

Common Table for Church Vitality Minutes

The scheduled meeting of the Common Table for Church Vitality was held on Thursday, July 28, 2022, at 10:00 A.M. in person and via Zoom.

For the record those present were as follows: Rev. Steven Summers, (Director of Connectional Ministries and Chair), Ms. Martha Stokes (Conference Lay Leader), Bishop Sharma Lewis (Resident Bishop of the Richmond Episcopal Area), Rev. Douglas Forrester (Cabinet Representative), Ms. Katie Mueller (Executive Assistant in the Office of Connectional Ministries), Mr. Lester Kurtz (Commission on Ethnic Minority Concerns and Advocacy Representative), Rev. Nickie Moreno Howard (Learning Ministries/Board of Higher Education and Campus Ministries), Ms. Kimberly Young (2023), Rev. Don Jamison (2024), Rev. Aaron Fitch (2025), Mr. Dwayne Stinson (Influence Ministries), Rev. Seungsoo “RJ” Jun (Serving Ministries - joined at 10:57 via Zoom) Rev. Claire Miller (Annual Conference Assistant Secretary, without vote).

Those who were unable to attend: Rev. Ryan LaRock (Board of Higher Education and Campus Ministries), Mr. David Domnisse (Conference Treasurer), Mr. Eduard Carrillo (Commission on Ethnic Minority Concerns and Advocacy), Ms. Terry Bain (2024), Rev. Megan Saucier (2023).

Rev. Summers called the Common Table to order at 10:01 AM and opened us with a word of welcome. He thanked Bishop Lewis for making the time to attend the meeting.

Devotion, Rev. Steve Summers

Rev. Summers led the Common Table by reading John 10:22 (CEB) and a reflection from *A Cry for Mercy* by Henri Nouwen. Rev. Summers quoted from the Nouwen reflection, “Listen to my cries Lord. When you aren’t the one to fill me, I’m filled with endless thoughts that tear me away from you.” Rev. Summers further shared:

“When we speak of Christ speaking and us listening and the conversation that takes place and the ways it takes place, some pretty special things happen, and miracles and transformation take place.”

Opening Prayer and Bishop’s Report, Bishop Sharma Lewis, Resident Bishop of the Richmond Episcopal Area

Bishop Lewis offered a prayer of invocation and stated that she was wearing a mask as a precaution because she has been around many people who are traveling as she will be soon. Bishop Lewis then thanked the Common Table for their important work. She reported that the Boy Scouts settlement is still being worked on and if anyone has questions, they should direct

them to Rev. Summers. She further stated that there has unfortunately been some incorrect information disseminated which has made their work more difficult.

Disaffiliation – Bishop Lewis described Team Jeremiah as a team of fifteen individuals who are ethnically and theologically different. Their purpose is to help the Bishop look for and implement proactive strategies for moving forward. While they had to postpone their originally scheduled webinar, a second one was held with 350 persons attending. Just less than 600 persons had registered for the first webinar.

The UMC Disaffiliation Task Force meets Thursdays at 7:30 – every other week and works with the Bishop on the nuts and bolts of the disaffiliation process. Oct. 29th is the date scheduled for the first ratification of disaffiliated churches. Currently less than ten churches looking to disaffiliate could be ready by the October date. The deadline for those churches to complete what is necessary is the end of September. By judicial decision when we gather to ratify, the vote will be either a “yea” or “nay” vote.

Bishop Lewis added that some clergy have withdrawn to join the Global Methodist Church (GMC), and some have simply withdrawn from the United Methodist Church. She feels that we have been transparent and consistent in the process. The latest news is that 106 churches are suing the Florida Conference. Our Chancellor is researching the lawsuit so that we can glean and learn from their experience. She thanked Rev. Summers for giving the Common Table Report.

Bishop Lewis then shared a matter brought to her attention by a clergy member in the Virginia Conference which is also a personal and heavy matter on her heart – the murder of two African American clergy members. The Bishop stated that she received an email from an Anglo clergy man in this conference who said he is really concerned for the safety of all clergy (not just clergywomen), and he requested that the Bishop establish a task force to look into clergy safety. Bishop Lewis added that she has asked Rev. Summers to look into the matter and encouraged the Common Table to continue to pray for the office of the Bishop and for Rev. Summers as they deal with many different things. Bishop Lewis added that she was going to Memphis to represent the Virginia Conference and to be with her colleague Bishop McAlilly. The Bishop reminded the Common Table that her door is always open whenever she is in town.

Regarding the 2022 Annual Conference, Bishop Lewis stated that she is very pleased that the District Initiative passed this time and added that she would leave this topic to District Superintendent Doug Forrester to share rather than to “steal his thunder”.

Conference Lay Leader Remarks, Ms. Martha Stokes

Ms. Stokes began by saying she was thankful for Rev. Summers' devotion this morning. The whole thought that when we are filled with Jesus we are transformed and allow God to use us to accomplish his mission impressed her.

Regarding Mission Encounter, Ms. Stokes stated that it has been a challenging four weeks with the group she is working with. There is a good age range going up to one member who will be ninety-six soon, although they are still missing some younger voices. She added that there is a good ethnic diversity in the group. She said the group focused on the question, "Who can we be together in the world?" and stated that there have been some challenging conversations including with two clergy leaders last Thursday who said they weren't sure they wanted to continue to be in this conversation because they are seeking to be fed and don't believe this study will permit that to happen. What struck her is that it is important that we have these conversations about the world and where we belong in it and yet we have some clergy leaders saying they don't want to continue in these hard conversations. She wonders how we continue to help our leaders understand the need and the responsibility we have and added that we need to question how we are being disciples in the world today. She stated that it is important that we consider how we continue to nurture, feed, and equip our leaders in the conference to make a difference in our lives and in the whole world.

District Superintendent's Comments, Rev. Doug Forrester

Rev. Forrester thanked the Common Table for its support of the District Initiative. Speaking on behalf of the whole cabinet, he stated that they are glad it passed. He said, we are "in an interesting, liminal space between old district pairings and the new districts that will be fully operational by the first of the year." He added that we have a great opportunity to look at restructuring and bringing on new leadership as the new leaders who have already been brought on have spurred new energy.

Influencing Ministries, Mr. Dwayne Stinson

Mr. Dwayne Stinson spoke on *Resourcing our Ethnic Minority Pastors and Churches: A Conversation*. He stated that he was meeting with a couple of pastors this afternoon and evening to discuss how they move forward post-pandemic. One Pastor in Petersburg is having a cookout in the community that afternoon and Mr. Stinson needed to leave early to help support that event as they work to connect with the community.

Mr. Stinson stated that last year he and the Bishop spoke about programing which could provide support African American clergy and congregations. He has been meeting with ethnic minority clergy and last September he met with twelve African American pastors on a task force to help with planning. Then in December he and the Bishop met with the Latino caucus. In February he invited the African and African American clergy and laity to meet and in March they met with clergy in cross-racial appointments.

He has compiled 235 different clergy responses to the question, "What do you and your churches need from the Annual Conference as we discern how to provide needed support?" The number one response from clergy was "connecting with other clergy and sharing resources with other clergy." He added that the laity were asked, "What barriers are keeping you from being successful in making disciples?" He reported that yesterday, the Bishop met with a group to go through the feedback to try to figure out how we can best support these churches. He stated that Clergy Excellence can help but that "clergy really need to just reach out to one another."

In other responses, African and African American Clergywomen responded that it was important for them to connect. There is an active chapter of black clergywomen forming to build connections. Other significant responses included the need for access to technology resources which UMCOM will be working on to figure out ways to let churches know what is available. Racism, especially in cross-racial/cross-cultural churches also received significant responses. There is a need to celebrate the diversity of the conference as we have a broad racial and cultural footprint. The questions remain, "How can we lift up those stories?", "How to fund ministry?". Other questions are related to Apportionments and Stewardship. He added that the Conference can help churches think differently about how they fund ministries.

Another response related to how the Annual Conference can reach more youth and young adults in the community at large. He stated that Influencing Ministries will work together with Rev. Moreno-Howard's office to address this issue. He added that the Board of Ordained Ministry and the District Committees on Ordained Ministry are working on the challenge of supporting candidates of color and ethnic minorities. He added that mental and physical health are ongoing concerns of the clergy as well as equity in accessing grants as some churches have no idea how to obtain a grant.

Included in the top ten of the thirty-four themes discussed with the Bishop yesterday, two themes that stand out are Communication at every level and Accountability. He asked the question, "How do we make it clear that clergy and churches need to be responsible for seeking out information themselves?" Mr. Stinson further discussed follow-up plans including inviting

the ethnic/racial minority clergy and laity to share how Virginia Conference is addressing these needs.

Bishop Lewis added that Mr. Stinson has taken on a Yeoman's job adding that with some of the "low-hanging fruit" the minority pastors asked for can be addressed immediately including a webinar which was held recently on grants. She added that we officially have a Black Clergywomen's caucus in the Conference which shows us that clergy just want permission to do things and they want knowledge. We need to undergird and provide the programs for their growth and strengthening. The key to our desire to strengthen all churches is to just listen to folks to find out what they need.

Mr. Kurtz asked how many African and African American clergy are in the Conference. Mr. Stinson responded that there were forty-five at the meeting with the Bishop and there are 108 African or Black clergy in the Virginia Conference who are split between serving same ethnic and cross-ethnic appointments. He added that almost all Asian clergy are in cross racial appointments. Rev. Moreno-Howard added that there are more than seven lay supply pastors serving in cross-racial/cross-ethnic appointments.

Regarding the proposed Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) position, Mr. Stinson reported that we need that position badly and are in process of trying to define the scope of the position. We have not yet started looking for candidates because we are still getting data together. He added that this year was difficult in making cross-racial/cross-ethnic appointments; it's been a tough year overall. He is not sure why but what goes on in the world affects the church. He stated that the Cabinet and the Board of Ordained Ministry has taken an Inter-cultural competency survey to help with discerning and modeling to the Annual Conference. Mr. Kurtz invited Mr. Stinson to attend the Commission on Ethnic Minority Concerns and Advocacy (CEMCA) meeting to do a presentation. Ms. Young encouraged everyone present to listen and to build on/cement the relationships in meetings. Mr. Stinson stated that he has really been connecting with ethnic clergy lately. He departed the meeting at 10:51 AM.

Learning Ministries/Board of Higher Education and Campus Ministries (BHECM), Rev. Nickie Moreno Howard

Rev. Nickie Moreno Howard presented the report from Learning Ministries/BHECM stating that she and Rev. Ryan LaRock are visiting as many campus ministries as possible during the year. They are also doing a major overhaul to the General Board of Higher Education Ministries (GBHEM) handbook as there are many errors in the current handbook. She added that she recently met with the Youth Ministries and the Young Adults and will be meeting soon with the Young Adult Council (CCYM) related to providing them with resources.

Rev. Summers shared that Devon Earl who is new to the Wesley Foundation board has good connections and has started the process now of working with the United Methodist Commission to rebuild and train campus ministers. The next training will be on Fundraising. He added that they are doing a full rebranding and that Old Dominion University (ODU) already is using its new logo. Rev. Moreno Howard departed the meeting at 10:55 AM.

Serving Ministries, Rev. Seungsoo “R.J.” Jun

Rev. Seungsoo “R.J.” Jun presented the report of the Serving Ministries. He stated that after being sick for four days following his attendance at Camp Rainbow he is “holding up pretty well”. This year’s Camp Rainbow was the first one held in three years. Unfortunately, on Thursday of the camp one individual tested positive for COVID and was sent home. Rev. Jun stated that his was case number nineteen out of sixty-eight members/staff. A significant number of people contracted COVID during that camp and in speaking with camp leadership it appears that all the cases have been mild so far. Rev. Jun added that is a blessing considering that so many of the campers are disabled and high risk. He stated, “This episode provides yet another wakeup call about the seriousness of COVID.”

The All God’s Children camp is ongoing with week two currently in session. They are doing well and have one more camp. He added that the third camp still needs some staff members and that there have not been that many clergy represented in any of the camps. This will need to be worked on. Rev. Jun mentioned that he was pleased when he visited the week one camp to see Rev. Ted and Teresa Smith there in shorts and “swagging with the kids”. He said that he asked Rev. Smith how he decided to volunteer for the camp and that Rev. Smith stated that he never had the time to do it before but now that now he does and because so many of the campers who attend are African American, Rev, Smith wanted to be there to show them an African American role model.

Rev. Jun reported that two more Advance Specials have been added and that he is excited because the business office helped to establish an online giving link for Advance Special partners.

Regarding the Annual Conference offering, the goal was \$150,000 and as of last week he had heard that the offering had reached \$144,000. He added that the breakdown is significant with \$50,000 coming from Floris UMC directly to Wesley Seminary. They can attribute this offering to the Annual Conference offering because Floris UMC was inspired by the Annual Conference call about giving money directly to Wesley Seminary. Of the \$95,000 collected, \$65,000 came from churches and the balance was from the 5K run and individual donations.

Rev. Jun hopes that \$100,000 will be given to Wesley Seminary and the balance to the Annual Conference.

Rev. Jun thanked the Common Table for United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) training support. He stated that the Leader certificate expires after three or four years and that during the pandemic most leaders' certifications expired so they are working to recertify leaders through bi-monthly training. He also mentioned training to prepare churches planning overseas trips also in order to increase the number of clergy involved/trained. Clergy Excellence provided him with access to the names of newly licensed and newly ordained clergy to assist with getting all incoming clergy trained. Rev. Jun stated that any church wanting to send a mission team, either local or overseas needs at least one person on the team to be certified by UMVIM. This will qualify the teams to be covered under UMVIM insurance. Currently many churches are sending teams without training or coverage, so his office is trying to encourage churches to use these resources.

The meeting paused for a time of prayer led by Mr. Fitch. Persons and matters lifted up included Ms. Stokes' husband Steve who is recovering from a recent surgery set back, Rev. Jamison's wife who recently lost her only remaining aunt, the Camp Rainbow members and Rev. Jun who are recovering from COVID, and for Ms. Young who recently lost a friend.

Director of Connectional Ministries/Assistant to the Bishop Comments, Rev. Steve Summers

Rev. Summers reported that the JEDI position is still being worked on. It is on the top of the list and movement is slow and steady. He added that not everyone is aligned around this new position and that it helped that he and Bishop Lewis were able to hear about the need for the position and the need to fill it correctly. Annual Conference caused a bit of a derailment because the focus of Annual Conference was more on the District Initiative.

Rev. Summers also reported that the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCF&A) is coming into the Conference Center to provide on-site diversity training. This year's Annual Conference feedback was amazingly confident, especially as compared to the previous virtual Annual Conference. The theme, "United as One in Worship" was "spot on", the District Initiative was approved and overall, all the pieces were unified. Another highlight of Annual Conference was the relational piece – people needed to be together to hug, smile and speak their piece. The Cabinet did an amazing job as well. There is another Annual Conference scheduled for October 29th at 9:30 AM to vote on disaffiliations and necessary closures.

Regarding celebrations, Rev. Summers reported that we are celebrating Ms. Katie Mueller who has been in the office for a month. He stated, “She came in seamlessly and has been a Godsend.” Rev. Summers thanked her for her work and her passion.

Additionally, Ms. Bev Myers who is now serving in a consultancy role is available in a healthy, supportive way and is accountable in being compensated. The landing plans for Ms. Myers and Mr. Bryan Compton have worked well.

Approval of the Minutes of May 12, 2022, Rev. Steve Summers

Rev. Summers presented the minutes from the May 12, 2022, meeting, including Addendum 1, pages 3-6 for approval as attached to the agenda. The Minutes were approved as corrected.

The meeting recessed at 11:25 for a 10-minute break. Rev, Summers resumed the meeting at 11:37 AM

Financial Update, Rev. Steve Summers

Rev. Summers presented the Financial Update included in Addendum 2, pages 7-8 on behalf of the members of the Treasurer’s office who are all away. He reported that Collections are up 37.79 % in 2022 vs. 2021 when they were at 34.82%. Cash flow in 2022 is at 37.79% compared to 34.82% in 2021. Pre-pandemic cash-flow was at 39.7% in 2018 so we are almost back to pre-pandemic levels. Rev. Summers reported that across the board, expenses are down.

Rev. Don Jamison asked if an influx generally comes in at the end of the year and Rev. Summers and Bishop Lewis affirmed that this is common in the Virginia Conference.

Personnel Committee, Ms. Kimberly Young

Ms. Kimberly Young presented the report of the Personnel Committee, sharing that, “we have some staff.” She said the committee is very happy with the recent inclusion of “the spectacular Administrator Katie Mueller”. She added that the committee will probably be making some “out of timetable” requests to discuss and take action on some personnel matters that have arisen. Ms. Young announced that there will be a short meeting on August 12th at 10:00 AM to discuss the personnel matters that have come up. She requested that the minutes reflect this meeting and stated that an email was sent out to the Common Table to take part in a hybrid meeting.

Ms. Young stated that with the inclusion of GCF&A, the Personnel Committee is formalizing a Human Resources structure across the conference. They are streamlining policies

on job descriptions, payroll, annual evaluation cycles, etc. GCF&A has done great job of bringing the Clergy Excellence and Board of Ordained Ministries Personnel Committees together for record keeping as well as training/development. They are currently in the process of implementing an annual cycle. Clergy Excellence will stay with their current cycle until next year and then all will be on the same cycle. The Personnel Committee will look at stakeholder feedback in new evaluations and will allow the employee to include their own position evaluation.

Bishop Lewis thanked Ms. Young for her work with Common Table and with the Conference office to ensure that transitions are going well. She stated that the makeup in the building is changing as people are retiring. As well, she said we will probably need to continue to identify districts by their current and previous names for a while.

Grants Update, Rev. Don Jamison

Rev. Jamison reported that we are entering grant season and that he sent application due dates to Ms. Katie Meuller. The Grants Committee has some dates already scheduled with Ms. Bev Myers. There are upcoming Grant Committee meetings scheduled for September and October to address grant applications. He added that the Committee still needs to obtain the numbers to know how much money they have to give away.

Camp Ministries Study Taskforce, Rev. Doug Forrester, District Superintendent, Valley Ridge District

Rev. Forrester reported that the former Roanoke District is an outlier because district apportionments are going to camp Alta Mons. The former Staunton district sends funds to Camp Overlook. A large part of the funds going to camp ministries are making it difficult to fund other ministries. Rev. Forrester stated that he spoke at the Cabinet level and found other districts are dealing with the same issue. Churches are groaning under the weight of their financial obligations. He added that the task force needs to look at other conferences who do more management and funding of campgrounds and similar ministries at the conference level rather than at the district level. Rev. Summers stated that some camps are heavily endowed, and some districts are not using the camps very much but are paying into their ministries.

Bishop Lewis stated that they are currently getting names from the District Superintendents of people who could serve on the new Camp Ministries Study Taskforce. She added that the first meeting will likely be after Labor Day. She welcomes the Common Table to recommend individuals who might serve on the taskforce and indicated that one group will include Camp Rainbow and All God's Children camp.

Ms. Young stated that this is a great opportunity to practically determine how we are financially supporting the camps and our people resources. She encouraged taking a global look rather than simply a financial look. She added that she is excited about how we might work with Grace Inside to integrate with some of the camps (Rainbow and All God's Children)

Rev. Summers added that he is seeing a recent uptick and movement of the Holy Spirit tuning us into the issue of safety. Two individuals (one clergy and one lay) reached out to him recently wanting to know what the Conference is doing regarding local church safety for clergy and laity. He believes God is moving in this situation.

Rev. Jamison said that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA gives out grants for church safety each year for enhancing safety features on church campuses. The application period has passed for this year, but it is something to be aware of. He recommends checking with local police also for assessments and training in church safety. Ms. Stokes asked how this connects with Safe Sanctuaries policy reviews.

Bishop Lewis stated that the Council of Bishops will be meeting August 22-26 to discuss these matters. They will be looking at where we are with guidance from the General church. She added that her office has received names of people who want to be part of listening to victims, but they haven't gotten any further communication regarding that. The Cabinet is doing preliminary data collecting looking at how many of our churches have Safe Sanctuary policies, how many churches have been trained, and how many do not yet have a policy. The Virginia Conference is assessing this year where we are with Safe Sanctuaries. She said that it's not fair this year to require a policy but after the Cabinet's assessment they will have a better idea of how to proceed. She added that they are also looking at other resources and hope to come out with an Annual Conference initiative related to safety.

Closing Prayer and Adjournment

Ms. Stokes offered the closing prayer, and the meeting was adjourned at 12:30 PM.

Upcoming Meeting dates/times:

- September 8, 2022 – 10:00 AM (Thursday)
- October 27, 2022 – 10:00 AM (Thursday)
- December 8, 2022 – 10:00 AM (Thursday)

Rev. Claire Miller, Assistant Secretary