

VAUMC QUARTER 1 REPORT

the

Q

SOURCE

April 2025

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THE Q SOURCE

THE NAME

The "Q source" (from the German word "Quelle," meaning "source") is a hypothetical, lost collection of sayings of Jesus, which biblical scholars believe was the primary source used by the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

WHAT IS THIS REPORT

This report aims to give Virginia Conference members an easy digest of the work that is happening across the Virginia Conference on a regular basis. The hope would be that conference clergy and laity could more readily have examples of how ministry is happening across the conference, point to "bright spots" in the VAUMC, and expect more regular updates from operational offices such as Treasurer's Office and VUMPI.

Members can anticipate an update in this format every quarter. Feedback or questions are welcome by emailing VAUMC Director of Communications at MadelineWhite@vaumc.org.



FROM THE BISHOP

BEING OPEN TO THE SPIRIT

Bishop Sue and Martha Stokes, conference lay leader, have invited the Virginia Conference to explore spiritual disciplines from September 2024 to June 2025. The book, *Soul Feast*, by Marjorie J. Thompson is guiding this initiative with a different spiritual practice focus each month. On the first Monday of each month, there is a live webinar to discuss the next spiritual discipline. Join any time: www.vaumc.org/soulfeast.

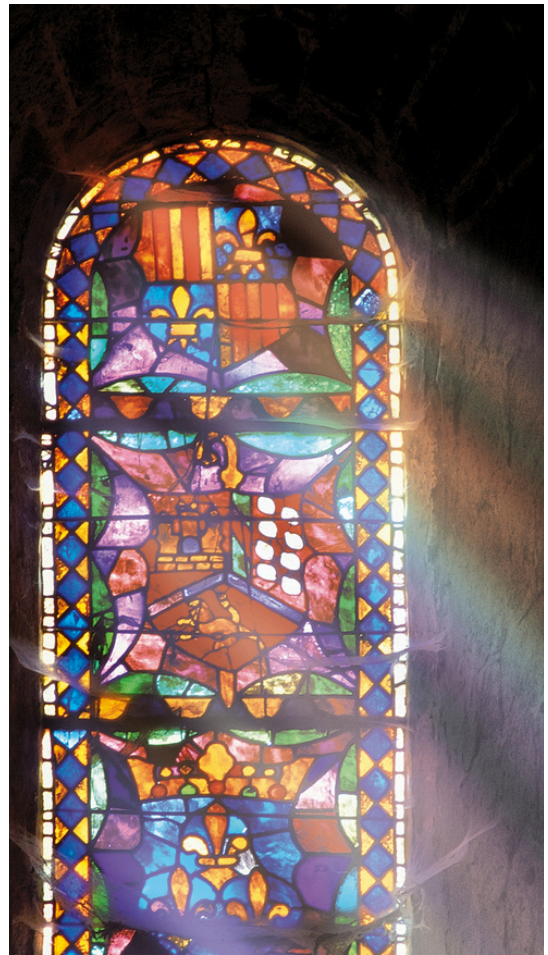
BISHOP'S CHARGE TO THE CHURCH

- I am grateful to serve alongside each one of you.
- May we strive to truly “see” each other.
- Show up for each other, support one another, see one another.
- Help make our UMC congregations places of comfort, solace, and encouragement.
- This quarter, be mindful of how God is calling us to show up and walk alongside our neighbors and communities.

CLERGY EXCELLENCE

HIGHLIGHTS

- One hundred clergy from the VAUMC gathered for **March 12, 2025** for worship, prayer, embodying spiritual disciplines and learning for clergy spiritual renewal. Bishop Sue and the Board of Ordained Ministry will look to offer more opportunities on an annual or bi-annual rhythm.
- The first Discernment Day was held **March 15** with 26 individuals to engage a culture of call for laity and clergy in the VAUMC, one of the aims mentioned in the 'Extended Extended Cabinet' report at Annual Conference 2024. This event was held as a partnership with the **Office of Clergy Excellence and the Board of Laity, the DCV office.**
- Three young adult pastors from VAUMC have been accepted to Church of the Resurrection's "Emerging Leaders Cohort." Resurrection UMC is the largest United Methodist Church in the U. S. and among the most influential churches in mainline Christianity. This cohort is a nine-month experience for young adults aged 22 to 35 who desire to strengthen their relationship with God and grow in their leadership within the church. Please pray for **Rev. Madison Ailinger, Rev. Daniel Burch, and Rev. Meredith Webb** as they start their cohort and connect with pastors around the country.



ANNUAL CONFERENCE

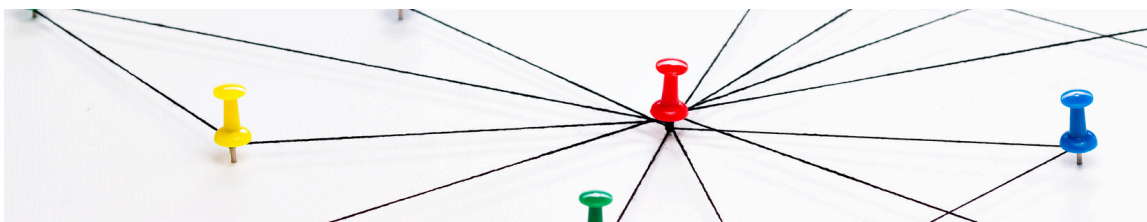
Every year, clergy move forward to answer God's calling upon their lives. The following will be recommended at the 2025 Clergy Session and celebrated at the Service of Call and Ordination on Saturday, June 14:

- **11 people** for full membership and ordination
- **1 person** for full transfer as an ordained deacon
- **2 people** for associate members
- **8 people** for provisional elder
- Licensed local pastor interviews are in process

CONNECTION & INNOVATION

HIGHLIGHTS

- After consultation with Bishop Sue and the Executive Team of the Annual Conference, the work of Jonathan Page and Katie Mueller has been newly designated as the Office of Connection and Innovation, with Jonathan serving as Director and Katie serving as Executive Assistant/Project Manager.
- During the first quarter of 2025, the office has attended district training events throughout the VAUMC and the office staff has witnessed the hard work that goes into these meaningful spaces and the deep learning that is the fruit of these efforts. In the coming months, the office will develop opportunities for training that grow out of the Annual Conference session alongside opportunities to resource and coordinate other channels of training in the conference.
- In the last year, an ad hoc team has analyzed the metrics and measurements used to assess vitality and effectiveness of churches and clergy in the VAUMC. The purpose of this work has asked whether VAUMC collects the right kind of data in this season of the church. This team will soon assemble alpha and beta testing of different methodologies around data, with the hopes of amassing data that is more helpful in the connection and better informing the missional strategy and deployment of resources throughout the conference.



ANNUAL CONFERENCE

With roughly 70 days to go, the office is ramping up efforts for the 243rd Annual Conference Session. It is exciting to have Rev Dr. Candace Lewis, Rev. Edgardo Colón-Emeric, and Scott Erickson as teachers this year.

Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson will preach the Opening Worship Service, Rev. Dr. Candace Lewis will preach the Memorial Service, and Bishop Kenneth Carter will preach the Service of Call and Ordination.

The business of the session will include important matters related to voting on constitutional amendments, pensions, and budgeting, along with a wealth of other important updates and considerations. With this being the last year VAUMC will gather in Roanoke, Virginia, before the shift to Harrisonburg, the AC team is working hard to make it a memorable time of fellowship and worship.

DISCIPLESHIP & CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

HIGHLIGHTS

- In **October 2024**, the Office of Discipleship and Congregational Vitality (DCV) sponsored a training in Growing Young, research from Fuller Youth Institute that helps local churches shift their culture to be more inclusive of children, youth, and young adults. Beginning in **January 2025**, four cohorts representing 13 local churches have met monthly for coaching as they strive to integrate the six core commitments of Growing Young into their congregations. The DCV staff have provided Growing Young training for the Mission Rivers District and in local churches in the Shenandoah River District.
- In **January 2025**, staff from DCV provided two workshops on youth ministry for the Mission Rivers District. In **March 2025** on the Coastal Virginia District, staff offered workshops on Developing a Discipleship Pathway and Engaging the Bible. DCV staff has also provided Safer Sanctuaries training for a local church in the Three Notch'd District.



MISSIONAL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CELEBRATIONS

- VAUMC alleviated **\$9,790,209.56** of medical debt for **11,732** individuals in Virginia through VAUMC members' generosity for the 2024 Annual Conference Offering that included Undue Medical Debt campaign.
- The Missional & Community Engagement Office (MCE) celebrates the culmination of a dream that has been years in the making: the Climate Justice Summit. The Summit was held on **March 8, 2025** at Randolph Macon College; it gathered various stakeholders from the VAUMC, including representatives from VAUMC boards, agencies, districts and local churches. The event focused on encouraging participants to connect and explore the ways we are all key to the VAUMC response to God's call for climate justice.
- VAUMC's partnership with Cross Connection strengthens as they expand into Virginia. Cross Connection is focused on cultivating transformational experiences for students in middle and high school around access (home repair) and awareness (social justice and advocacy). The MCE Office is excited for the ways that this will launch and transpire in the conference in the summer of 2026. For more information on Cross Connection, please visit: www.crossconnection.org.
- On **January 30**, over 100 United Methodists from across the VAUMC gathered in Richmond to advocate on behalf of the least, the last, and the lost at the Virginia General Assembly. Partnering with Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP), Virginia Interfaith Power and Light (VAIPL), and Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC), participants met with their

legislators and legislative aids to advocate for bills focused on supporting affordable housing; requiring paid sick days for all workers in Virginia; increasing the amount of days between eviction notice and time of required move out from five days to 14 days; and incorporating community health and environmental justice concerns in comprehensive planning. A big thank you to the Conference Legislative Network for their teamwork in organizing and putting this together, and to the Pace Center at Virginia Commonwealth University for hosting this event.



MISSIONAL & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

HIGHLIGHTS

- Since the fall of 2023, the Missional & Community Engagement (MCE) Office has created and strengthened partnerships with local community organizing groups who are passionate about the work of justice that happens on the local level for the most vulnerable in Virginia communities. In addition to organizing work happening locally, there is also a passion for building culture in VAUMC congregations and communities that are grounded in a biblical understanding of justice. Local United Methodist Churches in the Richmond and Charlottesville areas have been connected with **Richmonders Involved in Strengthening Communities (RISC)** and **IMPACT (Interfaith Movement Promoting Actions by Congregations Together)** partnering with Community Organizers to affect change in their respective localities. The MCE office celebrates that RISC has three United Methodist Congregations (Common Table, Asbury UMC Church Hill, and Discovery UMC) who are the first ever United Methodist congregations to join RISC. We celebrate the continued and steadfast participation of Charlottesville-area United Methodist Congregations who are members of IMPACT. RISC and IMPACT are not the only community organizing groups to exist throughout our conference, so if you have a community organizing group that you are connected with in your region, let the office know by sending an email to Rev. Jo Ann Batteiger at joannbatteiger@vaumc.org.

- **Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)** is a grass-roots strategy for sustainable community-driven development looking to shift the locus of power back to people who are closest to the solutions by building upon collective gifts and the cultivation of relationships. In the fall 2024, two cohorts of clergy completed the first part of the training and are moving from foundations to engaging in a discernment process around what implementation looks like in their respective contexts. This work deeply resonates with the early Church in Acts and the early Methodist movement where the work was intentional and attentive to relationships and the gifts that everyone could share in the service of the collective well-being of the whole community. The MCE Office is excited to continue to walk alongside as this develops. For any questions or interest in participating in a cohort, please email Rev. Jo Ann Batteiger at joannbatteiger@vaumc.org.



- The **Church Development Team (CDT)** discerned a call to engage in a season of intentional listening beginning on **April 1**. CDT members hope that this season of listening will enable CDT to clearly articulate its purpose and vision as it seeks to resource local churches in the coming years. Throughout this season, CDT will not be accepting any new grant applications (including new faith community grants, leadership grants or fresh expressions grants). Please contact Amanda Miller Garber with any questions (amandagarber@vaumc.org).

DISASTER



RECOVERY

- The Virginia Conference collected over **2,500 UMCOR Cleaning Kits** to send to Mission Central in Mechanicsburg, PA to be deployed across the connection to those who were impacted by Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton in September 2024. Over **65 Early Response Team Volunteers** and **20+ United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) Team Leaders** have been trained and recertified to respond to the call to serve in many stages of the disaster response process.
- A number of churches from the Virginia Conference have modeled partnership and collaboration to respond to the Hurricane aftermath in time and labor through serving on Early Response Teams (ERTs) in Spruce Pine, N.C. We are grateful to:
 - **Floris UMC (Northern Virginia)**
 - **Ramsey Memorial UMC (Three Notch'd)**
 - **Woodlake UMC (Three Notch'd)**
 - **Braddock Street UMC (Shenandoah River)**
 - **Haymarket Church (Northern Virginia)**
 - **Bethlehem UMC (Mountain View)**
 - **Christ Church Fairfax Station (Northern Virginia)**
- The Western North Carolina Conference has moved into Long-Term Recovery.

Ways VAUMC can respond

Pray

Continue to be in prayer for those impacted by Hurricane Helene and Milton and for all those who are responding to the call to serve in this work.

Give via Financial Generosity

You can donate to support the Western North Carolina Conference's recovery efforts directly through this link: [Donate here:](https://bit.ly/WNCCHurricaneReliefDonations) (<https://bit.ly/WNCCHurricaneReliefDonations> or via checks made payable to "Office of Disaster Response" with "Helene" in the memo line. Checks should be mailed to P.O. Box 2757 Huntsville, N.C. 28070.

Give via Amazon Registry for Supplies to Equip Volunteer Team

A registry has been created by the Western North Carolina for items to be purchased to help equip trailers with necessary supplies, tools, and equipment for recovery work. [Find registry here.](#) (Two notes: 1. Whatever you order is already set up to deliver to Western North Carolina; 2. You do not have to have or create an Amazon account in order to purchase from the registry.)

Give via Time and Skills

Now through December 20, 2025, dates are open for groups to serve in the Western North Carolina Conference to help rebuild. For more information about getting a trip scheduled, visit : <https://www.wnccumc.org/disaster-ministries-new> .

FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS

- In **January 2025**, a communication was shared throughout the Conference to bring awareness to local churches that the Virginia Conference will change how the Conference-sponsored clergy health benefits are funded. Currently, the funding for Active Clergy Health is shared connectionally by all local churches paid through the 407 Apportionment. In 2026, the apportionment will be replaced by a flat amount billed directly to churches for each health-plan eligible clergyperson. As a result, each individual local church will pay the cost of their pastor's health benefits. John Fuller, VUMPI Executive Director, and David Domisse, Conference Treasurer, prepared a [short video](#) to help explain how this change will affect your local church budget in 2026. There is also a [Calculation Tool](#) to look up your specific church. If you have questions related to your clergy appointment for 2026, reach out to your District Superintendent. Be on the lookout for an overview of the 2026 Budget that will come out in the Book of Reports in May.



- The Treasurer's Office began sending the VUMPI monthly invoices through Acumatica on **March 1, 2025** in partnership with VUMPI. This is the same system that Apportionment Statements are sent out each month. Up next a customer portal is in development for the next quarter where local churches will be able to schedule payments online to remit their monthly VUMPI payment. The office will continue to look at process improvement across the conference and hope to find additional added benefits to local churches.



APPORTIONMENT OVERVIEW

The collection percentage in the first quarter of 2025 fell within the range of Conference Treasurer David Domnisse's projections. A long-term projection will be available once the Easter season has passed.

Domnisse predicts fluctuations in donation receipts at local churches due to current economic policies and the related decline in the financial markets. he shared that expenses at the annual conference are within budgets and there are no significant expenditures outside of what's been planned.

APPORTIONMENT ANALYSIS

* The VAUMC collected 16.7% in the first quarter of 2025, a decrease of 0.4% from the first quarter of 2024.

* District Apportionment collections were 18.4% in the first quarter of 2025.

16.7 %

2025 Conference
Apportionments

18.4%

2025 District
Apportionments



VIRGINIA UNITED METHODIST FOUNDATION

Several staffing changes were announced in March 2025 for the Foundation Office. The Rev. Dr. Steven J. Summers will begin his term as president of both the Foundation and its affiliate, Virginia United Methodist Development Company (DEVCO) on July 1, 2025. Dr. Summers is currently serving as the chief operating officer and assistant to Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson.

Courtney Howell has been promoted to Vice President of Operations. The Rev. Chris Allen of Tampa, Fla., will start March 31, 2025, in the new role of Vice President of Lending and Investments. The Rev. Dr. Matt Charlton will assume the new role of Vice President of Philanthropy and Development starting on May 6, 2025.

TRUSTEES

The conference trustees have been working with Wesley Community Development to manage over 50 closed church properties. The trustees are working with the new property advisory team led by Rev. Amanda Garber, Missional & Community Engagement Office (MCE), to discern potential missional uses for the closed church properties.

Properties not suited for missional use are being evaluated past to whether they could be used as investment properties or should be sold. David Dommissie, conference Treasurer, expects there will be funds available to the conference grant making collective from the proceeds and earnings from closed churches in the third quarter of this year.



VUMPI

- A new billing methodology was introduced in **March 2025**. Prior to March, all VUMPI billing statements were printed and mailed via regular mail which required a great deal of manual processing time, along with high postage costs. By using the same system that the Conference Treasurer's Office uses to distribute monthly apportionment statements, VUMPI will reduce processing time and total costs by sending some billing statements electronically. Their hope is to develop the ability to receive payments electronically.
- The **Clergy Benefits Task Force** formed in early 2024 and met throughout the year. The task force concluded its work at the end of 2024 and presented several recommendations, including the following:
 - Beginning in 2026, replace the active clergy health plan apportionment with a flat direct billed amount that will be billed directly to churches and agencies for each health plan-eligible pastor. VUMPI worked with the Conference Treasurer to determine the amount that will be billed each month. For 2026, that amount will be \$1,660.
 - Adopt the Via Benefits retiree medical program for Medicare-eligible retirees beginning in 2026. The Via Benefits program, which has partnered with Wespath, is currently utilized by 28 other Annual Conferences and will give Virginia Conference's eligible retirees access to a greater range of medical, dental and vision coverage than is currently available in the Conference-sponsored retiree health program.
 - Additional information about both of these recommendations will be shared via videos in advance of Annual Conference.
- VUMPI is working with Wespath to prepare for the launch of the **new Compass pension plan in 2026**. The Compass pension plan will have new features, including automatic enrollment and automatic escalation, which are intended to help our denomination's clergy prepare adequately for retirement. Additional details about the Compass pension plan will be shared in advance of and during Annual Conference 2025.

DISTRICT OFFICES

COASTAL VIRGINIA



The district onboarded with new District Superintendent Rev. Beth Givens in the summer of 2024 which revealed a lack of connection and communication with the District and between churches. As one way of addressing that, the CVD Leadership Team approved in January dividing the district into eight regional community cohorts. Associate Lay Leaders are being identified for each cohort, and this group along with a few ministry stakeholders such as UWF and CRCC will replace the Board of Missions model. This group will work with their Leadership Team to develop vision and strategy for the District moving forward.

District Bright Spot:

The church plant Impact SoNo launched in the midst of COVID in South Norfolk. The Rev. Tracy Bass and laity at Impact have worked diligently during the launch phase with financial support from the district. Today, Impact SoNo partners with Sentara Health every second Saturday for a Health and Wellness Institute. In addition to a preschool, Impact has a growing afternoon ministry for kids in grades 1-7 focused on S.T.E.A.M.M. (science, technology, engineering, arts, math and mental health. The integration of mental health supports, such as teaching anger management skills, makes this program unique. It also provides low cost after school care in a neighborhood where that is a demonstrated need.

LIVING WATERS

HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 200 people attended an in-person leadership training day at Crenshaw UMC in Blackstone in mid-January. This was the first in-person leadership training offered since becoming the Living Waters District. Topics included Finance, Lay Servant Ministry, Nominations & Leadership Development, Simple Accountable Structure, Staff/Pastor Parish Relations and Trustee.
- **New School Connection Initiative to Begin in Fall 2025:** There is a heightened church interest to become more involved in lay ministry within the local community. The district is currently part of The Village Initiative in Dinwiddie Public Elementary-Middle Schools that is being planned for connecting community and schools for the benefit of students and their families. More information will be forthcoming.
- The Cameron Foundation approved a proactive grant of \$73,000 for the **Ettrick Community Building Project**. The district is committed to repurposing the property for The Gathering at Washington Street, Inc. to use in community development work in the Ettrick community. The Gathering and Open Table will:
 - serve as consultations to lead an evidence-based Community Convening model that aligns with the principles of asset-based community development.
 - guide and train community partners and stakeholders to implement strategies that fully involve the people of Ettrick.



By inviting and integrating their voices, gifts, strengths, and action, the community will drive and define their own vision for the closed Ettrick UMC property to create the solutions and social innovations they see possible.

- 2025 is the year that the Living Waters District will focus on youth ministry. The district added the Rev. Thomas Wynn as the District Youth Coordinator to lead the re-imagining of youth ministry throughout the church communities in the Living Waters District. Thomas was the keynote speaker at Jesus Camp in early February and, along with LW District Developer, Rev. Tim Beck, is working with local church youth leaders in developing strategies for youth ministry throughout the district.

MISSION RIVERS

HIGHLIGHTS



For the first quarter of 2025 Mission Rivers District focused on important goals and initiatives from last fall's District Conference aimed at better supporting congregations.

- In January, they held a successful training day at Williamsburg UMC for both laity and clergy.
- A new District Youth Coordinator position was created and funded by the Board of Directors,\
- District Director of Connectional Ministry, Dr. Clarence Brown, continues to provide consultation services
- The Missions Committee recommended nearly \$67,000 in grant awards to help children, families, and seniors, and assist flooding victims in North Carolina. They plan another round of grant applications.
- The Trustees Committee recommended nearly \$100,000 for churches' facility repairs.
- The Board is enhancing communication among congregations and supports multi-congregation programs.
- The district's finances are stable, with high apportionment receipts.
- The Heartwood Seed Project has started a community garden

MOUNTAIN VIEW

District Bright Spot:

Bethel New Hope, a non-profit founded by Sandra Fulcher and her son Tee Fulcher (a 2025 Missional Grant recipient)

A mother to a recovering addict, Sandra Fulcher asked God in 2024 what would be God's plan for her life after retirement. She felt and heard God say, "I saved your boy, now you and he go save others in My name."

An idea was then born to start a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation to house men in the transition between graduation and entering into society safely. This idea led to many "God moments" from the corporation's realtor to find a space, a private investor and many others who shared their own connections with family and friends related to overdoses and illnesses related to drugs or alcohol. Bethel New Hope opened April 1, 2025 with three residents who have graduated from a local Hope Center Ministries after a year-long, faith-based crisis recovery program. The men will have a safe place to stay while working toward reconciliation with their families.

"God's presence is felt in Bethel New Hope. One definition of Bethel is "Holy Place." This holy place is the new hope for men who are ready to face life sober for the first time in a long time," Fulcher said.



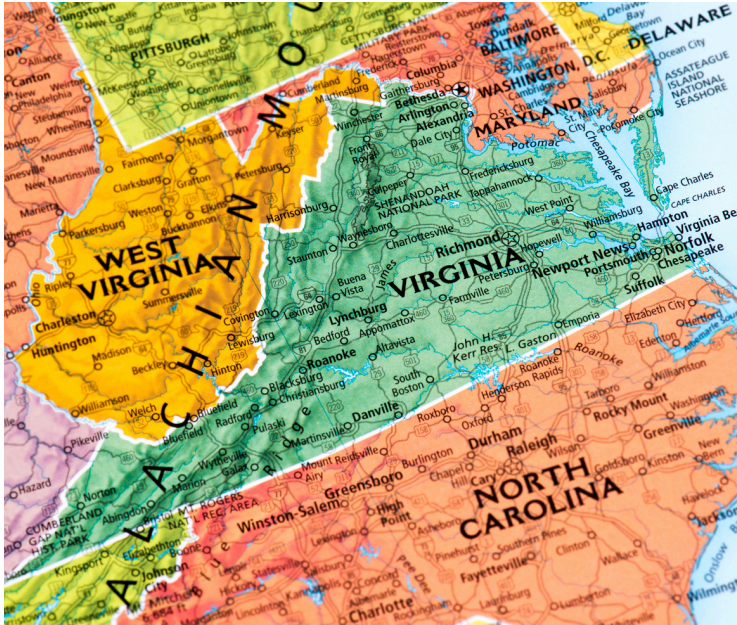
HIGHLIGHTS

- The district celebrated the impact Sandra Fulcher made over the past 26+ years as Administrator for the Mountain View and former Danville and Lynchburg Districts. She defined for all who knew her what the district vision, Leading in Love, looks like.
- Katie Wilson joined as the new Administrative Manager, and Kathryn Ware of Danville, and Tammy Burdick of Rocky Mount who join us as Co-Lay Leaders with Sue White of Lynchburg. .
- DS Sarah Calvert encouraged each clergy/church to mine their updated MissionInsite report to discover who their neighbors are and to develop an action plan to connect with their communities. Twelve pastors are ready to begin a six-month learning cohort to turn that MissionInsite information into a concrete plan for reaching out in love to our neighbors.
- The MVD Missional Team distributed \$42,500 in mission grants to: Bethel New Hope, providing transitional housing for those coming out of Hope Center, Just Call Granny, providing direct needs of grand families for gaps in the system, We Dream Art School of Burnt Chimney UMC for children in the community, Fairview UMC for relocation of food pantry, Wesley Chapel UMC for Satisfy Your Hunger weekly community dinner ministry serving neighbors with food insecurity, and Redwood UMC of Rocky Mount for the Warming Center of Franklin County serving unhoused neighbors and SPARK, a summer youth mission ministry.

NORTHERN VIRGINIA

At a conference Hatch-a-thon event in early 2024, the Northern Virginia District team dreamed and planned for a ministry that would inspire and equip lay people to engage in ministry in their neighborhoods and communities. Spiritually grounded in the sending of the 72 (Luke 10:1-17), the district ministry was named Go!

In August of 2024, over 20 lay people began their training which has included learning their strengths, engaging in dynamite prayer (Sue Nilson Kibbey), listening to their community (Luke Edwards), telling their story (Katie Carson Phillips) meeting their neighbors and understanding the importance of lay ministry (William Chaney). This first cohort of Go! Is now in a time of discernment before their commissioning in April 2025. They are considering their particular ministries and to which community they feel called to connect. In their next phase they will work with a coach to plan their next steps and begin to establish relationships and be a disciple of Jesus engaged with their community.



SHENANDOAH RIVER

One of the ways United Methodists in the Shenandoah River District (SRD) are living into their calling and passion is by partnering with Just Neighbors. Just Neighbors is a non-profit agency designed to provide hope through immigration legal services or simply steps to procure necessary documentation for secure living in the United States.

“Just Neighbors is a powerful tool for realizing God’s abundant and unconditional love for all people right here in our district, Rev. Dr. Victor Gomex, SRD DS, said. This challenges all faith communities to recognize our role in building the New Creation through providing our time, advocacy, financial support, and prayer. As churches build bridges with each other, collaborate, and share resources, we recognize the beauty of our connectional system because it fosters joyful servanthood that actually transforms the lives of our siblings in Christ. This work is especially important for vulnerable segments of the population and we are proud to support an agency that is willing to embody the light of God’s Grace in an otherwise dark and uncertain place for so many people.”

THREE NOTCH'D

- Reveille UMC has partnered with two churches in the Swansboro neighborhood of Richmond since 2013. Their ministry together includes an annual study, often focused on racial justice. The 2025 Partner Church Joint Study is on Prison Justice. On March 26, 52 people gathered to hear guest speaker Rev. Rodney Hunter (Wesley Memorial UMC, Richmond) talk about criminal justice reform and the impact of mass incarceration on people of color. On April 2 Pastor Jay Scruggs, Koinonia Community Church, shared his experience with the prison system, focusing on the impact prison ministry had on him and how the church can address the impact of mass incarceration and offer support.
- The Racial Justice Network (RJN), a group of ecumenical people of all colors, races and ethnicities that desire to see liberty and justice be experienced by all people in the United States, held an in-person “Journey to Healing” Conference on March 1, 2025 at Belmont UMC (Richmond). Ninety-two people from 28 different churches attended. The RJN has based much of its work so far on Jemar Tisby’s “How to Fight Racism” book where he argues that Awareness, Relationships and Commitment are essential elements of any racial justice effort. This conference focused specifically on Relationships as attendees had intentional small group discussions using questions developed by Matthew Freeman of Dialectix Consulting. Jill Gaynor (Reveille UMC) and Bishop Larry Branch (Love Center Unity) presented on the partnership between their churches that has been ongoing for over 11 years. Rev. Bayo Ogungbade (Reveille UMC) shared about how to attract young people to church. The opening speaker was Rev. Roscoe Jones (St. Paul’s Baptist Church). Rev. Jones emphasized why building strong cross-racial relationships is so important for Christians. . The RJN meets by Zoom on the first Thursday of each month. For more information and/or to receive regular RJN communications, email RacialJNetwork@gmail.com.

VALLEY RIDGE

At a time when so many—both clergy and laity—are navigating uncertainty, the Faith in Troubled Times: A Symposium of Hope and Connection on March 8 at Main Street United Methodist Church in Waynesboro, VA, provided a much-needed space for spiritual growth, honest conversations, and deeper connection. This event was the result of a collaboration between Main Street UMC and the Valley Ridge District.

Amanda Held Opelt, author of *Holy Unhappiness*, delivered a powerful keynote on faith in troubled times, offering deep insights into grief, loss, and faith in difficult seasons. She shared her personal journey of navigating the loss of her sister, Rachel Held Evans, and challenged the common belief that faith should always feel good. Amanda described what she called the “emotional prosperity Gospel”—the assumption that if our faith feels difficult, we must be doing something wrong. Instead, she offered a different perspective: faith is clinging to God even when it feels difficult to do so. Faith, she reminded us, is moving toward God despite our feelings or circumstances.

Throughout the day, participants engaged in a variety of breakout sessions that explored different ways to live out their faith in difficult times. Melaine Reuter, Micah Smartt, and Babs Bristow led a session on the power of art as an expression of faith. Dr. Dale White and Shannon White guided participants in understanding how to build the faith of persons with autism. Rev. Lester Kennedy and Rev. Hungsu Lim explored the transformative power of prayer, while Amanda Held Opelt led a deeper discussion on healing from loss and hurt. Debbie Ramsey and Bill Roberts facilitated a session on redemptive compassion, and Linda Kusse-Wolfe invited participants to reflect on Wesley’s Three General Rules. Dr. Bright Lee led an exploration of crisis and personal faith, encouraging attendees to consider how faith sustains us in life’s most challenging moments.

UPCOMING VAUMC DATES

**ANNOUNCEMENT
SUNDAY**

APRIL 27

**ANNUAL
CONFERENCE
2025**

JUNE 11-14

**CLERGY MOVE
DATE**

JUNE 25

**LAITY OF THE
CONGREGATION
SUNDAY**

JUNE 29*

**FIRST SUNDAY FOR
NEW CLERGY**

JULY 6

***THIS SUNDAY, BISHOP SUE AND THE CABINET
WOULD LIKE THE LAITY OF THE CONGREGATION
TO LEAD WORSHIP.**