

THE MINISTRY ADVISORY TEAM

The Ministry Advisory Team strives to create a more excellent way in ministry by advising the bishop and district superintendents, as well as the programmatic, administrative and personnel teams of the South Carolina Annual Conference. This team is composed of representatives from all aspects of ministry across the Annual Conference – Clergy Services and Ordained Ministry, Congregational Development, Connectional Ministries, the Districts, Finance and Administration, Benefits and Lay Leadership.

Before navigating the complex and evolving landscape of decisions facing the Annual Conference, our first step is always to listen for God's voice, leaning not on our own understanding – and acknowledging the importance of finding a way forward together.

We are prayerful that this report will serve as a compass, guiding the Annual Conference through a collaborative, transformative process to fully engage our local churches in our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Our disciple-making mission has not changed and will not change. Call this process a new trajectory, one that sets us on the path toward a future with hope.

We acknowledge that some have felt called to be in a different place, and they have now chosen a pathway outside of our denomination. For those who remain with The United Methodist Church, it is time to imagine what it is that we are called to do into the future.

We know the instinctive response to the departure of those South Carolina congregations can be to focus primarily on what is lost – connection, collaboration, friendship, and yes, the money. In times of uncertainty, it can be easier to look backward, to where we once were, instead of looking forward, to where God is leading us.

From the wisdom of Solomon, a millennium before the coming of Jesus Christ, to Paul's teachings in the decades that followed the resurrection of our Savior, we have been called to trust in the Lord with all our hearts, and to keep our eyes on where God is beckoning us, never turning back.

As we face our own challenges – and the anxieties and fears that come with them – we pray that those who feel called to continue as a part of The United Methodist Church will embrace these five words as we serve together:

Don't think less, think different.

Now, what does that mean?

It means focusing on what God provides, rather than what we don't have.

It means looking toward a future with hope, not looking back in despair.

It means focusing on the mission and ministry work that is right here in front of us today, rather than expending time and energy worrying about what tomorrow might have been.

Don't think less, think different.

Notice what sets apart the following questions:

“We have fewer dollars to spend, what are we going to cut?” vs. “We have fewer dollars to spend, how are we going to make sure we’re still doing the work necessary to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?”

“Where are we going to find more money to keep the church doors open?” vs. “What is happening in our community, in our mission field, that God is calling us to address?”

“How did we get in this situation, and whose fault is it?” vs. “What are our next faithful steps that will ensure that our ministry is effective moving forward?”

Don’t think less, think different.

We are praying our way and working our way toward a future in which our local churches are fully engaged in our collective disciple-making mission. With the departure of numerous South Carolina congregations from The United Methodist Church, we know that a reset is necessary.

The members of the Ministry Advisory Team have leveraged ongoing conversations and taken to heart sentiments expressed from the floor of the 2023 Annual Conference. As a result, the ministry areas represented by this team already have initiated measured and prudent changes, including:

- The Cabinet has moved to a new model for district leadership, with 10 superintendents overseeing and serving as chief missional strategists for our 12 existing districts.
- In collaboration with the Conference Committee on Standing Rules, the Conference Committee on Nominations, the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, and Conference Connectional Ministries are working to reduce the size of their boards and agencies and to refine many of their processes.
- The Board of Ordained Ministry has implemented changes in the way it interviews candidates for ministry in an effort to become more efficient and to better address the changing leadership needs of local churches.

In addition, the Ministry Advisory Team distributed a survey to more than 2,300 lay and clergy members of the Annual Conference in March 2024. We asked you to help us think through this reset, how your local church can be a part of it, and how you personally can be a part of it.

Clearly, you do want to be a part of this reset, and you know that your local church is the most significant arena through which disciples are made. Here is a small sampling of what we heard from you about the greatest opportunity for ministry for your church in your community:

- “Shining a light of love and welcome to all human beings in the present context of The UMC, with a sustained focus on discipleship and mission.”
- “Developing a ministry with the forgotten – those with cognitive impairment.”
- “Helping people understand that they’re not alone.”
- “Truly rethink a church that reaches out to, serves, welcomes, and encourages all.”
- “Realizing that the people are there if we would only truly see them, care enough to build relationships, and follow through to make disciples for Jesus!”
- “Reimagine evangelism.”

Don't think less, think different.

How are we going to address these opportunities? Here are some suggestions you made:

- "Helping the congregation to know that they, too, are in ministry."
- "Continuing to remind, encourage and empower our congregations."
- "Meeting people where they are, both spiritually and geographically."
- "We need to be constantly reminded to look outward rather than inward as a church."
- "Continuing to lead in a forward direction without giving in to paralyzing and polarizing fear."
- "Treating all who come with dignity, respect, kindness, a smile and a blessing."

Don't think less, think different.

So, where do we go from here? To "think different" requires that we reset, realign and respond.

A call for a collective reset emphasizes looking at areas of influence and aligning them with our disciple-making mission and Our 4 Priorities – on the leading EDGE of ministry – **E**ngaging Our Communities, **D**eveloping Leaders, **G**rowing and Connecting With Disciples, and **E**valuating and Measuring Current Realities and Missional Opportunities.

Transparency, honesty and a willingness to struggle are integral in this process. Rather than assigning blame, the focus is on learning from small- and medium-membership churches, and celebrating fruitful ministry.

One example from our survey of Annual Conference members: There is an opportunity for evangelism, and for the Annual Conference to focus on helping local churches increase their capacity for evangelism in their communities. We can look for ways to use the often-uncomfortable disaffiliation/separation spotlight that is on The United Methodist Church and transform that negative energy into something positive.

As we all seek to respond together, here are some important aspects the Ministry Advisory Team is considering as it continues its work:

- The conference is responsible for a diverse array of individuals – including people in our local church pews and in our communities, potential disciples, clergy, clergy families, and conference leadership and staff. Prioritizing the needs of these key stakeholders is foundational to our work.
- Addressing anxiety related to the unknown, potential changes in The United Methodist Church, and the desire for answers becomes a crucial aspect of the conversation.
- Understanding what we can control and what we can't control in the current landscape is essential. Assumptions about shared understanding of United Methodist principles must be clarified, and the driving forces behind discussions must be explored.
- For all conference and local church leaders, identifying and addressing the "elephants in the room" is crucial. These include our personal baggage and

sacred cows that hinder progress. Open discussions around budgets, positions and perceptions are imperative.

- Recognizing the absence of certain voices at the table, such as Hispanic-LatinX, Native Americans, and specific lay leaders, is paramount. Tackling these gaps involves evaluating and reshaping historical structures and perceptions.
- Stewardship and education are keys to effective communication. Recognizing and enhancing values, strengths and assets is essential. In times of financial uncertainty, strategic prioritization and a focus on vitality measurement become critical.
- Aligning mission and ministry for a collaborative budget involves effective communication, funding for diverse church types, and leaning into Our 4 Priorities.
- Outcomes must be defined by what makes local churches successful in making and growing disciples, engaging their communities, developing lay and clergy leaders, and pursuing identified missional opportunities. Fostering stewardship is critical, but it is merely a part of the disciple's growth.

And, throughout it all, we rejoice, knowing that we will think, serve, lead, share and communicate in such ways that the mission is before us, and we have hope for the future.

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Respectfully submitted,

The Ministry Advisory Team:

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