



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 21st 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.