

June 11, 2023

Dear Friends across the Virginia Conference:

As we enter into this season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time, we recognize that we are in anything but an ordinary time in the life of our beloved denomination. Yet, our call has not changed. In fact, we believe that being a disciple, a follower of Jesus, demands even more of us today than ever before.

The call of the *laos* – the Greek word meaning the whole people of God – has not changed. The call to be in ministry is not reserved for the clergy. It is for all who want to follow the path of becoming and living as disciples of Jesus Christ. This call is not easy to carry, especially in a time like now with so many unanswered questions. This call requires that we build and nurture authentic relationships with one another, even when we disagree.

As your current and former Conference Lay Leaders, we are committed to the future of The United Methodist Church. Our connection - our relationships with one another around the globe based upon our love of Jesus - is important in each of our lives. We did not come to this United Methodist connection by the same paths. In that regard, we're not any different from our local congregations. We're a mix of a lifelong Virginia United Methodist baptized and confirmed in a small church of the Mountain View District, a cradle Methodist from a large church in New Jersey, and a child of a Tennessee Southern Baptist upbringing. Despite all that we've seen and experienced, we are United Methodist and will #BeUMC. Why? Because...

- Our neighbors, our communities, and our world need what we as United Methodists offer: an understanding of God's grace working in and through us as we live out our faith in the world.
- We can model for the rest of the world a way of being followers of Jesus who might not agree on every question but can worship and grow through our relationships with one another. We have a distinctive way of studying and understanding scripture that gives us room for differences of opinion and understandings, allowing us to continue our own spiritual growth and learning. We celebrate this freedom but agree that we are bound by the Articles of Religion as set forth in ***The United Methodist Book of Discipline***.
- We are a people who know that new expressions of church are needed to meet new people where they are. We may have forgotten that at times as we've grown comfortable in our pews, but our heritage is a reminder that the world is still our parish. We are not afraid to take the church outside the walls of a building to meet the needs of the community.

None of us – laity or clergy – knows exactly what to do right now. We feel lost: church properties that hold special places in our personal faith stories are leaving the

denomination, people we hold dear have made decisions that new church homes are best for them. We are grieving the loss of church buildings and members - family and friends. But there comes a point when the mourning must turn to dancing and joy. Now is the time for new beginnings! Here is what we know we must do.

- Forgive each other – for our failures, our decisions, the harm we have caused one another. Care for and love one another. That commandment doesn't cease if the name on the church building changes.
- Learn from the children and youth who know what church is without all the politics and debate: communities of support and acceptance doing what Jesus taught us. Our young people have a lot to teach us about being disciples.
- The months and years ahead will not be easy, but we will learn together. Be permission giving as creative ministry ideas come forward. Our call is to be bold and courageous, especially as we seek the renewal and revitalization of The United Methodist Church.
- Stop waiting! Now is the time! The Holy Spirit is moving, Let's use our gifts and callings now to return to our roots. Be vile as John Wesley would say and go share the Good News from the storefronts, in the parks, through the streets, and up on the rooftops. We can't walk out the door on Sunday and forget who we are called to be.

Something happened for each one of us in our church lives that changed us, transformed us, led us to be United Methodist. For the three of us, we recognize it was the relationships built locally and globally through our United Methodist connection that shaped our lives, teaching us how to be like Jesus as we work to bring about God's Kingdom in the world. We honor our doctrine and heritage, the core values that connect the people of The United Methodist Church. We see the beauty of our traditions and rituals. We seek to live into the fullness of all our baptism calls us to be.

We embrace the future of The United Methodist Church. The world desperately needs us all to do that, now more than ever.

In Christ's Service,

Martha Stokes, Conference Lay Leader 2020 - Present

Warren R. Harper, Conference Lay Leader 2012-2020

Shirley Cauffman, Conference Lay Leader 2006-2012