Friends of the Alabama-West Florida Conference, thank you for taking time out of your personal schedule to allow me to share this second edition video presentation for the staff parish committee, or in some churches, known as the pastor parish relations committee. As we move into 2018, I wanted to take this opportunity to allow you to watch it at your convenience. I know some will watch it individually while others will watch it as part of your committee work. I give thanks that you are taking time in this very important role you play in the SPR/PPR committee as you share in giving leadership to your pastors, the staff you might have and to your congregation.

Over the last several years, the work and strategy of the Alabama-West Florida Conference has been around the acronym SEND: Seek, Engage, Nurture, Deploy. As you have heard me share over the past year, this is lived out in my personal mission statement. It’s about winning people to Jesus, seeing the unseen, transforming lives, and changing this part of the world.

Matthew chapter 28: 18-20 begins to sums up my personal mission statement in the great commission. It states, “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” this alongside Matthew 25:40 where Jesus shares, “I tell you the truth, when you did it to me of the least of these my brothers and sisters; you were doing it to me.”

This is all encapsulated into the general UMC mission statement of making disciples for the transformation of the world. And so the key for your staff parish relations committee, and for all of us, is how do we align the mission we’ve been given with our strategy? And also, as the pastor parish relations committee, you come together to give leadership with your pastor, the staff you might have and your congregation.

Last year I asked each church to look at four questions.

Who are you as a church now? You’re not the same church you were five or ten years ago so who are you now as a church?

What is the purpose of your congregation right now? It’s different than it was even five years ago.

Out of those questions we begin to ask, who is your neighbor? Who lives in your community? Our hope is for each church to be involved and to really seek to know who is living around you and to reach those in your immediate area.

As I have traveled over this Annual Conference in the last year, putting over 42,000 miles on my car, I have witnessed many glory sightings of our congregations making
significant impact on their communities and the lives of people. This is why we exist as a church.

As the Methodist Movement began and churches were established, the church was focused around community and we’ve forgotten that. And so out of discovering who you are as a church, what your purpose is, who your neighbors are, then the next question to discuss is what is God calling you to do next? What is the next step you need to take now? Several of our churches are utilizing your District Superintendent’s offer of a tool we are calling Next Step Ministries.

And so, the SPR committee gives management to the pastor and staff, but it also gives leadership to ensure the mission and vision of your congregation, inspired by God, is in alignment as you carry forth. You give leadership to the vision but you also have to manage this along the way. If you are just about managing it, you lose the mission. If it’s all about the vision, somebody needs to take care of the details.

As you think about that, if you’ll take the first handout entitled, “Begin with the Mission of the UMC” you may want to pause the video and read through it and come back as I share from this page. This is important work as we are in covenant together.

**As you take this page the SPR Committee, by discipline of the United Methodist Church, is to meet quarterly. That is four times a year. And this is most important because what I’ve found is that many staff parish committees only meet when there is a problem, or a crisis, or a pastoral move. And that’s not very healthy, especially when we think about aligning mission, strategy and vision.

So I’ve given you some guidelines of what you should do in your meetings and I’ll talk about that in a few minutes. Staff Parish Relations Committees are to meet at least four times a year. Here again it’s an opportunity to gather with one another and as who are you, what are we doing, how is it going and what are we accomplishing together? Here again, focus on mission, vision and strategy. The PPR committee is a key component to this.

As we think about meeting as a committee, it is most important the pastor meet with you. In fact, the discipline requires that the pastor is present at all meetings. No meeting should take place without the pastor’s knowledge. There may be times when the pastor needs to take themselves out of the meeting. For example, if you are doing an evaluation, which you will be doing in the first quarter of this year. Or you might need to talk about the pastor’s salary, or how you will appreciate your pastor in the coming month or year. But that should be mutually agreed upon.

There are times when the pastor or chair of the committee can call for a meeting. When everyone is called, everyone needs to be present. Sometimes the district superintendent or the Bishop can call a meeting with the staff parish committee. It is so
vital we communicate together but it’s crucial to know when we are doing it, and who needs to be involved.

As we think about these primary responsibilities, we are called to work in harmony and work together. In December of this past year, your staff parish chair received a mail out from your District Superintendent. In it was a conversation about the appointment process for the coming year. As most of you know our appointment cycle is July 1 through June 30 of the next year. For some, this coming June will end a pastor’s tenure in a church and a new tenure will begin July 1. In February and March the cabinet and I will gather and we will project appointments for the upcoming appointment year.

But there is an evaluation form you will fill out and return to your District Superintendent. If there is a need for them to meet with your committee, you will note that on the form. The District Superintendent may need to call a meeting as we talk about pastoral appointments.

At this time, if you will take handout number two, and let us talk about a calendar year with a pastor or staff parish relations committee might look like. This is a skeleton of how you may structure your staff parish or pastor parish relations committee through the coming year. As you begin 2018, this would be a great time for you to schedule meetings throughout the year. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of times committees only meet when there is a problem or crisis or pastoral change. That can lead to difficult places to work through. If we can go ahead and plan those meetings now, it may prevent us from getting in difficult places. The SPR Response Forms are due at the end of this January and each pastor will meet with their District Superintendent in January and February as well. I’ve given you some examples of things you can talk about because your role is to help your pastor be all that he or she can be. We are all human. We all make mistakes. We all have things we need to work on and when we’re working together, that helps us to move forward to align vision, ministry and strategy of how to accomplish that.

As you think about those things, let’s talk about the fact that people will come to you because you are on the staff parish committee and they’ll pour out their soul to you. Perhaps they’ll vent to you for a little while. They’ll share with you their problems and issues and they may be with the pastor. The proper response to these conversations is to listen, because that is part of your role. You represent the church, but you also represent the pastor. And when you’ve done that you simply say, “I appreciate you sharing that with me. Now I would like to take that back to the committee and share your concerns so that we can get to a better place.” And the person will say that they don’t want their name used and your response is to simply say, “ok, I respect that but because I cannot use your name I cannot take it back to the committee. I will be in prayer and I would encourage you to take it to other committee members or please take it directly to the pastor and see if you all can’t work through those.”
It’s very, very important that we have confidentiality in our meetings, that we are transparent and we don’t get cornered. There are times that I receive letters unsigned. Typically they contain complaints or are expressions of unhappiness about something. I read those, I hear those, but if it’s not signed, there’s not one thing I can do about it. I usually put that in a file and at the end of the year, I simply shred those because they don’t help us. Without a name, there is no one to whom I can respond. Handout number three provides additional information about this topic.

I’m seeking and asking that we work together, and sometimes we have to work in difficult situations. We have to talk about tough topics. So, if someone is not willing to give their name, or if they’re not willing to sign something, there’s really nothing we can do with it. Because when we act on anonymous claims, we start spreading rumors; it’s unhealthy and we get cornered. That’s something I encourage you and I’ve encouraged pastors, and myself, that we don’t get into these difficult situations and conversations. I do love to receive letters when people sign their name offering praise for their pastor. I get many of those and I give thanks.

So this is a key for how you might run your meetings and how you might communicate. Remember, we have to be transparent with one another. Be careful when someone says, “A lot of people feel this way.” What exactly does that mean? Is it one, is it two or is it 100? “We” and “they” need to have names. Be very cautious. Be very careful about how you use conversations. We have to be careful because rumors often get started and we need to be really, truly intentional about having open and honest conversations.

When we think about confidentiality, Bishop Ray Chamberlin, one of my former Bishops, said not even pillow talk, and you know what that means. When you get home and your spouse or maybe a close friend or family member will ask you what you talked about at staff parish committee and what went on in your meeting and to simply say “our conversation was hard or difficult, it was a joy or celebration,” and that’s really all you can say about it. Or, sometimes you say, “I just really can’t talk about that. It’s not about keeping secrets but it’s about keeping confidentiality and that is so, so important. Our work breaks down and often puts us all in a difficult place when confidentiality is broken.

Friends, I have been in some situations where people talk outside the pastor parish relations committee and misinformation was given and it started very difficult rumors. It’s human nature but please be cautious when you do that. Also, the staff parish relations committee is responsible for staff. Some churches have paid staff, other would say we don’t have any staff at all. But if you have a volunteer that plays the piano, leads the choir, does children’s ministries or youth ministry, they absolutely are staff. They may not be paid but they are a volunteer and they are doing it on an on-going basis.

When a staff person is misaligned with another staff person or with a pastor, it makes for very difficult working conditions and we need to have honest conversations with one another. How can you be in relationship with them? How can you encourage them how can you lift them up? What are some things you can do for them? And part of your
responsibility will be around salary. You’ll set your pastors salary, you may give honorariums that are gifts for pastor appreciation gifts at the end of October, Christmas, but also how are you negotiating that with volunteer staff? How do you honor them? How do you appreciate them? That’s really important.

Also part of your responsibility is around housing. Some of our churches have parsonages and our pastors are living in those; others have housing allowances. How are you being fair to that? Instead of viewing the maintenance of a parsonage as an inspection process, there should be walk throughs to evaluate improvements that should be made, convenient to both the pastor's family and the committee. You can and should make the living conditions the best they possibly can. Pastors have responsibility as well to help maintain the parsonage. We need to work in concert together.

This past year we had some major issues on moving day around how parsonages were left, and what I found is that pastors don’t invite people to their parsonage. Pastors, I would encourage you to invite people into your home. It's your home but it's their parsonage. And when you can get together, good things can happen. There should be routine maintenance taking place with a plan to replace carpet and update bathrooms and kitchens. Because what happens when you don't? Just like a homeowner, it all adds up and becomes a costly process. Pastor, you are responsible for damage you or your pets cause.

When we think about your pastor, hand out number 4, is the hand out your pastor has been given that they are to turn back into their district superintendent sometime in January and February. It is titled, “Growing As a Leader.” My desire is for our pastors to continue to grow in their pastoral leadership, in their preaching and teaching, how they lead, how they guide, and how they work together with teams, because teams are so important. They are being asked 10 questions. You can see those 10 questions and I would hope that in some part of the year that the pastor and you, the committee, would have conversations around these questions. Here again, transparency and open honest conversations are so important.

As we move in to the final part of my presentation, again I thank you for taking your time to view this video. I know that I’ve moved through a lot of information but I’ve given you material that I hope will help you in your discussions, especially in this next handout. Handout number five is developed into a pie chart that really gives you all the components that a staff parish relations committee should be reviewing. I hope that you all will take time throughout the year and maybe in your next meeting to look at how we are doing with our confidentiality, and how we are doing in supporting our pastors in their continuing education.

And that’s part of the evaluation process— to come alongside your pastors and to really have discussion of some things that they might work on, grow in, whether it might be in preaching, worship or teaching when we all have our places we need to grow in. One of
the things I find is that church people are real nice in meetings and then they talk about it in the parking lot, and it is good to be nice, Jesus was nice, but Jesus was also transparent. And I believe we have to be transparent, as I try to be transparent with pastors, to say in a loving way, you know these are some areas I feel you could grow and be lead in and one of the ways I can do that is to provide opportunities to grow in that and so it’s really important for continuing education for our local licensed pastors. Most of them are still going through course of study. That is a cost where the district provides some money as well as the annual conference, but we also ask that each local church provide some funds for that as well to help them in this process

Let me talk about the appointment process for just a moment. Every pastor in the United Methodist church is appointed at the will of the Bishop and the Cabinet every year. That is reviewed each year but typically we look at trying to have long-term pastorates. Many people say, "well, Methodists move often" but the latest data shows that United Methodist pastors stay longer in their appointment in their church setting longer than any other denomination in America. So we’ve really bucked that trend.

Now, there are many people that have served long term appointments in many places but those appointments are reviewed every year. If the appointment is missionally and strategically effective, we may look at it longer. Long-term tenure is very, very important. But you have to realize every pastor is leaving at some point and so our focus has got to be on the mission, the vision, and the strategy—aligning it with our leadership, aligning it with our management so that we keep the kingdom work continuing as we move forward.

Your committee needs to consist of 5 to 9 people—the discipline gives you that latitude. For smaller congregations, it maybe difficult to have nine. Sometimes it’s difficult to have the five but that’s our guideline. We would ask that no two family members would serve on the staff parish committee at the same time. Here again sometimes that’s very difficult in small member congregations, but be conscious of that and seek to try to have a broad spectrum of your congregation because you want to get the full viewpoint and every person on your staff parish committee has friends, relationships and connections and people will feel comfortable talking to you.

We are people of prayer; therefore, how are you coming alongside to pray for your pastor? How’s your church praying for your pastor? It’s essential for our Christian faith that we seek to be Christ in all things. Your pastors are going to make mistakes. Pastors, people in your pews are going to make mistakes, **so how do we live life together, how do we support one another, and how do we live life? We all live in the midst of God’s grace. Grace is given but grace is also received and every time we serve holy communion, the extensions of grace and forgiveness and the opportunity to move forward in a new fresh way are given to us.

This final handout is perhaps one of the most important pieces in our consultation work. Handout number six is your response form to be turned in to your district superintendent
by the end of January. This handout focuses on five questions as you work with your pastor. We also ask for you to indicate if there is a need to meet with your district superintendent regarding the upcoming appointment year. We are not to vote, but are in a consultation process and this continues that ongoing discussion. Let me emphasize, we do not vote. Some of you missed that point last year.

In conclusion, let me again express my thanks for your service on the staff parish relations committee. It is important work and at times, the most difficult work. I’ve often told people that this is the most difficult role in the church. You will hear things, and you will see things that break your heart. There will be times where pastors will fail you. There will be times, pastors, where people in your congregation will wound you. In the midst of that, how do we move forward? The role of the SPRC is the most important, key element of how we move forward. It is crucial to meet often and to deal with small issues before they become major issues.

Our work must be transparent and done with honesty and confidentiality. When there are times of brokenness, how can we be the body of Christ to say “yes, you know it’s unfortunate that happened but here is how we are seeking to move forward together.” And when we think about that, your work on this committee is important and this is why we emphasize that people should serve in panels of three-year rotations. They should serve for three years and rotate off. That is important because there needs to be fresh, new ideas and an opportunity for those to be expressed. Sometimes there are difficult circumstances and you don’t want to deal with that year after year after year.

So please, rotate after three years, giving you a fresh perspective and enabling you to move forward. Remember your work will be much more fluid and focused on mission. If you’re focused on the appointment process, it gets you off track. If you’re focused on problems it’s going to get you off track. If you will focus on mission, if you will focus on vision, if you will focus on your strategy of what is your next step as a congregation and how you are going to get there, it will get you to a helpful place.

One of my favorite scriptures comes from second Timothy chapter four, verse 5. But you should keep a clear mind in very situation. Don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the good news and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.

I have found that to be so helpful to me. So I thank you for your willingness to serve in this capacity. If I can be of help to you, and to your committee, please feel free to call me. I enjoy and relish the times we can come together and to share together and work through things together to get to a good place. As the new year is upon us, I believe, friends, that the best is yet to come.