without a consistent or growing baseline of disciples, it is impossible for the United Methodist Church in this area to both support its most basic requirements as an annual conference and grow with the changing times. As a result, we are stuck in the past, biding our time until we cease to exist.

Yellowstone Conference is the smallest by membership of all non-missionary United States conferences and less than half the size of the next nearest regular conference. While our geography will be a challenge, the truth remains that in terms of membership, even combined the Mountain Sky conferences would still rank 43rd out of 54 regular U.S. conferences by membership.² The weight of maintaining two duplicate annual conference structures with so few people is holding back our efforts to innovate in both conferences.

Thriving ministries are creative, expansive, and outreaching. Our two conferences are becoming more isolated and siloed instead of bridging perceived boundaries and supporting new opportunities outside

² 2014 numbers provided by GCFA. <http://www.umc.org/gcfa/data-services-statistics>.

of our currently declining membership. The Rev. Dr. C. Dennis Shaw, Rocky Mountain Conference Statistician, recently stated in his report to the Mission-Shaped Future Committees,³ “If our decline in disciple-making were comparable with the attendance decline, those declines would be in the range of 13 percent and 22 percent, respectively. It is not. It is, in fact, much worse. Our decline in attendance is modest compared to our decline in the making of new disciples.”



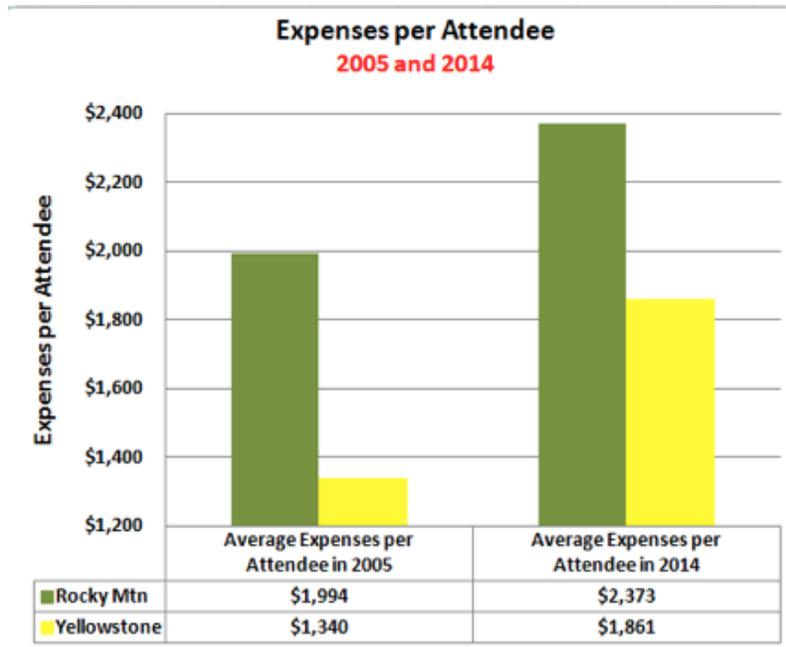
For example: Rocky Mountain attendance in 2014 was 87% of 2005.

Already, many of our rural communities that once saw large United Methodist memberships are seeking out shared ministries between local churches, which are becoming federated⁴, dual-affiliated or union congregations to meet pastoral staffing needs, building needs, and mission needs of actually meeting people where they are: at home, in the schools and in the community. It is time for both local congregations and conference-level ministries to also break out of their silos and focus more intentionally on our mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

More often than not, the church is becoming more a place of burden than one of rejuvenation. In the past decade, the financial expense per attendee has risen by 19 percent. The decline in attendance coupled with continued financial needs is setting a precedent that will soon become impossible to maintain.

³ “A Few Shared Mountain Sky Area Numbers: Local Church Focus,” Rev. Dr. C. Dennis Shaw, Rocky Mountain Conference Statistician. 2016.

⁴ A federated congregation or federated church is two or more congregations that are affiliated with different denominations that together act as one local church congregation. Federated congregations are distinguished from dual-affiliated congregations, where the congregation as a whole is affiliated with more than one denomination. Federated congregations are also distinguished from union congregations, which are formed by separate congregations that cooperate, but exist as separate entities affiliated with separate denominational bodies. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federated_congregation. E.g., United Church of the San Juans in Ridgway, CO; Hamilton Federated Church in Hamilton, MT; and Community Federated Church in Thermopolis, WY.



We thrive on service, want to be inspired by God's work, and need to change the fundamental structure of the conferences in order to lead the collective Christian life to which we were called. Joining together as one body, the Mountain Sky Area, will allow us to move forward and change our declining trends.

Our conferences are experiencing an identity crisis of sorts. We are separate but we are joined on so many levels, sharing a bishop, a pool of seminary graduates from Iliff and others, Wyoming DS, Vital Congregations Developer, Transitional Ministry Developer and Director of Communications. The past has taught us that, when examined side by side, our conferences and congregations are going through similar challenges and deficits.⁵ In the midst of a general decline in membership, we find ourselves floundering in the brokenness of our system. The struggle to retain current members is compounded by a failure to develop congregational and conference systems of metrics that allow pastoral and lay leaders to set goals for growth and find ways to measure “achievement” of goals.

The time has come to admit that while we are divided geographically, and often structurally, we are also *united through grace* and a shared mission to create disciples by resourcing our leaders and laity to reach out beyond congregations’ walls. We need to begin connecting via common mission instead of adhering to old boundaries and trying to repair old structures.

⁵ Chart 1: 2014 as a Percentage of 2005 in Four Indicators of Vitality, Appendix A, “Statistical Analysis.”

2. WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?

In asking this question – who is our neighbor? – the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 offers some immediate insight. A person asks Jesus to create a definitive boundary around the concept of neighbor. In doing so, the man sought a clear answer as to the nature of his relational ties. Jesus’ answer disrupted the man’s ideas of neighbor, self, duty, and opportunity. Jesus makes it clear that we cannot easily separate the status and needs of our neighbor from our way of being in the world.

Jesus calls us to love our neighbors. The United Methodist Church as a whole is called to love our neighbors. The Mountain Sky Episcopal Area is called to love our neighbors. But who are our neighbors? Our neighbors are quite simply: everyone. Our neighbors are the people around us whom we are trying to meet, serve, and invite into our local congregations and into the shared ministry work of our conferences.

“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

- John Wesley⁶

THE NEIGHBORS: INSIDE THE SILOS

As each conference is operating under separate broken systems with a shared episcopal leader, many times the hand does not know what the foot is doing.⁷ We have an overarching goal from our denomination, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” but as conferences and congregations we are failing to develop even small benchmarks for a successful future, only looking at the numbers to confirm what we already know about our decline in attendance, membership, and financial gifts. The survival mode each body has been living in has led to the elimination of ministries and boards, the draining of precious volunteer and pastor resources on multi-point charges and boards, the adding of more administrative staff to address the “issues”, and the spending of more time and money on consultants or task forces to tell us who we are. But few of these changes have invited more neighbors to become members of our congregations.

Shared Success: Wyoming District

In 2010 the Mountain Sky Area created the Wyoming District. A first-of-its-kind experiment where a single district, with a single District Superintendent, was comprised of churches from two different annual conferences. One of the many benefits of this arrangement was increased cooperation between the churches across the state:

“Before the Wyoming Experiment, the churches in Wyoming always felt split up (as we were) and on the edges of both conference. The Wyoming Experiment has given us a better sense of our own identity and place. And the friendships between clergy colleagues that are being built across conference lines but within the state has been truly life-giving to me, both personally and professionally.”

—Rev. Jeff Rainwater,
Wyoming District Superintendent

THE NEIGHBORS: OUTSIDE THE SILOS

⁶ Letters of John Wesley, “To Young Friends” by John Wesley, p. 423.

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 12:15-25.

In addition to similar trends and learnings in our respective pasts, we have seen strikingly similar situations in our present. Changing landscapes are affecting much of the mainline church. This is necessitating flexibility in ministry aims in several areas of each annual conference.

One shared trend is the difficulty reaching several particular demographics, including many younger people, those with changing religious or social identities, and non-white ethnic groups.

In both annual conferences, projections indicate sharp increases in ethnic diversity in metropolitan areas over the next 10 years. Also, the growing irreligious nature of our communities, also called the rise of the “nones”, is well documented. Nevertheless, the “Religiously Unaffiliated” now represent more than 22 percent of Americans.⁸ For some, the church seems out of touch or out of pace with emerging values. Specifically, many see the church as disconnected, repressive, shallow, or exclusive. (*You Lost Me*, 2011 by David Kinnaman).

State	“Nones” 2008	“Nones” 2014
USA (Overall)	15%	22.8%
Montana (ranked 8 of 50)	21%	30%
Wyoming (15)	28%	26%
Colorado (9)	21%	29%
Utah (26)	14%	22%

A silver lining can be discerned by recognizing the success stories that work against the trends. Such examples can be found in both conferences.

Yellowstone Conference has seen a surge of young people (ages 16-30) taking an interest in leadership in local congregations, conference leadership, participating in the voting delegation at Jurisdictional and General Conferences, national UMC boards and planning teams. Being a mission-minded conference, Yellowstone has recognized the importance of the Native peoples in our conference through a long-standing and growing ministry in the Blackfeet United Methodist Parish (BUMP), a mission church. It is also deepening its connection with the global United Methodist Church through the strong support of the East Angola Pastor Partnership (www.eastangola.org).

In Rocky Mountain Conference, church planting has been a vehicle for some innovative ministry efforts to reach new and growing demographic segments. New, creative faith communities that don’t look like traditional congregations, gather people who would never come to “church,” and provide useful lessons for established congregations.

Across both conferences, Whole Church Initiative projects (<http://wholechurchinitiative.org>), and other efforts toward general vitality have been well-received by many congregations. This success suggests

⁸ Pew Forum 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>.

that similar tools can be effective across current conference boundaries in working against the trends of decline. Furthermore, feedback from participants from different areas and ministry contexts underscores the value of wide-reaching collaboration.

THE NEIGHBORS: UNITED THROUGH GRACE

We can help each other and make disciples more effectively together than we can apart. If we each admit that current systems of our conference silos are not sustainable, or being filled with diverse populations, or reaching new believers, can we unite in our common mission? It is time to start thinking

Shared Success: Whole Church Initiative

Whole Church Initiative (WCI) began as a project of the Yellowstone Conference to address issues of vitality in local congregations. WCI is creating a new path for this type of work, one that relies heavily on spiritual grounding, discernment, and developing the local assets already in place in the life of the congregation. In 2015 WCI expanded to be an area-wide effort in which more than 30 churches will participate by the end of 2016. An area-wide team of laity and clergy continue to develop the WCI process and expand the opportunities for participation.

“Our participation in the Whole Church Initiative prompted us to examine who we are as a church. The congregational survey helped us assess: Are we the disciples Jesus intends us to be?”

We started an intentional process of forming disciples in 2015, small groups for discipleship. As of January 2016, 20% of our worshipping community has participated in this first phase of discipling. The Holy Spirit has helped us focus on making disciples and deepening discipleship, one person at a time.”

– Rev. Karen McRae,
Cody UMC, Wyoming

about what kind of new ministries we could create among all of our ministry stakeholders that would serve more neighbors while freeing up current constituents and board members to do the ministry work they have been called to do. We have tested the waters extensively through shared staff (Episcopal leaders, Wyoming DS, Vital Congregations Developer, Transitional Ministry Developer and Director of Communications) and through shared missions (Nothing But Nets, Imagine No Malaria, Sand Creek Massacre healing and commemoration, Volunteers in Mission Coordination and the support of UMCOR West).

Creating something new is not the death of one conference or the other. Rather it is the mutual agreement that we are better neighbors together than when we are separated by boundary lines, that we can serve the growing diversity of our communities better with unified resources and staffing, and that we are truly *united through grace* and serving a common mission.

In creating a new annual conference we will be able to begin “a new season of Vital Wesleyan ministry in the Mountain Sky Area”⁹ and begin a new season of effectively identifying, knowing, serving, and loving

the neighbors outside of the restricting silos we have created in our currently separate conferences.

⁹ “Mission Shaped Future” Bishop Elaine Stanovsky <http://www.yacumc.org/missionshapedfuture>

3. WHAT IS GOD CALLING US TO DO?

THE EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY

The creation of a new annual conference in the Mountain Sky Area is an excellent opportunity to begin anew. We as individuals and leaders of the new conference can use the transition strategically to rekindle our Wesleyan heritage, and to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of our world. Every journey is oriented by its goal, and our goal is to build on a new foundation with what can be accomplished, not on what could have been in the past.

We long to see every congregation in the new Mountain Sky Conference making disciples of Jesus Christ with the support of every annual conference employee, appointed leader, and volunteer.

We believe in these principles of Wesleyan vitality:

- Evangelistic zeal, spiritual vigor, and missional vitality for all people
- Effective small groups where Christians become disciples
- Outreach ministries that transform communities with love
- Passion to serve poor and marginalized people
- Love of knowledge and of the natural world
- Educated clergy serving in partnership with empowered laity

COMMUNICATE CONSISTENT VISION AND MISSION OF THE NEW CONFERENCE

In communicating a vision it is important to acknowledge past history. The new conference will make a concerted effort to keep the history of the two former conferences and use portions of the history when describing our vision of the future. Both conferences currently have vital congregations making disciples and doing wonderful, mission-oriented work in their communities. These congregations will be encouraged to continue their efforts, and to become mentors for other congregations. Vital congregations can collaborate with congregations wishing to start similar missional initiatives and help them with their mission-oriented plans. Conference resources can support this effort by providing expert advice, information, and assistance to the leadership.

In order to provide a positive value to the process of creating vital congregations, the new annual conference will strive to unify its ministry across the entire geographic region, while recognizing that vitality will be expressed in diverse ways due to geography and demographic differences. We trust that the new conference will commit to helping identify and guide congregations toward Wesleyan Vitality. To do so, the conference will need to prioritize its human and financial resources based on the needs of the congregations it serves.

CONSCIOUSLY CREATE DISCIPLES IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Disciples are formed in congregations. The role of the conference will be to equip leaders to inspire congregations for outreach, including experimental missional projects. Local church leaders will be encouraged to conduct missional outreach projects that are tailored to their communities. Clergy and lay leaders will be trained in strategies that free their people to use local gifts and talents, supplemented by conference resources, to venture into new mission fields. Priority will be given to work that touches communities outside the church walls, much as early Methodists reached out to the poor and marginalized in their day.

Leaders need to be coached in the dynamics and methods for venturing into new communities and new opportunities. Local clergy and laity will rely on the support and encouragement of conference leaders for the confidence to carry out their experiments. Training can present lessons learned from successful missional projects conducted by other congregations, so that we may learn new ways to build relationships with new people. People's lives can be changed by relationships in small groups, whether they are within, on the edge of, or outside a congregation. The conference can help congregations by equipping and encouraging them to bear the fruit of God's spirit and make disciples who live in peace, joy, hope, justice and forgiveness with God's grace.

A NEW AND VITAL ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Within our connection, there are boundless opportunities for missional collaboration. In some cases, this may take the form of pairing two or more congregations around a common outreach project. These "affinity" groups can share their strengths and serve as an example to less experienced churches. In other instances, it may involve pairing an experienced congregation with a church that hopes to launch a new initiative, bringing expertise to get the new project off the ground until the local congregation is able to sustain it alone.

The new conference will be rich in experience, with many shared missional opportunities. Our metro areas have all seen rapid growth, and many communities have programs to reach out to new arrivals. Resort communities, energy-producing regions, and agricultural areas all have experience with seasonal workers. College towns have explored many ways to connect with student populations. All of these experiences contribute to a collective learning that can be shared with others throughout the new conference.

Shared Success: Transitional Ministry

In 2015 a new temporary position was created to help develop processes to aid churches in transition. Many of our churches have seen dramatic changes in their membership and now need to adapt to new ways of being a church. Often this involves training laity to fill roles traditionally left to the clergy. Many congregations have benefited from this intentional investment of time and energy.

"My ministry since 2010, first as D.S. in Wyoming and now as the area-wide Transitional Ministry Developer with Small Churches, has been able to connect congregations and provide on-the-ground ministry resources and networks for both laity and clergy. Through the power of the Spirit, we have been able to support and grow deeper faith relationships with our United Methodist sisters and brothers, no matter the location or size of our congregations."

—Rev. Deb Olenyik,
Transitional Ministry Developer

Leadership training that currently takes place at the conference level, such as Missional Leader, Lay Servant ministry, and Whole Church Initiative, can be expanded through regional settings across the new conference. This would reflect the intent of the Mission Shaped Future Team to promote training and innovation at the margins of our conference, rather than initiating new ideas from a central point. It represents a shift from giving *orders* to giving *permission* for new ministry.

Shared Success: Communications

Communications across the area saw major improvements when an area-wide Director of Communications was hired in 2014. Updates about what is happening around the area are more timely and more informative. A new website was launched for Rocky Mountain Conference and many behind-the-scenes upgrades have been put into place to make communication easier and more robust.

"My top goal has always been 'A better way of telling the story in the Mountain Sky Area.' With the launch of a new website for Rocky Mountain Conference on the same platform as Yellowstone Conference, and the purchase of new video conferencing equipment to connect across boundaries, we're sharing more ideas, more content, and truly doing a better job of telling the story of our mission and ministry."

—Charmaine Robledo
Director of Communications

The role of the Mountain Sky Conference would be one of uniting our diverse region, empowering the spirit of Wesleyan Vitality through new tools made possible by advanced training and digital technology. None of these initiatives are new to us. The new conference is simply a catalyst for these changes. We are urging United Methodists in the Mountain Sky region to "get outside." Our churches serve God's mission to the world. We are invited to go outside of our church buildings, outside of the traditional boundaries of ministry that limit our outreach, and outside of the expectation that only experts can make disciples. We are all uniquely qualified to make disciples in our own time and place.

4. WHAT PRINCIPLES WILL WE FOLLOW IN THE NEXT THREE TO FIVE YEARS?

Now that we have explored our present and where God is calling us next in the broadest of terms, it is important to begin to articulate what creating a new annual conference means. We need to know what we are trying to focus our resources to accomplish, so we can evaluate proposals and make decisions that will lead toward that vision. If we do not do this well, we risk reverting to what is easiest or what feels most palatable. We need to know what principles we are trying to live out, so that our decisions will lead us in the right direction.

Below are the principles developed by the Mission-Shaped Future team in consultation with others. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list or be seen as unchangeable. It is a starting-point that, after much prayerful consideration, our group feels God is moving us towards.

PRINCIPLE 1: DEDICATE CONFERENCE RESOURCES TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND VITALITY OF LOCAL CONGREGATIONS.

The new conference needs to better claim its role in encouraging, resourcing, and equipping our local congregations and developing new Christian leaders. The health and vitality of the conference as a whole is deeply related to the health and vitality of the local churches. The two cannot be separated from each other.

While we affirm there is no one solution to the issues of vitality that face our local congregations, it is imperative that the conference invest in developing systems and cultivating leaders that will aid each congregation in living out to the fullest its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

PRINCIPLE 2: SIMPLIFY CONFERENCE STRUCTURE AND ELIMINATE REDUNDANT WORK.

The new conference, while large in geography, will still be relatively small in terms of number of churches and number of members. By eliminating redundant committees from the two current conferences, precious leadership resources will be freed up for the critical missional work of the new conference.

In addition, creating the new conference offers an unprecedented opportunity to scale back the number of committees and teams and allow us to be more nimble and responsive.

The current efforts around creating “permeable boundaries” demonstrate the value of this opportunity. Shared staff positions like the Wyoming DS, Vital Congregations Developer, Transitional Ministry Developer and Director of Communications have greatly benefited both Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone conferences. However, we have nearly reached the end of what it is possible to do while remaining two separate entities. These shared positions have also introduced new inefficiencies as people are required to interact with two separate conference systems, negotiate two budgeting processes, and in some cases doubling the number of meetings and thus limiting the time available to fulfill the actual job.

We have recognized from the beginning that as we create a simplified means of doing our work, great care must be taken to ensure we maintain the opportunity for a broad range of voices to be heard. This is especially important for those traditionally marginalized by society or the church.

PRINCIPLE 3: FOCUS CONFERENCE WORK MORE ON DISCIPLESHIP THAN INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCES.

Here we recognize that the principle of “keeping congregations happy” is not serving the conference or the local congregation. The new conference will put at its center the calling of the church to make disciples. All of us – pastors, lay leaders, staff, and local church parishioners – will need to grow in our ability to set aside personal tastes in order to serve God’s mission in the world.

This is not an invitation to callousness or disregard for people's feelings. Instead, it is an effort to foster a more spiritual environment, where we seek to demonstrate by our behavior and decision-making the high calling of humility and sacrificial love set by Jesus Christ.

PRINCIPLE 4: INCREASE COLLABORATION BETWEEN CONGREGATIONS OF SIMILAR AFFINITY.

One of the most powerful tools of any annual conference is the ability to connect local congregations to one another. Technological advances make it possible to bridge our four-state geography in ways only dreamt of by previous generations. We will have the capacity to connect congregations of similar affinity and context to resource one another and learn.

PRINCIPLE 5: DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A CONSISTENT DEFINITION OF DISCIPLESHIP AND A MEANS FOR MEASURING AND CELEBRATING DISCIPLE-MAKING.

The mission of every local church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of their community and the world. Despite this clear call, we lack a consistent definition of what a disciple is and any means to know if our mission is being accomplished. The new conference will be positioned well to explore the definition of discipleship as well as measuring and celebrating progress.

This consistent definition will guide the work of the conference. Local congregations are free to adopt as little or as much as they feel called to. The goal is to bring consistency to the work of the conference and limit the valid criticism of “flavor of the month” that comes from constantly shifting vocabulary.

New Idea: MAVIS

The Mountain Sky Area Video Information System (MAVIS) is a series of locations with dedicated video conferencing equipment. Each location can connect to the others, allowing people to travel a much shorter distance to their nearest MAVIS site instead of everyone traveling to a central location. The system will expand to six sites in Yellowstone Conference in 2016 with an additional site in Denver. Future expansion is planned as funds become available.

“The use of [video conferencing] technology allowed us to reduce our travel costs to next to nothing, which leaves more money in our administrative fund to focus on reviews and analysis of our accounts. The addition of the [MAVIS] unit at the Conference Office has been even better because we have all the conference resources at our fingertips, including equipment and personnel as well as reports and other records. It has saved us time and energy, on top of the money we have saved in travel costs.”

—Pam Dandrea,
Chair, Yellowstone Conference Board of Pensions

CONCLUSION

After months of work that built on years of work preceding it, it is clear to our team that the process of creating a new conference is a unique and valuable opportunity that needs to continue. It has allowed us to start the conversations we have needed to have for a long time about the health and vitality of Wesleyan ministry in our area. It invites us into deep introspection while also requiring us to dream big about the possibilities ahead.

Risk is inherent in this process, with the biggest risk being that we move forward with the process and losing sight of our overall goals. That is why this document was created and why we have endeavored to state our principles clearly. These principles can provide accountability as we move forward to find answers to Questions 5, 6 and 7.

Many have expressed a desire to hear concrete details about how pensions, itinerancy, conference committees, and other aspects of conference life will function in this new Mountain Sky Conference. That is a very understandable desire. However, it would be premature to make decisions in any of these areas before we have agreement about what we hope to accomplish in creating a new conference. If we can develop and affirm our guiding principles, we can then move forward.

There is no doubt that God's hand has been in this process and will continue to be moving forward. We urge continued discernment about where we are being called as a church. Surely God's most important desire is that more people will encounter God's grace through the Holy Spirit and come to know the love, forgiveness, and acceptance offered through a relationship with Jesus Christ. And as Christ empowers these followers to be disciples, they will transform their communities and the world in life-giving ways. This is God's audacious dream in which we as the church share. To achieve this dream will take bold and faithful action which is exactly the opportunity we are presented with here.

*Everyone around was in awe – all those wonders and signs done through the apostles!
And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common.
They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.
They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home,
every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God.
People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew
as God added those who were saved.*

- Acts 2:43-47, *The Message*