

# Annual Conference Report on the Imagine Team

Rocky Mountain Conference  
Saturday Morning, Plenary, June 21, 2014  
Pueblo Convention Center

## **Introduction: Formation of the Imagine Team      Youngsook Kang**

A new visioning team called the *Imagine Team* was formed at the invitation of Bishop Elaine J. W. Stanovsky. The purpose of the Team is to clarify the mission and vision and adopt priority outcomes and core measures that articulate the future we believe God envisions for the Rocky Mountain Conference.

The work of the Team is to move forward with the visioning process on the shoulders of what has been done so far. For instance, about seventy leaders of the Rocky Mountain Conference gathered for a learning and visioning process at the 2013 Leadership Summit this past September. A conversation was held connecting the Rocky Mountain Conference quadrennial theme, our quadrennial strategic plans and SMART Goals to the larger picture of the changed mission field.

The work of the Team is for deep change. The Team is not asked to manage but carry on what the Rocky Mountain Conference is dreaming. Now, Bishop Elaine is going to share her message of hope and vision for the Rocky Mountain Conference.

## **Message of Hope: We have hope for the Rocky Mountain Conference      Bishop Elaine**

I grew up in a vital congregation. It was a thriving place in the 1950s: two packed worship services with great choirs and relevant, prophetic preaching; huge youth groups that went on hay rides, jamming Sunday School, incredible potlucks, visiting missionaries from the Belgian Congo with real snake skins and pictures of agricultural projects. By the time I was in high school, my peers were drifting away from the church. The Jesus Movement came to town with John the Baptist types that swept kids down to the lakeside for a sudden, emotional baptism. By the time I was in seminary, the church was aging and seeming irrelevant. On one visit to my home church, a friend asked, hasn't seminary killed your faith yet? My first two parishes were slip-sliding away, living off borrowed time. Sustained by aging faithful from the "builder" generation who couldn't understand why their children and grandchildren weren't coming to church with them. Our three sons love us dearly, and they admire what we do through the church. But it's a stretch for many of their friends, so they mostly don't find a spiritual or fellowship home in the church. Admittedly we did subject them to some of the worst praise music out there during some of their formative years.

So, as social patterns changed, the church lost the niche it once had and the churches we are part of today, for the most part, are not sustainable. Fewer, older people are giving more to keep them afloat. That's not sustainable.

Does that mean the gospel of Jesus Christ has lost its meaning? No, but it might mean that the old forms don't carry the gospel any more. "We have this *treasure in clay jars*" Paul writes to the Corinthians. Gil Rendle says, we've got to distinguish between our purpose, which is the treasure, and the container, forms that have carried them. We need to leave the clay jars behind in order to fulfill our purpose.

*The reality is that a revitalized future will require us to break our own rules. . . . purposefully and appropriately so that we do not dismiss the mission of our denomination or pit parts of our community and connection unduly against one another.*

Gil Rendle in *Back to Zero*

The Rocky Mountain Conference is organized for a different time. We need to prayerfully reconnect with our purpose to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, focus our energy and resources on serving God's purpose for us, and let go of lots of clay jars that are cluttering the house.

That's why we formed the Imagine Team of leaders of the Annual Conference to work with Gil Rendle from the Texas Foundation, to find our way back to the core of our mission for Jesus Christ, so that they can lead the Conference into the future. *Ancient – Future* I think they call it.

Now, Let us get a glimpse of the Imagine Team work so that you all can respond.

### **Message of Unsustainability**

**Dennis Shaw**

Bertrand Russell once wrote that some of us are "moved emotionally by statistics. This capacity .... is as rare as it is important." Numbers moved Jesus emotionally to action. Otherwise, why would he gone to go looking for the Lost Sheep, if he were *not* moved? I am going to challenge you for a few minutes to be "moved emotionally" by numbers. Let me start with ...

### **New Church Starts**

From 1945 to 2001 – what is now the Rocky Mountain Conference started 61 churches. That was an average of more than one a year. In the last thirteen years, we have gotten two churches to full recognition as a "church." Two.

We celebrate the chartering of Elizabeth UMC this year. It is our first chartering in a decade. *Does anyone believe our current rate of establishing new churches is an indicator of long-term sustainability for Methodism in the Rocky Mountain Conference?*

Let me now move to ...

### **Worship Attendance**

Since the early 1980s, in spite of pretty steady declines in membership, our conference attendance held reasonably steady for many years in the 35,000 range on an average Sunday. **Everyone** ... our attendance dropped below 30,000 in 2013 and in fact has declined by 13% over the last ten years.

*Does anyone believe our steady loss in worship attendance is an indicator of long-term sustainability for Methodism in the Rocky Mountain Conference?*

Our decline in attendance is modest compared to our decline in ...

### **Making Disciples**

Our mission statement is about making disciples. *We are not doing well here.* Let's look at three indicators: New Christians, Confirmations, and Baptisms.

As I just said, we have lost 13% in our average Sunday attendance over the last ten years. If our decline in disciple creation were comparable with that decline it would be in the range of 13% or so. It is not. It is in fact, *much* worse.

New Christians joining our churches -- Confirmation classes -- Baptisms are all down about 35% or nearly twice what we would have expected given our attendance change.

*Does anyone believe our sharp decline in overall disciple making is an indicator of long-term sustainability for Methodism in the Rocky Mountain Conference?*

### **Allow me to make an invitation for a movement to bottom up thinking**

We need to try something new (pause). We need to try something different (second longer pause).

Our *Discipline* reminds us that it is at the *local* level where the church is the church. Bishop Robert Schnase notes that we also have in our current *Book of Discipline* over four thousand "shall" statements.

*Does anyone believe that top down directives will lead to long-term sustainability ...? Or will it be bottom up?*

Doubtlessly, we *are*, scripturally and theologically, people of hope. And there are in our numbers, glimmers of vitality that move us emotionally to see hope.

### **Vitality is being displayed in many shapes, sizes and forms ....**

If we look for churches in the Rocky Mountain Conference that –

Increased in attendance,

Baptized someone,

Brought in a New Christian, and

Conducted a Confirmation Class.

We show here in your conference booklet (hold it up) the names of 25 churches with the smallest being Chugwater, Wyoming. A worship attendance of 25, and Chugwater is in *this* report. In addition – Chugwater increased in membership **and** they paid 100% of their tithe plus! Can we have a shout out for Chugwater?

*Vitality is not dependent on size.*

If we relax the Confirmation Class requirement and look only at positive attendance change, a baptism, and a new Christian, we add 32 more churches. Thirty-two more churches on the edge of disciple making vitality.

Vitality can be displayed in other transformational ways, but might we offer, it will be difficult -- if not impossible to transform the world -- without disciples. For those rare souls who want to reflect on the important, and prayerfully be emotionally moved, a more extended analysis is in this report (again hold up) ... but I invite you to know that good people are working on this, people who love the church as much as you do are working on this. ***Pray for us.***

We are working in the belief that the people of the Rocky Mountain Conference values transformation, mission, competency, and inclusion. *We believe that we here -- here now and in our local churches now -- have the capacity to lead us, in community, back to long-term sustainability. Do you believe that? If not, we ask: If not you, who? If not now, when? What is your part in this transformational work? What is God's part? Doug Palmer is going to talk about how we might work together to bring transformation into our local communities and the world."*

**What is my part in this? What is God's part in this? Doug Palmer**

Yes, Dennis, truly the work of the Imagine Team is about deep change and transformation of the world. The individuals on the Imagine Team are amazing and dedicated leaders who are working hard to change the church and transform the world. As I have gotten to work alongside them for the past several months, I have been continually amazed by their drive, passion, and kindness.

However, creating dynamic change in the Rocky Mountain Conference can't happen without everyone doing their part in any way that they can. By being here today it is clear that you are a leader in this Church, and today we are asking all of you to work alongside us to lead this Church forward.

In First Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 12, the Apostle Paul tells us that "just as the body is made up of many parts, so it is with Christ" so it is with the Rocky Mountain Conference. We are made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds, a whole range of ages, and a wide variety of ministry programs; and together we work to "Make Disciples of Jesus Christ, for the transformation of the world."

**Invitation to respond Mike Gillette and Brad Laurvick**

**M:** Hi, my name is Michael Gillette

**K:** And my name is Kristi Kinnison

**M:** We wish to give thanks to the entire Imagine Team who have begun this important work.

**K:** This work may seem like a very overwhelming task. For many of you, this may be the first time you have heard this information. I know the first time I heard these statistics, ideas and reflections, it stirred up all kinds of emotions.

**M:** Yes, that was true for me, too. Therefore, we want to ask a couple of quick questions. Please pull out your smartphone and text your message.

**M:** First question: What one word emotion captures your feelings about these presentations? (*Highlighted words are for slide*) (30 second wait or so)  
(Have answers show up on the screen)

**K & M:** (Start sharing and validating answers)

**K:** Second question: Given the challenges and emotions that we are facing - What are 1-4 words of advice, wisdom, or encouragement that you would share with the Imagine Team? (*Highlighted words are for slide*) (30 second wait or so)  
(Have answers show up on the screen)

**K & M:** (Start sharing and validating answers)

**M:** If you would like to review the Imagine Team report, visit the conference website-[www.rmcumc.org](http://www.rmcumc.org) and click on [www.rmcumc.org/imagineteam](http://www.rmcumc.org/imagineteam) or you can find it in the right-side menu under Leadership Summit...

**K:** If you have any insights to share with the committee, we would invite you to send an email to any member on the committee.

**M:** We would like to thank you for sharing your emotions and wisdom with the team and we humbly ask for your prayers as the Imagine team continues this work.

### **Imagine Team Members**

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