



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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**February 8, 2021**

### **Non-Internet-based resources for sharing District Alignment Team Update**

Dear Pastors,

Attached to this letter are the following non-video/non-Internet-based resources which are provided for you to use when necessary in place of the Internet-based materials related to the District Alignment Team update.

- Transcript from the Bishop Lewis based on her video message
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Input Questionnaire for virtual listening post

Please feel free to share these messages with your congregation(s) in any way you deem effective (read from pulpit, summarize from pulpit, share in meeting(s), print in newsletters, provide printed copies for those who are interested, etc.)

I fully trust and rely on each of you to determine how to best communicate with your congregation and help them feel a full part of this message and process.

As we get closer to the virtual listening post events, the District Alignment Team will be in touch to offer opportunities for those who can't participate virtually.

Peace and Blessings,

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis

#### Enclosures

- Transcript from the Bishop Lewis based on her video message
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Input Questionnaire for virtual listening post

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.



## **1. Why is it necessary to make changes?**

As United Methodists, we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. In the past, we shared this good news by inviting people to become a part of our churches. This “come-and-see” model worked, as people enjoyed inspiring services and wonderful community. In recent years, as the world has changed, fewer people are engaging despite our continued invitation and elevated events, groups, and programming.

When we look at the larger picture, we see a need to change. There is a need to shift toward going – going to our communities and going to our world with the message of Jesus Christ. This requires bold, new thinking and new ways of working. Thus, Bishop Lewis has focused on vision and alignment as a path forward, to take us into this new day stronger and better equipped.

Bishop Lewis spent a year in conversation, reflection and prayer to discern a new vision for our Virginia Conference: “To be disciples of Jesus Christ who are lifelong learners who influence others to serve.” Next, she formed a team to consider how we order our conference to equip and support our clergy, our laity, and our churches for this vision. Bishop Lewis asked, “How can districts most effectively order themselves for the adaptive challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”

The question propels us to be innovative, collaborative, and nimble especially as we have not significantly changed our order for more than 40 years. The Bishop’s District Alignment Team (DAT) has made six forward-looking recommendations. These recommendations recognize this moment in time in which we have an opportunity, an opportunity for transformation, and an opportunity to re-ignite the flame as Virginia United Methodists. We were made for a time such as this: to transform the world as disciples of Jesus Christ.

## **2. What are the recommendations?**

In 2020, DAT members collected conference laity and clergy perspectives from qualitative and quantitative surveys, interviewed key leaders, gathered best practices from other Conferences and discussed emerging demographics. After much reflection, prayer and discernment, the team made the following recommendations:

1. To support and resource clergy as a matter of priority.
2. To create collaboration between churches as a matter of community.
3. To streamline and automate routine, repetitive processes as a matter of stewardship.
4. To reset the district landscape as a matter of revitalization.
5. To create equitable baseline district budgets as a matter of fairness.
6. And to determine how to measure our effectiveness as a matter of responsibility.

## **3. Why is the focus of the first recommendation on clergy?**

We count on our clergy to resource our churches and laity, thus support for clergy is support for our churches and laity.

#### 4. What are the near-term changes?

A new team, the Implementation District Alignment Team (iDAT) is now working on practical pathways forward for each of the recommendations. While the plan allows for a year to engage in dialogue and discernment with interested parties across the conference, Bishop Lewis is taking the first step toward a new future.

In July 2021, we will build on the success of our experiment in the Danville/Farmville Districts and move to one district superintendent for two districts – 8 district superintendents (DS) for 16 districts.

The other exciting near-term decision is that we will be creating new positions in each of our districts. These District Developers will focus on three vital areas — resourcing clergy, fostering church-to-church collaboration, and facilitating new ways for churches to engage with their communities. This will enable our District Superintendents to focus on the critical work of being missional strategists. Across the next year, we will continue to refine the position description and get the word out about these new and important roles.

#### 5. How does this help?

These changes allow us to move in the direction that most conferences are taking – fewer district superintendents with larger districts. Moving in this direction positions us well for the unknowns of General Conference and forces us to get more creative on how to better support our clergy when their district superintendents have more churches to support. These changes also create new opportunities to leverage all areas of our conference Connectional Ministries Office in alignment with our districts and local churches. And this approach gives us a year to engage interested parties in dialogue about the best ways to meet these challenges.

#### 6. Have the eight District Superintendents been named?

Here is the list of projected appointments for DS for July 2021 - June 2022:

- Alexandria and Arlington Districts, **Sarah L.K. Calvert**
- Danville and Lynchburg Districts, **Denise P. Bates**
- Harrisonburg and Winchester Districts, **Victor R. Gomez**
- York River and Rappahannock River Districts, **Charles F. Ledlum-Bates**
- Charlottesville and Richmond Districts, **Hyo J. Lee**
- Elizabeth River and Eastern Shore Districts, **Seonyoung Kim**
- Farmville and James River Districts, **Jay Carey**
- Roanoke and Staunton Districts, **J. Douglas Forrester**

#### 7. What's the timeline for these changes?

The new District Superintendent appointments take effect July 1, 2021.

8. **Does moving to eight district superintendents require an Annual Conference vote?** No vote is required to change the number of District Superintendents. The number of districts does not change this year therefore no vote is needed at the 2021 Annual Conference. Changing the number of districts does require an Annual Conference vote. So, if that ends up being a recommendation, a vote will be called for at the 2022 Annual Conference.

#### 9. How can we do the work of 16 districts with 8 District Supervisors?

As mentioned, this is an interim step. During this year, all district staff members stay in place.

This will ensure that the good work of the districts keep moving forward throughout this year of dialogue and discernment.

**10. Is my church changing districts?**

No, churches will not change districts at this time. We see this as an interim step in the right direction. The work will continue to determine what a new, streamlined district landscape could be.

**11. Does my current role on a district board/committee change?**

No, all district positions appointed for this year (through June 2021) and next year (July 2021-June 2022) remain in place. Thank you to all who serve at the district level!

**12. Are more changes expected next year?**

We expect and hope that in conjunction with the dialogue sessions, the team will flesh out the recommendations in ways that move us forward aligned with our new vision for the conference. The results of that work will be moved on at Annual Conference 2022. As is our United Methodist tradition, we are taking an ordered and thoughtful approach to change.

**13. How can I share my thoughts and ideas about the changes?**

Please look for opportunities to dialogue. We plan to host six virtual listening posts between April 2021 and February 2022. All interested parties will be invited to participate. You are invited to begin your participation now by following this link where you can provide feedback and ask questions that will help shape the upcoming virtual listening posts.

**14. Do we anticipate saving money as a result of the changes?**

This is not a change for the sake of financial savings. Although we believe there will be long-term savings due to smart streamlining of routine tasks, these changes are centered on supporting our clergy, facilitating collaboration among clergy, and churches creating more community connections.

**15. What should local staff share with their congregations?**

Because we are committed to transparency, please feel free to share the Bishop's video and these FAQs. Please encourage your members to pray for this process and for God's direction. Please pray for unity in the Body.

**16. How many employees will be affected?**

Of the 14 current District Superintendents, eight will serve as DS next year. Five have indicated their preference to either retire or serve a church, and one will be working with the Implementation District Alignment Team (iDAT) to help flesh out the recommendations.

**17. Does this mean we're moving toward 8 districts?** Our implementation team is considering this and the implications. We expect there will be fewer districts, but the final recommended number has not been determined. We are prayerfully seeking wisdom for alignment and scalability. As mentioned above, any change in the number of districts would require an Annual Conference vote.

**18. Why these changes now given all the stress of COVID, General Conference and racial unrest?** In the midst of a pandemic, with a renewed call to combat racism, and with General Conference delayed but looming ahead, it is more important than ever for the institutional structures of our church to be aligned WITH and work FOR the missional purpose of our

church. We are called to lead, not wait. We must boldly move forward in a time when people need to hear the good news of Jesus more than ever. In that sense, now is the perfect time.

**19. What is the DAT and iDAT?**

As mentioned above, the teams doing the work of alignment are the District Alignment Team (DAT), which met from June through November of 2020. Members included: Bishop Lewis (Leader), Betty Forbes, Carol Draper (team support), David Dommissé (co-convener), DS Denise Bates, Kathy Merry (co-convener), Rev. Kyunksuk Cho, Rev. Michelle Matthews, and N.L. Bishop.

The Implementation District Alignment Team (iDAT) began meeting in December 2020 and plans to meet through at least the end of March 2021. This team will be engaging interested parties across the conference to discuss thoughts and ideas about the best ways to go about implementing the recommendations. The members of the iDAT are: Bishop Lewis (Leader), Rev. Ashley Isernhagen, Carol Draper (team support), DS Charles Ledlum-Bates, David Dommissé (co-convener), DS Denise Bates, Rev. Jim Chandler, Rev. Joshua King, Rev. June Carpenter, Kathy Merry (co-convener), Rev. Kirk Nave, Rev. Kyungsuk Cho (spiritual leader), Rev. Michelle Matthews, Sandra Fulcher, DS Scott Davis, and Rev. Tracy Bass. Please keep these team members and their work in your prayers.

**20. How will the recommendations help the Virginia Conference and our congregations succeed?**

Rethinking and redesigning how we work will allow District Superintendents to serve their intended role as Missional Strategists. We will also discover new ways to support our clergy, as well as facilitate collaboration among clergy, churches, and the conference Connectional Ministries Office. In short, it will facilitate ways to become more relevant in our communities.

**21. Are the district superintendents being asked to stay or leave depending on their position on any church polity?**

No. The Bishop values theological diversity. The district superintendent (DS) positions are being decided based on some logistical considerations, such as those entering retirement, as well as on repositioning some leaders for other roles. We want to be as thoughtful as possible and care well for those who have served our conference for so long and so well.

# Help us shape our virtual listening posts

Insights for the district alignment work of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church

Thank you for taking time to complete this form. You will not receive an individual response. Instead, we will look for areas of convergence to address in our upcoming virtual listening posts. We appreciate your honesty and thoughtfulness. To mail in this form, send it to the conference center. Mailing Address: 10330 Staples Mill Road, Glen Allen, VA 23060. Address it with ATTN: Carol Draper, DAT

1. My initial reaction to this news is...

*Mark only one oval.*

- love it/excited
- sad/disappointed
- fine – no strong feeling
- mad or frustrated
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Want to say more about your initial reaction?

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3. Please share your thoughts about our need for change.

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4. What did you connect most with in Bishop's message and this announcement?

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5. What is your biggest concern about this direction and approach?

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6. Are you a member of UMC clergy?

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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