

Friends,

I can already tell 2017 is going to be a great year. After a wonderful time with family and friends in Tennessee, the Alabama-West Florida Conference has collectively hit the ground running! From Town Hall meetings to visiting your churches, I continue to be reminded of how lucky I am to serve here. We have a great opportunity to tell our story and lead people to Christ each and every day.

I would like to congratulate two churches in the Demopolis district for receiving the Southeastern Jurisdictional Renfro grant. Mt. Moriah UMC and Wesley UMC were the recipients of this brick and mortar grant that enables them to make repairs to their church buildings. We are thankful, yet again, for our connectional system that dedicates funds to the improvement of rural churches each year.

I continue to receive letters like this [hold up letters] from our neighboring Bishops who have expressed their thanks for our generosity in responding to disaster relief efforts. Many of our AWF churches have sent monetary donations to the Louisiana and Holston Conferences and I know will send volunteer teams as needed in the coming months and years. To add to this ongoing work, both the Mississippi and South Georgia Conferences experienced significant destruction from the tornado outbreaks last weekend. As always, we will keep you posted on how you can help. Check out our Website and social media pages for more information. Thank you for so wonderfully representing this conference.

Let me briefly take a moment to extend my sincere appreciation to this conference for your missional giving efforts in 2016. I am thrilled that we finished the year at 90.7% with our conference and district giving. This represents the highest percentage of giving in the last seventeen years and for the past six years, we have made slight increases each year. It is certainly not all about the money, but your commitment to this connection through giving allows us to do so much more than we could as individual churches and reach more people for Christ. I sincerely thank you for your dedication.

Hopefully you saw the article on our Website about the pilot project in the Demopolis District. Dr. Victor Dingus with Next Step Ministry and Rev. Allen Newton, the Demopolis District Superintendent, have partnered to work with the churches in our West Alabama area. Many of those churches are geographically isolated and can greatly benefit from Dr. Dingus' knowledge and expertise. One of his primary recommendations is that any church can embrace this plan by establishing partnerships with one another by sharing leadership, resources, ideas, facilities and passion for their ministry. Join me in praying for this movement!

Each year we anticipate gathering together at the annual Bishop's Day Apart. I am thankful to Dr. Jim Sanders and his team at Dothan First for hosting us on February 21. Logistical information and registration can be found on our Website but let me offer a brief glimpse of how this year's day apart will look a little different than previous years. You might have seen that Rev. Jerry Hershops and Claire Bowen will be leading our time together. Jerry will give a similar presentation that he did last year at the Fred Craddock Center in Cherry Log, North Carolina. Our sessions will be a bit more interactive than perhaps you're used to experiencing. The topic is entitled, "That'll Preach! How to Make Your Message Stick." Rev. Hershops will explore his innovative techniques to engage all personality types through your sermons. After being in a local church just six months ago, I understand the stress and time commitment sermon preparation requires. It is my belief that you will walk away with practical knowledge to further engage your congregations. Claire Bowen will have each of us take a 15-minute Communications Style Preference assessment at the beginning of our session that will allow us to better understand how we engage with differing personalities. We are also asking that you bring a rough-draft sermon you are working on that is not Wifi dependent, perhaps it is your Easter sermon or Ash Wednesday sermon. We will break into small groups and have time to work on it together. Please bring your tablet, laptop or a printed copy—whatever you are most comfortable with to access your work in progress. You can expect great laughter, lots of fun, appreciable learning and a sermon that will preach and stick! Because we will be breaking out into groups at tables and possibly sitting on the floor in small groups, let me encourage you to come casual! Your blue jeans are welcome! I know this is a change from prior years but it is our goal that you arrive comfortable ready to work together. Please register as soon as possible so that we can have an accurate head count for lunch. We will all eat together on campus at Dothan First.

I continue to look forward to seeing many of you at our district town hall meetings. They are going well and I am thankful for this time with our lay and clergy to learn more about each of you. Thank you for your partnership in ministry as we win people for Christ. May God bless your ministry in this outstanding conference.