

Madeline White: I am joined for our interview about district alignment with two clergy in our Conference who are part of the Implementation District Alignment Team, or IDAT. It's the Reverend Ashley Isernhagen and the Reverend Kyungsuk Cho. I thank you both for joining me for this important conversation.

Rev. Kyungsuk Cho: Thank you for inviting us.

Rev. Ashley Isernhagen: Thank you for having us.

Maddie: We're going to start with you, Ashley, and we're going to start with the question of why district alignment?

Ashley Isernhagen: For me, the question about why district alignment is so important because we are a connectional system, and many of us are working within a new structure and a different structure throughout this time of COVID. I think we've become more aware in more tangible ways how our structure has benefited us and how it has kind of held us back a little bit for our potential for ministry. I think in this season, we're trying to learn from all of the information we've been given through pandemic, through the visioning process, through our shared ministry together. This team has a lot of different ministry perspectives represented to craft a system that will enhance and nourish all of us throughout this process, so that we can enjoy our connection.

White: Kyungsuk, what do you have to say about district alignment?

Kyungsuk Cho: I pretty much echo what Ashley said as well. That question brings me back to some multiple conversations that I had with my friends in ministry. Being in ministry for more than a few years by now, there was one thing that I have been told over and over again. I heard it from the Conference, from the speakers of hundreds different leadership workshops, and from congregations, and most of the clergy friends of mine as well. They all say we need a change. We need to do things differently. And as a part of the connection with Church, as Ashley also said, I think one of the most needed and also much outdated changes is our organization's structure.

Connection [inaudible] can be a blessing when the system works effectively, but when it's outdated and ineffective, and just hierarchical, the system can be not just unhelpful, but it can be a burden and it can even undermine all the efforts at the local church level. A car won't start even if we change the tires, if the problem is in the electric circuit. You know?

White: Mm.

Kyungsuk Cho: That's why I think our district need to be aligned to a way that can effectively support and empower the fruitful ministry of churches. Dioceses must be able to work as mission strategists. As a current Book of Discipline reads, "Instead of chasing all the unnecessary details and finishing paperworks, our system must

be able to equip our capable leaders" and it has to be a good steward of resources of the Church. There are places in our connection, and even in our Conference, where we see things are working really well, so it's not necessarily about the problem of the system itself. It's about how we do it. And that's something that we can change, I believe. But that's the pure why I said yes to the process.

White: Mm. So you both are young clergy members in our Conference. When you think about our denomination and the Church in general, what are some of the realities you see, and how perhaps is this district alignment going to address those realities? Kyungsuk, we'll start with you.

Kyungsuk Cho: Honestly speaking, I'm 42 this year, so I don't really know if I still deserve to answer the question, but I'm still younger clergy, I believe, so I'm slightly out of the [inaudible] of young clergy, but I guess I can still speak about it.

Well, what I think is that our churches are no longer in their golden ages back in like 60s. People won't join the things that fail to offer a meaningful reason. Denominational loyalty is an ancient vocabulary [inaudible], and the churches without a mission will be left behind, just like the businesses without a vision. So most of the challenges we face are extremely complex, I believe, and that means none of us knows what will be next. We don't know what post-COVID churches will look like, we don't know what the UMC will look like after the General Conference. Uncertainty is always painful, and the level of anxiety's always high.

People have different details in their mind, but one thing is sure, and I think everyone agrees that the Church in the future will never be the same. I think we need a structure that is nimble to the changes of this context. And I think we need to have a connection that does not simply require its members to be loyal, but offers why it is [inaudible] powerful to be connectional. With all the divisive issues that the Church is currently facing, district alignment may not be the one and only answer to that, but it can be a part of our efforts to equip our leaders and free them up for more important work to do. I believe that's why the team is now working on recommendations rather than detailed suggestions or proposals, so we can respond to the fast-changing situation.

White: Same question, Ashley.

Ashley Isernhagen: Yeah. I resonate so much with what you've just said, Kyungsuk. For me, I've been a United Methodist my whole life, and from a young age, I knew I wanted to be a clergyperson. I think what I crave the most from our Church in this season is an honest and healthy place.

Growing up, I wanted a place that I could be real, a place that I could be whole, and a place that I could get to know Jesus better. And I think the challenges that

our Church is facing right now our legitimate in many cases. Challenges of structure with General Conference, challenges of theology and human sexuality.

But I also think that there are a lot of things that are pulling our attention away from our purpose. I think the church is adrift in many ways, and being out to sea isn't always a bad thing. I think there's plenty of stories in the scripture where Jesus did powerful things at sea.

And so I'm looking forward to being honest. I'm looking forward to a time where we can explore and experiment, where failure isn't necessarily the thing we have to fear, but that we haven't tried be the thing that we have to fear. And I think district alignment, at least in the many ways that we're recommending, offers our local churches and our clergy the opportunity to be in an environment of experimentation and to be supported in that.

It's really hard as a young clergyperson to come in with exciting ideas and hopes for the Church and to be told "No," time after time. I'm sure that I'm not the only one that has experienced that in the past few years.

White: Probably the Annual Conference first heard about district alignment at Annual Conference last year. There was a short presentation. Then there have been two major announcements this year with resources that were shared. So I'm sure you both have heard from your friends and colleagues and others already some misgivings or misconceptions about district alignment. What have you heard that you would want to address? Ashley, we'll start with you.

Ashley Isernhagen: I think the two main that I've heard is that there isn't any transparency, and what I mean by that is our old structure of bringing about something new is electing a few of our clergy and lay together, putting them in a back room, and having them make a decision, and then the Conference votes on it. I think the lack of transparency in our new structure is being witnessed because we are trying to collaborate. We're trying to structure even our work into this new thing, into this new alignment process, which is very collaborative. So a lot of decisions actually aren't made, which can be frustrating for some people.

I've heard some of my colleagues say, "Well, why don't you just make a decision already? But I think that the point is, district alignment teams are here to think up all of the possibilities and come up with a probable course of action, and I think the misunderstanding is that we are the ones charting the path. Very little of these decisions actually ever come from us. They come from those that are responsible for that work.

Another misconception is that this is about money. I hear that one a lot, and although there is a financial implication to any changes that we do, we've been very intentional about how we start our meetings, how we pray over these possibilities, to make sure that we keep in mind those practical things; that those things, like finances and timelines, aren't the things that are necessarily

driving the potential for those decisions. Those are the two that really hit home for me.

White: Are there any others, Kyungsuk, that come to your mind?

Kyungsuk Cho: I think hearing, almost like the same way. I think one of the most widely mistaken pieces of information is about how the team is working and the way that this team is designed for. From the beginning, I and the members of the team have been told over and over again that the initial DAT and the IDAT, which, which is the second phase, are not designed to be a decision-making body by any means. So the team has been working more like a think tank rather than a committee. So our job as a team has been pretty much like to pray, listen, imagine, and recommend. That means so far there as been no decision that has been officially determined by the team, and there will be none, because we are not a decision-making body.

It seems like they're having a few strategic decisions made by the accountable leaders of the Conference, such as the decreased number of the diocese and the addition of district developers, or the budget for the next fiscal year and stuff like that. But for the recommendations that the team is accountable, the way I understand how things will happen is, the team recommends, accountable Conference leadership decides, and the annual Conference votes. So I like to encourage my friends in the Conference to read the Book of Reports thoroughly and tell us what you think.

Another piece I think I have to mention is about the trust issue, as in the transparency conversation. I hear that a lot of voices in the Conference are currently related to the questions about the credibility of the Conference and the leadership. I know there's a long history behind it, and as a general member of the Annual Conference, honestly, I even sometimes agree what is spoken.

But here's what I want us to remember. I hope we may not mistake the finger for the moon. I'd like to encourage us, especially if you are one of those who agree that change is necessary to our system for its future. I would encourage us, all of us, to focus on why and how the process, and speak up what you think will be the right way of doing it. That's the way that I believe that a healthy change can be made to our system.

White: This is a very similar question, but what about the process that you both have been through with district alignment? Would you want to share about how the group has worked together, how you went about acting as a think tank? What would you want people to hear about how this process has led us to here? Kyungsuk, we can start with you.

Kyungsuk Cho: I think for the all year answer, I've spoken about some things about the process. I was actually thinking about a couple words that have been in my mind, even from the beginning of this conversation. I kept these two words in my

conversations, and every time you have a conversation, which is collaboration and contextualization.

First, as I said earlier, I think the world is moving to a direction that people do not unite just for the sake of unity. They unite when unity can bring about something meaningful. We are United Methodist Church, but why? I want to see our Conference being able to answer the question. And I think collaboration can be one of those answers.

But the way we see our denominational structure actually works, is however, we are way too often compelled to stay inside the Church and to focus on what we already have. We are also compelled sometimes to compete with each other as if ministry is a zero sum tournament. My hope is that we can see our connectional system that can help churches to focus on mission together rather than running a race against each other.

Of course, there is no program or structure that can completely remove those human struggles, but if the system cannot help this to any extent, and somehow worsens it, again, "Why 'United'?" Is this not a secret anymore that most of the churches in Virginia are now in the category of being a small church? And we have many of them, many of them, literally. Imagine what can be done when they are together.

I wish the Conference can focus on our purpose to build a healthy structure in which dioceses and district offices can actually equip and support the leadership of each congregation, so that they can collaborate and faithfully accomplish their best in the context they are called to serve. Collaboration for the sake of mission in the community they serve, that's the first thing that I really want to see.

Another thing we know is that Virginia is an extremely diverse state in its social, political, and economic geography. Some say we have two Virginias: Commonwealth of Virginia and the State of Virginia; some say four, some say eight; but overall, I haven't heard anybody who says Virginia is one in its cultural background. In that sense, contextualization is a key to build a fruitful and supportive system for our ministry.

When I got my first appointment, one of my mentor pastors told me this: "You are not being appointed to the Church. You are being appointed to the community. Minister leaders, therefore, must be trained into the context of the community, and the connectional structure, the way that the Conference and the district offices and leaders function, has to be able to provide the resources and support so that the churches and disciples can freely reach out to their surrounding community, in a way that the context can grasp the essence of Jesus' gospel.

I think this is a very important part of the goals we have set for the district alignment process, and that's what I want to hear, and that's what I hope the Conference can hear from this conversation.

White: Do you have anything to add, Ashley?

Ashley Isernhagen: No. Actually just one more thing. It's hard to follow you, Kyungsuk. I think one of the things that has really excited me about the process of district alignment so far is that it's been a real opportunity to actually be at the table and actually have voice, and baked into the work that we're doing is that for everyone.

I don't know if everyone has had this experience, but I've been invited to tables purely because of my age or my gender, and then I was told, "This is the way we've always done it," or "Wait your turn," or "We just can't do things that different. We have to stay in our lane." And I think that this opportunity, this process, is really aiming to have the best of us and not just have those that have always done it, not just have those that represent a certain demographic.

I think that this process, as uncomfortable as it is to not have a decision "yes or no" by June is to say, "We are the best resource that we have. We are the ones that we're called by God, and those gifts are what we need to make our system the system that will help us all thrive no matter where we're appointed and no matter what season of ministry we're in. So that's been exciting for me, and I hope that people hear how much we need you in this process.

White: The IDAT has shared that there's going to be two listening opportunities coming up on May third and May seventeenth. There may still be individuals who, even leading up to that, will have some lingering questions or some misgivings, but when we have conflict and when we have the moments of uncomfortableness, of change, what is something that you think that everybody can agree, even if they're unsure about this process or unsure about the recommendations? What do you think we can agree on? Ashley, we'll start with you.

Ashley Isernhagen: I'd like to hope that we can all agree that we love Jesus, and I'd like to hope that we can all agree we need change.

White: What about you, Kyungsuk?

Kyungsuk Cho: I would say the same thing. I want to say it again that I hope we can agree with the why of this conversation: the purpose to do our system well so that we can be a faithful and fruitful church. That's all I can say, and that's all that I actually have at the moment. I haven't met any Methodist minister so far, lay or clergy, who's said to me that we don't need change to the way we do the Church. We know that we need the change. Need for change is a universal term in today's Methodism, I believe, and if the change has to be made, all of us want to make it well, in an effective way. That's where I think we all can start together.

If I can add some more to that, I believe most disagreements come out of the question about how or when, and a little bit of who. I think we can find another agreement here, which is there is no one perfect answer to those questions. Therefore, I'd love to say to the Conference, "Please tell us what you think." The team, they want to do it well. The purpose is not to kill what is going well, but to grow what is not growing well. Therefore, we'd love to hear from the Conference what they think.

When the information about the DAT was related, some good friends of mine called me and shared their thoughts, sometimes in a very emotional way, and they said, "Sorry," at the end of the conversation almost always, but I always told them, "Please don't. Please do more." Seriously, I believe the Conference can see what the team can't see, you know?

Of course, I have a good faith in each member of the team, they are creative thinkers and innovative leaders. Yet, we also know that we have thousands of us in the Virginia Annual Conference. So I hope we can agree that the Conference will tell us what they know and what they think.

Let me say that again. Please tell us what you think and what you know. Most of us know well already that parking lot conversation may have no power to change. Please tell us what you think, and I'd like to encourage everyone to attend The Listening Post, which is scheduled for ... It's today, right? This podcast is streamed today, the day that the first Listening Post is happening. Other gatherings for clergy and laity are scheduled in the future, and tell us how we, the Conference, can do this together and become greater.

More importantly, I hope we all can agree to pray with us and for us. I am extremely humbled to be assigned as a special leader of the team. As a part of the conversation process, we adopted a spiritual discernment model through the prayer. Every team member is committed to pray every night when an alarm rings at 8:45 every evening. We pray that God may open our hearts and ears of the team members, and that we the Conference may be in one heart for the sake of God's kingdom mission.

This is the quote from my dad: "Prayer is the winner, because those who pray more can listen more to God." Please listen to what God speaks and help us to listen what you hear but we don't. I think we all can find an agreement in that, can't we?

White:

My final question to you both is, as you've said, this is a collaborative process. You're also still in the process of listening, of listening to the Conference and wanting that feedback. What the group has put forward is recommendations, but there's a lot that still hasn't been decided. In what you've recommended, going through this process, where do you and the rest of the team see the Conference after two to three years following district alignment? Kyungsuk, we'll start with you.

Kyungsuk Cho:

It's a great question. First of all, I'd like to make it clear that I, by any means, do not represent the whole members of IDAT, so I can only humbly share what I envision as a result of any possible change that can be made throughout this conversation. I hope to see that every church in our conference passionately serves the community they are called to serve as missionaries in the community, so to speak.

Just so you know, and as my first name can tell, and as my pronunciation can tell, I am from South Korea. As a person with that background, I can definitely say with confidence what we need in the Church today is a spiritually grounded missionary mindset. Like what you all did, the American Methodist Church did, 100 years ago for the churches in Korea. When we send a missionary, we do not send anybody. We pray, we discern, we train them, and we support the missionaries.

Again, I believe that's the blessing of being a connectional church. I want to see the Conference moving toward that direction. Leaders serve like a missionary, churches emerge like Jesus incarnate, and the system being centered and able to empower that effort. Dioceses totally know the geographical area and its spiritual need, developers support with adequate resources and contextual training, clergy collaborate and grow together, and churches happily make disciples.

To be more candid, honestly speaking, I think two or three years may not be long enough time for that, such a big cultural shift. It may not be even enough for us to observe all other outside changes and challenges. Also, I don't think district alignment can be a sole and absolute solution for that change. Still, I want to see that shift at least begins to happen in two or three years as an outcome of this conversation. And my time will be completely rewarded if this process at least can be a start of such a transformation of our connectional identity. That is my humble wish.

White:

Ashley, your turn.

Kyungsuk Cho:

I think what I personally would like to see in the next two to three years as a fruit of this process and this conversation is twofold. I would love to see all of our churches and all of our clergy working together with joy. I'd love to see folks enjoy the fact that we are connected, and thrive in that, utilizing the gifts of our neighbors to meet the real and tangible needs of the communities that we've been placed in. I think we readily forget how many churches we have all across this state, and that that's a good thing. We are present in pretty much every community. Our joined together witness of Jesus, that needs to be powerful and that needs to be with joy, not just with obligation.

I think the other hope that I have deep down in walking through this process and the many hours of conversation and the many different roads that we've taken, and then decided they just may not be the roads that need to be talked about any further ... All of the different things get thrown up in a think tank ... Is

that I hope that this process of aligning ourselves to who we say we are and then exploring what that means can be replicated all throughout our churches as well.

We are united in many ways, as Kyungsuk has talked about, but not all of those ways are effective, are helpful to us. Let's be united in the way that we embrace change and in the world. Let's figure out what it means to live what Jesus has asked us to live, for the people all around us, and I think that not only do I want to see the process replicate, but I want to see health and wholeness.

Those are the two hopes that I have for the years to come, and I agree Kyungsuk. I don't think two to three years is going to be enough, but if we can faithfully move that meter closer, if we can just continue to turn ourselves to God's will, eventually we will get there.

White:

I want to thank you both so much for joining us. That was our featured story about district alignment for our listeners. I hope that you learned more about the why of district alignment and delved deeper into the story. If you want to learn more about district alignment, tonight, May third, we have one of The Listening Posts, and another one will be on May 17th. To register for those events, but also to learn more about district alignment, please visit vaumc.org to learn more information.

Thank you both so much.

Kyungsuk Cho:

Thank you, Maddie.