

**Conference Lay Leader Remarks
Martha Stokes
2021 Annual Conference**

Bishop Lewis and members of the Annual Conference:

During my high school years, Rev. and Mrs. Robert Callis, Jr. were appointed to Fieldale UMC. Mrs. Callis, who had been an early Local Licensed Elder in the Virginia Conference, was instrumental in helping me identify my gifts for use in the life of the church. She always carried an embroidered handkerchief, holding it in her hand each time she preached. Just as many of you who are clergy pass a stole to the person following behind you at a local church or to an entering member of your order, Mrs. Callis passed on her handkerchiefs. Before she left Fieldale, I was blessed to receive one. I carry it with me whenever I know I will be facing something difficult. I wasn't planning to bring it with me to Annual Conference, but before I left the house this morning, I clearly heard that I needed to get the handkerchief out of my dresser drawer. It's been on the table with my notebook all day and now; I'm going to hold it in my hand tightly as I share my remarks with you. Mrs. Callis was one of the influential people in my faith journey who helped me see God's call upon my life.

Darlene Amon was another one of those influential people. I would not be standing here today without Darlene's example, guidance and witness. The announcement of Darlene's death on May 27th has left a deep sense of emptiness throughout the Virginia Conference.

Darlene was serving the last few months of her term as the Virginia Conference Lay Leader in February of 2000 when I applied for and was offered a position on the Conference Connectional Ministries staff. I knew of Darlene through her leadership with the United Methodist Women and as Conference Lay Leader, but it wasn't until that interview that I got to finally meet her. That day - in the old Conference Office building on Broad Street, Darlene as Conference Lay Leader and Chair of the Personnel Committee, greeted me with such graciousness. She and the others in the Cabinet Room that day took a risk, offering an unknown lay person the opportunity to lead in a position that had previously only been held by ordained clergy.

Darlene held numerous roles across all levels of The United Methodist Church. I will not note them all but must recognize that she was elected to the General Conference delegation from Virginia every quadrennium since 1992. Darlene served as President of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders and the National Association of Annual Conference Lay Leaders. She was the first woman to serve as the President of the National Association.

The impact of Darlene's leadership in the church will go on for generations. I am eternally grateful to have learned from her. I would not be who I am today without Darlene's example. We would not be the church that we are today without her courage and boldness. Join me in a moment of silence to give thanks for the life and witness of Darlene Amon.

Amen.

My sense of time has been thrown off-kilter since stay-at-home orders were put in place 15 months ago. Without consulting the calendar, I could say that it has been a year since I stepped into the role as Conference Lay Leader. Yet it was only eight months ago that I first stood before this body in this role. That day, I asked you to stand with me on holy ground, the sacred space where our words and actions matter more than ever. I slipped my Birkenstock sandals off as I spoke as a symbol that we have been called, just as Moses was before the burning bush, to open ourselves to the uniqueness, the wonders, the holy of this unusual time in which we find ourselves as members of the Body of Christ in this community we call United Methodist.

Three weeks after last year's Annual Conference, I had foot surgery. Six weeks later when I put my foot back in a shoe for the first time, everything was different. The Birkenstock that had for years been conforming to the shape of my foot didn't fit. My toes did not fall into the same spaces that had cradled them. The leather straps had stretched to accommodate the shape of my old foot, not my new reality. The footprints I left looked like they belonged to someone else. I spent weeks in physical therapy retraining my toes, ankle and knee to move in different ways. Somewhere in that process, multiple breaks in a repaired bone in my foot required a second surgery. For the last twelve weeks, I've been in a beautiful surgical boot. Don't expect me to slide out of it right now!

Due to the "failure" in the structure of my repaired foot, I have to start again. I'll be looking for new sandals to conform to a new foot. I'll be strengthening muscles that haven't been used for a while and figuring out how to walk on different terrains and along new paths. My footprint has changed again so there will be no stepping in my old patterns or directions.

We are experiencing exactly the same reality as "church."

- The familiar ways of being church don't fit any more; we are being called to find new opportunities for worship together. We must learn new ways to be and make disciples.
- The pews that cradled us so comfortably have given way to being church outside the building. We have always known that's what we were **supposed** to be. COVID just showed us that we **must be**.
- The straps that held us in place have stretched and loosened, giving us greater opportunity to reach new places and new people – to step outside what has held us tightly in place.
- The footprints that we've been following are gone. The walk ahead is not the same as it was in the past. We are being called to redefine and reinvent being "church."

One of the books I read in the early months of the pandemic was ***The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*** by Joan Chittister. In the forward, Sister Joan, an American Benedictine Sister, tells us that we have a choice as we stand between two worlds: the world we were told and never doubted would last and the world where we find ourselves living now that defies everything we were taught. She reminds us that we each have a prophet within ourselves, but recognizing that prophet requires us to enter into spiritual discernment where we ask ourselves what we really stand for – and what we have done to prove it.

As a result of that discernment, Sister Joan writes, "we either become prophets – or simply churchgoers."

“The prophet calls us to the best of what we say we are. The prophet confronts us with the deep-down great goodness of our common call to holiness, to love of neighbor, to commitment to the life of the whole world.” (p. 75, ***The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage***)

I can't speak for you, but I want to be this kind of prophet. I believe this type of spiritual prophecy is what we are called to by virtue of our baptisms. Yet the one thing I have heard over and over since November is that we must find new ways to talk about the call to ministry that all of us share.

- There have been exciting conversations about how we change our language around “call” to encompass all our varied gifts and talents; ALL of us, not solely those set aside by action of the denomination for licensed and ordained ministry. We are a team – laity and clergy together - both with 100% responsibility for outcomes as we live out our shared vision for the church.
- We are excited by the opportunity to focus on this call during the Laity Celebration worship service which will premier on Sunday morning at 11 AM on the VAUMC Facebook page.
- As we move forward, you will see how these conversations about our call to ministry are being brought to life through expanded opportunities in Lay Servant and Certified Lay Ministries. You can find a new video celebrating our call to ministry under “The Ministry of the Laity” section of the Conference website. (<https://vaumc.org/lay-servant-ministries/>)

God continues to call us to stand as witnesses to the dual pandemic of COVID and racial injustice as well as to the power of our faith and congregations - even when we don't have answers about the future of The United Methodist Church.

- It is hard for me to describe what a joy it has been to share my kitchen with Deborah Straughter, Hungsu Lim and Dan Kim as we created the first two episodes of *Diversity Kitchen*. My hope for *Diversity Kitchen* is that we can model a way of bringing people of different cultures together over the love of food and love of Jesus that furthers conversation and relationship-building.
- The efforts of the Call to Action Work Group for Racial Justice and Reconciliation have created resources and events to guide discussion around systemic racism, division within our communities and social unrest. On this eve of Juneteenth, we recognize more than ever before that we cannot sit as observers to the events of the last 15 months. We will not go back to normal nor can we be silent. We are called as prophets of our time to create safe spaces for hard conversations – just as Jesus did - so that our understanding of and love for one another can grow.
- Our acts of witness and servant leadership often mean we need to let go of old ways and old thinking that may allow us to perceive that some people are better than others and deserve more, while accepting that other people, ideas or dreams are disposable. ***None of us is disposable in the Body of Christ.*** We are so much stronger together, even when we disagree.

I have taken these last eight months to listen. Laity and clergy: I hear you today and will continue to actively listen to all voices.

In the reality of leading in this space of not having answers about the future of our denomination:

- I ask you to pray for the delegation as we participate in a called session of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Conference on July 21st. This session is being called for the purpose of voting on a resolution from the Tennessee and Memphis Conferences to unite the two conferences to form the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference. Delegates will also receive reports on the pandemic response in the jurisdiction, the work of antiracism across the jurisdiction, and the work of the jurisdiction moving forward.
- There is ongoing discussion as to how best to move forward with preparation of the delegation in anticipation of the postponed General and Jurisdictional Conferences.
- Expect updates at next year's Annual Conference on the work of the General Conference which is now scheduled for August 29 – September 6, 2022, and the Jurisdictional Conference which be held the following November.

Twenty-five or so years ago, Darlene Amon wrote an article that has been widely distributed about laity and clergy working as partners in ministry. I could not close with any better words than these that she wrote from her heart, as a prophet of her time. She wrote:

“This new style of partnership calls for ministry and leadership to be *shared* by the pastor and local church laity. It calls for teams of lay and clergy to trust each other, to always seek win/win solutions, to keep agreements, and to assume full responsibility. **We can't become what we need to be by remaining what we are. When we risk enough to move from where we may have been for years by opening ourselves to the transforming work of God in Jesus Christ, there's no telling what will happen in our lives, our churches, and our annual conferences.**”

Here these words again:

“We can't become what we need to be by remaining what we are. When we risk enough to move from where we may have been for years by opening ourselves to the transforming work of God in Jesus Christ, there's no telling what will happen in our lives, our churches, and our annual conferences.”

May it be so.