

State of the Church

The 144th Session of the West Tennessee Annual Conference

The 13th Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

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The A.M.E. Church, the Black Church in America, and the Church Universal are all facing significant challenges in this country. Some of these include: The changing state of morality in America which is constantly being pushed to new limits of societal norms by our President, those in his circle of influence, and lawmakers on all levels of government. The changing dynamic of the family unit which includes the legalization of gay and lesbian marriages, and couples routinely living together in monogamous relationships and having children outside of marriage. The on-going killing and victimization of Black Americans by law enforcement and those in positions of authority. Voter apathy, including low voter registration and low turn-out among African Americans, including many in our A.M.E. Churches. And finally, the clergy sex abuse scandal that is wreaking havoc on the Catholic Church and threatens to have a negative impact on all churches, both Black and White.

In order for the church to minister in the midst of times such as these, we must be a Christ-centered Church. In other words, we must be a church that loves unconditionally, and we must be a church that welcomes and accepts people as they are while teaching the unequivocal Gospel of Christ. But being welcoming and accepting does not necessarily mean that we should not set limits on what is appropriate, out of fear that we will offend someone. The hope and prayer is that through our teaching and preaching of the Word of God, and the example that we set in Christ, we will see a positive change in the lives of those we welcome into our churches from the margins.

As ministers of the Gospel, we must be examples for Christ who walk in integrity. To walk in integrity, we must love and promote truth and righteousness even in the face of challenges and attacks from the enemy who seeks to deter us. By walking in integrity, our primary goal should be to effectively share the gospel of Christ with the singular intent to save souls and to change lives, rather than to inflate our statistical numbers on our pastor's reports. There is no better way to encourage others to be followers of Christ than by being an example for the Lord by walking in integrity ourselves.

At various times during this conference year we have focused on Criminal Justice, Social Justice, and Environmental Justice, among other issues, in our various Episcopal District meetings and training sessions. All of these are relevant and important issues that affects all of us in one way or another. Unfortunately, it seems that very little is being done at the local church and conference levels to put that training into action in order to bring about positive change in our communities. As a result, the A.M.E. Church is no longer at the forefront of community activism, nor are we a relevant force in many of our communities for positive change in the areas of Social, Economic, or Criminal Justice reform, or even in voter education and registration efforts. In fact, the A.M.E. Church, in some areas, is slowly becoming a classic archetype of an anachronistic organization, in danger of becoming merely a footnote to the history of social activism.

We can no longer just bask in our past glories or accomplishments and expect to be looked upon as a harbinger of social justice in America. We cannot employ tactics from the Civil Rights era when party line telephones were the norm, and expect to bring about change in a 21st century society of cell phones, social media, and instant communication over the internet. We cannot expect the Church to be relevant to a new generation by solely employing practices from a past generation. Nor can we expect the A.M.E. Church to be a force in West Tennessee and beyond, unless we work together rather than seeking after individual glory.

Oftentimes our local churches, in a quest to present an outstanding pastor's report at the annual conference, will focus on their individual accomplishments to the detriment of the conference or district as a whole. An individualistic attitude such as this is incongruent with an organization that expects to make an impactful difference in the community. The classic song *Wake up Everybody* by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes puts it succinctly as they implore us to:

Wake up everybody no more sleepin' in bed; No more backward thinkin' time for thinkin' ahead. The world has changed so very much From what it used to be; There is so much hatred war an' poverty. Wake up all the teachers time to teach a new way, **Maybe then they'll listen to whatcha have to say**... The world won't get no better if we just let it be...we gotta change it..., just you and me. [We] can't do it alone, [we] need some help y'all!

Because many of our smaller churches do not have the resources or membership to have an effective community outreach ministry, it is all the more essential that we work together as a cohesive unit. If a group of churches in a given geographical radius of each other would work together on community outreach and ministry, they could have a much greater impact on the community in which they are located. By working together we can accomplish so much more than if we are an island unto ourselves. Rather than one small church trying to do a myriad of things, each individual church can focus on one aspect of a plan of action such as voter education and registration; community activism; serving the poor and homeless community, etc. There is power in unity and strength in numbers. Our responsibility, as people of faith, is to do our best and trust God to do the rest.

As important as ministry is to the local congregation in our churches, ministry outside of the congregation is equally as important. If the church is to grow, we must minister to those outside of the church. If the church is to make a positive impact in the community, we must minister to those outside of the church. If we expect to change the community in which we live, work and serve, we must minister to those outside of the church. However, because some of our smaller churches do not feel that they individually have the resources or membership to do ministry outside of the church, rather than partner with another congregation, they chose to do nothing. In the book *Standing in the Margin: How Your Congregation Can Minister with the Poor (and perhaps recover its soul in the process)*, the authors address this issue this way:

When it seems to us humans that the problems in church and world are just too massive, too big for us to manage, we can rely on God's grace. For our purpose, we are thinking of God's grace not only as divine forgiveness, but also as that power in

us that enables us to do what we otherwise could not. God's grace allows us to give more, do more, and carry more than we ever thought possible. Precisely because of this way of thinking about and relating with God, many Afrikan American Christians have believed that God makes a way out of no way, that God is able, and that God can do anything but fail. We would add, however, that this should never be taken to mean that God can (or will) do everything for us humans. There will still be sorrows and disappointments. We are expected to work together cooperatively with God to address the problems of church and world, for we are companions with God on the road of life (Mary Alice Mulligan and Rufus Burrow, Jr. 66-67).

And not only must we "work together cooperatively with God," but we must work together cooperatively with each other. And when necessary, we must also cross over denominational lines and partner with other churches and organizations in our communities to work together to bring about positive change that will benefit everyone.

Recommendations:

- As stated in last year's report, voter registration efforts should be an integral part of each local Church's outreach efforts. We feel that it is important to not only register people to vote, but to educate them as well; especially as it relates to the different candidates' views on issues that will impact our members, and the community at large. Find out where candidate forums are being held and go as a group to these events. This is especially important with the upcoming mid-term elections in which control of congress is at stake.
- Encourage smaller churches to partner with other churches in their general vicinity on community outreach efforts, and other areas of ministry. In multiple locations throughout West Tennessee, there are several A.M.E. Churches located within just a few miles of each other.
- Encourage all churches to have an active and effective teaching ministry, which includes Church School and Bible Study where possible. The teaching ministry is one of the most effective ways of growing members to maturity in both faith and biblical literacy. It is also an effective way to train individuals for outreach ministry and to bring in people from the community who may not otherwise attend worship service at your church.

Respectfully submitted,

The Reverend Dr. Dave Louis Adams, Sr.; the Reverends Linda A. Evans; Patsy T. Brown; Agnes M. Henderson; Bobby Carter and Darrell K. Scott. Sisters Pauline Guyton, Remell Rogers, Linda Pettigrew, Robbie White, Mary R. Jones, Gloria Epperson and Barbara Duty.