

Ministry in a Pandemic/State of the Church  
The 146<sup>th</sup> Session of the West Tennessee Annual Conference  
The 13<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Bishop Jeffrey Nathaniel Leath, Presiding Prelate

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**God is changing our story...**The Church Universal, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Black Church have experienced a sharp decline in attendance over the last two decades. According to the Gallup Poll Social Series and Pew Research Center on average, 69% of U.S. adults were members of a church in 1998-2000, compared with 52% in 2016-2018. The beginning of this year has yielded an overall 20-percentage point decline in religious affiliation and/or individuals less likely to belong to a church or other place of worship. While this has raised ecclesial eye brows and caused a push toward increased evangelism, the Church noted that the non-attending group was in the minority with 77% identifying with some organized religion. The Church, however scrambled to pinpoint the causes...age and religiosity, the absence of men, millennials with no religion, generational differences, whether Catholic or Protestant, or no confidence in organized religion...to no avail as it continued ministry in the midst of thousands of churches closing, communities crumbling, social injustice rising, God being taught in homes declining, and no thought of being our brothers' keeper.

**God is changing our story** in the midst of a dangerous and life-changing time in history...the coronavirus pandemic! Noting the government's declaring churches as "essential services," the need to enforce capacity guidelines, the vacillation of governors and mayors between the red phase of almost total closure to the less severe yellow phase the questions for pastor from our leadership simply became, "Is it worth it?" The church is not the building, but the people. Therefore, the mission of spreading the Gospel does not stop. Churches in our conferences and around the world found new or expanded ways to engage in worship and other ministries online while under government "stay at home" orders. Creativity, collaboration, and consultations moved in-person worship to ZOOM, Facebook Live or other online meeting platforms, parking lot worship, telephone conferences, and phone trees to foster fellowship.

**God is changing our story** as churches continue to hold worship, Bible Study, prayer sessions, small group meetings and other activities online. Many report growing participation in their online gatherings, including non-members across all ethnicities. Some may even create special online ministries for those who cannot or do not wish to come to the church building. Others suggest that even when they are able to come together in their church buildings again, they see the need to continue their expanded online outreach.

**God is allowing our story to be changed** by social media and other digital means to engage in a culture of prosperity at the expense of the poor: lawlessness over black lives, politics over humanity, and blatant lies over 200,000 lives. The mood in the messages has changed ... less glitter and more hope as memberships and pastors create new ways to engage the Word, the Sacrament, and the Fellowship in the presence of a Holy God.

**God is changing our story** with the challenge of leadership to embrace the church of the future with Christ as the cornerstone. How we worship has changed, the way we gather/interact has changed, family dynamics have changed, education and work experience has changed, and recreation has changed giving the Church further opportunity to minister in God's vineyard.

**In this changing story Leadership must:**

- **Be a Non-Anxious Presence.** Note that pandemic and panic have the same root word in Greek (pan = all). This is a time of heightened fear, uncertainty, and grieving. The job of leadership is to not panic and be a non-anxious presence to help calm the anxieties congregations may be experiencing.
- **Focus on Faith rather than Fear.** During any time of crisis, a calm and steady faith in God and God's love is what will get us through. Part of overcoming fears is to name them and be honest about them. Helping people give voice to their fears is a first step to dealing with them.
- **Lead by Values.** While there is a plethora of medical guidance and information everywhere, our values of love, hope, and faith are the motivation for the Church's ministry. Remind yourself and your memberships of your "why" for living how we live. This is especially the time for living and preaching about self-giving love. We wear masks and socially distance because it is an act of self-giving love.
- **Lead With Gratitude.** This is a time to express gratitude for big and small things people are doing. Prayers should include thanksgiving for those who are risking their lives for us: first responders, health care workers and essential workers. Look for opportunities to thank persons in your congregation for anything they are doing that is helping.
- **Keep Current With and Follow Health Guidelines.** As a leader, you can model those acts of love that keep us safe: wearing a mask when in public places, social distancing, staying at home when feeling ill. Staying healthy yourself is very important.
- **Follow the Guidelines set by the Episcopacy as You Re-Open Your Church.** This is not a time to take risks. This is a time for being safe and smart. While many will want to rush back to in-person worship, there are many crucial steps that must be taken before you church is ready to reopen.

**In this changing story Pastoral Care must:**

- **Be Creative.** Due to stay-at-home orders, we need to be creative about doing pastoral care. In-person pastoral care is difficult, if not impossible, especially with persons in the vulnerable category (over 65 or having underlying health issues). This is a time for embracing 21st century technology: Zoom and Facetime are available for video calls. If members cannot use these, there is the old-fashioned phone call, text, email, or tele-conferencing to connect membership.
- **Stay Connected with Your People.** We may not be able to visit members in-person; however, we need to be there for them. This means lots of checking in by the new technologies mentioned above, or by phone or email. Persons who don't normally need pastoral care will now need pastoral care. Pay attention to what you are hearing and seeing in your virtual visits with them to assess how they are really doing.

- **Exercise Healthy Practices.** Leaders pay attention to your own health! Make sure you are getting regular exercise, eating healthy and getting good sleep. We are the models for a healthy body, mind, and spirit. Pay attention to how you “exercise” your mind and spirit. Take time to read things you wouldn’t normally read as a way of exercising your mind. Try out some new forms of spiritual practice as a way of keeping fresh and healthy (i.e. prayer walk, mindfulness hike).
- Be sure to intentionally take a weekly Sabbath day of rest and renewal.

**In this changing story try:**

- **New Kinds of Groups.** Try out something new. One church on-line does “prays the pounds away” using guided faith-based dietary guidelines, while another asks participants to “Walk with Me.” Another church is offering a “happy hour” for socializing. Still another “Prayer at Midnight.” There are so many different possibilities for keeping small groups connected.
- **Transform Church Meetings.** While online church committee and church council meetings usually focus on church business, these meetings can matter more if some time is set aside for checking in and prayer. Give these meetings a spiritual purpose rather than a church business purpose.
- **Give thanks** for the small and large things in your life that are good. In any and every circumstance, express thanksgiving. Modeling a life of gratitude will inspire and motivate your people to do the same. Have an attitude of gratitude!

**In this changing story:**

- **Remember the full Membership.** The Church has the opportunity minister to the sick and shut-in by assisting them in experiencing some sort of virtual worship with their home church.
- **We are all Accountable.** The church should be concerned about accountability (every component and auxiliary). Are all of the Churches in our Conference doing some sort of virtual worship, and have each church reached out to their members to see if they are connected in some form of virtual worship, and if not, do we assist them in the connection?
- **Do Not Get Weary in Well Doing.** While this is a good time to broaden our worship by evangelizing over the airways, let’s not forget or get too comfortable that we do not ever want to come back into the Church to fellowship with one another. This could be a time for us to soar to new heights in worship, so let us soar!

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Respectfully submitted,

**The Reverends** Linda A. Evans, Patsy T. Brown, Bobby Carter, Agnes Henderson, Darrell K. Scott; lay delegates Christian Anderson, Willie Brown, Frances Burge, Mary R. Jones, Cheryl Love, Diane Pettigrew, Linda Pettigrew, and John Weaver