



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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**June 16, 2020**

### **Expanded In-Person Worship and Other Church Gatherings Start this Sunday, June 21**

Dear Virginia Annual Conference:

As we expand in-person worship and other church gatherings beginning this Sunday, June 21, I want to celebrate God's goodness and the faithfulness of Virginia United Methodists. Since Stage 1 of our plan to carefully return to in-person worship began, I have attended four in-person worship services and felt the presence of the Holy Spirit at each one. I have been quite impressed with the care taken by local clergy, Healthy Church Teams, and volunteers in blending public safety guidance into our worship experience. Thanks be to God we have had no apparent outbreaks of COVID-19 in our United Methodist churches since we began to return with Drive-In and Pioneer worship services.

I also want to commend all churches throughout the Conference that have had online worship services. For many, launching these services was a new and difficult challenge, requiring much painstaking and dedicated work. Yet, our churches have persevered and succeeded in offering quality online worship services at a time when many who are impacted by the pandemic yearn to be able to worship Christ.

In addition, many rural churches have provided telephonic worship services as Internet access remains a challenge in some areas of the Commonwealth. This, too, required diligent work and was a blessing to many who otherwise could not worship.

Our Workgroup on Returning to In-Person Worship has also been learning a lot as the members have received feedback and evaluations from churches offering Drive-In and in-person services. You should know that the materials produced by our team, including the Health Acknowledgement Form and Handbook, are also being used by other denominational leaders in the Commonwealth as they have contacted us in developing their own plans.

**As we move into Stage 2 next Sunday, I have some important updates for you:**

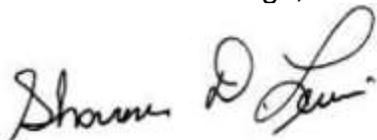
- We have a new resource for Healthy Church Teams to use—the Technical Assistance Manual. While the Handbook for Local Churches has been useful in preparing us for this transition, the Technical Assistance Manual is considerably reduced in size and easier to use. This Technical Assistance Manual includes all the requirements for in-person worship and gatherings and it can be found on the Return to In-Person Worship web page: [www.vaumc.org/return](http://www.vaumc.org/return). I am asking every church to use the Technical

Assistance Manual to develop a plan that can be submitted to their District Superintendent for approval.

- Completion of the Health Acknowledgement Form is required to attend any in-person worship service and other in-person gatherings. The Health Acknowledgement Form is available on the Conference website and there are other paper forms available. Anyone can now go to the website, fill out a form for their particular church, and it will be sent to their local church clergy. The forms are effective for one week and can be accessed at: <http://www.evc.vaumc.org/home/>. You will still need to let your church know the particular worship services and gatherings you will be attending. Check with your local church on the registration process.
- You will note several changes based on feedback we have received:
  - Persons of any age in good health may now serve as volunteers;
  - There are now no set age limitations on children attending worship. Parents are asked to determine if their child can abide by the requirements such as distancing and wearing of face coverings. We invite parents to sit near the exits of the worship space in case they need to leave the service quickly;
  - Baptisms may be offered during Stage 2 using a recommended protocol referenced in the Technical Assistance Manual;
  - In-person gatherings of 50 or less may take place on site if churches develop and submit a plan to the District Superintendent using the requirements in the Technical Assistance Manual; and
  - New attachments on outdoor worship and limited childcare during worship are included in the Technical Assistance Manual.

We will continue to monitor and review our process in the weeks ahead. As I have often said, this is a marathon and not a sprint. Some churches will determine that the most faithful step for them is to wait a bit longer before moving to in-person worship and in-person gatherings and continue to provide other ways to worship. We expect that many churches in the Conference will move forward to providing in-person worship and other in-person gatherings. Thank you for your patience, your flexibility, and your faithfulness to our mission.

Peace and Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharma D. Lewis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis