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Dakotas Conference to launch Dakotas Connection Initiative with Lilly Endowment grant

When many rural churches are closing, and denominations struggle with a lack of resources, the Dakotas Conference is experimenting with new ministry models to create thriving rural congregations that enhance rural communities.

The Dakotas United Methodist Foundation has received a grant of \$982,854 from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help the Dakotas Conference of The United Methodist Church establish the **Dakotas Connection Initiative**.

The **Dakotas Connection Initiative** leans on assets, strengths, and technology. Rather than focusing on a scarcity of resources—limited full-time clergy and fewer financial resources to support them—the conference is imagining the future with the gifts that God has provided—gifted and faithful laity in communities and surrounding areas, retired pastors with a gift for mentoring and a calling to preach and deliver sacraments, and an openness to using technology to reach people.

The program is funded through Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations Initiative. The aim of the national initiative is to strengthen Christian congregations so they can help people deepen their relationships with God, build strong relationships with each other, and contribute to the flourishing of local communities and the world.

Lilly Endowment is making nearly \$93 million in grants through the initiative. The grants will support organizations as they work directly with congregations and help them gain clarity about their values and missions, explore and understand better the communities in which they serve, and draw upon their theological traditions as they adapt ministries to meet changing needs.

Rev. Rebecca Trefz, executive director of ministries for the Dakotas Conference, describes the need. "The vision for the grant began to emerge out of conversations and experimentations that have been taking place in the Dakotas in the past couple of years. As we have had fewer full-time pastors available to serve churches in the Dakotas, we began to ask, 'How can we continue to provide solidly equipped and supported leadership for our smaller churches?' We had witnessed the closure, the diminishing witness of other denominations in our rural communities and had even seen some of our churches close. We don't want to lose the 'mission outposts,'" she says. "We also believe that churches can be a vital component of a community, bring light and hope, and providing a network of support that partners with other community organizations to make sure individuals and families are supported."

There are three primary components to the **Dakotas Connection Initiative** are:

- Providing grants, training, and support for churches who are open to experimenting with team ministry;
- Resourcing larger churches that want to be a hub to connect with smaller churches through technology and training;
- Connecting rural church leaders—clergy and lay, at equipping events and networks to learn from one another.

The Dakotas United Methodist Foundation sees the **Dakotas Conference Initiative** as maximizing congregations' resources and has already committed a \$100,000 matching gift.

"The Dakotas Connection Initiative will enhance our successful ministries and provide resources and

platforms to ensure that vital ministry and community impact are happening in our rural communities," says Sheri Meister, president and CEO of the Dakotas United Methodist Foundation. "New leadership models that maximize the gifts and callings of laity who are indigenous to the community and innovative systems to accomplish the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ will allow congregations to maximize human, financial, and other resources.

The Dakotas Conference is one of 92 organizations taking part in the initiative. They represent and serve churches in a broad spectrum of Christian traditions, including Anabaptist, Baptist, Episcopal, evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed, Restoration, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox, as well as congregations that describe themselves as nondenominational. Several organizations serve congregations in Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American traditions.

"In the midst of a rapidly changing world, Christian congregations are grappling with how they can best carry forward their ministries," said Christopher Coble, Lilly Endowment's vice president for religion. "These grants will help congregations assess their ministries and draw on practices in their theological traditions to address new challenges and better nurture the spiritual vitality of the people they serve."

Lilly Endowment launched the Thriving Congregations Initiative in 2019 as part of its commitment to support efforts that enhance the vitality of Christian congregations.

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Contact: Doreen Gosmire
605-770-8540
doreen.gosmire@dakotasumc.org

About Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is an Indianapolis-based private philanthropic foundation created in 1937 by J.K. Lilly Sr. and sons Eli and J.K. Jr. through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly & Company. Although the gifts of stock remain a financial bedrock of the Endowment, it is a separate entity from the company, with a distinct governing board, staff and location. In keeping with the founders' wishes, the Endowment exists to support the causes of religion, education and community development. The Endowment funds significant programs throughout the United States, especially in the field of religion. However, it maintains a special commitment to its hometown, Indianapolis and home state, Indiana. The principal aim of the Endowment's grantmaking in religion is to deepen and enrich the lives of Christians in the United States, primarily by seeking out and supporting efforts that enhance the vitality of congregations and strengthen their pastoral and lay leadership.

About Dakotas UMC

The Dakotas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church is one of 57 annual conferences in the United States and 76 additional annual conferences internationally. The conference is home to 245 congregations, 36,000 members, with an average of 23,000 members worshipping each week. The Dakotas Conference is on an intentional journey to become a more adaptive, more fruitful, more faithful expression of the kingdom of God. The mission of the conference is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Dakotas UMC seeks to live out the vision for every congregation to become a vital expression of the scriptural imperatives to: grow in love of God and neighbor (the Great Commandment, Matthew 22:37-40); reach new people (the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20); and heal a broken world (the Great Proclamation, Luke 4:16-21).