

# Report to the Yellowstone Annual Conference

## by the Yellowstone Cabinet

### Introduction

It has been an extraordinary year since we gathered in Helena for Annual Conference 2016. The Mountain Sky Area has been working on your behalf to help support and build vital churches that live into God's vision for beloved community. Every day we are inspired by your ministries and commitment to Jesus Christ and the many ways you are already living into the vision of Beloved Community. Thank you.

### Welcoming Bishop Oliveto

Last July, all eyes were on the Western Jurisdictional Conference gathering in Scottsdale, Arizona. Most of us were fully expecting Bishop Elaine Stanovsky to be returned to the Mountain Sky Area for one last quadrennium. Upon the election of Bishop Karen Oliveto, Bishop Elaine was assigned to the Greater Northwest Area and Bishop Oliveto was assigned to the Mountain Sky Area. The rest is history, or rather is becoming history, as we are now a central part of shaping the future for our entire denomination.

What a journey it has been and how fortunate we are to have received this gifted, visionary spiritual leader. Bishop Karen immediately won the members of the Cabinet over with her passion for Christ, her deep love for the church, and her commitment to creating loving Christian communities in every place. Her energy and enthusiasm is contagious. Her willingness to honestly engage and affirm those who opposed her election has been inspiring. She leads from a place of acceptance and love, desperately needed in these deeply divided times.

### Episcopal Tours

The first thing Bishop Oliveto asked of us was to set up tours across each District, with particular emphasis placed upon those communities on the margins which are often overlooked. (And there are many communities on the margins of this vast Area!) Within her first few months among us, Bishop Karen and each of the members of the Cabinet covered thousands of miles stopping in hundreds of churches and meeting the people of our vast region for conversations, pictures, cookies, coffee, meals and tours.

She experienced firsthand the full flavor of the Mountain Sky Area from the Blackfeet Reservation of Montana to Trinidad, Colorado, from St. George, Utah to Chugwater, Wyoming. She became familiar with the clergy and the congregations they served. Her energy and enthusiasm were infectious, and while she wore us out, it was a wonderful experience. Some churches had never had a Bishop visit before and many were deeply grateful for her presence.

For members of the Cabinet, the tours were an opportunity to see the churches we serve with new eyes as past stories were told anew and new questions were asked. It's amazing what one can learn in the matter of only a few minutes sometimes. Of central concern in those conversations was how could the conference better resource the local congregations. What do you need from us and how can we support you? This central question is at the heart of our ongoing work as a Cabinet.

### Vision for future - One Mountain Sky Area Cabinet

In the midst of this episcopal transition, the Yellowstone Conference and the Rocky Mountain Conference were already in the midst of making history as we pursue conversations that we hope and expect will lead us toward the formation of a new Mountain Sky Conference in the next few years. With the vote at last annual conference by both Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone in support of this endeavor, the Cabinets have looked for ways to live into our shared future now. The most obvious was to quit acting like two Cabinets. We have only one Bishop and we already have shared area staff including one Superintendent.

For much of the last year, we have been living into our work as one Cabinet, building a shared story, getting to know each other's areas and congregations, and being even more open to making cross-conference appointments where it seemed most appropriate and would do the most good for the congregations and the pastors. It is a joy that many of the Rocky Mountain Conference Cabinet are here today.

In the next year, we intend to live into this vision of a single Mountain Sky Area Cabinet even more as all our meetings will be held together in the coming year. More importantly, we will be meeting across the area as each District Superintendent will host at least one Cabinet meeting within her or his District. It is our hope to include within these meetings a time to meet with clergy and laity for ongoing discussions.

The tours that began Bishop Oliveto's time among us are by no means over. This summer the tours will be more regionally gathered as we come together for "holy huddles" to discuss how we can live together faithfully and fruitfully, recognizing our great diversity and addressing those ways in which we are divided. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' prayer was that all his followers would become and remain one. It is our calling to live into this prayer as a Cabinet, as a conference, as an area, and as a denomination. And we believe we can help lead the way for our denomination, because we are stronger, more fruitful, in the work of Beloved Community when we are united.

### Implementation of Circuits / Other Shared Activities

The Yellowstone Conference has led the way as for the past several years you as clergy and laity have been organizing your life more and more as Circuits. The circuit model was implemented, in part, to distribute some of the administrative and connectional responsibilities to circuit leaders to make the experiment of a single Montana District Superintendent even possible. The circuit model also grew out of our early experiments with a missional understanding of church, especially in Wyoming. But we see even greater potential for circuits to foster congregational vitality through peer learning, mutual support and accountability, and a way for us to remain connected across our wide spaces. Thank you, Yellowstone Conference. Because of your successful implementation of circuits, they will be implemented area-wide this summer.

Expect in the next year to see new ways that we will work together through the circuit model and other ways that we can gather. For instance, it is very likely that charge conferences will be held as circuit gatherings this year across the area. It is also the Cabinet's dream to use District Conferences, that have not been used in much of Yellowstone for some time, in a new way. Drawing on the resources held by both annual conferences, we hope to bring in well-known, gifted, church leaders to the area as keynote speakers, but distribute those addresses to District or sub-District conferences. These conferences may also include local conversations and

training. We have only begun to dream ways we can live together in beloved community through circuits.

### **Cabinet Transitions**

One thing that has not changed in this year; the Cabinet itself is always in a state of change. We have said goodbye to Bishop Stanovsky and welcomed Bishop Oliveto. In mid-year, we said good-bye to one member of the Cabinet who had served for almost 9 years, first as Wyoming District Superintendent and then as Mountain Sky Area Transitional Ministries Developer and is now the Senior Pastor of Riverton United Methodist Church -- Deb Olenyik.

And after five years of service on the Cabinet, Kama Hamilton Morton will be taking a new appointment as the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church of Billings, Montana.

When Rev. Morton came onto the Cabinet, she was assigned half of the fourth largest state in the Union. Soon after, she became the Superintendent of the entire state, very likely the largest geographic District at least in the continental US. This is an enormous challenge and she has sacrificed much in her service to the churches and to the conference she loves. So we send her now to her new appointment with our deepest gratitude, our utmost respect, and all the blessings we can offer.

*Kama Hamilton Morton offered words of thanks and farewell.*

And starting July 1, we welcome the Rev. Dr. Jan Witman as the newest member of the Cabinet. Rev. Dr. Witman is now serving Roberts United Methodist Church and on the staff of St. John's Lutheran Ministries in Billings. We are excited about the gifts and insights she will bring to the Cabinet table and the ways she will be able to lead her churches.

*Jan Witman offered words of welcome and hope.*

### **For All That Has Been Thank You, For All That Is To Come, YES!**

It has been quite a year as we have made this journey together. In spite of some struggles, the churches continue to pursue vital and lifesaving ministry to serve the lost and suffering. You continue to build disciples who make a difference. You have stayed connected amid differences, trying to model healthy diversity in a very divisive culture. You have led the way with grace and connectionism and we are thankful. The Cabinet offers our deepest gratitude to all of you, the leaders of the Annual Conference for the ways you love and serve God in Jesus Christ.

Yes, this has been a most interesting and demanding year. But through it all we have seen the Holy Spirit visibly at work, giving birth to a new church and it is an honor to share this resurrection journey with all of you. In the words of Dag Hammarskjold, "For all that has been, thank you. For all that is to come, yes!"

*June 8, 2017*

Respectfully submitted by  
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on behalf of the Yellowstone Cabinet,  
Bishop Karen Oliveto, Rev. David Burt, Rev. Kama Hamilton Morton,  
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