

West Area Listening Conference Report
Submitted by Dennis Gray and Rachel Nance Woehler
Fall 2013

Background

The West Area of the Christian Church in Kentucky is comprised of 47 churches and three Christian Care Communities (Bowling Green, Hopkinsville, Owensboro). The area, stretching from Glasgow to Fulton is divided into 3 districts

The West Area is guided by Board of 16 people—a moderator, vice-moderator, and two representatives from each district, plus four officers (chair, vice-chair, secretary, and treasurer) elected for two-year terms. Ex-officio members include the West Area Minister, General (Regional) Minister, KBY Team Chair, WAYC Representative, the Recording Secretary, two Regional Board at-Large members, and the Vice-moderator of the Regional Board. While they work in partnership with the staff and board of the CCK, the West Area staff is hired by and reports solely to the West Area Board.

God is at Work

Across the West Area, conference participants shared a lengthy list of times and spaces where they felt or saw God at work among us, most notably:

1. The Ministries and Leadership of Cathy Hubbard and Glori Cope

“My congregation really connected with Cathy big time. She was there for them whenever they needed her. She problem solved in many, many ways.”

“Cathy and Tom [Steiner] both did a superb job putting a face [with the ministry]. They were there in congregations.”

“Cathy Hubbard was a real joy. Always pleasant on the phone or in person. Very helpful!”

“[Cathy] attended almost every one of the Men’s Meetings. She went above and beyond.”

“I saw God working in Cathy’s coming to us and in her willingness and energy in being in the West Area. I saw her as a good, faithful steward.”

“She pitched her tent among us.”

“How God is working is Glori. She is the vehicle which everything good happens. She is the one who will remember people. She is the one who will answer emails night and day. Without her, there would be no West Area.”

“Glori Cope is the one who holds things together. She is excellent at what she does.”

2. The Camping Ministry at Camp Kum-Ba-Ya

“How do we talk about the West Area as separate from camp?”

“An important place for faith to emerge.”

“Folks in our church think that the West Area IS the camp.”

“The way people support the camp is amazing.”

“The Far West CMF-- their focus on the camp and the kids having a physically safe place.”

“KBY is holy ground.”

“Kum-Ba-Ya is the one singly unifying element that we have.”

“It becomes part of you.”

“I see God at camp every summer.”

3. West Area Fellowship Opportunities

a. The Youth and the West Area Youth Council (WAYC)

“The WAYC—seeing how they have grown in their abilities to lead worship.”

“The young people moved that body [at the Regional Assembly]. We need young people at the top, not the bottom.”

“The youth are on fire!”

“Last January at West Area Ski Thing we had 200 youth and that was a really exciting thing.”

b. All-Disciples Sing

“[At All-Disciples Sing in Hopkinsville] it was unbelievable the sound of all the voices. You are no longer an individual; you are a part of the whole. Sometimes I think we miss being a part of a whole. We are struggling in our own congregations [and coming together] gives us a boost in the arm.”

4. Providing Congregational Leadership & Visioning (i.e. search & call, the commissioned ministry track and training, pulpit substitutions, and Surfing the Edge)

“I see...the assistance from the West Area that churches have received. When the need comes about the West Area is there.”

“The classes given through LTS.”

“The interaction between churches and the West Area.”

5. Efforts and partnerships among “the individual congregations doing such great work, doing Christ’s work!”

“There are a lot of congregations that were struggling to find a way ten years ago, who now have energy and vitality-- Elkton, Hopkinsville, Russellville, Benton and others. They are really getting out and doing some new things.”

“There are not words to express how we saw God [at FCC Owensboro].”

“I enjoy hearing about the little churches...that just keep on keeping on. I find them to be very uplifting...They are so important.”

“The fact that the West Area is doing this kind of conversations and coming to where we are [Glasgow]—it’s a God thing.”

Challenges

1. Tension Between Confidentiality and Transparency in Staff Transitions/Search Processes.

“Such a lack of transparency...I worry that that hurdle [Cathy’s dismissal] may cause us to lose some churches...There is a disconnect between the Region and West Area on that issue. There was no closure to that ministry.”

“There needs to be closure around Cathy’s leaving. There is a sense of loss in the churches.”

“There was no follow up from the regional ministry, no follow up from the West Area Executive Committee, and no celebration of her ministry.”

“A lot of personnel matters cannot be shared because of confidentiality reasons.”

2. Hiring a West Area Minister

Several questions emerged as we considered the challenges of future staffing:

a. Can we afford a West Area Minister?

“With churches getting smaller and smaller, can we afford it?”

“For my congregation, I struggle to get them to give to anything beyond the local town. Can the West Area be able to fund a staff if congregations like mine don’t give?”

“We’ve got to beef up our salary package if we’re going to get anyone.”

“Who are we going to find to do what our needs and hope are? Someone cannot do [all that we’ve named]. How do we create a ministry in the West Area that will address the needs we have with the resources we have?”

“I think we have to be fiscally responsible, and I don’t think we always have been. Hiring a person [is expensive with a benefits package].”

b. Can we create a doable job description for one person? Or do our current expectations demand two people?

“Do we need two part-time people?”

“Is there a well delineated job description?”

“I think our old models don’t work.”

“Are we asking someone to step into Billy William’s ministry that he created? Is that fair? We need to look and design a new role.”

“I think we’re looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“You’re looking for the six million dollar person.”

“[So far] we’ve gotten two people out of ten who could hold the job for any length of time.”

“There are 47 or 48 churches and only 53 weeks in the year...The math doesn’t work.”

c. Is hiring staff a good use of our budget?

“Are we getting the bang for our buck?”

“Why are we paying for a staff person that should be paid for by the whole [region]?”

“We also have the extra burden of supporting both the West Area and Region. Finances are tight.”

“At least two or three West Area ministers have left under some kind of cloud...Makes you think, could those [salary] funds have gone toward something else--maybe to struggling churches?”

“A man asked me, ‘Why is it that our congregation is asked to give money [at that level] when folks on the other side [of the state] aren’t asked to make such a sacrifice.’ I didn’t have a good answer...I don’t know what the argument for having the West Area staff is.”

“I don’t think this church needs the West Area, but I suppose there are others in the far west who do.”

d. If we don’t hire a West Area Minister, would the Region be able to supply coverage to this area?

“It’s hard for the regional staff to cover that kind of ground.”

“We’ve learned that the regional staff physically can’t [cover the West Area.]”

“The geographic layout of the state is a problem.”

“I think it can only be frustrating for the Region. A lot of that has to do with money--how to spread themselves thinner.”

e. Do we need an intentional interim at this point?

“We need a skill-set in healing. An intentional interim regional pastor or something like that.”

“Someone ASAP to bring about healing. Not permanent. We need someone in that seat.”

3. Communicating the work and mission of the West Area to the members of the congregations

“I’m not sure that we as pastors can communicate what they [staff] are doing. My congregation identifies Cathy with camp.”

“Many church don’t identify with the West Area. West Area is an abstract concept to them.”

“We forget that we are all still the Kentucky region. It confuses people.”

“I don’t think folks in congregations understand what’s going on in the West Area except camp, ski thing, the newsletters, and letters asking for money.”

“Send Board minutes to the congregations.”

“Information isn’t shared down to the congregation members.”

“Churches that give a lot of support have good communication.”

“I don’t know who the giving letters are from—CCK or the West Area?”

4. The numerical decline of the church and the lack of name recognition for our denomination

“Evangelism in an area where our population is declining—especially in the western part of the state where we are closing down one of the major employers.”

“CMF & CWF are dying off.”

“The CWF retreat for this area has been cancelled. And I understand that [it was due to numbers].”

“How do we minister to the 30-year olds effectively? Some of the old ways will not work anymore.”

“If our memberships are down then our giving is down.”

“It is a struggle to keep the doors open.”

“We need to get back to getting out into our communities again.”

“There are not many resources in the West Area. When we have a push for a ministry we need to have the resources to get it done—troops on the ground.”

“We are great at making ideas, but we are really poor on follow through.”

“[There is a] small church/large church division.”

“The little churches are the ones that struggle on a day-to-day.”

“Marketing—we don’t market ourselves at all. Most people have never heard of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).”

“Focus on the brand. Our brand is Jesus Christ.”

5. Finding ministers for the small churches

“Trying to find ministers to take on the responsibility and leadership of small rural churches who are without ministers but have so much to give.”

“I think [finding ministers to serve small churches] is a huge problem, and if you don’t have a connection to one of the seminaries, it’s difficult.”

“Sometimes the small churches don’t get the help they need. Sometimes they feel like step-children.”

“Seminaries are full of folks who need internships...We need an entryway or vehicle to make that happen.”

6. The geographic disconnection from the rest of the Region and among congregations

“The biggest challenge is this division that is present...I think until we do something structurally to make [unity] happen, we are going to repeat [the division].”

“The camp is the child of the divorce between the Region and the West Area.”

“Our identity became adversarial—a fight for the camp and so everything else (pastoral care, etc.) took a back seat to that. I am concerned about the adversarial role.”

“The distance between congregations. The busier we become, the more difficult it is to come together and be the church on a regional or area level.”

“The time change, too, is an issue.”

“Perhaps we talk a good talk when we talk about being a region or the West Area. Perhaps it’s the problems that we face as individual churches that get in the way of us being the church.”

7. Participation at Ministers’ District Meetings

“Such a range of congregational sizes. We range from ten to hundreds...How to address the different needs of the pastors so that everyone feels like they are fed. When I come to a meeting, I come with a get-it-done mindset.”

“I get frustrated if there isn’t an agenda.”

“Maybe we need new ways of clustering pastors [by church size or part-time/full-time/retired]”

“What would it look like if we took away geographic barriers and based [District Minister] groups on affinity?”

“There is a huge disconnect between [chaplains and non-congregational ministers] and the Region.”

“We don’t do a very good job of living out unity and validating one another’s ministries.”

8. Finding Counselors for Camp

“It’s REALLY hard to find counselors.”

“We don’t have that spiritually sound depth because we can’t find counselors.”

“I didn’t get a lot of pastoral support when we tried to get counselors for camp. We had to pull folks who were too young [to be counselors]...Our camping program is suffering.”

“We need people, counselors who want to put in the time. That’s where our church leaders come from, our “Timothy’s”.

“Too many college students.”

Hopes and Dreams

1. Communicating via New Technologies

“The answer to communication is going to be technology.”

“The little churches in the West Area don’t know how to use the webmeeting technology.”

“We are in the 21st century. Can we skype from our offices in our meetings? There needs to be a way to connect us.”

“To meet electronically or skype. It’s poor stewardship of our time and resources to ask [the West Area Minister] to drive.”

“...that we could come together as a region with shared hopes and resources and do God’s work in a more efficient way. That we could know our brothers and sisters on the other side of the state better.”

“How many churches have internet? The West Area could provide technology to individual congregations to have access and webpage building.”

2. Connection and Communication with the West Area Minister and Ministries

“The next person needs to visit all churches in the first year.”

“Email communication is not enough.”

“Send a letter saying, ‘Looking forward to getting to know you and ministering with you.’”

“We are talking about a pastoral presence. We pastors have to bear some of that responsibility.”

“There used to be a lot more training events in the West Area.”

“West Area Celebrations at Lake Barkley or some venue. If we could have an annual event, then we could offer trainings, speakers, and get people pumped up.”

“One of the learnings for our congregations is that we need someone on the board.”

“Events for adults, drawing the adults together again.”

“We are all going to have to take ownership and make a commitment.”

“Do our part.”

“Work together and then share it in the West Area newsletter.”

“Pulpit swaps.”

“Attend events at one another’s churches.”

“We have many people with gifts and resources for ministry. We can share resources where we are strong, swap leadership by providing resources for someone to go to another [church] location for a few days and help out where there is a need. Our choirs could practice together, or even sharing a bus!”

3. Maintain the Camp at Kum-Ba-Ya vs. a centrally located camp?

“I think [my congregation] wants to make KBY financially feasible.”

“...that Kum-Ba-Ya’s debts are all paid and all the cabins have new roofs.”

“We have to keep up with what children keep up with and then bring them back to a space where they can be children. That’s why camp is so important.”

“[I want to see] the two camps considered equally by the other part of the state. Having something on the lake is a special thing. It’s not where it is. It’s what it is.”

“I would love to see a central camp—a conference center, like in Iowa. They made it a passion of theirs. Everything takes place at this one location.”

“...to have these youth events [like CYFX] in a camp setting and have the facilities to accommodate that.”

“KBY can be a magnet camp. You can’t do sailing camp at Wakon’Da-Ho.”

“Can a conference center be built on KBY?”

4. A Healthy Area and Regional Relationship

“It’s been kind of subtle, but the conflict between here and Lexington seems to have lessened. There seems to be an intentional effort on the part of Lexington to reach out.”

“Rebuild trust. Make sure there is an understanding of trust.”

“A ministry that engages the current passions of our people and not about maintaining the passions of our past.”

“We are going to have to rewrite our story. Are we relevant today?”

“The introduction of churches coming together to become viable congregations where mission is something they want to do.”

“I hope it gets out that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in western Kentucky.”

“I’d like to see more joy in it. Upbeatness.”

“A joyful gathering, a want to be together enough to put yourself into it. It has nothing to do with the Region; it has to do with the individuals in the church...You have to feel it.”

“Have group get-togethers among churches—several at once.”

“We need to be ambassadors, and it needs to start with us...We are the ones who are going to have to start it, and follow through, and see that it is done.”

“Too much of us and them. It would be a beautiful thing if it could be [just] US.”

“We can’t say ‘We are one region’ and say ‘but stay away from OUR camp.’”

“A vibrant sense of stewardship so we don’t feel like step children to the Region, so we don’t *have* to support it; we WANT to support it.”

“This [region] is the birth of our movement. That’s a HUGE commonality.”

“[We need to] embrace that history.”

“[I hope for us to...] dissolve into union with the body of the Region of Kentucky at-large.”

“We don’t need it. I’m not going to dream if we don’t need it. My dream is don’t have it [the West Area].”

5. Hire a West Area Minister

a. Ideas for Restructure

“What if we had a part-time West Area Minister devoted to a ministry of presence, committed to be in a church each Sunday. And a part-time, seasonal person dedicated to the camp side of things. Those are two different kinds of skill sets. Then add a robust regional elders program.”

“I wonder if there could be a collaborative effort with an extension office out here and allow [the staff] to collaboratively share the ministry we have out here. There wouldn’t be one person assigned, but a region assigned to this area. There needs to be someone on top of camp. That ship has to be righted.”

“Hire a West Area Youth Coordinator also.”

“I’d rather us figure out another format than this Area business. One camp ground that is central, with Regional staff offices there, and find a way to staff all the things that we are already doing and reformat it so that we don’t put it all on one person.”

“Can we have a Regional Ministry Team? The Regional Office in the West Area, where Glori does the coordination and all of those are accountable to the one board with one entity managing all?”

b. Qualities and Gifts in a West Area Minister

“I want a pastor in that role—a pastoral presence.”

“Not a fireman, but [someone who is] cranking up the light for Christ.”

“Someone with gifts for small churches and how to gracefully close churches and minister to churches in decline.”

“Someone that has a passion for God’s kingdom and a passion to do everything they can do to grow that.”

“Leadership. Proven leadership that can cast a vision and keep the energy going.”

c. Rewrite Job Description

“A strong and clear job description. It’s easy to track your progress...and say ‘Great job!’ or ‘You are not fulfilling your duties.’”

“A job description that defines goals and priorities.”

“Clear expectations of job descriptions and feedback loops.”

“...well compensated.”

“contact by phone with every congregation at least twice a year, and once a year on site.”

“It has to be a job description that is doable.”

“I’d like to see the whole camp part removed from the job description to make the job manageable.”

“Camp ate up all of [Cathy’s] time.”

“Education and pastoral care needs for smaller churches—these are two key things.”

“[The West Area minister needs to] communicate and be SEEN. Tell our congregations what the West Area DOES.”

“There has got to be adequate communication with Greg and the West Area Minister.”

d. Revisit Personnel Policies and Procedures

“Maybe there needs to be a formal [personnel] policy handbook [with steps for correction] with a paper trail.”

“Annual reviews that ask the [West Area Minister] to respond to areas of review, like pastoral care, and a feedback system.”