

Common Table for Church Vitality Minutes

Thursday, August 22, 2024 – 10:00 AM

The scheduled meeting of the Common Table for Church Vitality was held on Thursday, August 22, 2024, at 10:00 AM on Zoom.

Attendees:

- Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson (Resident Bishop of the Richmond Episcopal Area)
- Mr. Steve Summers (Assistant to the Bishop)
- Mr. Dwayne Stinson, Co-Chair, (Director of Connectional Ministries for Discipleship and Congregational Vitality)
- Rev. Jonathan Page, Co-Chair, (Director of Connectional Ministries for Creativity and Innovation)
- Ms. Martha Stokes, (Conference Lay Leader)
- Mr. David Dommissie, Ex Officio, (Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer)
- Rev. Amanda Miller Garber, Clergy (Director Office of Missional Engagement)
- Dr. Carlos Liceaga, Certified Lay Servant (At-Large member)
- Kristina Wilson, Lay (At-Large Member)
- Rev. Lyle Morton, Clergy (At-Large Member)
- Amanda Webber, Clergy (At-Large Member)

Not in Attendance:

- Rev. Doug Forrester, Clergy (Cabinet Representative)
- Rev. Ahnna Lise Jennings, Clergy (Board of Higher Education)
- Mr. Alan Webber, Lay (Conference Scouting Coordinator)
- Mr. David Collins, Lay (President, United Methodist Men)
- Mr. Albert Weal, Lay (President, Southeastern Jurisdiction United Methodist Men)
- Rev. Claire Miller, Clergy (Conference Secretary)
- Ms. Katie Mueller, (Executive Administrator – Office of Connectional Ministries)

Greeting:

Rev. Jonathan Page and Mr. Dwayne Stinson called the meeting to order at 10:00 AM and Rev. Page offered a word of prayer.

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Approval of the Minutes of May 9, 2024:

Mr. Stinson offered the previous minutes for approval and the minutes were approved by consensus with no corrections.

Bishop's Report – Bishop Sue Hupert-Johnson:

Invitation to Discernment and Spiritual Practices

Bishop Sue shared that she has been working on Spiritual Disciplines and that a series of webinars are planned to begin in September to explore spiritual practices.

Want to encourage folks to get back to the basics. The Church would be in a better place if we spent more time with God. Inviting the AC to reclaim the “Method” in Methodism – Daily practices connect us with God and allow the HS to perfect us in love of God and neighbor. Soul Feast lays out spiritual practices – Martha and Bishop will do series of webinars monthly – invite all VAUMC to join in this journey. Each month invite the VAUMC to explore different spiritual practices. Feedback monthly from AC members – will be the focus of AC next year.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

She also shared that she has been working with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Rev. Dr. Gary Mason who deals with world-wide conflict. She added that the Commission is aiming to address mistrust within the Conference. She has solicited a wide number of individuals and will create a steering committee of about 10-12 people and then will expand the conversation to about 100 participants looking at a variety of issues. Rev. Dr. Mason has provided a proposal for formatting these conversations over a six-to-twelve-month period. A report will be forthcoming to the Annual Conference.

The Bishop stated that there has been a lot of energy on both sides, and we continue to hear about a lot of distrust within the Annual Conference. She invited the Common Table members to join her in discerning whether the distrust is new or historic. She mentioned that Rev. Page had advised her that they are finding there is a lot of trust for the districts but distrust for the Conference, which she finds is a weird dynamic because the districts *are* the conference. She stated that “We need to get everybody in the same boat, working on the same page to build trust within the annual conference”.

Bishop Sue added that the Conference staff is first rate and that she has requested that staff members get rid of anything that is on their plate that does not help the local church. She stated that we need to build a new United Methodist Church from an old one with fewer resources available. We need to look at how do we do this differently. How do we

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reach out to new generations and communities? How do we reach those who have not been reached before?

Bishop Sue also shared that the word “Church” has been coopted in the US and noted the Church of England’s understanding and recent discussion on the word, “Church”. She shared a goal to create beloved communities that embody joy, love, acceptance and grace.

Lay Leader’s Report – Ms. Martha Stokes:

Ms. Stokes discussed restructuring the Board of Laity leaders to include younger voices. She welcomed Amanda Webber to the Common Table, Alan Webber to the role of Conference Scouting Coordinator, David Collins to his new role as President of the United Methodist Men and Albert Weal who is moving into the position of President of the Southeastern Jurisdiction United Methodist Men.

Ms. Stokes added that she is looking forward with great anticipation to the change in leadership in the United Women in Faith with Karen McElfish coming into the President’s role. Another exciting change for Ms. Stokes is that the General Conference added a single line to paragraph 660 that defines the role of District Lay Leaders that states that “care should be given if the District Lay Leader is not a young adult that there should be an Associate District Lay Leader who is a Young Adult.”

Ms. Stokes stated that she had a good conversation recently with the Lay Servant team discussing Lay Ministry and our Certified Lay Minister cohorts. There are a lot of good things happening and she is looking forward to seeing the ways we are living all that out in the coming months.

Bishop Sue added that she had recently heard from Rev. Jessie Colwell, Director of Clergy Excellence who reported that there were about thirty applications this year for Full membership and twenty-eight for Provisional membership. As well, there are numerous people reaching out from other conferences wanting to come be a part of what’s happening in the Virginia Conference.

Leadership Introductions:

The members present introduced themselves and the roles in which they serve on the Common Table. As part of the introductions, Mr. Stinson spoke of innovative approaches for reaching younger generations including an October event focused on helping churches rethink their church culture so they can “grow younger”. Currently there are sixteen-churches signed up for the training retreat already.

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Rev. Dr. Page reported that part of his position's responsibilities is to help guide our Annual Conference session. He stated that the June Annual Conference was a very positive and we want to keep up the momentum in Roanoke in 2025.

Some of the questions he is looking at in his role as DCM are, "How do we measure vitality? How do we help clergy and lay leadership to understand how to measure church vitality?" He stated that it's not just about how many people are in the seats or how much money is in the collection plate; it's about the overall congregational health and how it is relating to the community. He added, "People don't need more things to 'get done', we need to find new forms of reaching folks that complement what we are already doing."

Grant-making and Accountability

Rev. Amanda Miller Garber will be taking the lead role in the Church Development space.

Rev. Dr. Page stated that he will be in that space in an advisory capacity. He added that one of the things we focus on is managing grants. In the last year, they have worked on a project with the ministry incubators group called GrantSpace – one recommendation which came out of their advisory work was to develop a grant making body in the Annual Conference. This body would help people apply for larger scale grants. We are now at the point of starting to act on this, This is the time we normally open applications for special and sustaining grants. Feedback is requested because we are in a place where we feel confident that we want to take a step forward with the recommendation coming from GrantSpace to work alongside a couple of other bodies including our clergy at the Church Development team, the United Methodist Foundation and the Bishop's Foundation. Working together with them to take some of our usual sustaining funds, for preaching and evangelism and to invite people to bring their big ideas/dreams and how they plan to accomplish them. The Incubators group is looking at taking some larger swings which hopefully will make a bigger impact in the Annual Conference.

Rev. Miller Garber stated that the question is, "Does the Common Table feel comfortable with moving in that direction and away from the smaller, special and sustaining grants to develop an application for folks to tell the story of what they are trying to do and for the three grant offering bodies to assess what their body can contribute toward any grants?" She added, "We could still take things on independently, but we are looking at collaboratively offering larger grants".

Mr. Stinson – added that it would streamline the grant process and create more equity with our resources and to possibly serve more churches . Further it would create a better

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chain of communications so that we have a better overall view of what the grant money is going to fund.

Dr. Liceaga commented, “I’m supportive of what you are describing but I want to remind the group of the request made during Annual Conference by pastor Gina Anderson Cloud that we consider including the funds from the districts. Has this idea been looked at?”

Rev. Dr. Page responded that as a starting point we might gather the entities mentioned by the Conference office and then loop in the Districts. Each district has their own financial management processes – it would be another layer of the process.

Rev. Morton stated, “In previous years, many churches were seeking multiple grants from different entities within district or conference. They did so to support their particular missions. We need to remember – would the amount be adequate now that not as many funds are available?”

Rev. Dr. Page responded, “That’s what Dwayne was speaking of – creating an understanding across the grant-making entities of which groups have received the same applications. We need to make sure we are leveraging our dollars to have the highest impact possible. This is a stewardship effort.”

Mr. Dommissie added, “The issue is also to ensure that if a church needs \$5,000 and applies to three different groups for a \$5,000 grant that they are getting what they need but not that amount multiplied when those funds could have gone to fund another ministry.

Bishop Hauptert-Johnson offered an observation and a caution, “We need to focus on oversight and getting the biggest bang for our buck. We don’t have the luxury to do otherwise and be good stewards. But we must be careful with the concept of “Control”. People don’t always understand that word the same way and see it in a negative perspective rather than as oversight.”

Dr. Liceaga stated that previously when the Common Table was doing grants there were two types of grants. He asked if there will now only be one type of grant and if that will be clearly explained to people.

Rev. Dr. Page responded, “Ideally, we’ll have this conversation with Conference Development Team and the Bishop’s Foundation and the United Methodist Foundation to ensure we have buy-in to work on this together and to provide transparent communication. He expects a communication will be sent out in September, with applications due in October and decisions made in November. This would permit awards in December. What we would say in the application space is - “This is about connectionalism, and making a

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transformational impact in communities, When churches are working together on a project. It's about partnership with community foundations. Where we want to be careful is that we don't want to create so many qualifications in the application that we wind up discouraging people from applying." He added that it's about considering "high leverage scenarios" and coming to agreement on how much money each group can bring to the table for a grant season. We want to communicate to the Conference the total amount we want to award and will divide it up appropriately related to the large-scale impact the churches want to make.

Mr. Domnisse added that another potential part of this is that with properties coming to the district there are some that have been designated as not having a missional need. These properties might be sold and the proceeds available for granting purposes as well. He stated that it is important to get a group who can help focus on this very thing. Being able to partner with a group who has expertise in grantmaking could help raise all boats in the conference and bring us to a different vantage point with different capacities to make a difference in the future.

Ms. Stokes asked if there was something regarding the grant-making group that came out of Annual Conference to help connect local churches with opportunities.

Rev. Dr. Page stated, "Absolutely! This is one of the layers." He added that in the long range we don't need to just give money away, but we also need to help people find money that is available. We want to help resource local churches with opportunities and help in applying for grants.

Dr. Liceaga asked what the accountability will be for those who receive grants. Rev. Dr. Page responded that they envision quarterly and annual reporting. He added that it would depend on the type of grant and what it is for. Is it a one-time grant or something to be disbursed over three years?

Rev. Dr. Page asked the Common Table, "Do we have a consensus that this is the right direction to go?"

The consensus was "Yes, this is the right direction."

Diversity and Representation in Leadership: Rev. Amanda Miller Garber

Camp Rainbow Connection – handout

Rev. Miller Garber referenced a Camp Rainbow Connection Proposal which had been sent to the Common Table Members earlier in the day (Attached)

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She highlighted the history of Camp Rainbow Connection, which offers respite for caregivers for adults with intellectual disabilities. She stated that the “bottom line” is that the Camp Rainbow Connection Director who is a part-time employee of the VAUMC dreams of the organization becoming its own 501C with a board of directors and of becoming a Relationship Partner with the Annual Conference. Rev. Miller Garber spoke with persons in finance and with the Directors for Connectional Ministries and presented the Camp Rainbow Connection proposal on their behalf. She stated that the Conference realizes it is not equipped to oversee very specialized ministries such as this one and those to whom Rev. Miller Garber spoke have affirmed the proposal.

The next step is for the Common Table to approve proposal. The deadline for submittal for the 501C is December 31, 2024. Rev. Miller Garber asked the Common Table for their support for this Camp Rainbow Connection proposal.

The proposal was accepted by consensus.

Hampton Retreat Task Force Update

Rev. Miller Garber stated that she has connected with Mr. David Burkey – (United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries) who is experienced working with many Annual Conferences. He is working with the VAUMC in a mostly pro bono advisory capacity. The Task Force members are on track to get a proposal by October. Rev. Miller Garber added that Mr. Burkey has said several times he thinks it would be very wise to hire a consulting group for the next step; particularly one that understands trust clause, liabilities, etc. Part of the proposal will include a budget for the work that will be required for the next step in the process.

Mission Encounter

Rev. Miller Garber reported that the Common Table’s directive was to let the Mission Encounter leadership know they could receive \$5,000 grant if they agreed to meet to discuss important questions and discern the future of Mission Encounter. They are gathering their folks via Zoom. Rev. Miller Garber requested clear direction from the Common Table regarding who we want to be present when we talk about future grant support and our ongoing support of Mission Encounter. She further recommended an in-person meeting,

Rev. Dr. Page recommended United Women in Faith representation. Ms. Stokes recommended a representative from the Missional Ministries board as they have had conversations and are prayerfully considering their level of involvement. Rev. Miller Garber asked “Would someone from this body like to be present for that conversation. Perhaps Dwayne or Jonathan could check in”. Rev. Dr. Page added that we need to have some representation that is not solely Conference staff.

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Conference Boards & Agencies – Rev. Dr. Jonathan Page

Rev. Dr. Page stated that we are currently trying to determine what the overall roles of all our Conference boards and agencies are. He added that the Annual Conference Nominations Team nominates to about forty-seven boards. Sometimes this results in the members having differing expectations of the term “Leadership”. He thinks the Common Table might be a place to create leadership qualities for anyone who holds a leadership role in the Annual Conference. This might translate into creative standards for who is nominated to boards and agencies. He asked if it would be helpful to have some sort of covenant like the spiritual practices the Bishop spoke of earlier for this body,

Ms. Stokes stated that there was an old document from several years ago when Common Table tried to do something similar. There was also a Characteristics of Lay Leadership years ago which might be helpful to this conversation. She added that she would try to find those documents.

Rev. Morton added that around the same time of the documents Ms. Stokes referenced, there were certain standards for how leaders were to interact. Specifically, there were guidelines for how to agree and disagree, etc.

Rev. Dr. Page asked Ms. Stokes to send the documents out to the Common Table members and it will be an item on the September meeting agenda.

Dr. Liceaga added that we need to consider diversity when we nominate to ensure that “all the colors and all the voices are represented”. This needs to be across the boards and agencies and how they represent the conference.

Rev. Dr. Page stated that we also need to look at the bodies that do not have nominations such as the United Methodist Men and the United Women in Faith.

Mr. Stinson added that one of the challenges has been that not all persons are nominated by the Nominations committee – some people on some boards and agencies are nominated or appointed from elsewhere. He recommended that we be thinking about how we maintain that balance when we don’t have full voice in filling the positions.

Rev. Morton stated that we need to be cognizant of the small number of certain ethnic churches and that there are also stronger ethnic churches like the Korean churches which have the people and the facilities to serve and the roles of leadership. He added that most African American churches are very small, and everyone is already doing two and three jobs and when you ask them to do something else, they won’t because they are already

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doing too much. He asked how we could we start an initiative to start some native American or African American churches.

Bishop Sue stated that what disturbs her is that a lot of the whiteness of the United Methodist Church can be traced back to the whiteness of the early Methodist church. She recommends that we can get leadership and build cohorts with young black leaders across denominational lines and really giving them intentional mentorship and guidance without the United Methodist- centric focus. She added that if we can build a cohort of young leaders, we can start building from grassroots – whether it's black or multi-racial churches. She further stated that we have tremendous ethnic leadership representation (nearly half of the bishops in the Southeastern Jurisdiction are African American while the churches remain predominantly white. We have historic prejudices that are stored in our makeup.

Rev. Morton stated that we need to meet and talk about these historic prejudices to change them. He related the story of how he was told as a young man that he could never become a United Methodist pastor in the Virginia Conference but that he finally found a path through the Holsten Conference. He added that he eventually came back to Virginia and was finally accepted in this Conference.

Safe Sanctuaries Report – Mr. Dwayne Stinson

Mr. Stinson stated that the Conference is in the process of updating the Safer Sanctuaries Policy at Conference level. To ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards, the policy will also serve as a model for local churches and will be finalized before the end of the week. The goal is to ensure the safety and well-being of children, youth and vulnerable adults in Conference events and activities. The Common Table will review and hopefully approve this revised policy at our next meeting.

Rev. Morton encouraged our body to support African Americans and those from other regions who have been invited into the midst of growing our churches into multi-cultural and mix ethnicities. He added that much of the mistrust which the Bishop spoke of earlier is because some church's leadership is not as transparent as it could be.

Meeting Conclusion and Next Steps

Our next meeting will be held on September 19th at 6:30 PM on Zoom only.

Closing Prayer – Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson

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Bishop Sue offered a closing a prayer asking God for clear signs to help us to discern where God's Spirit is leading us.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:34 AM

Upcoming Meeting Times/Dates:

Thursday, September 19th at 6:30 PM – Virtual only

Thursday, October 17th at 6:30 PM – Virtual only

Thursday, November 14th at 10:00 AM - In Person

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Claire B. Miller", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Claire B. Miller, Conference Secretary