

**State of the Annual
Conference**

Cabinet's Report

Inclusivity Study

The State of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference
June 9, 2006
Alan Rhein and J. Keith Zimmerman, Cabinet Co-Chairs

Bishop, Members of the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference, and guests, we come to share with you the state of our conference. We live in a day and time that we have come to realize that "it is all about relationships". I don't know how many of you know Shel Silverstein the writer of children's books of poetry. I have read these to my children and grandchildren. They are delightful and unique expressions of children and their lives. One of his poems is about relationships.

Apparently there is family that has several children and the parents feel the need to give them all a bath at the same time. He writes this poem, "there's too many kids in this tub, there's too many elbows to scrub. I just washed a behind that I'm not sure was mine. There's too many kids in this tub!"

Well, that is one expression of relationships. Another happens to come from an experience I had with my granddaughter Annibel. She calls her grandmother "nana" and me "papa", which I thought was a "silly" name until she called me that, and now, it is just fine! Well, anyway, we attended church service with Anni and her family. At the close of the service the pastor, Rev. Eadie, gave an invitation for persons to come to the kneeling rail at the altar and pray. Well, we are sitting there and Anni takes her Nana's hand and says, "Nana, will you come and pray with me?" Well, I was embarrassed. You see Anni was only three at the time and I thought that she would go up there and fidget and play around. But you know what, she went up to the rail and knelt for maybe five minutes with her eyes closed and prayed! Well, I felt about "this tall". You know what I learned? I was reminded that God still speaks to the hearts and lives of men, women, and children in a desire to be in relationship with them. I told Anni's mother that Anni may not understand what God is saying to her, but God is speaking to her heart and she responded in the way she could understand.

Friends, God is still speaking to the hearts of people, in whatever way they can understand, striving to be in a transforming relationship with them. Our responsibility as a church is to create the kind of atmosphere that will enable them to form that relationship and let Christ form them into disciples that will transform the world.

Aligning ourselves with the vision and mission of the IGRC---is all about relationships. Relationships are what make our lives breathe and move and have life. We are created by God to be in "right relationship" with God and to be in "right relationship" with our fellow human beings. It is also important that we, as a conference be in "right relationship" with the vision and mission we have laid out for ourselves as United Methodists in the Illinois Area. Through our relationship with God our vision and mission keeps its integrity and meaning that is not just our own but comes from God. This, then, keeps us aligned with who we are so that we can do the work that God has called us to do and will continue to call us to do.

We understand as our vision and mission grows and our relationship with God feeds it that we begin to look outside of ourselves and become involved in hands on ministry that touches the lives of others to introduce them to the transforming power of Jesus.

Let's look again at the Vision the IGRC has established for itself... "all the physically and spiritually hungry people of the world feasting on God's abundant grace at God's table so that they experience God's unconditional love for them, are formed in that love, and are sent to live and share that love with the individuals and institutions of our world." This is a self-perpetuating vision in that those who experience this grace go out to lead others to that grace and then they go out and on and on.....

The mission of our annual conference is to form disciples of Jesus Christ by equipping it local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church, all to the glory of God. (2004 Book of Discipline, Par. 601)

In other words our mission as an annual conference is to "equip and connect" our local churches. Equipping them by providing the resources and training they need to fulfill the vision and connecting them with the larger world beyond their walls to reach "all the physically and spiritually hungry" with the grace of God. This connecting is to persons in their community and around the world. And the most important part is that this is all done "TO THE GLORY OF GOD"!!!!

This "equipping and connecting" part of our mission can best be illustrated by the response our conference gave to the hurricane tragedies of 2005. Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas all became a clear and powerful connecting piece of our mission as Christians in the IGRC. The need was shared. The means by which a response to the overwhelming needs could be accomplished---work teams, the distribution center--- financial resources, etc. Then, the connection happened by our response. Did you know that we increased our giving to advance specials in 2005 by 170% over 2004 which includes \$921,738 to Hurricane relief, \$37,716 for pastor support in Louisiana---for those pastors whose churches no longer exist because of the hurricanes---\$55,000 that was undesignated giving to the Advance and other giving to the advance for a total of \$2,399,000!!!!!!!! There have been nearly fifty work teams from the IGRC that have gone to this area to help in the rebuilding and more are planning to go.

I would ask all of you to stand who have gone on work trips to this troubled area of our country.....I would like all of you to stand who have given in any material way---money or supplies.....

All of this happened on the heels of an overwhelming response to the Tsunami that occurred in 2004.

This is the strength of who we are as United Methodists and particularly an illustration that we truly, as John Wesley's would say "saw the world as our parish."!!!

This past year has been a year of study, searching, learning and praying by your leaders of the IGRC. There was a commitment made to better align ourselves as a conference with our "Vision and Mission". Why? Because our vision and mission has evolved over the last few years into a clear committed path to "equipping and connecting" us as United Methodists to make disciples both for the transformation of our world---here and abroad. Many persons have spent many hours in Christian Conferencing, study, evaluation and re-evaluation, and much Bible study and prayer looking for a richer and more specific alignment of our conference with our vision and mission. It has been stated over and over that the "Vision and Mission" statement of our Conference is a working document and it truly is because if we put together our vision and mission and then dust our hands together and say, "well that is that", then we run the risk of missing the work of God's spirit among us and among others that might lead us into the path of others who need to hear the Good News of Jesus and experience His transforming power.

There were five areas that were focused on in this aligning process:

1. Renewing our focus on God in Jesus Christ
2. Re-aligning District Relationships
3. Re-assessing Ministry Relationships
4. Re-shaping Working Relationships Among paid and Volunteer leaders (lay and clergy)
5. Re-engaging with God's people in need in our local communities and around the world.

"The means of grace".....this is the heart and soul we often talk about when we talk about our United Methodist DNA.....that part of us that marks our very being in a distinctive and clear way that sets us apart from the rest of the world.

There were three qualifications John Wesley required all of his people who were called Methodist as an evidence of their desire of salvation:

1.doing no harm by avoiding evil of every kind
2.by doing good of every possible sort, as far as possible, to all
3.by attending upon all the ordinances of God:
 - a. The Public worship of God
 - b. The ministry of the word, either read or expounded
 - c. The Supper of the Lord
 - d. Family and private prayer
 - e. Searching the Scriptures
 - f. Fasting and abstinence

There is a renewed and specific emphasis being placed on these "means of grace". When leaders gather the "means of grace" is a topic of discussion and in the context of the gathering acted out in whatever way is appropriate....For example, most of our conference and district meetings begin with a study of scripture and often have the Lord's Supper as a part of the gathering---either at the beginning or the end of the time together.

The commitment to live out the "means of grace" more directly and intentionally is not merely a "program plan" to grow the church but rather is the way to grow disciples who will then have the spiritual depth and maturity to share Christ with others. It brings alive the openness to the spirit of God in the lives of persons.

The "means of grace" has always been the life blood of who we are as United Methodists and we believe that we need to emphasize the practice.

This emphasis on the "renewing of the focus of God in Jesus Christ" by embracing the discipleship journey through what is being called, "NEW STREAMS OF LIVING WATER INITIATIVE", is another part of the emphasis in the IGRC on the "renewing of the focus of God in Jesus Christ. This is an embracing of the discipleship journey. This new process----this is not just another program for church growth----of our conference is designed to help individuals understand what discipleship is, help individuals understand that a life of discipleship is a lifelong journey, help individuals know specific things they can do to grow deeper as a disciple of Jesus Christ and help answer the question, "How do we fulfill what Jesus commanded? How do we make and grow disciples?", and this lets the community know that the church is taking seriously the call to make disciples. This is a process for local churches to initiate intentional leadership development and intentional disciple formation....You will be hearing more about this at this session of our AC and in the near future. There is even commitment to have a staff person lead and co-ordinate this "New Streams Initiative".

As you remember from AC 2005, there was a proposal presented to you by the cabinet to move from 12 districts to 10. This process was completed with new district lines beginning in Sept. of 2005. This change has been challenging and maybe even a little frustrating at times, but has been well received by all that were affected by the change.

1. As a result two district offices and parsonages were closed and/or sold....Olney and Decatur.
2. Two district offices and parsonages were relocated---Mattoon to Effingham and Carbondale to Marion.
3. Two District Administrative Assistants are each serving two

Districts: Spoon River and Illinois River Districts and Embarras River and Iroquois River Districts.

There has been and will continue to be "regional" events held, rather than "district" events to allow for persons to attend an event in their region that may be closer and require less travel time than a "district" held event.

There is still study going on to find other ways district relationships may be further re-aligned to more effectively challenge us to become a vessel where disciples are made and lives transformed.

As has already been said, "it is all about relationships" and another area that there has been a great deal of time spent on is the relationship of the various ministries of our conference. The first piece of this re-assessing is the Ministry Assessment.

With the help of Dr. John Harris a program assessment and effectiveness specialist from Samford University in Alabama, Donna Gaither, Susan Ruach, and Deb Smith, all from the General Board of Discipleship in Nashville, a process and tool was developed to assess

the various ministries of the IGRC and their alignment with our vision and mission. This process was developed in the summer and fall of 2005 and then implemented in the budgetary discussion in Jan-March for the establishing of a 2007 conference budget to be presented at this session of AC. There were three questions each group used to assess their ministry:

1. What activities are you currently doing in your ministry group that furthers the Vision and Mission of the IGRC?
2. What specific activities are you planning in your ministry group for 2007 that will further the Vision and Mission of the IGRC?
3. What will be the tangible results that will indicate your activities further the Vision and Mission of the IGRC?

This process was carried through by the persons involved in those ministries meeting together to focus on the whole of the Conference and see what role individual ministries play in the fulfillment of our Vision and Mission. The goal was to assess all of the ministries of the conference and develop measurable tools to evaluate their alignment with the Vision and Mission. This was a challenging and exciting time as we all worked together to focus on our Vision and Mission. This process will continue to be refined as we move forward in its use as a Conference.

Much time and energy was spent in the past year looking at ways we might reshape our working relationships. The goal here was and is to develop ways in which our working relationships as various boards, committees, agencies, and staff can better lead us in reaching our vision and more fully living our mission as a Conference. It is imperative that we have the kind of working relationship with all the parts of the conference that will help the overall mission, "to make disciples", happen more fully and effectively. If our staff and groups are all working effectively together our churches will work more effectively as well and this is where making disciples happens.

One of the key pieces to this re-shaping of working relationships is the "Common Table". A common table is a gathering of United Methodists in the IGRC who are invited by the Bishop and/or the cabinet to sit at table together for the purpose of Christian conferencing.

What happens at common tables is that:

1. A strengthening of relationships occurs as people sit around the table and share in conversation about a need, concern, or issue. Any time we can gather together and share, we help develop the kind of relationships that

enable us to create trust and a desire to work together for our common mission, "to make disciples."

2. Connecting the connection---bringing together the various parts of our conference and connecting with each other for the purpose of growing in Christ as well as growing a relationship that uplifts and strengthens all of us to live out our vision and mission.
3. Furthering the mission of the IGRC by addressing a question that enhances our disciple-making ministry....are there restraints to our disciple-making ministry that we need to deal with? Are there areas we need to look at that can move our disciple-making process further down the road? Are there areas of duplication that we do not need to continue? These and other questions form the foundation for "Common Tables".

"Common Tables" are a collaboration in which all participants have the opportunity to contribute to the conversation and its results. The context and focus of the conversation is the vision and mission of the IGRC. The "common table" complements but does not replace the decision-making processes of the conference.

In short the "common table" is a way to build "relationships" by sharing together as we deal with needs, questions, and concerns that are a part of the IGRC.

After having several "common tables" and meeting with various groups throughout the IGRC, it became clear that there was a need to take a serious look at our "working relationships". Various issues emerged that have developed into three specific goals:

1. To reduce duplication of efforts as I shared under the discussion of "common tables";
2. To reduce confusion among those served by the conference;
3. To increase cooperation among all of the various parts of the conference leadership (elected, appointed, and employed) in working together cooperatively, efficiently, and effectively as one team toward our vision and mission.

This re-shaping of relationships utilizes staff positions set forth in the Book of Discipline, 2004, in the conferences standing rules, while focusing on how staff inter-relate with one another, to lay and clergy leaders in the conference, and to local churches.

This process will be assessed over the course of the next year and reported back to the 2007 Annual Conference including proposing any changes in the Standing Rules that might be needed to enhance our working together.

In order to help us visualize the re-shaping of working relationships, we have adopted an ancient Christian symbol. The triquetra, spelled: t-r-i-q-u-e-t-r-a, is not the easiest word to say, but the name of a symbol that seeks to communicate the continuous flow throughout the whole symbol...there is no exclusive point of beginning or ending.

An appropriate symbol in its representation of the Trinity communicating God in three persons. Appropriate as well in our borrowing of the symbol to represent the importance and the inseparability of one part of our conference's working relationship to each of the other parts reminding us, as the scriptures tell us, that we are one body with different parts with no one part being more important than another.

At the heart of our working relationship as a conference is our vision and mission. Everything we are about needs to find us working to carrying out the vision of making disciples in order that we will move nearer to the vision.

One aspect of this working relationship is the Leadership Summit. The Leadership Summit will bring to one table as one team (four times a year) the lay and

clergy leaders of the conference with those who staff our conference and the Bishop for the purpose of assessing current ministries and visioning new ways in which to fulfill our one mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In doing this, the Leadership Summit will be looking at the whole, and not totally focusing on the part for which each has responsibility.

Another aspect of our working relationships will be provided by the *Equipping and Connecting* ministries:

- **Connectional Ministries**
...is set forth in the Book of Discipline of the UMC to “focus and guide the mission and ministry of the United Methodist Church within the annual conference”. This staff person will serve as team leader for the *Equipping and Connecting Team* and oversee those ministries currently relating to the Conference Ministry Team as provided for in the Standing Rules. Terry Clark has served in this capacity for the past three years and we appreciate his leadership and wish him God’s blessings as he again becomes pastor of a local church. We also welcome the person who will be named at this Annual Conference to take on this leadership role.
- **Missions**
...will continue to focus on the outreach of the conference locally and beyond, including but not limited to disaster training and response, Volunteers in Mission, Conference Health and Welfare Ministries, and missional communities. Bunny Wolf has been giving wonderful leadership in this area and we look forward to continued leadership in helping us to reach out in mission.
- **Camping and Retreat Ministries**
...directs the work of the Camping Commission and the campsite staff in seeking to fulfill their purpose in creating “a hospitable environment for the nurturing of Christ-centered transformation through adventure, community and worship that results in growth, leadership and discipleship.” We are blessed by the leadership that Peggy O’Neal is providing for this ministry to all age levels and families.
- **New Streams**
...is something that we will hear more about throughout this Annual Conference and in the year ahead as we take focus on developing a discipleship system in each of our local churches. If approved by this Annual Conference, a new staff position proposed by the Conference Ministry Team will be give direction to this exciting new ministry.
- **Congregational Development**
...will continue its effort to revitalize local churches and to work with congregations in starting new faith communities as set forth in the Comprehensive Plan. Dr. Sherry Daniels has provided energetic and focused leadership to this ministry. We are deeply grateful for her efforts on our behalf and wish her God’s blessings as she follows God’s call to provide pastoral leadership in starting a new congregation in Virginia. In the days and weeks ahead, you will learn more about the next steps that will be taken in providing leadership to this crucial ministry in the life of our conference.

Each of these areas will carry forth the vital ministries they provide, while functioning as a team in equipping and connecting local churches in ministry.

We also want to take this opportunity to thank the host of lay and clergy who are giving their time and energies as unpaid servants in these various areas of ministry.

From time to time throughout this Annual Conference you will see glimpses of the vital ministry they do on our behalf as a conference.

Ministry Empowerment is not a team or area unto themselves, but represents vital support ministries that under gird and extend the ministry of the whole conference.

Communications had previously been under the umbrella of the Conference Ministry Team working to provide information about mission and ministry to the whole conference. Susan Meister has led this ministry with passion and we want to thank her for her work in serving God and the church. Our thanks as well to those on the Communications Team, staff and committee, for the ministry they provide.

The Book of Discipline, 2004 recommended for the first time that each conference have a Director of Communications who would "focus and guide the communications ministry of the United Methodist Church within the annual conference" (§ 608). This new position will relate to the Area Office and the Cabinet under the direction of the Bishop, and will serve as a resource to the *Equipping and Connecting Team*, as well as to the Cabinet and Leadership Summit. This position will be responsible for insuring lines of good communication among the various conference leaders, as well as interpreting the conference's message and ministries within our conference and to the larger world around us. A search process has been undertaken to fill this position and it is hoped that an announcement can be made in the very near future.

Administrative Services is another area that provides *Ministry Empowerment* that enables all of the conference ministries to happen.

This ministry area carries out Disciplinary duties and responsibilities outlined in *The Book of Discipline, 2004*, § 618.2 and § 618.3, which I leave for your light reading when you have spare time, as well as those set forth by the Conference Council on Finance and Administration. This staff person serves as a resource to the Cabinet and to the *Equipping and Connecting Team* while remaining under the authority and supervision of the Council on Finance and Administration. Brenda Barton served in this capacity until resigning last month. She provided the leadership we needed as the dream of a conference center took shape and came to reality. We wish the best for her. The Council on Finance and Administration has named Rick VanGeisen as Interim Director and will in the months ahead be working on staffing this position.

We want to note as well that the Administrative Services director also serves as a resource to the Conference Board of Pensions and Health Insurance, Conference Board of Trustees, and Conference Commission on Archives and History. To each of these groups and to the Council on Finance and Administration, we want to express our gratitude for countless hours you have given to provide the support services so necessary in empowering the ministry of our conference.

Also yoked in our working relationship as a conference is the Cabinet, which is the Bishop and superintendents who serve the conference as set forth in *The Book of Discipline, 2004*--more light reading if you need to fall asleep some night: § 414 through § 416 and § 419 through § 424. We strive to lead the conference in keeping faithful and focused on the mission and vision, and in working together in the spirit of Christian community. We want to acknowledge too with appreciation the work of the Board of Ordained Ministry. We held three Common Tables with the Cabinet and Board this past year to continue to enhance the working relationships that is ours as outlined in the Discipline.

One final aspect of re-shaping our working relationships is the Visioning Team which brings together those who staff the *Equipping And Connecting Team*, *Communications*, and *Administrative Services* with the *Conference Lay Leader*, *Co- or Associate Conference Lay Leader*, the Cabinet and the Bishop (four times a year) for the

purpose of articulating the vision in light of the input of the *Leadership Summit* and coordinating our one mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Re-shaping Working Relationships utilizes staff positions set forth in *The Book of Discipline, 2004* and the conference's Standing Rules, yet focuses on how staff, lay and clergy leaders, and local churches can better inter-relate in carrying out our mission of making disciples. Be reminded that these relationships are evolving and they will be assessed over the course of the next year and a report will be made to the 2007 Annual Conference, which will include any needed changes in the *Standing Rules* to further enhance our working together.

We would also like to invite you into this conversation about "Re-shaping Working Relationships" by taking some time to receive your input.

Throughout the whole "re-shaping" process it became more and more clear that it truly is "All about Relationships". A part of being in relationship is the sharing of ideas, concerns, and possibilities. We have listened to various entities and groups within the IGRC and now we want to hear from you. Every time we listened to a group or entity there were shifts and refinements made to whatever was our topic of discussion. We expect the same as we share today.

As a conference you have heard that much of what we have been talking about today and in other areas and times are "working documents". This emphasizes the fact that as a conference we do not want to "lock-in" to a pattern of moving forward in our vision and mission and miss some input that might help our conference become more equipped to "make disciples."

And so today, we want your input around two questions. These questions are on your tables and we want you to take a few moments and discuss.

Please assign one person to be the scribe for your tables and after we complete this time of Christian Conferencing the pages will pick up your responses.

QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways do you believe the re-shaping of working relationships in our conference will better lead us toward our vision and mission?
2. What additional aspects of our working relationships need to be considered in the year ahead?

Thank you for sharing your input. While the sheets are being collected, I would like to note that among the Common Tables held this past year were the Covenant Care Team, Conference Council on Finance and Administration, as well as the Board of Ordained Ministry; others included the District Lay Leaders and Conference Lay Leader, the Bishop's Response Team on Clergy Sexual Misconduct, and others, which enhanced our working relationship.

Let's move our focus now to the final area of relationship, which is...

Re-engaging with God's people in need in our local communities and around the world, and let's do so first by "Looking at our current reality".

There are several realities that we can identify:

1. Membership in our conference decreased by 3,115 in 2005—the smallest decline since 1990—but still a decline.
2. Professions of faith increased for the second consecutive year, but about one-half of our churches received no one by profession of faith in the past year.
3. Baptisms increased by 8% over 2004, but worship attendance continued its ten year decline.

In addition we know that:

4. More than 50% of the population in the counties of our conference have not accepted Jesus Christ or are not attending any church.

5. More than 50% of the population is 35 or under—the median age in Illinois is 34.7 years as compared to a national average of 36.2.

This age group also represents the greatest demographic of unchurched persons.

What does that mean? The fields are ripe for harvest...and we are called by Jesus "...to go 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... (Jesus) ...commanded..." Matthew 28: 19-20a).

In this spirit, we challenge each of us and all of us to commit ourselves and our churches to re-engage with the people in our communities and world...committing ourselves to a new reality.

A reality that will have...

1. Every church in our conference with an intentional plan for reaching out to and developing relationships with persons who are not currently a part of any church including those who are not like us.

2. Every church with a disciple making plan that raises vital followers of Jesus Christ.

3. Every church with a hands-on outreach effort to the needy of their community and the larger world.

4. Every church linked in prayer and ministry with our sister conference in Liberia.

We acknowledged earlier all of you and those in our conference who added to their financial gifts to the hurricane victims physically traveling to the Gulf region to be hands on in mission or by working at the Mission Distribution Center in Chatham.

Others have traveled to Liberia in the past year to give presence as well as financial and physical effort to support the United Methodist Conference in that nation.

Would those of you who have traveled to Liberia in the past year please stand, and please stay standing? Thank you.

Would those of you who made a financial gift to support one of the mission efforts in Liberia please stand? Thank you.

Would everyone please stand?

May all of us as we are able in this next year link ourselves in prayer and support with our brothers and sisters in that far land, and make a difference there as well as here! Please be seated. Ways in which we can participate in the ministry in Liberia will be shared in a special presentation tomorrow.

This is the spirit that needs to be stirred in every local church and in each of our hearts to send our gifts, and as we are able to offer our hands in face to face outreach to those in need...whether they live on the other side of the world, in the states of our nation, or across the streets from our church in our local community.

It is also our prayer and our dream that once again...

5. Every church (in our conference will be) experiencing the power of God's Holy Spirit and seeing persons' lives transformed through Jesus Christ.

When this is happening in every church, we will be transforming our currently reality and making a different world: in the places we live in this conference and in the places we touch in ministry across our nation and world.

And, we can only do this, when we are focused on our Mission to form disciples of Jesus Christ by equipping local churches for ministry and providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church.

So that we will move closer to the Vision that...

All the physically and spiritually hungry people of our world feasting on God's abundant grace at God's table so that they experience God's unconditional love for them, are formed in that love, and are sent to live and share that love with the individuals and institutions of our world.

Aligning ourselves with the mission and the vision is all about relationship, the one that begins in Jesus Christ.

It is all about relationships—men, women, and children can having the opportunity to hear the voice of Jesus speak to their hearts in a desire to be in relationship with them. What we must be is a place where, once they hear that voice, that there is never “too many kids in the tub”.

May all that we do at this conference and in the year ahead be “to the glory of God.”

INCLUSIVITY STUDY REPORT

Friday, June 9, 2006

10:15 a. m.

Rev. Alice Shirley and Rev. Beverly Wilkes Null

Alice: At the end of Matthew's gospel, Christ commissions his followers to....“go make disciples of **all** nations.” The first century church adopted this as the **Great Commission**, the *sole* aim of faithful discipleship. Yet taking Christ's gospel of love into **all** the world would require tremendous energy and power, for the Great Commission would require them to travel new roads and become conversant in new languages. The Great Commission would challenge them to overcome anxiety about external differences like the color of skin and cultural practices; and the Great Commission would require that they be willing learners in the hidden world of values, beliefs, traditions, perceptions, and histories --- the “subterranean” stuff over which we so often clash.

If we, in 2006, are to be faithful to Christ's Great Commission, **if** we are to carry Christ's redemptive world into the world, **if** we (in the spirit of John Wesley) are to make the world our parish, **if** we are to turn the trend of dying congregations around, we must, we **must**, become adventurers, learners, and transformers of the exclusive ethnocentricity that characterizes our congregational life. We must confess that most of us have evangelized no further than the safe boundaries of our white, aging, middle class church. We must confess that fear has replaced faith. We must confess that we need the spiritual power of another Pentecost to jettison us out of our sanitized comfort zones to dream the God-dream in partnership with God's multi-lingual, multi-colored, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, and multi-experienced world.

Bev: As a first step toward embracing God's diverse world, the IGRC adopted in 1998 **The Comprehensive Plan on Inclusivity**. The plan, which can be found in the minutes of the 1998 Annual Conference, was offered “in the spirit of our becoming....more like Christ” to raise the consciousness of exclusivity and ‘isms’ which hampers the process of making disciples of Jesus Christ,” and to facilitate “decisive change in the natural passive attitudes of people.”

Among the recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan for Inclusivity were:

- Sensitivity training
- Information sharing
- Provision of an evaluative and reporting instrument for local churches that will measure progress toward inclusivity goals
- The development of plans to assist with growing in inclusiveness
- And the monitoring, evaluating, and reporting of inclusivity as it is practiced on the district and conference leadership levels and in ministries of the conference beyond the local church.

Alice: In the early years of our life as a new conference, the spiritual leaders of our conference cast a vision that invites us into relationship with all the world. Our vision is: ***All the physically and spiritually hungry people of our world feasting on God's unconditional love for them, are formed in that love, and are sent to live and share that love with the individuals and institutions of our world.***

Bishop Christopher had led us in a number of faith-forming and disciple-making practices, as well. The annual Ordinand's Mission Trips, for example, have immersed our ordination candidates in intentional cross-cultural experiences in places like Mexico, Costa Rica and Jamaica. She continues to lead us by living out The United Methodist Church's commitment to cross-racial and cross-cultural appointments.

Following the 2000 General Conference, our Annual Conference invited congregations to participate in the "Acts of Repentance" study. Congregations which accepted the invitation reported positive experiences with Methodists from traditional African American denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal, the Christian Methodist Episcopal, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Churches.

Shortly after uniting as a new conference, we gathered tons of red beans and rice for Haiti, learning about the hungers of the people, as well as the difference between red beans and kidney beans.

The Human Mosaic Project, which began in 2002, was initiated to intentionally invite local congregational leaders to become more competent in the ministry of inclusivity.

This last year, we began fulfilling a new covenant relationship with Liberian United Methodists, who are attempting to recover their church and country from years of civil war.

And, finally, the Inclusivity Study was launched as one means of helping us understand and articulate the ways we need to be working on relationships within the bounds of this conference as we continue on Christ's journey toward becoming a more fully inclusive church.

Bev: In the fall of 2005, the Kaleidoscope Institute was invited by the Illinois Great Rivers Conference to conduct an Inclusivity Study. The goals and processes of the study were developed by the Inclusivity Study Team in consultation with the Rev. Eric H. F. Law, the Executive Director, and Peter Bechtel, Senior Associate of the Kaleidoscope Institute. The goals are as follows:

1. To take an honest and objective look at ourselves as to how inclusive we have been up to now. That is, what are we doing that is *inclusive* and what are we doing that is *exclusive*?

2. To assess the levels of intercultural sensitivity at all levels of the conference leadership.
3. To identify constraints to faithful and fair deployment of all clergy, lay professionals, and elected leaders, with special concern for those who are not part of the historically dominant group in the conference.
4. To identify constraints in our outreach to ethnics and those who are finding little in common with the predominantly white, aged, and middle-class congregations in our Conference.
5. To find constructive ways to prioritize where the gifts of our ethnic clergy, lay leaders and youth might be employed most effectively.
6. To help the Conference celebrate and affirm the inclusivity efforts which we already have in place.
7. And, finally, to arrive at a set of recommendations and programmatic suggestions that will enable the conference to move toward greater inclusivity. These programs might include local and conference-wide leadership development workshops and events and skill training programs.)

Here are some assumptions we made as we approached the study:

1. Diversity is not just about race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. It includes cultural dimensions such as age, ability, theology, marital status, language, geographic locations, roles in church organization, and many more.
2. Diversity is part of creation and is part of every human community.
3. Diversity is at the heart of our Christian faith. For example, we have 4 versions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, each depicting Christ from different cultural viewpoints. We also need diverse experiences of Christ from different communities in order to stay faithful to God. It's also important to note that a major part of Jesus' earthly ministry involved making connections with people with diverse backgrounds --- women, children, the poor, the sick, the foreigners, those whom society considered unclean, and so forth.
4. Being inclusive of people from diverse experiences and backgrounds is, therefore, an essential part of being Christian community if we are to:
 - A. follow Jesus' footsteps in ministry
 - B. See the fuller vision of God when diverse people share their connections with God through Christ.

Alice: The process we used for the Inclusivity Study included a **survey**, which was completed by 395 people, as well as **focus groups**.

The **survey** was developed by the Kaleidoscope Institute in consultation with the Inclusivity Study Team, and was completed by clergy and laity throughout the conference.

The **focus groups** were led by trained facilitators from our annual conference and involved conversation in small group settings. The principle process used in almost all the focus groups involved conversation around photographs provided by The Kaleidoscope Institute. Each "Photolanguage" set included 48 photographs of which participants would select two (2). One photo was to depict the **strength** of the conference in moving toward inclusivity, and

the other photo was to depict the **struggle** of the conference in the ministry of inclusivity. There were 156 people who participated in the focus groups, all of whom also completed the survey.

Bev: The profile of participants in the study shows, first of all, that more males than females participated in the study, more of the participants were married people than single, divorced, widowed, or partnered.

The surveyed group was almost exclusively heterosexual. No one claimed to be gay or lesbian.

More than half---63% of the survey group---was clergy, either licensed or ordained.

The majority (57%) of the people surveyed are from rural churches. Most of the people surveyed are from "pastoral size" churches, which typically have 51-150 in average weekly attendance. Congregational studies show that people from pastoral-size churches tend to organize themselves around the pastor, who is given a great deal of authority and is the center of communication and decision-making.

European Americans constitute 83% of those surveyed. About 1% of the participants identified their racial/ethnic background as "other," including: God's Child, Human Being, American, Gen X and Heaven Bound.

Alice: About 1 in 5 people (22%) had an initial **negative** reaction to the study. We will discover some of the reasons why there were negative reactions as we continue.

The majority of the people surveyed (over 80%) were able to articulate some kind of positive outcome such as:

- The study will lead to greater openness or unity, or
- We can find out good things that we're already doing, or
- It could result in some type of positive action and change.

Only 113% could not offer anything positive at all. This is a drop from 22% of the people who had a negative reaction to the study.

Almost 1 in 5 persons surveyed feared that this study will lead to no action and no change, and another 37% believed it could potentially create division and hurt beyond what we already experience.

It is clear that if the results of this study are to have a truly positive impact on the conference, it must lead to concrete actions. Furthermore, those concrete actions must take into account the fears that people have about further divisiveness, hurting others, forcing people to do things they don't want to do, and distrust.

Bev: Each survey participant was asked to rate the impact of 11 diversity dimensions on their capacity to serve Christ. Their choices for rating included "Critical" impact, "Often has impact," "Sometimes has impact," and "No impact at all."

Note that Sexual Orientation is identified by 22% of participants as having a **critical** impact on their practice of ministry.

Theology, race, language, and ethnicity are also among the top 5 critical diversity factors.

In the "Often Has Impact" category, Sexual Orientation disappears completely, to be replaced by theology. Language, race, age, and socioeconomic factors are identified, also, as having frequent impact on the practice of ministry.

Theology appears in the third category, too. In fact, theology is the diversity dimension that was mentioned the most if you combine the "Often Has Impact" and "Sometimes Has Impact" lists.

Theology is the one that the *fewest* people say has *no* impact on their ministry. This is like a double-negative, adding support to the idea that theology is an important diversity factor in our conference.

Age also shows up in three of the four lists.

The Kaleidoscope Institute ranks diversity dimensions that impact the practice of ministry in our conference in the following way:

1. Theology
2. Race
3. Sexual Orientation
4. Language
5. Age
6. Socioeconomic factors
7. Political Viewpoints.

Alice: The majority (64%) of those surveyed perceived diversity as something positive and felt that differences among people should be accepted and received as opportunities for learning.

About 1 in 5 (18%) perceived difference as something to be avoided and minimized as not important.

About 1 in 20 (5%) perceived diversity as *not* desirable and that those who are different should conform to the majority or change.

Asked how the conference is doing in the areas of inclusivity in *decision-making* and *raising up leadership*, participants rated the conference highest, followed by the district.

Ministries specifically mentioned include:

- Worship
- This Inclusivity Study Team
- The Human Mosaic Project
- Cross-Racial Appointments

One in ten people could not offer any strength.

Participants in focus groups selected photos of children 25% of the time to depict the **strengths** of the conference in the ministry of inclusivity. Specific

comments about the photos expressed a longing to return or yield to the innocence and vitality of children. Some sample comments included:

Sylvester: As a conference we have a great investment in children.

Beth: We look forward to the future when inclusivity will not be an issue.

Rhonda: Children adapt easily and so does the conference.

Terry: Children are able to regenerate easily and create community.

Beth: Children are eager to learn new things.

Rhonda: They thirst for knowledge and love.

Sylvester: Children are having a good time in church; we have lots of programming for kids.

Terry: We are learning how to play together.

Sylvester: We are learning how to include all in the game.

Beth: We are learning to look beyond color, just as children don't see color.

Bev: About the same number of participants in focus groups used images from engineering such as a railroad switching yard, a bridge, and workers

building foundations. These images were used largely to express the complexity of navigating toward diversity.

Some used these images, especially the railroad switching yard, to express their theology, saying that people want to shift tracks and get onto God's track.

- Terry:** We're beginning to build bridges in our areas of struggle.
- Rhonda:** We are building bridges of all kinds: bridges over our difficulties, people-to-people bridges, as well as bridges between people and God.
- Sylvester:** The Conference is very inclusive with people from different backgrounds and beliefs coming together.
- Rhonda:** We're working and building together.
- Beth:** We are creating relationships out of the earth, but they are very vulnerable to the tide of change.
- Terry:** We are digging deeper, working toward one main purpose.
- Sylvester:** An inclusive community *can* become; it *will* become.
- Beth:** When we bring together a diversity of talents – we can build big things.
- Rhonda:** Folks are getting down to bedrock and are building something that will serve community well.
- Terry:** People are working together with intention and intensity.
- Rhonda:** Inclusivity is desirable, but we sometimes need to coordinate the complexities.
- Sylvester:** We have a focused objective; each person brings input. We are learning to collaborate.
- Alice:** Pictures depicting close relationships were used to express the genuine caring that people in the conference have for each other. About 5% of the people from the focus groups share specifically that the conference works best in responding to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.
- Some sample comments included:
- Terry:** We are learning how to hold hands.
- Beth:** I remember when women weren't included, but women seem to have a special bond now.
- Sylvester:** People are more accepting and caring.
- Rhonda:** We are learning how to pass the peace.
- Beth:** We are open in our love and support for each other, as well as for those outside the United Methodist Church.
- Terry:** We are strongest one-on-one.
- Sylvester:** We are generous, helping others in need.
- Rhonda:** We are open to helping the poor and needy.
- Terry:** We come together when things need to get done.
- Sylvester:** During disasters our conference has stepped in to help, regardless of race and socioeconomic factors.
- Bev:** We turn now to our struggles, returning to the survey as a resource. Asked where they have experience *subtle* exclusion, participants named the **local church** more often than the conference or district. Asked where exclusion has been *blatant*, participants ranked the **conference** arena as first. The district level was perceived by those surveyed as having the fewest struggles with the ministry of inclusion.
- Those surveyed named gender, race and ethnicity most often as the areas where the struggle to be inclusive is experienced. About half of those who named gender, race and ethnicity felt that leadership and control of the

conference at all levels is still dominated by white males. The other half perceived reverse sexism and racism. The issue is that both the historically dominant group and the historical minorities feel that they are victims. One group feels that not enough is done to correct the historical exclusion while the others feel that the effort to include the historical minority results in unfair discrimination against them.

A second group of struggles could fall under the heading of "behaviors." The specific struggles mentioned are about behaviors people exhibit when they encounter differences. Some of these behaviors include shutting down of discussion, failing to gather enough information before making decisions, choosing sides, making denigrating statements, attacks, and persons refusing to build bridges by accepting cross-racial, ethnic, or gender appointments.

Only 3% of those surveyed mentioned sexual orientation as a struggle, which is interesting in light of the fact that 22% of the people surveyed said, as you recall, that sexual orientation has a critical impact in their ministry. Political and theological differences are often mentioned in the same breath. Some who labeled themselves as conservative/evangelical felt excluded. Again, there is an interesting disconnect between the 2% in this part of the survey who mentioned political and theological concerns as a struggle, and the fact that theological differences was identified as the diversity dimension having the highest impact on people's ministry.

Age, church size, local church, pastoral categories, clergy family, and disability were all mentioned as struggles as well.

Alice: In the focus groups, the most popular images chosen to depict struggles are a locked gate and a group of keys. Comments suggested issues of power, raising questions such as, "Who has the key?" "Who got locked out?" and "Who has locked themselves in?" The keys were also used to express the complexity of diversity.

Another set of images prompted remarks to the effect that people are out of touch and not willing to get out of their comfort zone to connect with others.

An apartment building inspired some to say: "There are walls between us; we are divided, separated."

Terry: We're on the same page, but not facing each other.

Sylvester: We tend to do our own thing and are not really communicating.

Rhonda: We have too many activities and not enough time to build relationships.

Beth: Everyone is focused on their own thing.

Rhonda: People are not connecting with one another, despite the fact that we live in such close proximity.

Alice: The switching yard, which served as an image of strength to some, was chosen by others as an image of struggle.

Sylvester: We're on different tracks; we need to work toward inclusivity.

Beth: We just go, go, go, and nobody really knows where we are. We run in too many directions.

Alice: An image of a cemetery was used to express a sense of depletion and loss in terms of the aging population of church members. A photo of money prompted another to express concern for decreasing funds and church membership in some areas. Pictures of masks, people putting on clown makeup

and marionettes were used to express people's needs to hide who they are, an unwillingness to see reality, and the question of who is really in control.

Terry: The changes are cosmetic.

Beth: We can't tell which one is really happy. Sometimes, we need to cry.

Beth: The survey also asked the question, "As the Conference strives toward becoming more inclusive in the next 5 years, what evidence will show you that we are making progress?"

The most popular responses (14%) describing evidence of progress had to do with changes in behavior and attitude. The changes named include constructive approaches to differences, inclusion of all the different voices in various kinds of settings, and follow-through on this study.

Some said that the visible physical inclusion of diverse members in committees, commissions, and leadership positions will be indications of progress.

Some focused on their relationship with God as a sign for progress. These reflections called for us to yield to the authority of the Bible and trust God and Christ to help us with our ministry of inclusivity.

Some said that when we are able to use only competence and experience and not gender, race, age, and so forth as criteria for leadership, we will have made progress.

Some said that when we stop talking about diversity or it becomes a non-issue, we will have made progress.

Bev: In consultation with the Inclusivity Study Team, the Kaleidoscope Institute offers some conclusions and recommendations:

1. If the study is to have a truly positive impact on the conference, it needs to lead to concrete actions.
2. The programs in response to the study must take into account the fears people have about further division, the potential of hurting others, the negative effects of forcing people to do things they don't want to do, and distrust.
3. The types of actions and programs that will increase the capacity for inclusive ministry must take into account the needs of the 3 different attitudes toward diversity: the positive, the minimizing, and the majority rule. That is, the programmatic strategies must be carefully chosen in order to achieve positive change.
4. The programs and actions should help people in the conference to address constructively the top diversity concerns: Theology, Race, and Sexual Orientation.

Alice: Kaleidoscope Institute celebrates with us the following strengths of our Conference in relation to inclusivity:

Many people see more visible evidence of inclusion at the conference level.

Many feel that even though diversity is very complex, the conference is heading in the right direction.

There is a yearning to return to the innocence of children who do not see difference and can adapt and be creative.

The conference is also very good at building caring relationships and in meeting the needs of those displaced by disaster.

Bev: Kaleidoscope Institute draws two conclusions about our struggles:

1. When both the historically dominant group and the historical minorities claim to be victims, both sides tend to revert back to a

political approach to change. How do we achieve mutual understanding of our differences and still attend to each other's needs in community.

2. The destructive behavior that people exhibit when dealing with differences is a major concern. Behavior such as shutting others down, choosing sides, and blatantly hurtful statements further alienate us from one another. How do we deal with issues that divide us in a faithful, constructive way?

The Kaleidoscope Institute and the Inclusivity Study Team of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference recommend the following actions:

1. **The establishment of training programs** that would give leaders skills and strategies in dealing with differences constructively and faithfully. Various gatherings, such as annual conference, district and local church gatherings could provide the arena for this learning.
2. The establishment of a dialogue program to initiate conversations around our theological differences, especially our approaches to theology and ethnics. We need to understand one another theologically in order to build strong foundations for ministries of inclusion.
3. **The establishment of a consultative/dialogue process** to arrive a set of criteria for leadership that includes a clearly state and agreed-upon description of competent leadership *in a diverse changing community*.
4. Since this study (especially the survey) did not have a significant participation by those not in the historically dominant group, the conference should **conduct a separate study** to listen to the experiences of this group.

Alice:

The Inclusivity Study team is grateful for the help of Rev. Eric Law and the Kaleidoscope Institute in this assessment of the hopes and dreams of so many in our annual conference, as well as the hard facts about our current reality. The leadership of this conference is committed to growth in ministries of inclusivity and the hard work of learning and teaching the relational and spiritual skills that enable us to meet God at the boundaries of the unknown. *Yes*, a fully inclusive church and world is an audacious goal. *Yes*, our work will at time be scary. *Yes*, we will all have to change. And a definite *yes*, we will need the power of Christ's Holy Spirit to do it. Let us begin our journey together today, asking ourselves if we are able and willing to make the following statement of belief found in our Igniting Ministry media resources:

Rhonda: I believe no one who asks for help should be turned away.

Terry: I believe it is good to question.

Sylvester: I believe none of us is qualified to judge the lives of others.

Beth: I believe a church isn't a building.

Alice: I believe my life is supposed to add up to something.

Bev: I believe when you truly embrace diversity, you embrace God.

Alice: We may not all believe exactly the same thing, but the people of the United Methodist Church and the Illinois Great Rivers Conference believe in God and each other.

Bev: With the power of God's Holy Spirit we *can* become, we *will* become an inclusive church, to the glory of God and God's son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
AMEN.