

To: Bishop Jeffrey Nathaniel Leath, Presiding Prelate

Dr. Susan Jones Leath, MD, Episcopal Supervisor

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All clergy and delegation of this 144th Session of the West Tennessee Annual Conference

The task before our committee on State of the Country is a difficult one because before us are several critical issues that plague our nation. Across the nation women continue fighting for gender equality, equity, restorative, economic and environmental justice. Just recently this past year thousands of women gathered in Washington DC from across the country with collective voices and an alternative vision for our country raising an awareness to overcome issues that seek to divide our nation along matters of race, class and equity. While there is an extreme sense of urgency that flags our attention there is a dire need to address the disparities in access to healthcare, housing crisis, Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation, a drug war crisis, education, immigration, mass incarceration, predatory lending institutions, an opioid crisis, civil rights and race relations, unemployment, poverty, environmental, foreign and domestic terrorism, voting rights restoration for felons, voter registration and so many other systemic problems in our nation, it's the absolute least we can do to protect our democracy and to honor those who have fought very hard for us.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "The ballot is stronger than the bullet." As we well know, voting gives us the right and voice, to have the say who will be the next most powerful leader in the world. It is the single most effective way to let your voice and my voice be heard. With that said, every election is determined by the people who take action and vote. One person can make a difference and one vote can be the difference. By not voting, you give away your right to influence the government overall decisions. Our coming together on September 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> at the Call to Conscience Action Rally in Washington DC kicked-off our efforts for the mid-term elections. Our priority focused on voter registration, education, the empowerment to organize and mobilize our people to vote in November. Jessie Louis Jackson stated at the rally, "If Blacks turn out in large numbers, we will determine the outcome in a large number of races. Jackson further stated, "It is time for the Black Church to speak, our congregations and the nation need to hear us. Therefore, it is not only time for us to say something, we must do something. We must fight against spiritual wickedness in high places." As mass incarceration rates balloon to inordinate levels, 1 out of 100 Americans are currently locked up. This mass incarceration epidemic has an explicit racial bias, as one in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime. A significant number of those incarcerated are held for low-level, nonviolent offenses.

The present crisis in our country has its deep roots in inequalities. However, in light of the development of countless themes of injustices, racial disparity in the criminal justice system, mass incarceration as a form of racialized social controlled slavery, the war on drugs, crucial healthcare issues, homelessness, gun violence, suicide, substance abuse, mental health problems, imperative immigration rights, minimum wage matters, gender identity, sexual violence, corrupt police practices, the provoking behavior of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Jose, as well as the destructiveness of violence in our nation; there is a sense of deep-seated discontent that seeks our urgent attention in our country. Although our country has made overwhelming progress in trying to ensure the progression of the welfare of our country; our global confidence in America has been shaken. The criminal justice system creates and perpetuates racial hierarchy in the United States and has done so throughout history. African Americans are criminalized and targeted because of their skin color.

As members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, our theological tradition teaches us to be good stewards in public life by serving as faithful and active citizens by exercising our voice and the right to vote. Almost 92 million eligible Americans did not vote in the 2016 presidential elections. In the 2014 midterm elections, an estimated 143 million eligible Americans failed to vote, marking the lowest voter participation in 72 years. For the nation's democracy to function properly and for government to provide fair representation, all eligible Americans must have the opportunity to vote—and be encouraged to do so. Our collective self-rule is established and fostered through free, fair, accessible, and secure elections through which the voice of every eligible American is heard.

The American people recognize the importance of voting in our democracy. In a 2018 Pew Research Center survey, 74 percent of respondents ranked election participation as a very important determinant of good citizenship—above paying taxes and following the law. And yet, millions of eligible voters are missing from America's political decision-making process. This may be because of unnecessary barriers in the voter registration and voting process that prevent would-be voters from casting ballots or because potential voters feel alienated from government. Nationwide, roughly 6 million American citizens are barred from having their voices heard because of antiquated and discriminatory ex-offender disenfranchisement laws.

Through civic engagement, we use our voices to defend what we believe is righteous and strive for a more just world where all are fed. As Christians, we understand that if anyone's voice is not heard, we fall short of God's vision for the world. That is why it is imperative for us to support legislation that ensures that everyone – regardless of race, class, sex, gender, etc. – has the right to vote. Moral convictions guide us more than partisan politics as followers of Christ. Let us work to bring justice to our communities and to further enrich the vibrant participation of our collective public life, reminded that “when justice is done it is a joy to the righteous” (Proverbs 21:15). So therefore, in a push to meet the voter registration deadline or update voter's registration information on October 9, 2018 it is imperative to be able to vote in the November 2018 mid-term elections. Not only is it important to vote in presidential elections: your vote has even more impact on the local level, whether it's taxes, schools, city government or voter initiatives. It's a small price to pay for the chance to affect how things are done in your neighborhood, your city, your state and nation. When we come together as a community and vote we can truly take this state and this country to higher heights. Let's act accordingly to be

reminded everyone's voice matters, including yours! It's your choice, your voice and your vote that counts.

Listed below are some core issues with recommendations for consideration.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To successfully make a difference in our communities in which we live, work and play; we must act now to:

**Elections** – Guarantee that all citizens 18 and older have the right to vote without barriers and establish universal voter registration. Guarantee that all candidates have the right to be heard in open debates and to run with low-threshold ballot access laws. Count all votes in a transparent method open to the public. Institute new voting systems so that more than majority views are represented, e.g. proportional representation; and voting systems that avoid voting based on fear of the greater evil, e.g. instant run-off or ranked choice voting. Create a level playing field by funding public elections with public dollars and clean election laws. Require that all donations directly and indirectly to elections should be transparent.

- Make Voting More convenient with in-person early voting, no excuse absentee voting and vote-at-home with vote centers.
  - **Restore Rights of formerly incarcerated with Felony Convictions.**
  - In conjunction with the Call to Forward Action of the Council of Bishops we also would like to recommend for consideration to challenge members to be intentional Every Sunday until November 4th, to provide opportunities for voter registration, and to remind parishioners of upcoming elections that will include seniors and college students.
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- Provide sufficient resources in elections and ensure voting is accessible to all.
  - Cut mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenses in half.
  - Training for gender equality and women's empowerment is an essential component to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. Training helps women and men to understand the role gender plays and to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for advancing gender equality in their daily lives and work. Training for gender equality is part and parcel of delivering our commitments to equal human rights for all.
  - End the privatization of prisons.
  - Allowing current nonviolent prisoners to seek fairer sentences

- Prioritize treatment and rehabilitation—rather than incarceration—for low-level, nonviolent drug offenders. More than half of prison and jail inmates suffer from a mental health problem. Up to 65 percent of the correctional population meets the medical criteria for a substance use disorder.
  - Support legislation to end racial profiling by federal, state, and local law enforcement officials.
  - Know Your Rights
  - Defend Your Rights
  - Get involved in grassroots community organizations to end mass incarceration
    - Influence public policy with your voice and your vote.
    - **Healthcare** – Create a national, universal and publicly financed comprehensive health system, i.e. improved Medicare for All, which provides full health coverage throughout life with no out-of-pocket costs. Promote wellness in public policy. Recognize that health is a human right not a commodity.
    - **Education** – Guarantee that all people have the right to a high quality, publicly-funded and broad education from pre-school through vocational training or university.
    - **Housing** – Guarantee that all people have the right to affordable and safe housing. End predatory mortgage and foreclosure practices.
    - **Environment** – Adopt policies which effectively create a carbon-free and nuclear free energy economy and that respect the rights of nature. Confront climate change with a rapid and comprehensive transition to an energy efficient, wind, solar and other renewable source-based economy that ends the wasteful use of energy. End the extractive economy and move toward a circular system where there is no waste and everything is re-used. Remake land use planning to support a healthy environment.
1. **Corporatism** – Firmly establish that money is not speech, corporations are not people and only people have Constitutional rights. End corporate influence over the political process. End corporate welfare that enriches the few and instead treat government investment as something that all profit from, ensure corporations pay their fair share by ending corporate loopholes and tax subsidies and put in place a global tax so that off-shoring of money does not avoid taxes. Protect people and the environment from damage by corporations and end corporate trade agreements and partnerships that undermine consumer, labor and environmental protections.
  2. **Wars and Militarism** – End wars and occupations, end private for-profit military contractors and end the weapons export industry. War crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes against peace must be addressed and those responsible held accountable under international law. Reduce the national security state and demilitarize the police.
  3. **Human Rights** – End exploitation of people in the US and abroad. End discrimination in all forms (race, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity), guarantee equal civil rights, and the right of people to travel across borders to work and live. Make the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a reality.
  4. **Worker Rights and Jobs** – Guarantee that all working-age people have the right to safe, just, non-discriminatory and dignified working conditions, a sustainable living wage, paid leave and economic protection. Put in place policies that allow worker owned and managed

businesses, e.g. worker-owned cooperatives, so workers can build wealth and have greater control over their economic lives.

5. **Government** – Guarantee that all processes of the three branches of government are be accountable to international law, transparent and follow the rule of law. Respect the civil rights of government employees. Create a work environment in government that empowers service to people, participation, honesty and integrity and that protects whistleblowers. Build policies and infrastructure that allow people to participate in decision making.
6. **Criminal Justice and Prisons** – end stop and frisk and other racial profiling police practices that lead to police harassment, brutality and even killings of civilians; respect constitutional rights against search and seizure, right to counsel and against self-incrimination. End the drug war and adopt a public health, evidence-based drug policy that respects individual rights and does not rely on law enforcement. End private for-profit prisons, end mandatory sentencing, recognize prisoners have the right to humane and just conditions with a focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society and abolish the death penalty. Police need to protect the right to peaceably assemble to redress grievances and the right to Freedom of Speech without infiltration or other police practices that undermine those rights.
7. **Finance and the Economy** – Break up the too big to fail banks, develop public banks in every state and major city, encourage community banks and credit unions, create local stock exchanges to allow investment in local communities and create microfinance loans to encourage entrepreneurship and support local businesses. Re-make the Federal Reserve into a transparent, democratic institution that responds to the needs of the economy and not to the needs of big banks. Put limits on the discrepancy between worker and executive pay. End policies which foster a wealth divide and move to a localized and democratic financial system. Guarantee that people’s deposits are protected and that the public does not pay for financial institutions that fail. Reform taxes so that they are progressive and provide goods, monetary gain and services for the people including creating a guaranteed national income.
8. **Media** – End the concentration of media by a small number of corporations. Democratize the media by recognizing that the airwaves and the internet are public goods and recognize independent and citizen’s media as legitimate media outlets. Require that media be accurate and accountable to the people and that the internet be accessible to all people, respect people’s privacy and promote the sharing of information.
9. **Food and Water** – Create systems that protect the land and water, create local, affordable and sustainable food networks, encourage community supported agriculture and farmer’s markets and diversify local food supplies so that food does not depend on transit over long distances. Encourage organic food production free of chemicals and end genetically modified foods. Guarantee the right to produce and harvest seeds. Stop commodification of water and guarantee access to water as a public good.
10. **Transportation** – Provide affordable, clean and convenient public transportation and safe spaces for pedestrian and non-automobile travel. Develop land use planning that creates walkable and bike able communities, with mass transit so that people do not depend on automobiles. Improve travel by train, rapid transit and commuter rails, so people are not dependent on-air travel and automobiles.

## **Recommendations for Preventing Gun Violence**

**1. Gun safety:** *Establish a culture of gun safety.* As the nation on earth with the most guns, we must make sure people are protected. As a starting point, let's insist on mandatory training and licensing along with safe-and secure-gun storage. This training should not be a one-time affair. Gun owners should be required to regularly refresh their training and renew their permits, with requirements at least as stringent as those governing renewal of your driver's license.

**2. Mental health treatment:** *Ensure accessible, high quality, culturally competent and widely accessed mental health treatment in the implementation of the Affordable Care Act.* While gun ownership has been rising, mental health services across the country have been slashed. We must face this challenge head on, reduce the stigma associated with mental health needs, and support our children, friends, family members and neighbors in seeking-and obtaining-high-quality treatment.

**3. Trauma reduction:** *Reduce children's exposure to violence and address the impact of trauma by implementing recommendations from the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence.* From the report: "Our children are experiencing and witnessing violence on an alarming scale...The good news is that we know what works to address children's exposure to violence."

**4. Sensible gun laws:** *Ban high capacity magazines, expand the 24-hour gun background check to make it universal, and reinstitute the assault weapons ban immediately.* We must insist that assault weapons have no place beyond the battlefield-not in our schools, not in our movie theaters, not in our places of worship, not in our streets and communities.

**5. Comprehensive solutions:** *Charge the Department of Justice; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration; and the Department of Education to identify solutions in 90 days.* With input from young people, community members, the faith community and others, these agencies should jointly identify the root causes of this country's more than 16,000 homicides a year and develop a set of recommendations to address them. The next step will be to implement these recommendations with policies, legislation and actions.

**6. Safe communities:** *Support citywide planning and implementation of comprehensive violence prevention plans that include prevention, intervention, enforcement, rehabilitation and reentry.* A growing research base demonstrates that it is possible to prevent shootings, killings and violence in the long term. Yet our communities lack the resources to do what is needed. Passage of the Youth Promise Act would help make our communities safer. We must commit to helping communities identify and implement solutions.

**7. Public health solutions:** *Recognize gun violence as a critical and preventable public health problem. Gun violence is a leading cause of premature death in the country.* Yet, unlike other preventable causes of death, we haven't mustered the political will to address it. We should establish a National Institute of Violence Prevention at NIH to research root causes and community solutions. We should fund the CDC to develop its infrastructure, so it can track, assess and develop strategies to prevent gun violence, just as we do with tainted spinach and influenza.

**8. Unshackle the CDC:** *Restore the CDC's freedom to study this issue and provide science-based guidance.* The CDC, the nation's public health agency, is now restricted from making recommendations on sensible ways to reduce gun violence. This must change.

**As our country reels from one tragedy to another, one crisis to another, we must vow to change our culture and our policies and to stop this cycle of violence with our voice and our vote. Together we can act in the memory of those who died and insist that this never happen again.**

Humbly submitted the committee on State of the Country,

Chair, The Reverends Dr. Janie D. Dandridge, Gary Fair, Dr. Errol Thomas, Jr., Kirk Ridley, Willie M. Williams and Perry Herman, Brothers Addison McFarland and William McIntyre, Michael Pegues, Sisters Carrie Wellington, and Dr. Pamela Murray, Wilma McCoy,