

Bishop Lewis –District Alignment Team update video transcript

Bishop Lewis:

Hello, Virginia Conference,

As this message reaches you today in your homes, and workplaces, and in your churches, I hope that you know just how grateful I am for you, and for the diligence with which you continue to do the work of Jesus Christ.

In the midst of the uncertainty of this pandemic; the deep racial and political divide in our country; and a delayed General Conference – I know it has been more challenging than ever to remain committed to the work and ministry of the church.

And I want you to know I see you. I see you, clergy – the sacrifices you've made, the exhaustion you've endured, the uncharted paths you've traveled, the leadership capital you've expended, many times with blind faith and much criticism.

And I see you, laity across the conference. I see your weariness but willingness to adapt over and over again. I see your longing for consistent and intimate Christian community again, and your worry for the future of the church you so love.

And this is why I give thanks to God for you, first, because, in the midst of all of this, you still continue to do the work and ministry of the church.

In the midst of decline and the growing disinterest and disconnection with the church in our communities, the urgency of the Gospel has never been more needed. And a renewed insistence on the mission of the church driving the institution, rather than the institution driving the mission, has never been more crucial.

Which is why I believe God is calling us into a new way, Virginia Conference – a new way of centering ourselves on the mission, a new way of ordering the church,

a new way of supporting our leaders, of streamlining our structure, a new way of collaborating to transform our communities with the love of Jesus Christ.

a new way, as the Apostle Peter puts it, to “use whatever gifts we have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”

Over the last eight months, I have had the pleasure of witnessing “God’s grace in its various forms,” flow out of the prayerful work of faithful stewards, both clergy and laity, serving on what is known as the District Alignment Team (DAT), a team tasked with dreaming of a new way, creating a new system, in order to answer the question: **How can districts most effectively order themselves for the adaptive challenges and opportunities of the 21st century?**

You may remember that at our 2020 Annual Conference session, a video report was delivered by Kathy Merry one of the conveners of the District Alignment Team (DAT) about the scope of their work.

Today, in an effort to invite you into a season of discovery and dialogue, I would like to share the recent decisions and developments that was birthed out of God’s grace. The Holy Spirit was alive in the process and the six alignment recommendations discerned by the team.

First, I want to emphasize that the team’s work reflects the perspectives of our clergy and laity across the conference, collected diligently through surveys, interviews with key conference leaders, best practices of other conferences, and research on emerging demographics.

Taking into account over 700 voices across our conference, the work of this team addresses the deep and expressed desire of our clergy for better support, mentoring, and resourcing at the district level.

It includes a common desire from clergy and laity to be equipped for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, new ways of engaging the community, and new ways of transformative mission in and outside the walls of the church.

Secondly, I assure you that this new way God is calling us into, through the bold and prayerful work of the District Alignment Team (DAT), builds upon the collective vision of the Virginia Conference which is **“to be disciples who are lifelong learners who influence others to serve”** which is rooted and centered in the larger mission of The United Methodist Church which is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

I have had the wonderful privilege of working with this team, and I believe the six recommendations will serve to strengthen the ministry, resources, and missional focus of our churches.

I am excited to share the first significant piece of this new way with you. We will build on the success of stewardship and collaboration in the Farmville and Danville Districts, where we have had one district superintendent, Rev. Denise Bates, in charge of two districts for the past two years.

Beginning July 1, 2021, eight DSEs will be appointed to serve and order the 16 districts of our annual conference.

Following this change, our DSEs and the District Alignment Team will continue to evaluate the resources needed to serve the people and communities of our districts well.

As a next step, we anticipate the creation of new District Developer positions across the districts to be implemented in the 2022 appointment year. The District Developers will be key to resourcing clergy as they partner with laity to engage with their communities.

We want to be as transparent and open with you as possible about the proposed recommendations and the changes ahead.

For more information, I encourage you to read the FAQs, included in the conference-wide email sent Feb. 8 and on the conference website.

We commit to being in dialogue with you, and we want to hear your feedback, as we remain open to the new thing God is doing, the new way God is moving.

In the weeks ahead, through a variety of means, including multiple virtual listening posts, we will continue to share our progress with you. To shape the content of these listening posts, I offer you the opportunity to share your thoughts through the questionnaire also in the Feb. 8 email and conference website.

Today, I ask that you would continue to pray for us along this journey, that working together, our districts and the Virginia Conference, may be empowered by the Holy Spirit, enlivened by the urgency of the Gospel, and reinvigorated for the mission of the church through community engagement.

May God continue to bless our work.