

**Tribute for Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker  
(Bishop Charlene Kammerer, March 30, 2024)**

It was with great sadness that we received word of the death of Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker this morning, Holy Saturday, 2024. It seems somehow appropriate that Bishop Tim received the Promise of Resurrection on Maundy Thursday. Since his cancer diagnosis this last year, he had been open with family and friends about the advanced stage of his disease. He chose palliative care at home to help him have as much quality of life as possible. Ever the teacher and theologian, he has written about Dying, Death and Resurrection as perhaps his last gift to the Church. With his dear and treasured wife Melba by his side, he was courageous and faith-filled in his living and dying.

I first saw and met Tim Whitaker at the Called SEJ Conference to elect a new bishop in February 2001. Bishop Cornelius Henderson had died while serving in the office in Florida. Here was somebody who was not an identified candidate for the office of the episcopacy. His name arose late in the balloting process as the election cycle unfolded. As was accorded every candidate who reached a threshold of votes to remain on the ballot, he came to the podium to address the delegates. In all humility, he said, "I came to this Conference as a delegate - with no prepared speech, no robe, and no wife!" He said very little, but many others in the Virginia Conference spoke about him, his ministry, his faith, his leadership. Tim Whitaker emerged in the process and was elected a Bishop in The United Methodist Church and assigned to the Florida Conference, my home conference. At a College of Bishops luncheon following the Called Conference, Bishop Joe Pennel, then Tim's bishop in the Virginia Conference, introduced Tim and Melba to all of us. One of the memorable things he said about Tim was that "he spoke to dead people...; referring to Tim's love of the Patristics in Church history.

Tim and Melba opened themselves to this surprise Call and Election and served honorably and with focused intentionality for the next 12 years before his retirement. It was in the shared life in our SEJ College and the Council of Bishops that I came to know Tim and Melba. Tim came to every meeting well prepared for the agenda and emerging issues. He listened intently to all discussion. Whenever he spoke, it was reasoned, thoughtful and sometimes provocative. He asked questions of himself and of us, his bishop colleagues. He never spoke unless he had something to say. You never knew exactly what he might say. He was not partisan in his beliefs or convictions. He was often asked to serve on writing teams to craft challenging statements from the Council to our worldwide church body. He served as a representative from the Council to bilateral dialogues with other

Christian Communion. His last major contribution to the Council and to The UMC was to chair the Task Force that developed “God’s Renewed Creation” - a call to the Church as a follow-up to the historic UMC Council of Bishops “In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace”, adopted in 1986. The General Conference of 2004 asked the Council of Bishops to publish a new document and study guide . I served on this Task Force, along with clergy and lay representatives from our global church. Our focus became threefold: pandemic poverty and disease, environmental degradation, the proliferations of weapons and violence. The Foundation Document and the Study Guide were published in 2009 and remain available for the UMC’s study and teaching around the Climate Crisis and beyond, with intersectional issues.

In this careful work of gathering research, conducting hearings with national and international experts, receiving negative feedback from the public and from within The UMC, working with a scholar to write our Document, Bishop Whitaker remained firm in guiding the Task Force. All views were considered, difficult conversations were aired, and decisions made to help craft the document. I saw firsthand the character and integrity of my colleague and brother bishop. He kept a steady hand and made possible a completion of our most challenging task.

Tim and Melba came to love Virginia and the Virginia Conference. They were “come here’s”, not “born here’s” in Virginia. While their roots were in Mississippi, they could understand the many subcultures regionally in the Commonwealth of Virginia. They could also relate to the shameful parts of both Mississippi and Virginia’s key roles historically in the enslavement of persons and the long road to forgiveness and full equality under the Law and in the Church. Tim and Melba were so very helpful to me in coming to better understand United Methodism in the Virginia Conference when we were assigned there to serve.

In retirement, Bishop Whitaker chose not to continue an active role in the Council of Bishops or our College. I think he believed sincerely it was time for him to pass the baton to those who followed him. Tim and Melba returned to their beloved Eastern Shore in the Virginia Conference. He continued to be present and connected to individual bishops and followed with great interest the movements and great challenges of our denomination. He returned to a life of study and reflection, rejoicing in his relationship with Melba and their family, attending a small membership UMC congregation, and embracing life on the Shore.

I will miss Tim, his wisdom, his understated humor, his perspectives on all issues, and his good heart. May God's loving and strong arms embrace Melba and their family as they celebrate his life and his entrance into Eternal Life.