

To: Bishop Jeffery N. Leath, the 128th Elected and Consecrated Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Presiding Prelate of the 13th Episcopal District

Dr. Susan J. Leath, MD., Supervisor of Missions

Reverend William Easley Jr, Host Presiding Elder, Louisville District

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General Officers

153rd Session of the Kentucky Annual Conference

State of the Church
Ministry in a Pandemic
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March 2020 marked the beginning of change for the churches located in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. March 6, 2020, Kentucky Governor Beshear issued Executive Order 2020-215, declaring a State of Emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During a press conference, Governor Andy Beshear said, “I am going to recommend that our churches across Kentucky cancel their services for this weekend. “I would recommend that people right now start avoiding large gatherings, and that would include [midweek] services” (Beshear 3/8/2020). The African Methodist Episcopal churches located in Kentucky were advised by the Presiding Prelate, Bishop Jeffery N. Leath, to revisit opening in mid-June. While some churches defied Governor Beshear’s recommendations, all African Methodist Episcopal churches in the Commonwealth of Kentucky adhered to the order, following the guidelines of the Council of Disease Control (CDC), the connectional Commission on Health, the Kentucky Council of Churches, and those set by the insurance company of the local church.

A directive given to practice social distancing, cease handshaking, cough into elbows, wear masks, wash hands often, and use hand sanitizer. Churches’ kitchens and fellowship halls closed. Persons 60 years of age and older, and adults with health conditions affecting the heart, kidney, and lungs are advised to shun large gatherings and public places where people gather. Bonded cleaning services conducted clean sweeps of sanctuaries and other gathering venues. Churches bought masks, cleaning supplies, disinfectants, and hand sanitizers in large quantities.

As in times past, churches searched for new ways to reach people, especially the members of each local congregation. Church leaders held brainstorming sessions, discussing ways to worship together without putting the worshippers at risk of contracting and spreading diseases. Communion was withheld from every worship to halt interpersonal contact. Advocates for communion pushed back at the notion of not having communion on the first Sunday of each month as tradition dictates.

Handshaking, hugging, extending the right hand of fellowship, and passing the peace, along with in-service worship ceased after the second Sunday in March 2020 for the churches in

the Kentucky Annual Conference. In-service worship was replaced with Zoom or similar online meeting platforms, parking lot worship, and telephone conferences. The gospel message continued to spread. The pandemic whetted the appetite of many who had taken worshipping together for granted. Bible study, Church School, prayer meetings, and other ministry meetings are conducting from the safety of our homes or sanctified environments.

Churches with the ability to live stream, podcast, and record worship did not miss a beat when the pandemic hit. Other churches scrambled to put technology in place to reach members of their congregations and the community at large through social media and other digital means. The use of social media is not problematic for most churches. However, there are members of our congregations who do not have the means to connect to social media.

Churches using live streaming must have a live streaming license for copyrighted materials and the use of music. “With streaming, there does come an obligation to ensure your church is doing so legally. Many church leaders are aware of the religious service exemption in U.S. copyright law that allows churches to perform copyrighted music during religious services. What the average person might NOT know is that the exemption does not, however, cover the re-transmission of those services over the internet, television, or radio” ((Why is a Streaming License Needed). Churches using Facebook Live circumvent the cost of live streaming, but not the cost of use and re-transmission of copyrighted materials and music.

Even in a pandemic, the church remains the body of Christ, the light in the darkness, God’s chosen people, and the place where God’s Spirit dwells. The church is not the building, but the people, the bride of Christ. The mission does not stop during a pandemic. The commission to spread the gospel of Christ remains tremendous and very much in play. “The incense offered by Christ to God as spreading the fragrance the knowledge of God among all people” (Bosch 41) is just as relevant today as it was when Christ walked the earth.

The church is Christ’s ambassadors. The gospel is credible! The church presents the credible gospel of Jesus Christ to the world (Bosch 56). The mission has not changed. Christ must be visible in the life of the church as it is in the life of the messenger.

Many church history scholars advocate going back to the first-century church model. The disciple-making model is the most effective mode of growing a spiritually grounded church. Spiritually healthy people create healthy communities. In his book entitled *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Peter Scazzero states that changing lives through discipleship produces healthy churches (Scazzero).

In a sermon preached on August 23, 2020, Bishop Leath challenged church leaders to embrace the church of the future following the directions of Christ Jesus led by the Holy Spirit. The church that was may never be the same. The way we worship will not change, but how we worship changed and may continue to change. Fellowship over a shared meal during a pandemic is prohibited. Pastors limit the number of home visits. Hospital visits by the pastor are not possible presently. Despite these conditions, ministry can and must be effective.

Recommendations: (The committee recommends)

The church must follow prescribed safety guidelines. Make use of all forms of technology to stay in touch with congregants and prospective members. Limit the number of visits to homes and public places to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. Wear masks and protective clothing as required. Do not neglect the elderly and young persons in the congregation. Stay connected with telephone calls, notes, and letters. Do not allow any members to fall through the cracks because of a lack of access to the internet. When all the safety guidelines are met, and churches are

allowed to return to in-service worship, practice social distancing, wear masks, and use safety measures to remain safe and virus free. Stay informed of the latest changes in denominational and governmental policies. Provide open and constructive relationships within the church--clergy, church leaders, and laypersons.

Humbly submitted,

The committee on the State of the Church/Ministry in a Pandemic

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