

## **Kathryn Witte**

### **GPconnect case study**

GPconnect was a quarterly publication sent to about 10,000 lay and clergy leaders.

#### **The Challenge**

The Great Plains Conference was comprised of United Methodists from the former Nebraska, Kansas East and Kansas West conferences. Kansas conferences had been operating under one bishop for some time and also shared the communications director. By the time the three came together, one conference had eliminated its print piece to members and Kansas West had reduced its circulation to lay and clergy leaders while Nebraska was still sending its publication to all known United Methodist households in the state. Each of the conferences had a communications advisory group.

#### **The Process**

The bishop in collaboration with the communications director (me) assembled a new Great Plains Communications Advisory Committee comprised of selected members of the former communications advisory committees from each conference. We came together over a series of meetings to discern the best alternative to communication with our members. Considerations included purpose, target audience effectiveness, budget, subscription possibilities, staff capabilities and so on. Old readership surveys were reviewed, focus groups were conducted among members, leaders and community members. The advisory group was apprised and participated throughout the process. The work was inclusive and collaborative and went very smoothly until we reached our recommendation to the bishop and his cabinet members.

#### **The Recommendation**

The recommendation was to retire both the Nebraska and Kansas West newspapers and their circulations and to develop a new circulation list comprised of lay and clergy leaders kept in the conference database and updated every year as new clergy appointments are made. Additionally, the purpose of the magazine was to help equip leaders of the church to do their local ministry work. Therefore storytelling included ways local churches might replicate a certain ministry, how they could find resources, and offer links to local, global United Methodist Communications Division and other helpful materials. It was recommended that it be a conservative, quarterly publication (that is, not so glossy it drew attention to cost). Further the recommendation

concluded the communications office in Lincoln was best suited to the work. A local printer and mail house was selected. In the end we determined that Nebraska was very "print" oriented and that Kansas probably had the best concept for who should receive the publication in order for it to achieve its purpose.

### **My Role and Responsibilities**

As editor/publisher, my role was to lead the production team for GPconnect. GPconnect came from a Nebraska email called UMconnect. GPconnect fit both the print and online communications vehicles. I oversaw the production schedule for each issue, contributed stories, helped with layout when necessary. I acted as the liaison to the printer and distribution house. I also worked with the inhouse database manager to ensure a quality leadership mailing list.

Six weeks out we would have an editorial meeting and prepare page allocation charts. We would review upcoming calendars and determine if there were leadership events that should be covered. Additionally, we reviewed church websites, publications and notices to cull for items of conference-wide interest. We also solicited contributions from our churches and institutions such as Nebraska Wesleyan, Baker University and Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. We used a filter that saw us taking into account the need to represent rural and urban and all corners of the new conference. Once we settled on a general page allocation we went about story sourcing and collection along with assigned writing and photography. Graphic design was conducted in Lincoln. Contributing writers were in Wichita and Lincoln (and others as identified, assigned or contributed). The database manager doubled as our advertising coordinator so that about one third of the publication costs was covered by advertising (not an easy task with such a narrow target audience).

The publication offered messages from the bishop and from the conference lay leader. It provided both a vehicle for conference messaging through the standing letters and a vehicle for the latest United Methodist news and offered local features stories of mission and ministry. It proved successful with audiences and continued through June of 2017 when the annual conference, because of budget consideration and the changing marketplace, chose to continue "GPconnect" in its online form inside the website content management system and retire the print piece.