

In 2021, Bishop Laurie Haller called for the creation of a Task Force for the Continuing United Methodist Church in the Dakotas. This group was charged with the task of deep listening across the Conference for the purpose of clarifying and articulating the vision and values shared by churches and pastors across the theological spectrum who wish to remain in covenant connection, believing that our diversity enhances our movement and our witness to the world. This intentional listening and conversation happened with those who would consider themselves conservative, progressive, and centrist. It happened in churches in large communities and in rural areas; settings with primarily older adults as well as campus ministry settings; gatherings with youth and with the LGBTQ community. They asked questions about what was important to them as followers of Jesus, what needs they saw in the community that the Church should address, what they valued about being United Methodist, and what their vision for the future was. Information from the Values Discernment workshops was considered, seeking common value themes among congregations across the Dakotas.

Below is a summary of the draft of the vision and values document—a sincere attempt to put into words what we heard as Dakotas United Methodists shared their hearts and their hopes:

Values and Vision Statement for the Continuing Dakotas United Methodist Conference

Dakotas United Methodists value following Jesus in a Wesleyan way. They value the understanding of God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace that comes through the power of the Holy Spirit. They also value the framework of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—the primacy of Scripture, the importance of Christian tradition, our God-given ability to use our reason and intellect, and the importance of learning from those moments when we or others experience the Holy Spirit moving in our lives and through the Church.

Dakotas United Methodists are also passionate about being ON mission and IN mission together. That looks like deep, intergenerational connections and relationships that bridge differences. That value looks like being the church in town that will “marry and bury anyone” and welcomes everyone to the Lord’s Table. Additionally, it looks like serving, sacrificing, and being sent into the world as members of the body of Christ who need one another and who are stronger when we work together to build the Kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven, starting in our local communities and spreading around the world.

With these values in mind, and considering the hopes and dreams that were shared, we offer a vision for the Continuing United Methodist Church in the Dakotas.

It is a vision of growing in love of God and neighbor that looks like walking alongside others to share the “Why” of our faith so they can find theirs, wrestling with hard questions and trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide our understanding of Scripture and faithful living, and experiencing effectiveness in ministry through the growth of the Fruit of the Spirit and the selfless, sacrificial love of Jesus.

We envision a renewed spirit of experimentation and innovation to reach new people in ways that are more expansive and inclusive. This will include new models of leadership – bi-vocational, team ministry, digital networking, hub-church relations, etc. – that help people use their gifts and encourage churches to step out of their comfort zone into a new chapter of ministry. It will mean models of church that create opportunities for belonging and becoming that connect with people who haven’t always felt welcomed inside our church walls.

We envision continuing to live this missional spirit of partnering with God in ways that bring healing to a broken world. This healing looks like building bridges through living in the tension of divisions and learning how to embrace diversity and the mutual sanctification that comes through navigating differences. It looks like churches working to support each other in addressing specific challenges in their community or the world. Furthermore, it looks like a posture of humility that knows we each need to experience healing and transformation in our own hearts, mindsets, and actions.

On the following pages you will find a more detailed description of these values and vision.

A. JESUS

We value following Jesus in a Wesleyan Way. We see evidence of this value in our churches through people who are:

1. Believing in God's Prevenient Grace (*John 12:32*) which goes before us and is working in the lives of people by:
 - a. Meeting people where they are in life and faith and by welcoming all people into our churches and ministries.
 - b. Embodying a welcoming, inclusive posture that seeks to see the image of God in people before we see their faults or failures.
 - c. Opening our churches—and our communion tables—to anyone seeking a relationship with Jesus and the love of a family of faith.
2. Experiencing God's Justifying Grace (*Romans 5:1*) which brings us into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ by:
 - a. Knowing Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
 - b. Sharing our "God stories" with others.
 - c. Modeling the Good News of love, forgiveness, redemption, resurrection, and new life found in salvation through Jesus Christ.
3. Desiring God's Sanctifying Grace (*John 15:1-17*) to work in, among, and through us by:
 - a. Being shaped by the authoritative power of Scripture as the primary witness to the foundation of our faith—God's saving and redemptive work through Christ from the beginning until the end—and using the gifts and wisdom of Christian tradition, the experiences of ourselves and others that comes through listening and learning, and the gift of reason that God gives us to help us interpret and apply Scripture to our lives.
 - b. Encouraging and equipping all people to engage in Wesleyan Means of Grace (personal/social, piety/mercy) that help them navigate questions, doubts, disagreements, and divisions, have the heart and humility to love and serve all and to see these as opportunities for transformation of our hearts and lives.
 - c. Responding to the call to be agents of reconciliation who actively seek places in our community and world where people, actions, systems, etc. are out of alignment with Jesus' command to love God and love people.
 - d. Acknowledging we "see in a mirror dimly" (*1 Cor 13:12*), looking for the planks in our own eyes (*Matthew 7:5*), knowing we won't always get it right, valuing the diversity of a big tent, and understanding that sanctification doesn't happen in an echo chamber or comfort zone.

B. MISSION

We value being "On Mission" and "In Mission" with other individuals and churches in the Dakotas and beyond. We see evidence of this value in our churches through people who are:

1. Living the embodying spirit of the Incarnation (*1 John 4:12*) by:
 - a. Moving beyond safe, comfortable spaces and relationships to be present with people who are "messy" or hard to love; engaging in means of grace beyond the walls of the church through mission, service, blessing, and hope, and "walking the talk" of our faith.
 - b. Reaching out, building bridges across differences, and walking beside people in our churches and communities in times of need.
2. Living the relational example of the Trinity (*John 15:26*) by:
 - a. Committing to gather as welcoming communities, to develop deep relationships with one another, and to learn from intergenerational relationships and the experiences of others through mentoring and small group discipleship.
 - b. Uniting our gifts and our energies to provide campsites as "places apart" to support mission ministries that impact "the least of these" (*Matt. 25:40*) within and beyond our borders and to respond in tangible ways when disasters strike.
3. Living the transformational paradigm of Pentecost (*Acts 1:8*) by:
 - a. Seeing beauty and power in the variety of ways the Spirit speaks and works in our lives and in our churches and not shying away from difference or diversity.

- b. Being empowered by the Spirit to be sent into uncomfortable spaces, difficult conversations, situations without easy answers, and the dark and lonely places that need the light of Christ.
- c. Admitting we need the power of the Spirit to help us hear Jesus in a “language” we can understand and speak in ways others can understand so we can faithfully follow him in this time and space.

C. CONNECTION

We value sharing resources and relationships in a way that allows us to support each other and maximize our missional impact, knowing that we can do more together than we can on our own. We see evidence of this value in our churches through people who are:

1. Serving together (John 13:15) by:
 - a. Sharing time and talents to be camp counselors, ministry mentors, youth chaperones, mission volunteers, clean-up crews, volunteer musicians, internship sites, and event hosts in order to make an impact in lives and ministries beyond their own.
 - b. Partnering with other churches in our communities and beyond to bear witness to the love and power of Jesus Christ that bridges our differences and unites us in mission.
2. Sacrificing together (John 15:13) by:
 - a. Giving through the Conference and Foundation to help “bear one another’s burdens” (*Gal. 6:2*)– the burden of a major capital expenditure, the burden of seminary debt, or the burden of camp or mission trip costs.
 - b. Giving apportionments so churches of all sizes, needs, and locations will have guidance in administering their church, navigating conflict or tragedy, finding and supporting pastoral leadership, and accomplishing their mission.
3. Sending and being sent together (John 20:21) by:
 - a. Sharing ideas, resources, encouragement, and leadership with other churches.
 - b. Encouraging and equipping people to answer God’s call to ministry and mission that happens in the church, the academy, the public square, the marketplace, and to the ends of the earth.

Building on these Shared Values and who we heard people say we were called to reach and called to be, we envision a future for the Dakotas Conference where United Methodists are growing in love of God and neighbor, embracing a renewed spirit of innovation, experimentation, and inclusion to reach new people, and seeing impact through partnering with God in ways that bring healing to the hurts of a broken world.

A. We envision United Methodists of all ages will be GROWING IN LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR.

1. We, clergy and laity alike, will know the “why” (“Why Jesus? Why Church? Why our Church?”) of our faith and discipleship, be living the “how” and “what,” and be equipped to help others experience the same. This will happen through mentoring/discipling relationships and contexts as well as through systems and processes that help people encounter the risen Christ inside and outside the walls of our churches and learn what it looks like to follow Jesus through the power of his life, death and resurrection. It will also happen as we help families disciple their kids and live out our call to be the *oikos* (family) for every child in our communities.
2. We will ground ourselves in Scripture, seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance, the traditions of the faith, the experience of brothers and sisters in Christ along with our own, and God’s gift of reasoning to help us navigate the questions and circumstances we face and grow in Christlikeness. We will seek to stay humble and curious, balancing encouragement and challenges as we follow Jesus and lead others.
3. Our United Methodist identity and “catholic spirit” will help us celebrate diversity and spur us on toward ecumenical relationships and unity in Christ as we resist a spirit of fear, tribalism, and scarcity. We will celebrate the “connection” that fosters a sense of organizational solidarity and selflessness that seeks to bless others.

4. “Success” in our churches will look like evidence of the Fruit of the Spirit, love as described in 1 Corinthians 13, new disciples of Jesus Christ, and the selfless, sacrificial love of Jesus lived out in relationships, social systems, workplaces, schools, and communities.

B. We will embrace a renewed spirit of innovation, experimentation, and inclusion to REACH NEW PEOPLE.

1. We will be more expansive and inclusive as we embrace our call to go out into all the world and make disciples. Churches will multiply through micro-churches, missional communities, new services and sites. Marketplace and mission-based ministries will also be encouraged knowing that one-size-doesn't-fit-all when reaching the diversity of our communities. We will carry the posture of the Open Communion Table into all aspects of life when it comes to reaching people who don't have a relationship with Jesus, or a church family, or haven't felt like they'd be welcomed, or like they belong in church.
2. A culture of call will be fueled by new forms of pastoral leadership—bi-vocational, team ministry, digital networking, hub-church relations, etc. – in order to help people use their gifts and encourage churches to step out of their comfort zone into a new chapter of ministry. This will be possible because our churches will champion a culture of multiplication by regularly identifying, empowering, and apprenticing persons who God is calling into a unique vocational ministry role.
3. We will utilize our connectional relationships and systems to share resources, guidance, and encouragement for reaching youth in our communities with the Good News, providing spaces of belonging where young people can wrestle with hard questions that don't have simple answers and embrace the mystery and power of the Holy Spirit that both anchors our identity in Christ and empowers us to step into the unknown future.
4. The Methodist movement will spread as people embrace the understanding that there is a missional seed and call to ministry inside each person and we are called to help people cultivate that, transitioning from going to church to BEING the church. Our small size will be an asset that helps us be nimble. Our connectional systems and relationships will help undergird these missional movements by providing support and resources as well as by removing barriers that threaten to stifle them.

C. We will see impact through partnering with God in ways that HEAL A BROKEN WORLD.

1. We will work to equip clergy and laity to model transformative conflict and convicted humility both inside and outside their churches. We will work to bridge divides – generational, socioeconomic, gender, sexuality, political, cultural – seeking to be agents of reconciliation and healing in our communities and providing a different vision than the world around us offers.
2. We will view struggles as opportunities to have our character continually refined and to be a part of God's creative process. Like the early Methodists who addressed issues of poverty, health and wellbeing, and education, our churches will be equipped and inspired to put their faith into action by identifying and positively impacting specific challenge or issues in their community.
3. United Methodists will engage in a “messy” world to bring the message of hope, redemption, and resurrection as they come alongside individuals who have been imprisoned by things such as loneliness, addiction, mental illness, toxic mentalities, and abusive relationships.