

State of the Church
The 143rd Session of the West Tennessee Annual Conference
The 13th Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church
Bishop Jeffrey Nathaniel Leath, Presiding Prelate
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In 2017, the A.M.E. Church (on all levels), and the Christian Church in America, is still grappling with many of the same issues that became a rallying cry for a call to action by Believers throughout America and the world, in 2016. Social, criminal, and political justice issues are still at the forefront of areas that must be addressed by the Church with the necessary action to back up its rhetoric. Poverty, homelessness, illiteracy (both juvenile and adult), racism, sexism, bigotry, social intolerance, and the continued unchecked police brutality against minorities, are all areas of great concern that much be addressed by the Church. And with the election of a candidate that many of us hoped would never be elected President – but secretly feared that he might as a result of voter passivism – things have gone from bad to worse. Things that once were done under the cover of darkness, are now done openly with little or no fear of long-term negative repercussions. In view of rapidly changing moral, social, and political norms in America, exacerbated by the rise to power of Donald Trump and his like-minded supporters, the Church must take a more vocal and forceful role in social, criminal, and political justice issues.

In this report, we will address two areas of concern that we believe are hindering the effectiveness of the Church. Those two areas are: Clergy Self-care; and the Relationship between a lack of Social Justice Activism and declining membership/attendance by our young adults (Millennials).

The Role of Self-Care in the Effectiveness of the Ministry

If we are to make a positive difference, we as a Body of Believers must become more active in our communities; more relevant in our teaching and preaching about the Radical Jesus who stood against injustice, poverty, and oppression wherever He encountered it; and we must address the issue of dwindling Church attendance, especially among our youth and young adults. However, we cannot be effective in dealing with any of these issues unless we as Clergy and Church Leaders first take better care of ourselves.

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make a positive impact on our society, in our communities, or in our local churches if we are not attentive to our self-care. One need only look at the number of Ministers in the West Tennessee Annual Conference who have suffered serious health issues – in some cases even death, since the last Annual Conference to realize that self-care must be a primary area of concern among our Clergy and leadership if the Church is to be effective in its ministries. Over the past few years serious health problems have been an all too common occurrence among Itinerant Ministers in the West Tennessee Conference. As a result, their ability to effectively pastor and minister to their congregations has been severely compromised.

If a Minister is physically unhealthy, their spiritual and emotional health will suffer as well. The result, quite frequently, is a correspondingly unhealthy ministry because the needs of the congregation and the health of ministers are inextricably intertwined; whatever adversely affects one will ultimately affect the other. When the spirit is unhealthy we are what retired A.M.E.

Bishop Cornal Garnett Henning, Sr. describes as “Looking good but dead.” Bishop Henning, Sr. goes on to state that:

We live in an age where imprecise communication often produces unintended implications. Once I was in a viewing line at the funeral of a friend. As I approached the casket, I heard someone ahead remark, ‘She sure looks good,’ to which the person before her responded, ‘She sure does.’ As I continued toward the bier, I thought to myself, ‘The mortician has done a really great job when you consider the condition of the person after such a prolonged and debilitating illness.’

Then, as if awakened to a greater truth, I thought to myself, ‘Looking good but dead’ (Bishop Cornal G. Henning, Sr., “You Look Good, But Are You Well?” *Living Well Everyday! The Anvil, Annual Resource Guide, Quadrennial Theme, 2005* 14).

Some of our ministers, due to being inattentive to their spiritual care, are in effect looking good physically, but dead spiritually. Consequently, their sermons are dead; their enthusiasm for serving God is dead; and unfortunately, their ministries are dead as well. Part of the reason for this is that many ministers do not allow time for their own spiritual well-being. For many ministers who are bi-vocational, the only time they take off from their secular jobs is time spent away at church meetings or conferences. This does not allow any personal time for the minister to spend with family, or for rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation. The frequent result is increased health issues, some serious, which have led to disability or death.

When one’s physical health suffers, quite frequently their spiritual health will suffer as well. This manifests itself in daily devotional time that is severely compromised or nonexistent in many cases; and prayer, meditation, and personal Bible Study time often suffers as well. If we don’t take proper care of ourselves, we not only let ourselves down but we can – and oftentimes will - hurt others as well. It is difficult for us as Ministers to work to make a difference in our communities, or proclaim Jesus’ Good News as His Disciples, if we are overly-stressed, sick or ill due to living an unhealthy lifestyle and not taking proper care of ourselves.

Numerous studies have shown that the lack of proper self-care is not limited to the A.M.E. Church, or the Black Church in general. This is an issue that crosses denominational, racial, gender, and socio-economic boundaries; it is also an issue which must be addressed by Clergy and Leadership at all levels of the Church if the Church is to be effective in its mission.

Recommendations:

- All Pastors, including those who are bi-vocational, should take a dedicated day of Sabbath which does not involve any ministry related work. This day should be communicated to church membership, and boundaries should be set and adhered to as much as possible.
- Take annual vacations excluding time spent at conferences and meetings.
- Engage in regular exercise or physical activity.
- Get regular check-ups and annual physicals.

- Coordinate with the local church, Presiding Elder, and Bishop to take time away from the church (mini-sabbaticals), if necessary, to relieve stress and prevent its harmful effects on your health.

The Relationship Between a Lack of Social Activism and Dwindling Church Attendance/Involvement from Millennials

One of the primary reasons that so many of our A.M.E. Churches are struggling, or in danger of dying, is because many Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) are not attending, or are not as actively involved in Church as those of previous generations. According to an article in the *Pew Research Center*, younger “adults are...much less religious than everyone else...and are much less likely than older Americans to pray or attend church regularly or to consider religion an important part of their lives.” Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that “Many Millennials have parents who are Baby Boomers” who instilled in their children the importance “to think for themselves” (David Masci, *Why Millennials are less religious than older Americans*. *The Pew Research Center*, January 8, 2016).

Part of this idea of “to think for themselves” has resulted in a generation of young adults who trust more in their own self-confidence, than in faith in the Lord. Others, as one of our young adult committee members, the Rev. Lula Martin Sanderson pointed out, see the Jesus that is preached and taught in our churches as “a White passive Jesus” who is all talk and no action. The reality is, however, that we are living in a time of such political, social, and racial turmoil that we need a radical Jesus, as well as the loving Jesus, to address those issues. In other words, if we want to draw, keep, and engage Millennials as active members of our congregations, we must move beyond a theology of passive love, to one of relative action and engagement spurred on by a righteous anger against the ills afflicting the society in which we live.

In the book *The Politics of Jesus; Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted*, Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. speaks to Rev. Martin Sanderson’s concerns this way:

Jesus’ response [in many instances throughout the course of His ministry], shows us that there are things that we should be angry about, there are things we must say and do as a testimony against every action, system, policy, and institution that excludes any of God’s children from the fullest fruits of life for any reason. That is to say, we must endeavor to love everyone, but we must also take sides. We cannot be against injustice if we do not take the side of justice. We must be angered by the mistreatment of any of God’s children. When we see people hurt and excluded in the name of God, we should be angry. When we see Church leaders misleading and exploiting the faithful just like the religious leaders Jesus died opposing, we should get angry. When we see a tiny group of elites take most of the fruits of this nation’s economic harvest for themselves, we should get angry. When we see corporate executives being paid in one year’s salary what the average worker can never earn in a lifetime, we should get angry. When we see some Americans excluded like lepers from the best this nation has to offer because of their religion or their gender or their ethnicity or their class, we should get angry. But our anger, our outrage, our righteous indignation must remain focused on the perversion of policies and traditions meant for good into laws and practices that do harm and evil. Not on particular groups or personalities, but on unjust policies and practices (Hendricks 165).

In other words, we must not get so caught up in focusing on the misinformed or hateful rhetoric of President Trump or any other individual or group, that we do not focus on the real issues at hand: working to change the laws and policies that are unfair or harmful to the masses. We must do more than preach about it; we must, as Hendricks pointed out, “get angry” and become actively involved in the process to bring about positive change. And if we hope to have viable congregations that are sustainable for the future, our youth and young adults must play an active role in that process. While our local A.M.E. Churches have made progress in this area, there is still much work to do.

Respectfully submitted,

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