

Friends,

I hope you have had an excellent start in this new year. Personally I have just returned from a very meaningful trip to the Holy Land with 141 people from the Alabama-West Florida Conference. To walk where Jesus walked is simply beyond words. We are already planning to do this again in 2021 and I hope you will join me!

We have so many exciting things going on in this annual conference in the coming months. First, let me remind our clergy that the annual Bishop's Day Apart will be Tuesday, February 20th at St. James UMC in Montgomery. Terri Real will be joining us to lead our time together. The topic of our discussion will be, "The Health of Our Relationships." Our goals for the day are to learn more about cutting edge tools in relationship therapy for working with your members as well as for themselves; identify depression and its affects on relationships; and explore the I-thou relationships vs. the I-It in this age of polarization. Registration will be launched soon. In preparation for this day, please read *The Anatomy of Peace* by the Arbing Institute.

Before I go any further, I want to stop and offer a sincere thank you for helping this conference set a missional giving record. We completed this year at 90.10%. Each year for over a decade we have gradually surpassed the previous year. You took my challenge to stay focused on mission and ministry! There are simply no words to express my thanks for making missional giving a priority. Through this connectional giving, we can do so much more than we could as individual churches. Our connectionism is the heart and soul of this denomination. Again, thank you.

It's hard to believe that we are already planning annual conference. The dates are June 3-6 at Frazer Memorial UMC in Montgomery. Our theme is, "Imagine: A Church that is the Hope of the World" based on Ephesians 1: 18-19. What if all of our efforts, as a church, could bring forth light, promise and hope? In the midst of such divisiveness, the church must be an outlet of hope. Our missional offering will go to Communities of Transformation. Many of you know one of their co founders, Laurel Blackwell, passed away in 2017 due to complications after successfully fighting cancer. There is no better way we, as a conference, could honor the outstanding Kingdom work this ministry does each and every day to bring hope to those who dream of a better life. We will collect this offering during opening worship on Sunday, June 3rd. I invite you to give generously to such a profound ministry that this conference launched in 2011.

If you are a lay or clergy member to annual conference, I have two homework assignments for you! This is probably a first in this conference but I can assure you that your efforts will produce an even better conference.

First, I am asking that all members to conference read two books. One is what I am asking clergy to read for our day apart called *The Anatomy of Peace*. This book will help us, together, transform personal, professional, and global conflicts and inspire reconciliation. The other book is one that our extended cabinet recently studied called, *The Church Guide to Making Decisions Together* by Julia Kuhn Wallace and Terence Corkin. We were honored to have Julia join our cabinet meeting in late 2017. I am a huge believer in their methods. The books explores collaborative, respectful, encouraging, engaging, and empowering decision making. Both books can be purchased through Cokesbury.com or other major retailers.

The other assignment is to attend a Courageous Conversation event near you this spring. The Alabama-West Florida Conference has begun to offer Courageous Conversations as a way to listen and learn more about one another in an appreciative style. The Courageous Conversations project is aimed to help us move from skepticism to curiosity and even openness to encounter God's grace. I am proud to have leaders from all theological perspectives organizing this unique time. Susan Hunt, our AWF Mission & Advocacy Director, is finalizing many details on these events. They will be offered in numerous locations throughout our conference so you will not have to travel far from home. Those details will be announced very soon. You may visit www.awfumc.org/courageousconversations to learn more.

As you can see, 2018 is shaping up to be a year of learning and growth. I'm so proud to be your Bishop and I look forward to our journey together. It is clear that God is doing great things in this conference and I still believe the the absolute best is yet to come!