

To: Bishop Jeffrey Nathaniel Leath, Presiding Prelate of the Thirteenth Episcopal District
Dr. Susan J. Leath, MD, Episcopal Supervisor of Missions
General Officers
Connectional Officers
District Officers
Visiting Presiding Elders
Rev. Troy Merritt, Jr., Host Presiding Elder
Rev. Sidney F. Bryant, Presiding Elder, South District
Rev. Alexander Gaston, Presiding Elder, North District
Rev. W. Antoni Sinkfield, Host Pastor
All clergy and delegation of this 153rd Session of the Tennessee Annual Conference

In this unprecedented time of uncertainty, isolation, and fear caused by a global pandemic, it remains important for church leaders to stay connected and active within their communities.

Beginning in late winter 2020, our places of gathering for worship temporarily closed their doors for the sake of the common good. But the Church was not closed. The Church is the body of Christ that includes saints throughout all time and space. Dr. Kenneth Hill expressed this time as “Shut In but Not Shut Out.” He explains that people have been shut in but not shut out of God’s blessings.

Many church leaders, who until months ago, had not heard of Zoom, had never used Facebook Live, and had not even imagined ever needing to upload a video to YouTube, are suddenly using new media to preach, to counsel, and to continue other forms of ministry work. Reverend Garrett Copeland explained that although there has been continued connection through various media platforms, some members have been left behind because of their non-relationship with the internet. He further explained the challenge and creativity of evangelism and outreach to elderly members and non-internet savvy members.

According to Barna’s State of the Church 2020 Report, there is a growing consensus that people are tired of business as usual when it comes to “church.” People are bored by the typical church experience. This has led to increased incidences of “church hopping” and a noticeable downturn in attendance and participation in the church overall.

With an already declining position in the community; current climate of fear, hate, and injustice, and now a pandemic, according to Reverend Deshnell Cobbin, the Church must reposition itself to be a catalyst for positive change internally and externally if the body of Christ is to remain relevant in times such as these.

The pandemic has pulled the covers back to reveal a world filled with evil, and it has also unveiled the pretenses of mundane ministries and “religion” worship in the church. This is a time

of revelation and reflection for the Church, specifically for the AME Church and her role in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Many have viewed this time of quarantine and social distancing as a negative. While grieving over the thousands of lives lost during this pandemic, it is still believed that God has given us an opportunity to step back so He can breathe new life into the body of believers. He has separated us from the routines of ministry and worship, to anoint and consecrate His people for the new thing He is doing and/or about to do in His Church.

Church leaders are rightly overwhelmed by the myriad rapid changes that they have had to make in response to COVID-19. Many are anxious to have churches filled again and for things to get back to normal—whatever normal has meant for them prior to the global pandemic that has disrupted everyone’s routines.

At the same time, we are curious about what would happen if we viewed this moment differently. What if we saw this time of disruption not as simply a time to tolerate changes to ministry, but as a *divine invitation* to shift our perspective on ministry in a new media landscape?

Perhaps during this pandemic, God is inviting us to open the visions we have had of where we are going, who we are ministering to, and who our ministry partners are to revision—perhaps to places (like digital spaces!) and people we have not yet imagined.

Perhaps if we become open to ministering in places we have not imagined and to partnering with people we have not yet considered; we can even connect with people who have decided that Christian religion is no longer for them or has never been for them. Perhaps seeing this time as a divine invitation could lead to healing and hope for groups in the American church that are in desperate need of revitalization.

We are “like living stones” being formed “into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5) even when we cannot gather in person. Whatever the Church does in its gatherings and other ministries expresses our understanding of who God is, what it means to be disciples of Jesus, and how the Holy Spirit empowers us to be witnesses to what God intends for the world. In times of crisis, when we must address new and challenging practical concerns, our basic theological convictions still apply: love of God and neighbor; regard for fellowship; worship and sacraments; inclusive hospitality that welcomes all; and the beauty of God, the world, and human creativity.

In this unprecedented time, instead of asking, “When do we get to go back to leading normal worship services?” Christian leaders can seek God’s guidance in order to innovate and minister in new ways beyond the walls of church buildings and the limits of physical spaces. Likewise, maybe what normally happens during church services needs to shift.

Church leaders have an opportunity during this pandemic to do what has been needed for some time: take inventory, assess, imagine, create, experiment. Taking ministry online is a perfect time to try new forms of ministry.

Long ago, the prophet Micah asserted that what God requires of us is “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed our lives and our world. It has not, however, changed what God requires of us.

We encourage church leaders to plan wisely and patiently when considering how and when we may again all gather for worship, study, fellowship, and sacraments.

This present moment calls for leaders of congregations, both lay and clergy, to step into the role of a moral leader and guide our people with the virtues of justice, love, and humility. In that spirit, let us provide care-filled attention to the well-being of all.

Practical things we can do during this Pandemic

Weekly Gathering:

- Develop/maintain on a platform that is easy for members to navigate.
- Reactivate in an intentional way, our “Class Leader” system.
- Create a virtual Children’s Church program

• Daily Presence:

- Send regular text to members
- Class leaders, text members at least 2 time a week.
- Stewards: exercise your spiritual gifts of service during this time.
- Do a need, safety check on older members or the sick and shut in.

• Groups:

- Lay, WMS conference calls to continue meeting/and activity planning
- Develop a platform for youth

• Families and Community Care:

- Develop resource packets for members, and for the community.
- Provide family time Zoom meetings

• Finances:

- Stewards, Trustees develop a plan to meet needs of the church

- Class leaders, check on your members and encourage giving.
 - Be open to adopt non-members into your services.
- Communication plan (Pastor):
 - Develop a bi-monthly plan for sharing and meeting with member via conference call or other media platforms
 - Visit the church at least one time a week to remain visible to the community

Humbly Submitted,

State of the Church Committee: The Reverends Randall Webster, Dr. Kenneth Hill, Dr. Yvette Tisdale, Benessa Sweat, Chris Grizzard, Garrett Copeland, Deshnell Cobbin; Sisters Courtney Hawkins, Mary Lacy, Josephine Jackson, Ada Gordon, Candy Morris, and Cynthia Herron.