

Tennessee Annual Conference 153rd Session

Bishop Jeffrey N. Leath, Presiding Bishop

Rev. Troy Merritt, Host Presiding Elder

Rev. W. Antoni Sinkfield, PhD, Host Pastor

Literary Report – State of the Country/Social Action

Wednesday October 21, 2020

The Reverends Dr. Harold Love, Fred Beasley, Vivan Canty, Dr. Barbara Crawford, Veronica Dailey, Dr. Trent Ogilvie, and Verissa Williams; lay delegates Devora Barner, Melvin Brown, William Fuqua, Laura Hollerman, Ron Mitchell, Candy Morris, Wanda Morris, Emma North, Cindy Schrag, Lisa Taylor, Saniya Trotter, Annie Webster, Antoiwan White, and Rose Wilson

The members of the State of the Country/ Social Action Committee present the following report. As of Wednesday October 21, 2020 we find the state of our country to be very divided. The health crisis brought on by the COVID-19 Coronavirus has affected every state in the country on several levels. K-12 education in public school districts has gone from in classroom to online for most students in the country. Higher education institutions have limited on campus living opportunities, shortened the fall semester and increased online classes all in a effort to protect the health of students, faculty and staff. Businesses have seen a reduction in revenues, closures and laid off employees. The death of George Floyd sparked protest for social justice around the country and several parts of the world. These protests emphasized the need to eliminate police brutality towards Black people and change the way that law enforcement is trained. The weeks and months leading up to the General election scheduled for November 3rd have been filled with some of the most divisive campaigning ever seen in modern times.

And yet we still have hope. In her 1999 article *The Image of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community*, author Allison Calhoun-Brown reminds us that “One of the primary assertions of Black theology is that the church must be socially and politically engaged.” The African-American church has often been viewed as both shield and sword in a harsh violent world of racial oppression. As shield it has often been a place of refuge for persons trying to make sense out of the situation they have found themselves in. As sword it has been the tool by which many persons liberated themselves from the state of oppression. The African-American church has always been a mixture of various ways to combat the ill treatment of oppressed people. We have hope because our faith informs us that God will always be on the side of those fighting for righteous causes. We are convinced that the efforts to combat racism in all its forms is a righteous cause.

If we are to engage in cause, we must do it with the best preparation and information that we can. It's not enough for the African Methodist Episcopal Church to be angry about what we see, we have to plan and take action. Just as the African-American church seems to have a natural fit as the major activist player in the socioeconomic lives of the community, the AME Clergy and Lay persons have a natural fit as the ones to lead the church in this direction. This is important to lift up so there is an understanding that simply wanting to have the church engaging in community political causes is not enough, there has to be someone to lead the charge. For the AME church even though Clergy and Lay are stretched in so many directions there is still a need to engage clergy in the political fight for community rights. The first step in the process is to get AME Clergy and Lay to talk about the problem in education, the church must engage the community in such a way that encourages dialogue about Black student achievement and foster open, two-way communication while rejecting authoritarian, unilateral power dynamics. Once dialogue has been opened there can be honest conversation about what African Americans expect from the school's system that will educate their children. The need for hope in the arena of student achievement is evident in the wake of low graduation rates and student expulsions. The AME Church has to look at its mission and find ways to expand it to include education reform. The model for education reform places the responsibility for African American student achievement in the hands of the community and education policy makers. It is not enough to protest poor academic conditions without a follow up to ensure that improvement has been made.

We have placed much of our attention on the education arena because we know that this is one area that we must be engaged in so that our children can succeed. With Governor Lee's most recent announcement about suspending the reporting of standardized test next year we know that we need to be strong advocates for education. The health crisis has caused many of our children to fall even further behind than they already were. The emphasis on education equity is our action item for this Annual Conference.

1. Each local church will either appoint someone, join with another church(s) or work with a nonprofit organization to have a monthly meeting with the local school board director or his/her designee to discuss efforts to increase black student academic achievement.
2. Each local church will either appoint someone, join with another church(s) or work with a nonprofit organization to have a monthly meeting with the local school board member to discuss efforts to increase black student academic achievement.