The following are questions that were raised during the development of the “Leaning into the Future” document. The committee hopes that these questions and answers will help clarify some of the concepts and open issues raised in the initial document. The future is still taking shape and nothing is “set in stone.” This is a conversation. Please continue to send the Future’s Committee new questions and ask for clarification of answers as necessary.

Q. Is this a merger?
A. The Mountain Sky Area Shared Futures Committee has discerned that God is calling the Rocky Mountain Conference and Yellowstone Annual Conference to a new relationship together that would involve streamlined operations. This shared future is about creating something new and more vital than our current reality and is much bigger than "merger," although it includes organizational merger.

Q. What has been done so far?
A. In response to the invitation from the Yellowstone Conference Futures Task Force in August 2014, Bishop Elaine formed the Mountain Sky Area Shared Futures Committee. The Shared Futures Committee builds on the work and relationships created by the recommendations of the Denver Area Futures Task Group in 2011. The Mountain Sky Area Shared Futures Committee also builds on the work of the Imagine Team of the Rocky Mountain Conference which recognized the growing unsustainability of the conference. The Yellowstone Futures Task Force recognized the urgent nature of the viability of the Yellowstone Conference. The Wyoming Experiment with one district superintendent for the state has led to greater permeability between the two conferences in Wyoming. Three area-wide staff positions have been created: the Mountain Sky Area Vital Congregations Developer, the Director of Communications, and the Transitional Ministry Developer. The Joint Cabinet of the RMC and YAC has been meeting twice a year since 2011. Trainings are often attended by persons from both conferences. The Bishop has served both conferences for many years.

Q. What is being recommended?
A. The Shared Futures Committee is recommending that the Bishop form two teams. One team will identify the steps needed in the near future to manage the logistical aspects of moving from two annual conferences to one. This team will create a new annual conference model and identity which moves beyond merger to a simplified organization, focusing on the basic responsibilities of an annual conference so that resources are freed for new uses. The second team will work to envision the spread of Wesleyan vitality in the mission field and discern God’s leading into the future, both in congregational and non-congregational ways.

Q. What is the timeline?
A. The intention is to develop and bring a proposal for vitality and unity to each annual conference session in 2016, and then to the Jurisdictional Conference in July 2016. The first expected combined annual conference session would optimally be in 2018.

Q. What opportunity will each annual conference have to discuss this among the at-large population? When will I have an opportunity to express my views?
A. An opportunity to discuss these recommendations and give feedback will be provided at the two annual conference sessions in June during Holy Conferencing times specifically designated for this purpose. During the next year, as the work of the two teams begins, team members will be encouraged to vet ideas with their respective conference lay and clergy. People are encouraged to contact any of the Shared Futures Committee members to share ideas and ask new questions. There will be a forum for new questions and ideas that need answers, testing, or validation.
Q. How will this benefit the two conferences?
A: This will benefit the two conferences in several ways:

- This work creates an opportunity to re-imagine and re-think the purpose of the annual conference and develop a system which would lead us to a stronger future which neither annual conference can achieve alone.
- Local churches will discover affinity with churches throughout the Mountain Sky Area and be able to take advantage of more creative alignment of resources.
- Human and financial resources might be freed from administrative functions and used to engage in adaptive ministry challenges in local congregations and communities.
- New relationships among clergy, laity, and local churches will be formed.

Q. What about the loss of our conference identity? Do the two conferences have enough shared culture/identity? Would it make more sense for Yellowstone to merge with another conference such as Oregon-Idaho or Dakotas?
A. The identity of each conference will change. We believe the two conferences have more in common than what separates them and that the benefits of joining together will be greater than the loss of identity. The intention is to bring forward the best of each conference and bring those aspects into the future together. Both conferences have a strong frontier dynamic, and have a common experience in different geographical areas. The shared Wesleyan theology is a strong bond. Many YAC pastors attend seminary at The Iliff School of Theology where they develop relationships with RMC pastors. The uniting of Wyoming Methodists would continue to solidify. The intention is to draw from the best of each conference and bring those aspects forward with us.

Q. How does this solve the problems with vitality and sustainability? How does this make more disciples for the transformation of the world?
A. Joining the two annual conferences doesn't necessarily solve our unsustainability issues, but it does provide an opportunity to innovate, to re-imagine the mission of The United Methodist Church in this area, and thus re-invigorate our vision and mission. The process of discerning our mission in this whole area will re-focus the annual conference on the work it needs to do in order to invite, form, and send disciples.

The key will be to stay focused on our mission, and not "merge" simply for institutional survival. We will come together so that we can be more vital, nimble and missional in our work.

Q. Is the Shared Futures Committee aware of the study done on mergers among UM conferences and the findings which showed a decrease in membership/worship attendance?
A. Yes, we are aware of the study. While informative to some extent, we continue to believe that joining together is a faithful response to what God is calling us to do at this time. Also, please refer to the previous question.

Q. Can’t we try other things besides merger? Why the urgency? Why can’t we consider this next quadrennium?
A. Yellowstone Annual Conference has tried several efforts over the course of the past 15 years. It is now close to being unable to meet some basic criteria for being an annual conference. For example, 50 elders are required and YAC can meet that number only by counting retired elders in addition to active elders. They are at the point where they must reach out beyond their conference boundaries to envision a new future. While RMC does not face the same urgency as the YAC, the RMC is on the same trajectory.
The worship attendance in RMC has declined by more than 10%, new Christians joining RMC churches and baptisms have declined by 35%, and confirmations have declined by 30% in the last 10 years.

Q. Who actually makes the decision about conference boundaries?
A. The Western Jurisdictional Conference, which will meet July 2016, makes the final decision about conference boundaries. The input of RMC and YAC will be crucial in the considerations. The Shared Futures Committee process is working to engage as many conversations among the two conferences as possible before the Western Jurisdictional Conference begins its deliberations.

Q. The geographical area is too big. How will we manage all the extra travel?
A. Some conference staff, including the bishop, have been relating to the whole Mountain Sky Area already. Other organizations are able to operate with even larger geographical areas. Learning new ways to communicate, plan, and operate will be a challenge. To address the growing need to connect across conferences, the Mountain Sky Area Director of Communications is guiding the integration of new video conferencing systems between RMC and YAC. The new systems would offer the ability for both conferences to reliably communicate and share resources across distances. The new technology would also increase the potential of both conferences to collaborate on vital ministry. Perhaps the districts would take on some of the functions that are now held by the annual conference.

Q. Will we lose General Conference delegates?
A. Most likely; the area would go from 4 clergy and 4 laity to 3 of each. Currently, RMC is given 3 clergy and 3 lay delegates and YAC gets 1 clergy and 1 lay delegate. Then, depending on the size of the annual conference, additional votes may be granted. As one annual conference, given current membership levels, the total size would entitle the conferences 3 votes at General Conference. As the conference grows, the number of General Conference delegates could increase.

Q. Will we lose lay voices on conference committees?
A. The future vitality of the church depends on the involvement of lay people. In our current reality, a few lay people are stretched to serve the annual conference in several capacities. Joining together would use our human resources more effectively.

There are many more questions to be addressed as this process unfolds, such as:
New questions can be asked by contacting a Shared Futures Committee member; soon an ongoing list of Q&A will be available online. Please watch for this announcement.
- Will we lose delegates on the jurisdictional level boards and committees? (General Conference delegates have been addressed in previous Q&A. This question is about jurisdictional representation.)
- Where will the conference office be located?
- As a clergyperson, will my salary and benefits change?
- Will clergy be required to itinerate in YAC if from RMC or in RMC from YAC?
- What will the conference minimum salary be?
- Where will Annual Conference be held?
- Will efforts to be vital and nimble together eventually weaken the overall vitality of the annual conferences?