

Warren R. Harper
Conference Lay Leader Remarks
Virtual Virginia Annual Conference
October 31, 2020

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on this glorious God given day.

We Welcome one another to the Virtual 238th Session of the Virginia Annual Conference.

The Wesley Covenant Prayer

“I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom you wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

I prayed that prayer with you, a stranger to most, eight plus years ago now, 2012 it was. I found out very quickly I was not my own. In these eight years I would serve with four wonderful bishops here in Virginia. My wife Sandy was along my every step as she has been for just over 51 years.

I began to witness the tremendous ministries and dedicated laity across all 16 districts. I was guided by the Board of Laity and District Lay Leaders, our Conference Lay Servant Ministries, United Methodist Women and United Methodist Men who answered the call to carry on Christ’s mission and our vision to make disciples who are lifelong learners who influence others to serve. Bishop Swanson recently said this about vision: “The vision is clear when you are out front.” Your lay leadership is out front of the vision and is constantly looking for new ways to be more present in the local church. The local church is where laity thrive in our communities.

I began to realize tremendous partnerships with the clergy were growing. With the wonderful partnership with Bishop Lewis and the Extended Cabinet I experienced an exceptional time of prayer and sharing.

Bishop Lewis has called each of us to “See All the People”. Romans 15:7 - “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

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With COVID 19 dictating change in our communities, churches and personal lives we need to be looking forward to new opportunities of **HOPE**. Our clergy have been challenged. For a majority of them they have been forced to come out of their comfort zones. Be with them, not against them.

My grandchildren will be learning via their computers from home this fall. One of our churches, Trinity UMC in Alexandria in September had the "Blessing of the Chromebooks". We are concerned about our children's education.

We are marching forward with centuries old concerns over racial justice. The bishop's work group, "A Call to Action" is very excitedly looking at new and dynamic ways to engage our church communities that haven't been tried before. Our first was a simulcast with over 13,000 views with Attorney General Mark Herring and invited law enforcement, police chiefs and County Sheriffs. They joined Bishop Lewis in a conversation regarding racial justice. The work group is now creating follow-up events to be held across the conference.

In a late summer letter from the Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders executive team says in part:

- **We are called to act. As laity, consider actions you can take with your families, congregations, and communities.**
- **Lead courageous conversations about this dual pandemic. (they referred to Covid19 and racial justice)**
- **Hold all of those in prayer who risk their lives..... Every day!**
- **Shine light on those invisible biases in our relationships, congregations, conferences, and the Church.....**
- **Question our assumptions about the way our church works.**
- **Renew our commitment to love one another.....**

General Conference 2020 did not happen in May. General Conference 2021 is scheduled at this time for August of 2021. We are in an attitude of serious conversation, Holy Conversation about a myriad of topics in our church. The most important conversation is to continue to have good honest conversations. Don't stop no matter the topic. The division of our denomination, discipleship, education, racial justice, what the pastor said, Black Lives Matter, inclusive church, missions, LGBTIQA+, apportionments, how long someone has been Council chair, white privilege, General Conference, Intersectionality, The Social Principles, Jurisdictional Conference, Laity Training, what Common Table does, Lay Servant Ministries, what the bishop said or did not say, what I said and am saying. We cannot stop having conversations. I will never say stop. We

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cannot stop. Christ has not stopped. Christ speaks to us now, October 3, 2020 because we have not seen **All the People**. We have not seen all the people and we need more conversations. We as a church cannot allow ourselves to box 2020 up in a crate and pretend anymore.

The Virginia Conference is moving forward to “**See All the People**” in the midst of this pandemic and our conversations. Your churches are trying new ways of ministry. Do not stop creating and thinking of new ways. Don’t stop asking questions. Assist your pastors, don’t stifle them. Be aware of their families needs. Be patient. With **HOPE** offer hospitality, with **HOPE** offer Christ, with **HOPE** do it with purpose, with **HOPE** do it with engagement and transform the surrounding community. Be Christ to all the people. **See All the People**.

Paul said in Romans 15:13 - “May the God of hope fill you with all the joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Grace and peace to you all. **Amen!**