



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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Excellence

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Reignite the Call for Clergy in the Virginia Conference

Dear Virginia Annual Conference:

“The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.” Mark 6:30-33 (New Revised Standard Version)

For the past year, there has been a relentless pace to ministry, much like we see here in this passage from Mark. Despite the extraordinary amount of work that needed to be done, Jesus is trying to teach his disciples to find a sustainable pace of work and time apart. When his energy was depleted, Jesus would find time to go apart, to rest, to sleep, to pray, to relax with friends and family, and this is what he modeled and taught his disciples.

We, too, need a more sustainable pace of ministry. The pandemic, elections that highlighted divisions in our congregations, the renewed focus on the struggle for racial justice and reconciliation, trying to work and be with children who have been in school online and at home for a year, and even the future of our denomination - all have been a part of the landscape of ministry this past year. We, your Bishop, Cabinet, and Clergy Excellence leaders, are seeing signs of fatigue and exhaustion across our conference in our clergy, such that we are very concerned many have lost the ability to keep a sustainable pace.

We see increases in requests for leave of absence, increases in mental and physical illnesses, and we see many more early retirements. Ours is not a job, but a calling, but the calling could be forgotten or neglected in a year of unprecedented change and stress. As a conference, we feel the need to help reignite our call to ministry, better care for the souls of our clergy, and find that sustainable pace that Jesus modeled for us.

We are providing three distinct ways to try and help clergy to survive and even thrive during these days:

First, we are asking our clergy, in consultation with their Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committees (or its equivalent in your ministry setting) to set aside a Time Apart for each clergy person of

up to a week. This is not vacation, and this is not study leave, but a specific time of renewal, refreshment and reigniting of our calling. We ask each clergy person to make a plan for a retreat contextual to the needs of your particular context and situation, and share the plan and dates with your S/PRC. You may want to just rest, or visit and spend time with family and friends, or study something, engage in a hobby or interest, or any one of the many ways we can find a time away from the day to day stresses of ministry. For some of us, just a time to get into better sleep habits would be helpful! We'd like you to accomplish this plan sometime between now and September, if at all possible.

As always, it is your responsibility to find someone to take your worship service and sermon, as well as take care of your congregation's needs while you are away. Your district may have lists of possible preachers for your worship services, and if you are online in any way, we will be offering both conference and district led recorded worship services you can use. This is a great opportunity to work with another local church as well, to maybe swap weeks of congregational care. This is also an opportunity to encourage laity to step up in these roles.

We will have some limited grants to help pay for the pulpit supply for churches for whom finances would be an issue, and Clergy Excellence has other grants and offerings that may also be helpful in creating your time apart. Now is the time to ask for resources and time away, before our workload changes once again as we enter a time of more in person worship possibilities.

Second, we are concerned that the resources that already exist through the conference, including parts of our health plan, assistance programs, Ministry Education Funds, and the like are not as well-known as we would hope. To help with that, we will be releasing over the next several weeks some short videos covering the ways in which the conference may be able to help you with resources for mental health, understanding programs like renewal leave and sabbaticals, finding employee assistance for you and for family members, and other wonderful benefits of connectional life together. Look for these videos, and please share the ones that are relevant with your family, your staff, your S/PRC, or whatever might be of help to you.

Third, we are calling for a specific Day Apart for Renewal, on May 24th, Aldersgate Day, and the day after Pentecost. As we celebrate that moment in John Wesley's life when he came to know that Christ died for him, not just a generic 'us all,' but for John Wesley himself, we hope to help you find the same connection or reconnection in your own life and calling.

We will learn, listen to each other's hearts, and find new ways to connect and reignite our callings. After a morning teaching session, we will have an afternoon of experiences we hope will take you deeper into your own calling and life with Christ, such as lectio divina, music, prayer, playful engagement with scripture, and many more. Please save this day on your calendar, and learn and experience with your colleagues across the connection. We want to help you care for yourself in your active ministry, as well as in your time apart.

Each clergy person is unique, with different gifts and different needs. Nothing we can do here at the conference is going to solve all of the issues we are seeing, but we want to make sure that we help you to find what you need, take the time to rest and renew, and reignite your calling to ministry.

How else can we help you? What resources do you need? Please let us know and respond to Clergy Excellence at: clergyexcellence@vaumc.org.

Bishop Sharma Lewis
Cabinet of the Virginia Conference
Center for Clergy Excellence