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All clergy and delegation of this 151th Session of the Tennessee Annual Conference

As this committee make this report, there are several issues that affect the state of our country; this United States of America. Among them include racism, police brutality, health care, mass incarceration, immigration, unemployment, poverty, education, injustice, and other social concerns.

The most critical event this country face today is the 2018 midterm election, in less than 30 days. The Trump agenda hinges on what happens in the 2018 midterms. From legalizing marijuana to increasing minimum wage, voters nationwide won't just be deciding candidates in the 2018 midterm elections. A bevy of policy initiatives are slated to appear on ballots for the people to decide.

This is a critical time for the Black Church to speak loud and clear and let our voice be heard by casting our vote. It's time to take action and vote.

Here are just a few issues this country face that should encourage you to cast your vote.

Reinvestment in Justice – Our nation's investments in the criminal justice system should increase the safety of our communities, so we can live and raise our children in neighborhoods free of violence and crime. Yet America spends more than \$270 billion a year—including more than \$80 billion annually on incarceration alone—to pursue policies that amply fund policing, courts, and corrections while failing to address the forces driving crime. As rehabilitative services, drug treatment, mental health care, job placement, and education and training go underfunded, our policies create pipelines to prison and lock up millions of people in the United States. The epidemic of mass incarceration disproportionately engulfs communities of color—and has done little to make the country safer.

The number of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails has increased 500 percent over the past 40 years, not as the result of an increase in actual crime rates but as a consequence of policymakers' decisions to raise penalties, create mandatory minimum sentences, and establish truth-in-sentencing and three-strike laws. This dramatic rise in the number of people incarcerated opened the gates for the growth of the U.S. private prison industry, which now pushes contracts that include requirements that a certain number of beds are filled and other policies that perpetuate mass incarceration and maintain its profits.

Currently, the criminal justice system touches 1 in 40 U.S. residents and incarcerates traditionally marginalized populations at disproportionately high rates. Because of the over-policing that occurs in communities of color, policy changes that have increased the penalties for crimes have the most severe impact on people of color. Currently, there is a 1 in 3 chance that a black man will be imprisoned, compared to a 1 in 6 chance for Latino men and a 1 in 17 chance for white men.” Similar disparities exist for black, Latina, and white women. Meanwhile, approximately 66 percent of people incarcerated in state prisons have not graduated high school, 50 percent of prison inmates and 64 percent of jail inmates either suffer from serious mental distress or mental health problems, and 58 percent of prison inmates and 63 percent of sentenced jail inmates have drug abuse disorders.

Our nation’s investments in the criminal justice system should increase the safety of our communities—but mass incarceration has not accomplished this. We can reduce incarceration while maintaining public safety. Reinvesting in our justice system will advance racial equality.

Employment - Harassment and discriminatory hiring, firing, promotions, and pay continue to shape the U.S. labor market in ways that systematically disadvantage people of color, women, LGBTQ workers, people with disabilities, and other targeted groups. As our jobs largely determine our incomes, economic opportunities, and the livelihood of our families, unfair employment practices worsen cycles of inequality. Today federal law forbids discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, as well as employment discrimination based on disability, pregnancy, age (age 40 or older), or genetic information. Yet evidence of persistent discrimination remains widespread. African Americans consistently face much higher unemployment rates than white workers, regardless of education. White job applicants still receive 36 percent more callbacks for a job interview than equally qualified black applicants, and 24 percent more than Latino applicants. Meanwhile, different types of discrimination overlap and deepen inequality: For example, in 2016, Latina women working full-time, year-round were still paid only 54 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men. Race and gender contribute to dramatic pay gaps across the spectrum, and gaps persist for workers at all levels of education and in the vast majority of occupations.

All Americans deserve a fair opportunity to earn a living and sustain their families—employment discrimination cannot be tolerated. Laws against discrimination work when they are vigorously enforced. Job seekers with an arrest or conviction record deserve a chance to start fresh.

Education Equality - Equal opportunity is a cornerstone of the American ideal. To make that a reality, every child deserves a quality public education, with an opportunity to learn, flourish, and become a full citizen of our democracy. After gains from civil rights-era policies, decisions by today’s policymakers are re-segregating American education, with students increasingly clustered in schools that are isolated by race and class. Segregation further concentrates both public and private resources among the already well-off, and limits opportunities for all students to learn from peers with different backgrounds and to prepare for life and work in an ever more diverse and interconnected world.

In most states, public school districts are operated at the local level and are funded largely by local property taxes. As a result of these political decisions, students of color are more likely to attend overcrowded and underfunded schools that have a lower percentage of highly qualified teachers and less access to quality curriculum and up-to-date technology compared to white students. Overall, students who need the most resources—including English language learners and students whose family, social, or

economic circumstances challenge their ability to learn at school—attend schools that receive *less* funding than schools serving better-off students.

Discrimination within schools and classrooms is another barrier to education equity. Nationwide, more than 80 percent of public school teachers and principals are white, while more than half of public school students are of color. Teachers' and administrators' implicit bias about students' learning abilities can limit opportunity for students of color, contributing to lower academic performance and student disengagement from learning. At the same time, racialized disciplinary policies result in students of color, particularly black students, being disproportionately suspended or expelled. American Indian students, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities also face disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion. Zero tolerance policies, surveillance, and the increased presence of police officers in schools—particularly schools that serve low-income students and students of color—contribute to a school-to-prison pipeline that pushes students of color into the criminal justice system for minor offenses. Treating students as criminals rather than addressing the underlying causes of misconduct—such as a learning disability or a history of child abuse or exposure to violence and instability—undermines learning, increases students' risk of falling behind academically, and does little to increase school safety.

A young person's opportunity to get an education should not depend on his or her zip code. We are a stronger and more prosperous state when every child has the opportunity to learn. All students benefit from more diverse schools. Treating students as criminals undermines learning.

Health Care - When a child is injured or a loved one is suffering from a serious illness, no one wants to think about co-pays and deductibles. We want compassionate, effective medical care, delivered quickly and accessibly. We know that people, families, communities, and our nation thrive when good health is a public priority. The Affordable Care Act was an historic achievement to provide health insurance to a record number of uninsured Americans. Yet even if the Affordable Care Act were fully implemented, nearly 30 million people would remain uninsured, and out-of-pocket medical costs could lead to financial ruin for many people.

People of color, undocumented immigrants, and people with low incomes have higher rates of disease and mortality, and suffer disproportionately under our current health coverage scheme. African Americans are 77 percent more likely than white Americans to develop diabetes. People of color run 2 to 4 times the risk of reaching end-stage renal disease than white people. Racial disparities are particularly acute for pregnant women and infants: Because African-American mothers are far less likely to receive prenatal care than white mothers and the care they do receive is likely to be lower quality, the infant mortality rate for black babies is more than twice as high as for white babies, and black mothers are more than 3 times more likely to die in childbirth than white mothers.

States must take steps to build upon the gains of the Affordable Care Act and expand health care access and coverage. In the 18 states that have not yet expanded eligibility for Medicaid coverage, 2.6 million adults fall within a coverage gap where they earn too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid yet too little to be eligible for tax credits that would help them pay for private insurance coverage. Expanding Medicaid eligibility, which comes at little cost to the state, is the critical first step for states to increase health care access.

We all thrive when good health is a public priority. No one should struggle with debt to get the care they need.

Modernized Voter Registration - Voting is critical to the health of our democracy. Voter registration is the on-ramp to participating in elections, but the registration system can be complicated and daunting, and does not ease participation in our democracy. Initiating or updating voter registration is often a serious roadblock for people who move frequently, those who speak English as their second language, individuals with disabilities, and people whose background and education may not have exposed them to the voting process.

Nearly 1 in 4 eligible voters in the United States is not registered to vote. Lower registration rates among historically marginalized communities today reflect the long history of exclusion from our democracy. Low-income Americans are also disproportionately impacted. Unregistered individuals in households making less than \$15,000 per year are twice as likely as those making \$75,000 or more to say they are not registered to vote because they do not know how or where to register.

More than 60% of eligible voters report having never been asked to register to vote. This means that for the majority of eligible voters, the burden of navigating complicated voter registration procedures is on them. Arbitrary voter registration deadlines and outdated voter registration systems that rely on paper application forms add unnecessary layers of red tape and confusion to the process in many states.

Our antiquated voter registration systems lead to problems for Americans who are already registered as well. People who register in advance of an election can find themselves left off the rolls when they show up to vote, due to mistakes in processing from illegible handwriting, outdated scanners, and human data entry errors

Registering—and staying registered—to vote does not need to be this hard.

Making voter registration inclusive and accessible advances our democratic values of freedom, equality, and fairness. Modernizing voter registration is a commonsense solution with bipartisan support across the U.S. Modernized voter registration improves the accuracy and integrity of our voter rolls.

Recommendations:

1. Develop a robust state “**justice reinvestment**” program to reduce the number of people behind bars and address factors that drive incarceration. This requires that states:

- **Reform sentencing laws.** Eliminate mandatory minimum sentences and three-strike laws.
- **Amend other laws and practices that result in over-incarceration.** Improve pretrial inability to pay bail.
- **Reinvest criminal justice funds in community services that reduce recidivism and address the root drivers of incarceration.**
- **End collaboration in federal immigration enforcement.** State and local governments often spend their own scarce resources to engage in immigration enforcement activities that are the responsibility of the federal government.

- **End the use of private prisons.**
- **Abolish felony disenfranchisement laws.** Repeal any laws that disenfranchise voters as a result of criminal convictions.

2. Strengthen the enforcement of existing **fair employment laws**, and clarify that discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, personal credit history, pregnancy status, or caregiving responsibilities are illegal. Ensure people with arrest or conviction records have a fair chance to work. States have enacted the following policies:

- **Adequately fund and empower state agencies responsible for enforcing laws against workplace discrimination.**
- **Ensure fairness for pregnant workers.** Require employers to make reasonable accommodations for pregnancy, recovery from childbirth, and related medical conditions.
- **Stop credit discrimination in employment.** Prohibit employers from using personal credit history to make decisions about hiring, firing, pay, or promotions.
- **Prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.**
- **Guarantee equal pay**
- **Provide a fair chance to job applicants with a criminal record.**
- **Strengthen employment protections for workers with family care responsibilities.**

3. Establish **education equity** by guaranteeing adequate and fair school funding, combatting segregation, and dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.

- **Ensure adequate and equitable school funding.**
- **Provide incentives for local governments to consolidate school districts and to enroll students across district boundaries.**
- **Support the development of affordable housing throughout the state and fight housing discrimination.**
- **Create community schools.**
- **Respect teachers as professionals.**
- **Prevent schools from moving students into the juvenile justice system for minor offenses.**

4. **Expand health insurance** coverage and **access to health care** for all state residents. States should consider the following steps:

- **Expand Medicaid coverage.**
- **Reject work requirements and other restrictions on Medicaid eligibility.**
- **Establish a Basic Health Program.** The Affordable Care Act gives states the option to implement a Basic Health Program to cover residents with incomes between 133 percent and 200 percent of the federal poverty level.
- **Increase support for community health centers. Implement all-payer rate setting.**

5. **Modernize voter registration** to remove red tape and make it cost effective, accurate, and secure.

- Offer an *accessible*, online registration system where eligible people can register to vote, update their voter registration, and check their voter registration status.
- Automate your state's voter registration infrastructure so that eligible citizens are registered to vote—and registrations are automatically updated—when they interact with state agencies.
- Expand the state and local government agencies offering voter registration
- Allow voters to register to vote and cast a ballot during early voting and on Election Day.
- Pre-register eligible 16- and 17-year-olds and automatically add them to voter rolls when they turn 18.
- Equal Access for All Eligible Voters

It's Your Right and Our Fight – Register to Vote!

Humbly Submitted,

State of the Country Committee: The Reverends Randall Webster, Fred Beasley, Victor Goodman, Veronica Dailey, Albert Strawther, Linda Brown-Saffore, Dr. James McKissack, Verissa Williams, Sisters Darlene Page, Emma North, Esther Gardner, Lisa Long