



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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Dear Virginia Conference—

The topic of human sexuality has long been a source of disagreement within The United Methodist Church. Right now the topic is the focus of many conversations as we prepare for the Special Session of General Conference 2019 in February.

With tensions so high, congregations may be concerned about what is happening and what this means for their church. Church leaders may feel fear or uncertainty. I send this letter in the hopes of setting us on the same course in the Virginia Conference.

It is my hope and prayer that we can stay a connected church.

As the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 3:20, it is God who can do more than we can ask or imagine. I hope that the Virginia Conference will trust in our Lord together.

The reason I hold out for hope for this denomination's unity is because I know what we can do together. I have seen it.

Our conference has been historically and consistently one of the strongest supporters of the missional connection. Our small and large membership churches, through shared ministry in apportionments, help support Global Ministries and 350+ missionaries in 60 countries.

We have been a part of the church's growth in countries such as Cambodia, Brazil and Mozambique. Through our unique conference Initiatives of Hope missional partnership team, we have:

- Supported church and parsonage construction and lay and clergy leadership development in Cambodia and Mozambique.
- Started educational advancement through school and dormitory construction and scholarships for students in Cambodia.
- Provided tutoring and after school programs for at-risk children in Brazil through the Shade and Fresh Water ministry of The Methodist Church of Brazil.
- Opened dialogue and support for Virginia Native peoples as they seek autonomy and sovereignty as well as offering opportunities in cooperation with the conference Native American Ministries team to provide a family camp.

Through our aid to UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief), we have supported disaster response when disasters such as wildfires and hurricanes are more prevalent. The need has never been greater. In 2017, the Virginia Conference supported UMCOR in excess of \$1.7 million.

Our churches, big or small, are and can be a source of hope. We are never more like the hands and feet of Christ than when we are working together in ministry.

I hope you will use the resources listed below to help start conversations in your context and share information. These conversations will be hard ones, but we learn more from our neighbors by understanding different perspectives.

As we prepare for this Special Session of General Conference, I call upon you, members of the Virginia Conference, to be a non-anxious presence. Lean away from fear and lean on God. Lean away from uncertainty and lean into the mission of your local churches.

God is here. And God is doing something immeasurably more than we know how to ask or imagine.

Resources:

- Commission on a Way Forward information: www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward
- Final Commission on a Way Forward report: www.umc.org/who-we-are/way-forward-report-released-in-all-four-official-languages-of-general-conference
- Virginia Conference Sept. 2018 livestream event: <https://livestream.com/VAUMC/COWFQA>
- Bishop Lewis' "Guiding Principles" for Virginia Conference: www.vaumc.org/ncfilerepository/WayForward/BishopLewisSlides9_27_18.pdf
- Judicial Council Oct. 2018 decision: www.umc.org/who-we-are/council-of-bishops-issues-statement-regarding-the-judicial-council-decision
- General Conference 2019 information: www.vaumc.org/GC2019

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