



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

POST OFFICE BOX 5606

10330 STAPLES MILL ROAD

GLEN ALLEN, VIRGINIA 23058-5606

Sharma D. Lewis
RESIDENT BISHOP

TELEPHONE: 804/521-1102
FAX: 804/521-1178
E-MAIL: terribiggins@vaumc.org

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Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup Report

Dear Virginia Conference,

Grace and peace to you in the strong name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In light of Governor Northam's announcement on May 4, 2020 that Virginia may be moving to Phase 1 of reopening as early as May 15, 2020, I want to let you know about the Back to In-Person Worship Workgroup. No date has been set for the return to in-person worship in the Virginia Conference, but on April 28, 2020, I convened this workgroup to provide advice to me, the District Superintendents, Clergy, and Laity about the best way to have our churches return to in-person worship and ministry safely.

The Workgroup consists of District Superintendents, local church pastors, a Deacon working with vulnerable populations, and legal and medical experts from around the Virginia Conference. They have consulted resources from church, governmental, and scientific communities, including materials from a variety of Conferences and denominations to glean best practices for returning to in-person worship in ways that are intentional and well-considered.

This process presents many questions and many of the 1,110+ congregations in our Conference have already begun thinking through the issues involved in re-opening. We will have a gradual reopening of in-person worship with very clear protocols implemented to help ensure the safety of the community—both the gathered community as well as the community beyond our walls.

We are seeking congregations from around the Conference who are willing and able to be pioneer churches in the first phases of bringing back in-person worship. There will be detailed guidelines developed by the workgroup for review by the Cabinet and approved by me. We will start slowly with these pioneer churches as they introduce in-person worship in a safe manner. The experience of these pioneer churches will help all of our churches as we learn together what this new season in the life of the church will require. If you believe this is something your church and leadership are able to do, we ask that you contact your District Superintendent by May 11, 2020 to join the pool from which those pioneer churches will be selected.

Although there are not exact dates for all of the churches to resume in-person worship, every church must begin preparing by reviewing the guidelines that will be provided soon.

We are not sure that in-person worship will ever be “like it used to be” because we are truly in uncharted waters with this pandemic. We also will not be able guarantee complete safety from COVID-19 or any other virus. We can take the proper precautions to make in-person worship as safe as possible and we will need our members and guests to help us adhere to our guidance and protocols. Working

together, with some time and a lot of patience, we can resume the worship we long for in some fresh ways as we gather in God's presence in person again.

We are praying with you as we look forward to the next stage of our ministry together and we are grateful for the tremendous patience, compassion, and creativity that Virginia United Methodists are showing during this crisis.

Peace and Blessings,

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis

The members of the Back to In-Person Workgroup are:

The Rev. Alex Joyner, Eastern Shore DS, chair

Mr. Steve Brown, Conference Chancellor

The Rev. Jay Carey, pastor, Bethia UMC, Chesterfield, DS Designate

The Rev. Douglas Forrester, pastor, Reveille UMC, Richmond, DS Designate

The Rev. Seonyoung Kim, York River DS

The Rev. Brenda Laws, deacon, Eastern Shore District

The Rev. Dr. Hyo Lee, pastor, Sudley UMC, Manassas, DS Designate

Dr. Karen McElfish, Arlington District Lay Leader, pediatrician

Dr. George Moxley, immunologist, VCU

The Rev. Wayne Snead, Elizabeth River DS

Mr. Neal Wise, Annual Conference Event Coordinator