

Bishop Lewis, Warren, and members of the Annual Conference:

I am humbled by the opportunity and vote of affirmation to serve as the next Lay Leader for the Virginia Conference.

I come with the unique experience of working with the four previous Conference Lay Leaders as their Connectional Ministries staff liaison. I have witnessed in ways that others could not see the dedication to the role demonstrated by Darlene Amon, Ron Hardman, Shirley Cauffman and Warren. I will never be able to fill their shoes, but I am honored to be able to continue the movement forward. However, you do have to accept the fact that it will not be Warren's colorful socks that you will see all across the Conference, but my Birkenstocks.

The scandals are just one indication that we are living in a new reality as the church outside the building. None of us have ever served in this type of liminal space. We have no personal experience to call upon and so, we are being summoned to lead and serve in ways we could never have imagined. New expressions of being the Body of Christ are now required of all of us.

There are so many uncertainties in the life of our denomination and our world. We are called as lay and clergy partners together to show this divided world - in this time filled with more questions than answers - who we are as United Methodists and who we follow. Yes, I did say lay and clergy partners, but you might recall that in the August letter to the laity of The United Methodist Church that Warren noted, the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders reminded us that as laity we "are 99.2% of the church and our voices matter." Using the reports in our 2019 Journal, in the Virginia Conference we are 99.5% – well, 99.49 to be exact. The work of living out our baptismal vows and making disciples is ours to do. And as that same letter stated, we are called to action because "the season for change and transformation is NOW!"

This is a holy time. This is holy ground. Remember the verses from Exodus and Acts that remind us of that. In the beginning verses of the third chapter of Exodus, Moses -as he's leading Jethro's flock beyond the wilderness - comes upon a burning bush. God calls out to Moses and says, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God proceeds to tell Moses that he will lead God's people out of the land filled with misery and suffering to a better place. Like many of us, Moses responds with, "Me??? Who am I to be the one to lead – at this time, in this place?" (Exodus 3:5 NSRV)

In the retelling of the appearance of Stephen before the Council in the seventh chapter of Acts, we hear these words again as Stephen shares the story: "³³Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you....'" (Acts 7:33-34 NSRV)

You can't see that I just slipped off my sandals. *But I did.* Take your shoes off now, too, because we are the ones standing on this holy ground. *We are the ones being sent to lead God's people.* All 99.49% of us laity and our clergy partners.

Wherever you and I stand is holy ground, sacred space where our words and actions matter more than ever. What we have experienced firsthand over these last seven months is that holy ground certainly does not have to be inside the walls of our church buildings. We must all continue the movement forward.

The work is not going to be easy, and you need to know right up front that I may not be as composed when I am before you as my predecessors. My personal discernment and experiences over the last few years have heightened my attentiveness to my own questions of faith and action. I have journeyed constantly with the questions of who God is calling me to be and how I am being called to lead in this holy time.

Honestly, I think many of you find yourselves in the same place. Together, we will honor our baptismal call to be ministers and recommit ourselves to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We've been called by name, just as Moses was, to move from what we have known to the unknown, through the wilderness and into a new land. We've been called, just as Moses was, to open ourselves to the uniqueness, the wonders, the HOLY of this time.

There was a benediction that I heard a long time ago but I have carried the words with me. Let me share them with you today.

*"Look around at each other. Smile.
Look with love and wonder.
Each one of us is a unique creation of God.
There is no ordinary person here.
We are all extraordinary because God has called us so.
And this is no ordinary time.
It is a unique moment for each of us that will never take place again."*

Stand firmly on this holy ground, and pray with me and for me that the Holy Spirit will equip us all for the work ahead.