GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

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Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development Hosts Engaging Virgin Gorda Easter Festival Forum

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The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development has described the Virgin Gorda Easter Festival Forum as a productive and forward-looking engagement that brought together clergy, cultural practitioners, festival leaders and community members in meaningful dialogue on the future of the festival.

The forum, held at the St. Mary's Parish Hall on Monday 16 February, examined the history and significance of the Virgin Gorda Easter Festival and its traditional dates. There were presentations by Reverend Dana Lewis Ambrose of St. Mary's Episcopal Church and Ms. Anne Lennard, Deputy Director of Culture. Both speakers highlighted the deep spiritual roots of the Easter period and the long-standing cultural importance of the festival to the Virgin Gorda community.

Junior Minister for Culture and Tourism, Honourable Luce Hodge-Smith welcomed the open exchange of views and underscored the importance of respectful dialogue in a diverse society now home to people from more than 116 countries. "We are grateful to live in a democratic society where differing perspectives can be expressed respectfully," she said. "This conversation is about balance: honouring faith, protecting culture and ensuring that the Virgin Gorda community has the final say."

The Junior Minister further emphasised that there will be no immediate changes to existing festival plans, but confirmed that additional consultations will take place, including engagement with church representatives and stakeholders, to determine a clear and community-supported path forward.

Honourable Hodge-Smith noted that festivals must evolve intentionally, not accidentally. She identified local music, maritime traditions, cuisine and folklore as core components that should remain embedded throughout the celebrations. "Growth is not the enemy of tradition," she stated. "But evolution must be intentional. Our festivals must embed and highlight our heritage at every level, not as an add-on, but as a foundation."

Balancing cultural heritage with modern festival development was another key focus. Mr. Reshawn Stevens, Chair of the Virgin Gorda Easter Festival Committee, spoke to the importance of maintaining the authenticity of the festival while

strengthening organisation and participation. Mrs. Natalie Penn-Lake, Chair of the Festivals and Fairs Committee, reinforced that cultural elements must remain foundational within all festival activities.

Community and youth involvement emerged as central to the forum's success. Ms. Sharlene Smith stressed the need for year-round cultural engagement beginning in schools and supported by elders and community members. Mr. Trevor Bridgewater Jr. advocated for intentional youth leadership, recommending that young people be placed in meaningful roles on festival subcommittees and be given practical exposure to event planning and execution. "Youth involvement must go beyond symbolism," Mr. Bridgewater said. "If we want sustainability, we must give young people ownership, responsibility and education about our culture."

Discussions also addressed volunteerism and the importance of ensuring that service opportunities are meaningful and rewarding. Participants called for clearer pathways linking volunteer work to internships, mentorship and career exposure within festival production and related industries, as well as stronger recognition for student and community volunteers.

In closing, the Junior Minister reaffirmed that festivals ultimately depend on community support and unity. "Our festivals cannot succeed without community buy-in," the Junior Minister said. "If we create the space for honest dialogue and shared responsibility, we will safeguard this festival not only for today, but for generations to come."

The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development expresses appreciation to all presenters and participants for their thoughtful contributions and reaffirms its commitment to transparency, collaboration and the preservation of Virgin Gorda's cultural heritage.

The next Festival Forum will be held on Tortola on 27 February at the Eileene L. Parsons Auditorium at the HLS Community College.

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About:

The Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sustainable Development is responsible for advancing the Territory’s tourism sector, preserving and promoting cultural heritage, and implementing policies that support sustainable growth and environmental stewardship.

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