Friends,

We are just days away from the beginning of Lent. This is one of the most important seasons in the life of the church as we take intentional time to prepare for the resurrection. Each of you honor this time in different ways whether it is through prayer, fasting, sacrificial giving, repentance or practicing spiritual disciplines.

This is not necessarily a glamorous time as we acknowledge our own short comings; yet we seek to become better Christians and model what it is to be a disciple.

This 40-day journey is personally challenging me to invite each of you in the Alabama-West Florida Conference to slow down, pause and take time to be informed as it relates to denominational matters.

As a United Methodist Bishop, it is my commitment and role to help us seek the best path forward. Many of you know the Protocol of Grace and Separation legislation was released a few week ago. Perhaps you’ve taken time to read all thirty-three pages or maybe you are leaning on others to inform you. Regardless of your knowledge on this legislation or other plans, I want us to take a moment to consider what is at risk and the ramifications of separation.

In talking with many of our clergy and laity, I have been asked to explain things such as how our Wesley Foundations will be funded; what would happen to our conference ministries that we’ve worked so hard to establish; and one that hits home for this conference is the future of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). Without them, the hurricane relief and rebuilding efforts along the Gulf Coast would not be as nearly as productive as they currently are.

Others have expressed concern about the appointment system and that responsibility falling on the local churches and pastors to negotiate their own appointments as well as the unknowns of conference leadership and who determines that role. As a conference and denomination, we carry financial liabilities as a large organization that smaller entities cannot.

If you have not yet considered these questions, I invite you take this time during Lent to discern these important points. Until General Conference, we will factually not know what options we have. Even after that, it could take months and years to identify the full picture.

In the spirit of being well informed, the discernment task force is inviting you to attend a listening session on March 2 at Montgomery FUMC. We want to hear from as many clergy and lay voices from around the conference. Details are on the Website. Each task force member is also holding their own small group listening session to collect data.

After these sessions, I anticipate receiving a recommendation report from the task force that would guide the process in the coming months and years for the Alabama-West Florida Conference. This report will be made to the members of annual conference, which will be held
June 7-9. In addition to celebrating mission and ministry, our focus will be on information and options to move this conference forward in the best way. I know people want this ongoing discussion to be resolved today, but it’s simply not possible.

While I was home in Tennessee in the fall, our family gave my grandson, Brooks, a new power wheels riding toy for his birthday. As excited as he was, he was hesitant to embrace his new freedom! As he began driving and pressing the pedal he proclaimed, “Stop! Let’s think about this for a minute.” He had so many questions: how to drive; how to stop; how to get down the street to pick up his best friend. Sometimes our children have a better plan than we do and his powerful words resonated with me. Stop, let’s think about this for a minute!

Over the past three-and-a-half years I have challenged you to stay focused on mission and ministry. Based on your professions of faith, attendance and missional giving, many of you have done just that. I challenge you in this season of Lent to focus on Christ.

This connection and conference are a blessing to me each and every day. The strength of our combined ministry is remarkable. I pray that God will make room in your lives to really live into this time of prayer and reflection. I am grateful for each of you and it’s an honor to be your Bishop.