

RICHMOND AREA REPORT

Bishop Sharma D. Lewis

The Virginia Annual Conference focus in 2016-2020 has been on casting and implementing the new conference vision. The vision of the Virginia Annual Conference *is to make disciples of Jesus Christ who are lifelong learners who influence others to serve.*

Therefore, the first year of the quadrennium involved me visiting all 16 districts and hosting the Bishop's Chat and Chew Sessions with clergy and laity. This was a time for praying, sharing and listening. After the sessions, we compiled the data which was essential in casting the new vision. During the 2017 annual conference, the theme "A New Thing," provided the opportunity and excitement for introducing the new vision. The Bishop's Steering and Strategic Collaboration Teams analyzed all data collected from the Bishop's Chat and Chew. The Bishop's Steering Team utilized the SLI3 (Spiritual Leadership Institute – Loving, Learning and Leading) model to discover, develop and deploy the next steps. In addition, a strategic planning consultant was hired to assist the Strategic Collaboration Team in strategizing the transformative work in implementing the vision. This process brought energy to the Office of Connectional Ministries and as a result, several new initiatives, caucus workgroups and events were created. It also led to a 3-Minute Stir Video explaining the new vision and the strategic process. The Latino/Hispanic clergy caucus, and the Immigration and Outreach Workgroup were formed as well as a conference-wide initiative of reading the Bible in a year was established. The conference took an active role in utilizing the model of Fresh Expressions to revitalize new congregations. The annual conference has welcomed (13) new faith communities since 2017.

2017-2018

The Bishop's Steering and Strategic Collaboration Teams continued to work on the implementation of the vision. Furthermore, the Office of Connectional Ministries continued the work of the Four Areas of Ministry Focus of The United Methodist Church: *Overcoming Poverty Together, Seeking Health and Wholeness for All, Leading Where God Calls and Making New Disciples in New Places.* The conference hosted the first Bishop's Convocation on Race and Reconciliation and the Virginia Conference Immigration Seminar. The conference continued to take a leading role in Disaster Response, UMCOR and missionary support. We have a strong partnership with our Central Conferences providing mission and missionaries to Mozambique, Cambodia, Brazil and Africa University known as Partnerships of Hope. In addition, we collaborated with GBHEM, West Ohio Annual Conference, Ginghamburg Church and East Africa Annual Conference (Burundi) in teaching and implementing the Course of Study for East African pastors.

Bishop's Chat and Chew (2.0) regional meetings were designed to share the progress of the Steering and Strategic Collaboration Teams. Simultaneously, the Commission On The Way Forward (COWF) released their final report. The Virginia conference clergy, laity and delegation took an active role in studying and engaging the work of the COWF to prepare for the upcoming Special General Conference. The annual conference theme in 2018 was "Servant Leaders Making A Difference." The conference engaged in the first "Great Day of Service" in Hampton, Virginia. 1637 clergy and laity participated in approximately (55) projects consisting of a Stop Hunger Now packaging event, prayer walking, ramp installations, painting, cemetery and school clean up and gardening.

2018-2019

The Virginia Annual Conference delegation met several times to prepare for the Special General Conference of 2019. The Bishop's Way Forward Workgroup was established to examine several critical areas (communication, pension and health benefits, foundation/development corporation, credit union, appointments, etc.) as we approached the Special General Conference.

Unfortunately, in December 2018, I was diagnosed with a degenerative hip disease that caused me to take a six-month medical leave. During this leave, I had four hip surgeries along with rehabilitation and outpatient therapy. I want to thank the Virginia Annual Conference clergy and laity for their love and support. I want to thank the Virginia Cabinet, the conference staff and Interim Bishop Peter Weaver for their leadership while I was recovering. Finally, I want to thank the Southeastern Jurisdiction and the General Church for their many expression of love during my medical leave. I was blessed to experience The United Methodist Church Connection at its best! The Bishop's Steering Team and the Bishop's Way Forward Workgroup continued to meet while I was on medical leave. The 2019 annual conference theme was "Moving Forward in God's Mission." The theme allowed us to reflect on the Great Commission that Christ gave us and provided a space to participate in our first 5K Walk, Run, Bike and Yoga Event. These events allowed an opportunity for fitness, fellowship, and fundraising in the Roanoke City Community.

2019-2020

In 2019-2020, The Office of Connectional Ministries and Clergy Excellence realigned to support the vision and to function more efficiently. The restructuring of the Office of Connectional Ministries developed three new positions that aligned with the conference vision. As a result, the Associate Directors of Lifelong Learning, Influencing and Serving Ministries were established. In addition, the administrative staff workload was combined and a Digital Media Specialist position was added to Connectional Ministries. The work of the Bishop's Steering and Strategic Collaboration Teams ended as The Office of Connectional Ministries became fully aligned with the vision of the annual conference and transitioned from development to deployment with the vision

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country and we were challenged to do church differently and keep the annual conference safe and informed. I took an active and comprehensive role in leading the conference through this pandemic. Several groups were created: 1) *In-Person Worship Workgroup* – A workgroup comprised of district superintendents, clergy, laity, church leaders, medical and legal professionals prepared a comprehensive plan. Our plan included: a handbook, Technical Assistance Manuel (TAM) and visual presentations for churches to address how to approach returning to worship; 2) *Mission and Ministry Workgroup* – A workgroup comprised of district superintendents, clergy, laity and church leaders that developed policies and guidance to the conference faith communities equipping them to execute mission and ministry during the pandemic; and 3) *Post COVID Re-entry Workgroup* – This workgroup incorporated members of the two current workgroups. This workgroup began the proactive work of resourcing churches for ministry in the post-pandemic environment. The workgroup continued to focus on assisting churches to engage in safe practices as they conducted in-person worship and ministry. Lastly, the conference was a part of Governor Ralph Northam's Faith-based Community Cohort. The cohort met frequently during the pandemic to be updated on the actions and executive orders of Governor Northam.

The death of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and the racial unrest all over the country led us to take an active and comprehensive role in dismantling racism and community policing. The conference “Call to Action” initiative led to the birthing of The Racial Reconciliation and Justice Workgroup, the creation of the “The Virginia Roots, Race and Discipleship Curriculum” and the collaboration with Attorney General Mark Herring on community policing. The 2020 annual conference theme was “See All the People.” Because of the pandemic, we hosted our first virtual annual conference at Woodlake United Methodist Church, in Richmond, Virginia.

2020-2021

In the last quarter of 2020, the DAT (District Alignment Team) was established to address this questions: “*How can districts most effectively order themselves for the adaptive challenges of the 21st century in order to facilitate our vision of local churches developing disciples as lifelong learners who influence others to serve?*” There were six recommendations from the DAT that reflected the perspectives of clergy and laity around the annual conference collected through the diligent use of surveys, interviews with conference leaders, best practices from other annual conferences and recent emerging demographics of the Virginia Annual Conference. The 2021 annual conference did not affirm the DAT’s recommendations.

The 2021 conference theme was “United As One.” Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual conference planning team decided to host the second virtual conference at Reveille United Methodist Church, in Richmond, Virginia.

2021-2022

The 2021-2022 focus of the Virginia Annual Conference was to continue to discern and design a new district organizational and leadership structure by reducing districts from sixteen to eight. As the District Alignment Team (DAT) concluded its work, I reframed our district alignment strategic planning through a new team named the District Initiative (DI). The purpose of the District Initiative was to create a contextual framework for the new districts that would best support and resource our churches and communities to share the love of Christ in real, tangible and transformative ways. While the 2021 annual conference did not affirm the DAT’s recommendations, the 2022 annual conference fully embraced the District Initiative after a vital yearlong season of adaptive leadership.

The 2022 annual conference theme was “United As One In Worship.” There was added excitement to be back in-person and the conference challenged our members by hosting a 5K Walk, Run and Bike Event.

Currently, the conference is engaged in working through the Boy Scouts sexual misconduct cases and The UMC disaffiliation process.

The Gospel of Luke 12:48 states, “To whom much is given, much will be required.” As an annual conference, we are held responsible for what God has blessed us with and it is expected that we share our blessings. In 2020, the pandemic negatively impacted our apportionment collection to 74.28% To God’s glory in 2021, we collected 80.65.%

I am grateful for the privilege of serving Jesus Christ, for the last six years, with the wonderful people of the Virginia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.