

Quadrennial Episcopal Address to the
Fiftieth Session of the General Conference
of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Read by Bishop Dennis Vernon Proctor and Bishop William Darin Moore

GREETINGS

To our Episcopal Colleagues including visiting Bishops from our ecumenical family; General and Connectional Officers; Members of the Judicial Council; Delegates, guests, and all assembled at this historic 50th Session of the General Conference of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. We greet you with the grace and peace poured into our lives through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Liberator!

NECROLOGY

Since we gathered at the last General Conference, our church has experienced the transition into eternity many of our beloved members of the Zion Family. Episcopal Leaders, General Officers, Presiding Elders, Clergy of all ranks, and the devoted laity at every level have left an enduring legacy and we offer tribute to their memories. We enter into the record the names of the following saints each of whom had responsibilities to the Connectional church, and with one accord we declare; “Well done, good and faithful servants!”

The Right Reverend Cecil Bishop - the 78th Bishop in Line of Succession

The Right Reverend Roy Anderson Holmes - the 92nd Bishop in Line of Succession

The Right Reverend James Elbert McCoy - the 94th Bishop in Line of Succession

Mrs. Ethel Gillis Coleman - former Missionary Supervisor and widow of the Right Reverend Clinton R. Coleman, the 72nd Bishop in Line of Succession

Mrs. Mary Ann Stotts Marshall - former Missionary Supervisor and widow of the Right Reverend Arthur Marshall, Jr., the 73rd Bishop in Line of Succession

Mrs. Ruth Rosetta Rogers Anderson - former Missionary Supervisor and widow of the Right Reverend Herman L. Anderson, the 77th Bishop in Line of Succession

Dr. Lem Long, Jr. - Retired General Officer, Secretary-Treasurer of the Department of Church Extension and Home Missions, Manager of the AME Zion Publishing House

Mrs. Juletha Neely French - former Chairman Life Members Council of the W.H.&O.M. Society

The Reverend Dr. Arthur L. Wilson - Founding President of the Presiding Elders Council

The Reverend Dr. Cynthia Willis Stewart - Past President of the Presiding Elders Council

The Reverend Dr. Cameron Wesley Jackson - Past President of the Ministers & Lay Association

The Reverend Frank Edwards Jones - Past President of the Ministers & Lay Association

“And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this down: Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they are blessed indeed, for they will rest from their hard work; for their good deeds follow them.” (Revelation 14:13 NLT)

On the evening of June 17, 2015, manifested evil interrupted a Wednesday night Bible Study at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. Nine Christian men and women became martyrs on that night in a case of domestic terrorism and racial hatred. We honor their memory by speaking their names into the record of this General Conference:

***The Rev. Clementa Pinckney
Cynthia Hurd
The Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton
Tywanza Sanders
Ethel Lance
Susie Jackson
Depayne Middleton Doctor
The Rev. Daniel Simmons
Myra Thompson***

With the tragic murder of these precious saints, the nation has been forced just as they were in 1963 after the bombing at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama that took the lives of four young girls, to face the reality of lingering, deep-seated racism in this country. Let us mourn the lost of their lives, but may we also honor the meaning of their lives by standing up and speaking out against racism and violence.

On Sunday June 12, 2016 our nation was once again shaken by the evil of domestic terrorism, this time targeting the LBGQ community. As The Freedom Church - The AME Zion Church, we condemn violence and bigotry against all of GOD's people, regardless of race, religion, and gender, including LGBTQ. We earnestly pray for all impacted by this act of hatred. If our faith means anything, we must reject labeling one another and respond in Christ-like love towards others.

“If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

2016 - 2020 QUADRENNIAL THEME: “THE FREEDOM CHURCH: REFOCUSING ON OUR PURPOSE, REVIEWING OUR PRACTICES, RETOOLING OUR PEOPLE, REACHING OUR POTENTIAL”

“Jesus said to the people who believed in him, ‘You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” (John 8:31-32 NLT)

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church is our church. For many of us it is the church of our birth, for others, it is the church of their choice, and for all of us, it is the church we love. We have offered our lives and labor to its continued mission. More importantly and of greater significance and meaning than this church being “ours,” The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church is God’s church. It is known to us and to many as “The Freedom Church,” and this we do not take lightly. The significance of this legacy now passed to us is precious and prized. We will not let it wane or die. The principle of freedom is inextricably bound with a profound sense of responsibility that calls us to face the challenge of how we may “serve the present age.” Our chosen quadrennial theme focuses on the concept of freedom and how the definition of being God’s church guides and informs our path forward in the 21st century and beyond.

Yet, while no church can ever claim to be perfect, the church must at least strive to be true. As the leaders and Chief Pastors of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, we take seriously the responsibility laid upon us by God and the church. As Dennis M. Campbell has said;

“The need for organization was not apparent to the earliest Christians since it was supposed that Christ would soon return to redeem his people. As time went on, and as second generation Christians were present, it was necessary to attend to structure, organization and planning for the future. It is a sociological truism that human communities must be organized for effective existence. Leadership is necessary for organizations to be effective. No human community can function devoid of leadership.”¹

By God’s grace, the “Old Ship of Zion” has traversed many dangerous and sometimes tumultuous waters since we first set sail in 1796 from the harbor of the John Street Methodist Church in New York City. We praise God for the safe arrival at the port of the 50th session of the General Conference. Grateful as we are for the guidance and protection of our Lord navigating us to this point, we also accept, acknowledge and cherish the confidence you place in us to lead Zion forward, “pressing on the upward way, new heights we’re gaining every day, still praying as we’re onward bound, Lord, plant our feet on higher ground.”

It is with this understanding of our charge and duty that we set forth, as the Chief Pastors of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the theme for this quadrennium: “The Freedom Church: Refocusing on Our Purpose, Reviewing Our Practices, Retooling Our People, Reaching Our Potential.” The gravity of this task is not lost on us; for “without leadership (the church) cannot exist as a community. Leadership requires willingness to contribute to shaping the community in a way consistent with the gospel...not to let the expected work be so draining that there is no larger vision.”²

¹ Dennis M. Campbell, *The Yoke of Obedience: The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1988, p. 29

² Dennis M. Campbell, *Who Will Go For Us?* Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 36-37

There are two definitions of freedom that must guide and inform us as we live out our theme: First, freedom is defined as “exemption from external control, interference, regulation, etc.” and “the power to determine action without restraint.” However, it is vital to understand that divinely granted freedom is not without significant responsibility. True freedom is not reckless, it demands accountability, maturity, and a spirit of stewardship. These characterizations are important because The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church – socially, politically, ecumenically and theologically – has made its mark on the world as the church that took its stand in the fight for human dignity and freedom for all of God’s creation. We seek God’s will, which is displayed in terms justice, not simply as acts of charity.

This is a tall order and such a monumental task that it cannot be actualized through human initiatives alone. As did our fore-parents, we embark upon this task with a clear sense of vocational call. That call (as elaborated by H. Richard Niebuhr), is understood as:

(1) the call to discipleship to Jesus Christ, to hearing and doing the Word of God...; (2) the secret call, namely, that inner persuasion or experience whereby a person feels himself (herself) directly summoned or invited by God to take up the work of the ministry; (3) the providential call, which is that invitation and command to assume the work of the ministry which comes through the equipment of a person with the talents necessary for the exercise of the office and through the divine guidance of his (her) life by all its circumstances; (4) the ecclesiastical call, that is, the summons and invitation extended to a man (or woman) by some community or institution of the Church to engage in the work of ministry.³

And this call, while constraining us in submission, also frees us to act, and to act boldly as we are confident that the presence and power of the Holy Spirit guides and protects us. In this freedom to act, not in our own strength and not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of those who are bound or oppressed in any way, we are, appropriately and in fact, “The Freedom Church.”

THE FREEDOM CHURCH: REFOCUSING ON OUR PURPOSE

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for He has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,
and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come. (Luke 4:18)*

We rely on the foundation of our Wesleyan heritage to proceed on our way forward and stay focused on our purpose. We are a church of order and of rule and discipline. We respect authority and submit to being governed by the powers of God and of those whom God has set in positions of leadership. This is an important part of what it means to be a Methodist. Yet, order, rule and discipline alone do not make a Methodist. Our heritage, passed down from Mr. Wesley, is one that regards as first and foremost, salvation, entire sanctification and Christian perfection.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1956, p. 64

Yes, we respect and expect order; but as Mr. Wesley wrote, “I would inquire, What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God; and to build them up in his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable, as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.”⁴

Our mandate is the same as the one which was given to the prophet Isaiah and the Savior Jesus: “*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...*” (Isaiah 61:1-2a). If the church of God, however well meaning its stated purpose may be, does not fulfill this mission and mandate, its activity, its ministry, its doctrine, and its order are rendered useless and such a church fails to live up to its name and should end any pretense of intention and cease to do business. This is not to say that the church is to be perfect in all its ways. After all, the church is a divine institution, effective as it operates under supernatural power, but yet does so under the aegis of human auspices. And this God wills to be so, “*For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us*” (2 Corinthians 4:6-7).

Bishop Ruben L. Speaks outlines a framework for understanding our purpose in what he termed the “Zion Methodist Synthesis”. He states; “Zion Methodist doctrine is founded upon three major pillars, namely, Christian evangelism, Christian perfection, and human liberation.”⁵ These pillars, as we reframe here as: Christian Transformation, Sanctification, and Liberation comprise the spiritual DNA of what it means to be the AME Zion Church.

Since the earliest days of our founding, the AME Zion Church has understood the essential need for educational excellence for our people. Our churches became classrooms where youth and adults alike were tutored. Our fore-parents made sacrifices to establish schools and colleges, so their children could have opportunities that were denied to them. Livingstone College and Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, NC, Clinton College in Rock Hill, SC, and Lomax-Hannon, in Greenville, AL attest to the continuing commitment our church has demonstrated to investing in education that empowers our people. Bishop James Walker Hood, who organized Zion’s presence in the South in 1864, was a pioneer in both voting rights and education. He served as the Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction of North Carolina, the first black person to hold such a position. Carter G. Woodson referred to Bishop Hood as “one of the most influential men of color in the United States.”⁶

⁴ *The Works of John Wesley*, “Letters to Mr. John Smith,” Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reprinted 1996, Vol. 12, p. 81

⁵ Bishop Ruben L. Speaks, *Our Heritage of Faith: Celebrating the Bicentennial of Zion Methodism*, Biltmore Press, Asheville, NC. 1996, p.viii

⁶ Sandy Dwayne Martin, *For God and Race: The Religious and Political Leadership of AMEZ Bishop James Walker Hood*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC. 1999, p.66

International Education for Zion is also an indispensable foundational component of the Kingdom building enterprise of the church. Thus international education became a sine qua non as the Church in America tried to reach the outside world with the Gospel. Zion's missionary outreach into West Africa resulted in the establishment of the AME Zion Church in Liberia in 1875 through the trailblazing effort and zeal of the Rev. Andrew Cartwright. Within a decade he founded a school in Brewerville in 1886 where he had hoisted Zion's flag. As Bishop William Jacob Walls rightly observed; "Cartwright had opened the door for Zion in Africa and blessings were in store for the church on this vast continent"⁷

Indeed from that humble but historic beginning in international education in Liberia, the A.M.E. Zion Church went on to play a big role and is still doing so today in education as a major part of her Overseas Gospel ministration. Schools were established side by side with our churches, if not on the Church premises. Such Mission and Day Schools enhanced the churches and became the magnet that drew the local Chiefs and Traditional Rulers to the support of not just the church, but also her schools. Thus the enlightenment, knowledge, and information impacted the life of the people as it engendered societal development and empowerment within the tribal community.

In 2016, the international educational enterprise of Zion remains earnestly growing in the Western West Africa Episcopal District. Aggrey Memorial Senior High School, Cape Coast, Ghana is one of several that have endured and make us proud as they continue to have a positive impact in the region. The AME Zion Academy in Liberia was organized by Bishop Solomon Dorme Lartey in 1958. The Wannabe School for Girls in Ghana is an exemplary testimony to our commitment to excellence of education for our young women. While in the Eastern West Africa Episcopal District, The AME Zion Academy School System in Nigeria which was established under the leadership of Bishop S.Chuka Ekemam, during a period ranging from 1988 through 2000, a time long after the Nigerian Government assumed control of all other Mission schools, currently boasts of several Government Approved Secondary Schools in Akwa Ibom, Abia, Imo, and Rivers States as well as numerous other locations.

The crowning of our international educational ministry is the establishment of the A.M.E Zion University in Monrovia Liberia, an institution that is fully accredited by the Government of The Republic of Liberia and recognized as a major training institution for the Government work force in Security and Law Enforcement, etc. as well as developing national leadership personnel for the future. Vocational education is offered at the Mt. Coffee Vocational School in Liberia and the Hood-Speaks Theological Seminary was established for the training of clergy to meet the needs of the growing congregations in Nigeria. By the instrumentality of the international component of our educational ministry, Zion has demonstrated beyond any shadow of doubt that we as a church take seriously the Great Commission and are committed to the spiritual, educational, and economic transformation of all people.

If liberation is a vital element in our spiritual DNA, and it is, then emancipation is the womb out of which the A.M.E. Zion Church was born. According to Bishop William Jacob Walls history; "Zion Church had not only always been an anti-slavery church, but in the days that tried men's

⁷ Walls, p.230

souls, our church was in the forefront of the battle.”⁸ We recognize that it was because of the strong stand for the liberation of black people that the likes of Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and others were drawn to the A.M.E. Zion Church. Bishop Hood stated in his History of the A.M.E. Zion Church: “In the days of slavery the Zion ministers were generally leaders of the anti-slavery movement and their pulpits were always open to anti-slavery lectures. If no other house could be obtained for an anti-slavery meeting, it was known that the Zion Church could be had.” He further stated that, “the doors of this Church were never closed against anyone who wanted to plead for the oppressed.”⁹

We are now faced with modern day oppression in multiple forms; the senseless violence in our streets, the mass incarceration of African Americans, overcrowded and underfunded public schools, a faulty criminal justice system, and disproportionately high unemployment within many of our communities. In 2016 the reality that racism continues to raise its ugly head is shocking, as is the ever-increasing coordinated attempt in many states, including the State of North Carolina where we meet this week, to deny voting privileges to minorities. The A.M.E. Zion Church must once again pick up the mantle of leadership to prevent the hand of convenience and compromise from muting our voices. We must lead the way to secure voting privileges for all people! Because of our unique perspective and place in history, silence and apathy is not an option for us. Zion must continue to be on the cutting edge of this struggle.

Where we find cruelty, oppression or persecution, we speak against it in the name of God and call it what it is – sin. The subjugation and devaluing of any human being is not the will of God, and the Freedom Church must never fail to raise its voice and declare this as an injustice whenever and wherever it presents itself. No matter how the lives of our brothers and sisters are minimized, regardless of how those we love find their existence marginalized or summarily dismissed, the Freedom Church stands in solidarity with the oppressed and declare without restraint that God would have us be free!

Our national community is hurting. The Black Lives Matter Movement has become the modern day Civil Rights Movement energized and lead by millennials. The cry; Black Lives Matter is not a suggestion that all lives don’t matter, so we reject appeals to qualify it nor do we as a conscientious people have to apologize for it. When we say “Black lives matter” we are demanding an end to the value gap that places less value on black lives than on others. It’s when black lives matter, and only then, will all lives truly matter!

The pandemic of gun violence that has terrorized many of our communities must be stopped! Our children are being slaughtered in the streets, devastating the families of all impacted by these tragic murders and robbing us of the potential greatness deposited in these young men and women. The AME Zion Church has called for greater accountability for the police departments who are given lethal authority and are sworn to “protect and serve” their communities. The plague of poverty, inadequate educational and economic opportunities, systemic racism and the lack of a comprehensive strategy by many municipalities and the federal government to

⁸ William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church*, AME Zion Publishing House, Charlotte, NC. p.138

⁹ Ibid.

implement a “Marshal Plan” to address the complex issues in urban areas has resulted in gun violence and gang warfare that has spiraled out of control. We encourage our members to redouble their continuing efforts towards community healing and economic development. Our churches should be sacred spaces offering help for families, safe places for youth, and hubs for tutoring and values education.

The Freedom Church must be at the forefront of the continuing struggle to eliminate the value gap in education, community investment, economic development, police protection, and within the criminal justice system. The mass incarceration pandemic is, in the words of Michelle Alexander, “the New Jim Crow”. Followers of Jesus are witnesses to a Savior and Lord who is also a Liberator. He came to dwell among people who were being oppressed and living in poverty and He proclaimed liberty. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, GOD incarnate, to prove - Human lives matter. He was born in a manger to show - Homeless lives matter. He was forced to flee His home because of persecution to affirm - Refugees and Immigrant lives matter. He lived without prestige and possessions to teach - underprivileged lives matter. He was born as a person with brown skin and with kinky hair to proclaim - **Black lives matter!**

How does the message of the Freedom Church – the message that preaches “good news to the poor” sound today? What must we know or do to “bind up the brokenhearted” in our homes and communities? What is the message of “liberty” that those who are “captives” need and wait to hear in contemporary society? Let us be clear and unequivocal in our stand. We know that evil is defeated because we serve a risen Christ. The powers of darkness, sin, racism, totalitarian control, politics or war cannot gain the ultimate victory. To cower and remain silent in the face of systemic racism and the devaluing of any human life is to choose Nero’s court over Christ’s Church. To fail to proclaim this message is to affirm the misguided belief that evil or worldly powers are ultimately in control.

We are sure and certain that we live according to our purpose as the Freedom Church when we remain committed to the cause of liberation holistically for every one of God’s children. We recognize that “The God who made us loves each of us as parents, who love all their children. God loves us with complete commitment to our well-being. Our worth is the gracious gift of divine love. The attempt of human beings to claim ultimacy is the height of usurpation, rebellion and apostasy. We are finite. God, who is infinite, loves us all the same. Our fundamental worth as persons is solely determined by that declaration of love and nothing else.”¹⁰ We must not be distracted from our purpose. We are the Freedom Church!

THE FREEDOM CHURCH: REVIEWING OUR PRACTICES

“Going through the motions doesn’t please you, a flawless performance is nothing to you. I learned God-worship when my pride was shattered. Heart-shattered lives ready for love don’t for a moment escape God’s notice. Make Zion the place you delight in, repair Jerusalem’s broken-down walls. Then you’ll get real worship from us, acts of worship small and large...” (Psalm 51:16-19 MSG)

¹⁰ James A. Forbes, *Whose Gospel? A Concise Guide to Progressive Protestantism*, The New Press, New York, 2010, p. 85

Some may argue that the church is dying, or maybe even dead. We must reject this heretical notion. A dead church is an oxymoron. It is either a church or it is dead, but it cannot be both. The church is not dead for it is connected and inextricably linked to a living Savior.

The AME Zion Church, along with all mainline denominations, is facing some enormous challenges in the midst of a constantly changing cultural landscape. Some have termed this the age of Post-Denominationalism, others have gone even further to suggest that it's an age of Post-Church. Your Board of Bishops acknowledges that the environment for being the Church has dramatically changed and continues to rapidly do so; however, we are convinced that the Church is more important today, not less.

Jesus established the Church as His agent of peace, healing, and transformation in the earth-realm. It is still the Bride of Christ, the Body of which Jesus is the Head. It is the Church that is to be the embodiment and the communicator of the Good News – the Gospel. With all the advancements of society, there is still an urgent need to hear, see, and be touched by the Good News of Jesus Christ and that is the role of the Church!

We must also acknowledge, however, that what the world does not need and has no tolerance for is a cold, bankrupt, irrelevant institution that is more concerned with maintaining its status, its buildings, its customs, its positions, its titles, and its finances than it is about transforming lives, strengthening families, and impacting our communities and the world for Christ.

Therefore, as your Episcopal Leaders, we do not fear the challenge to take a new and closer look at our practices so that we may carefully examine those elements of our church practices which remain effective, which must be retooled, and which must be ended. We will courageously take the advance against what Jaroslav Pelikan aptly distinguished as the difference between “traditionalism” and “tradition.” Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead. Change is always happening, but we do not fear change because at heart is our unchangeable core. We hold our customs, our rituals and our traditions as valuable, but not inviolable. After all and through whatever change we may encounter, we know we are God's church! “To value the Church's tradition is to recognize that our forebears in the faith had many insights into what worship means, that their hymns and liturgies and symbols have carried the faith well, and that therefore those tools and forms are vital for immersing us in the presence of God.”¹¹ When we prayerfully and respectfully honor our traditions without making idols out of them, we give a voice to the great cloud of witness comprised of our biblical and ecclesiastical ancestors without ignoring the voices of our contemporary communities, and more importantly, the Holy Spirit, Who shapes, guides, and gives life to the Lord's Church.

Dr. Kevin Watson states that; “If there is one thing that the Methodist movement should prioritize in order to witness personal and congregational renewal it is ‘Holy Conferencing’, specifically, reinvigorated Class Meetings.”¹² Your Board of Bishops having been determined to practice what we preach and set the example, shared in holy conferencing each week from May

¹¹ Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000, p. 35

¹² Kevin Watson, *Holy Conferencing and Church Renewal*, Notes from his Lecture to the Pan Methodist Bishops Gathering, Atlanta, GA, March 2015

through October, 2015. We met via conference call every Monday morning using a Class Meeting format. We established a covenant to hold what we shared in these meetings in absolute confidence, thereby creating a sacred space of trust and transparency. The sessions began with prayer and then proceeded with each bishop answering honestly the following six questions - Since our last meeting:

1. How am I coming along in my prayer life?
2. How am I progressing in my personal study of God's word?
3. Are there areas of struggle or specific needs for which I desire the prayers of the class?
4. Are there areas of victory or blessings through which I see God at work?
5. What progress am I making in learning to share my faith with others?
6. In what ways have I been able to meet a need in the lives of others?

In an effort to expand this important experience throughout our church, many of the Bishops or their designees led their Presiding Elders through the same weekly meetings and challenged each Presiding Elder to do the same with the pastors on their Districts, who in turn would be better equipped to lead the Class Leaders of their local congregations in this transformative encounter each week.

Can you imagine the power that would be birthed in our church if Bishops, Presiding Elders, and Pastors, Trustees and Stewards, Class Leaders and Missionaries, Choir Members and Ushers, if every member of our church spent time each week praying for one another by name, confessing our struggles, naming our victories, celebrating when we lead people to Christ, and holding one another accountable? Our challenge is to;

*“Rise up, O people of Zion;
Have done with lesser things.
Give heart and mind and soul and strength
To serve the King of Kings.”*

The Board of Bishops calls for an end to the “worship wars.” It does no faction or segment of our church good to debate whether any are more “true” or “sincere” than others in the way they worship. These are unnecessary causes of division and strife that keep adversarial and satanic forces fully employed as they seek, at the very least, our inefficiency or, at the worst, our cessation to do the Master's work. Our church offers a suggested Order of Worship and liturgical outlines that serve as guideposts to assist with our theological understanding of worship; however, we warn against becoming dogmatic and divisive in attempts to force a one size fits all form on our congregations.

The truly important concern is not whether the *style* of a worship experience is more traditional or contemporary, the issue is whether the *substance* of the worship is transformative. A contemporary service can devolve into empty entertainment and a traditional service can become rigid ritualism, with neither one lifting us beyond our personal preferences to a life-sustaining, life-changing encounter with the Divine. We must all guard against falling into our comfort zones and making worship about us rather than about the Lord. Whatever style may be employed, may Jesus Christ be praised!

We do not need to fight each other. Let's embrace one another in the church we all love. The wise counsel of John Wesley is helpful on this point; "Keep you your opinion; I mine, and that as steadfastly as ever...Let all opinions alone on one side and the other: Only 'give me thine hand.'" ¹³ Let this be our marching orders:

What do you mean by the Church? A visible Church (as our article defines it) is a company of faithful or believing people...This is the essence of a Church; and the properties thereof are, (as they are described in the words that follow,) 'among whom the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered...' It were well if this were a little more considered by those who so vehemently cry out, 'The Church! the Church!' (as those of old, 'The temple of the Lord! the Temple of the Lord!') not knowing what they speak, nor whereof they affirm...The article mentions three things as essential to a visible Church. First: Living faith; without which, indeed, there can be no Church at all, neither visible nor invisible. Secondly: Preaching, and consequently hearing, the pure word of God, else that faith would languish and die. And, Thirdly, a due administration of the sacraments, - the ordinary means whereby God increaseth faith. ¹⁴

The AME Zion Church is very good at maintaining a comfortable atmosphere for the older saints to worship and work, but we've been far less effective in reaching and enlisting the younger generation into the life of the Church. This is not only a tragedy for Zion because it is a prescription for the decline of our congregations in future years, it is also a tragedy for the younger generations because essential Christian values and the rich legacy of liberation of our people will be lost in the hearts and minds of the youth. We need each other. The seasoned saints need the energy, vitality, and creativity of young people in order for our churches to continue to impact future generations; but our young people also need our seniors for wisdom, mentoring, and learning of the struggles we've endured to provide the advantages they enjoy today.

Regardless of the generation in question, whether young or old or somewhere in between, every person comes to the church because they are in need of or seeking healthy relationships, first with the Lord and then with others. Persons come seeking God, seeking fellowship, seeking to find a place where they can find acceptance and belong, seeking a place where love is evident. So much hurt and pain exists in our world. People are confused, hurt and torn. Historically, the church has been a place of refuge for such persons impacted and negatively affected by any force or means of oppression. From the days of the abolitionist movement to the current #BlackLivesMatter movement, the quest for human freedom remains and will find a means of expression. Historically, the Black church has always been a place for this expression, and a voice for the beleaguered and a refuge for the oppressed. The church at its best has always been the healing space where the earthly embodiment of the invitation of Jesus is realized – "Come to

¹³ *The Works of John Wesley*, "Catholic Spirit," Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reprinted 1996, Vol. 5, p. 499

¹⁴ *The Works of John Wesley*, "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reprinted 1996, Vol. 8, p. 30-31

me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). We can – and must – do no less in the 21st century.

The AME Zion Church offers earnest prayers for our sister church, The United Methodist Church, and other ecumenical partners as they face threats to their organic unity over the issue of LGBTQ rights to ordination and marriage. We respect the deeply held convictions of Christians on all sides of the issue and recognize the diversity of strong opinions within our own denomination. The Board of Bishops completely understands, but does not accept the argument that in order to affirm the human dignity of all of God’s creation and to advocate for justice must also include the endorsement of “Same-gender Marriage” in our church polity. Our hearts and doors will remain open as we extend radical hospitality to all, including those who disagree with our position; however, what we cannot and will not allow is for those who freely enter the ministry of our church and who freely make the requisite vows for ordination in our church, to violate their sacred oaths and disregard our doctrine and polity. (See the BOB Statement in Addendum I)

As America stands on the brink of an election this year, where we are is literally a precipice for the nation. The voices of hate, derision, and bigotry have found new expression in a major political party and around the country. Divisions that were once perhaps thought to have been largely overcome through decades of struggle and sacrifice have reared their ugly heads once more, emboldened by challenges and perverted charges against “political correctness.” For followers of Jesus, it is not a matter of being “politically correct”; it is about being morally correct!

Violence, both in actions and in words have engulfed our discourse and our demographics, and we are in danger of being subsumed. Some would have our church, our culture and our community be rendered invisible. But we do not despair! Salvation that impacts every aspect of our people’s lives is in our DNA. The promises of God stand sure! The pursuit and realization of social justice runs in our veins, and we know that God is yet on the side of the oppressed. We cannot speak of salvation as only existing in the “sweet by and by” for the Freedom Church embraces the challenges of the “ugly here and now.” We do not speak of salvation as only the realm for the soul, while the bodies of our sisters and brothers are devalued, diminished and dying. From Connecticut to California, from Alabama to Accra, Ghana, from Anchorage, Alaska to Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire, from Albany, NY to Abuja, Nigeria, wherever the banner of the AME Zion Church is raised, we as the Church of Jesus Christ – the Freedom Church – will engage the fight valiantly in the name of God, pressing onward, sure that *“Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds”* (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

The upcoming presidential election will certainly impact our social, economic, and political life in significant ways. It could have devastating implications, especially when the next president will be responsible for nominating persons for the Supreme Court, as well as set an agenda that will shape this country for generations to come. This election is critical and demands our active, informed engagement! This will be the most consequential election of our generation. With demagoguery being embolden, the likes of which have not been witnessed since George Wallace, we must not allow apathy to paralyze us on the sidelines. This is not a choice between

two evils. It is the choice between rejecting forces that will turn back the clock on racial, gender, and immigrant policies. The slogan “Make America Great Again” begs the question; “Exactly what year in our history would you suggest was our country great for all of her people?” Do you suggest to make it great again like the 1800s when people of African ancestry were enslaved? Are the 1900s with its treatment of women and racial minorities as second-class citizens the days of American greatness? Is a return to Jim Crow laws, lynching, poll taxes, literacy tests, racial segregation, and gender inequality what you mean by “Making America Great Again”? It is no accident that thirty- three states have passed voter identification laws for the express purpose of disenfranchising and discouraging potential voters. The church must be ever vigilant in organizing our communities to ensure that every eligible voter gets the chance to exercise his and her right to vote. We cannot afford to repeat the mistake of Rip Van Winkle who slumbered on a grassy knoll up in the Catskill Mountains; and when he finally awoke, sadly discovered that he had slept through a revolution. Could it be that a revolution is unfolding before our very eyes? **WAKE UP CHURCH!**

Our ability to fulfill our mission and preserve our rich legacy depends, at least in part, on our willingness to understand and address the faith development of the generation born between 1984 and 2002—often referred to as “Millennials”. If we do not yet see this as a crisis to be addressed, it is time that we do. Thom and Sam Rainer state that “More than two-thirds of young churchgoing adults in America drop out of church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two!”¹⁵ We may have a robust debate about the reasons youth and young adults are dwindling in number in our churches, but we simply cannot afford to watch an important demographic of our present and our future disappear before our very eyes and we do nothing.

Were we to honestly assess our local congregations or simply talk openly about our own families, we would easily confirm that our Zion is not exempt from this phenomenon. The unchurched segment of Millennials has increased in the last decade from 44% to 52%, which mirrors a larger cultural trend away from churchgoing in the U.S. While preceding generations in Zion can attest to having been “born into” our church or another faith community, this is increasingly not the testimony of young people today. Without intentional and meaningful ministry designed to reach and engage this population, we should expect this trend to continue. Any initiatives we expect will impact and attract young adults must involve them thoroughly and consistently in the conversation, planning, leadership, and execution. Youth and Young Adult Ministry is not to be done for them, but by them and with them.

Finally, when asked what helps their faith grow, “church” does not even make the top 10 factors among young adults! Instead, according to this age group, the most common drivers of spiritual growth are prayer, family and friends, the Bible, having children and their personal relationship with Christ. Taken together, the implications of these trends are clear—we must reexamine our ministry motives, models and methods. Is increasing the number of members,

¹⁵ Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, III, *Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN, 2008, Kindle, location 164

people in the pew on Sunday morning or simply meeting the connectional, conference, and district obligations this year our main focus? Do we implement viable evangelism strategies that leverage technology and allow youth and young adults who are seeking a relationship with Christ to hear the voice of the Freedom Church with a fresh and relevant word for times like these? Can we detect a laser focus on making and equipping disciples to live meaningful, Christian lives in the world? Have we relegated ministry to youth and young adults to periodic workshops, annual conventions, a night at our District or Annual Conferences or a special denominational observance or designated Sunday? Are our attempts to connect to Millennials undermined by our unwillingness to untether ourselves from the historic “church” models that we have known and ourselves grown up in and are comfortable with?

These are hard questions and we must ask and answer them within the context of the broader culture and what we know about how young people increasingly see and approach their spiritual development. Beyond this examination lies the challenge of actually adjusting our mindset and methods to reposition the Freedom Church in the hearts and minds of youth and young adults who seek to know and experience God.

The Board of Bishops believes the time has come for us to implement the action of the 2012 General Conference establishing indigenous leaders for Western West Africa and Eastern West Africa in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. It is difficult to justify any delay. The Freedom Church must be consistent in our affirmation of equality and justice. Our own early history attests to the consequences of denying the full participation of all, regardless of race or nationality. We painfully recall the exclusion evidenced by the Methodist Episcopal Church, when during the late 18th and early 19th centuries preaching licenses were granted to only a few black men, but they were not allowed to fully exercise their gifts, even among other black members of the church. Moreover, preaching to white Methodists was rare and in most cases out of the question. These black preachers were prohibited from joining the Methodist Annual Conference. It was not until 1820 that several of our people met to seek the ordination of Abraham Thompson and James Varick, who were local preachers of the African Chapel, also known as Zion Church. Subsequently, the black congregations were allowed to have clergy persons who could identify with the unique customs and culture of the black congregations as well as the black community.

And now, in the 21st Century and the 220th year of the AME Zion Church, can we deny the full inclusion of our brothers and sisters in Africa, the very people from whom we received the name of our denomination? Are the Zion brothers and sisters in Africa not entitled to indigenous leadership? We are compelled to reject the hypocrisy of bearing the name of “The Freedom Church” while withholding the same privilege our fore parents demanded from the Methodist Episcopal Church over two hundred years ago.

Our church can gain some wisdom at this important juncture by reflecting on insights found in the book written by William Bridges entitled, *Managing Transitions, Making the Most of Change*. Bridges opens chapter 3 by saying, “Before you can begin something new, you have to end what used to be. Before you can become a different kind of person, you must let go of the old identity. Before you can learn a new way of doing things, you have to unlearn the old ways. So beginning depends on ending. The problem is, people don’t like endings. Yet, change and

endings go hand in hand. Change causes transition, and transition starts with an ending. If things change, at least some of us are going to have to let go of something.”¹⁶

THE FREEDOM CHURCH: RETOOLING OUR PEOPLE

“Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11&12 NLT)

In the words of Bishop William Jacob Walls, “Methodism is a spiritual movement in the temporal environment. These would be cold words if they were not built upon hearts pregnant with celestial fire and hands and bodies absorbed in a wholehearted trial to fulfill and expand the spirit and fervency of this potent reality of divine presence and meaning in the concrete environment.”¹⁷ This clarity and definition of Methodism in general and the Freedom Church in particular will generate great obligation on our current understanding of ourselves and our mission.

It is to these ends and purpose that we seek to retool our people. The concept of retooling is in sync with the technological definition of retrofitting. A retrofit refers to the addition of new technology or features to older systems. Used as a transitive verb, to retrofit means “to adapt to a new reality or need.” We embrace the concept of a retrofit for this reason: the advantage and benefit of a retrofit is that it permits the old to still be employed while the new is being built. A retrofit honors traditions and blesses the past while advancing with new vision into the future.

As the church presses on to bring to realization the Kingdom of God, we recognize that challenges lie ahead for this generation. We do not deny them, we do not shrink from them, we cannot go back to a past that will not return no matter how much we wish or pine for it, and we will not pretend that the challenges are not real or do not exist. Instead, by God’s grace we press on to meet the challenges of our day. Thus we appeal to our beloved Zion, as did Moses when he spoke to his brother-in-law Hobab, “*We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said, ‘I will give it to you’; come with us, and we will treat you well; for the Lord has promised good to Israel’*” (Numbers 10:29). Yes, Zion, “The Lord has promised good to us; His word our hope secures; He will our shield and portion be, as long as life endures.” Will you join us as we begin the process of retooling our people?

It has been said that, “if the only tool that you have is a hammer, then every problem that you see will be a nail!” The issue of retooling is not optional but a necessity. For years, our beloved Zion has been primarily populated by patrons of the post-depression, post-war era. Gary L. McIntosh popularized a four generation model.¹⁸ Simply put, they are:

Builders - born between 1910-1945

Boomers - born between 1946-1964

¹⁶ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, DaCapo Press, Philadelphia, PA. 2009, p.23

¹⁷ Walls, p.29

¹⁸ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church*; Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI. 2002

Busters - born between 1965-1984
Bridgers - born between 1984-2002

Our graying congregations have tremendous strengths. They are frugal, steadfast, stable, loyal, and deeply committed to their religious and civic affiliations. Our churches were at one time the leaders in the religious community--downtown, urban center churches in the spiritual and civic forefront. Annual days, revivals, rallies, family attritions, weddings and baptisms kept the pews, coffers and social outreach vibrant and viable. There was a galvanizing motif of Civil Rights that provided an undercurrent of incentive and initiative. Unfortunately this demographic is limited in the field of their potential harvest. Their friends, associates and neighbors are by and large, members of other churches and with few exceptions plan to remain where they are.

The children of the builders, known as the boomers, have become the predominant populace of the emerging non-denominational movements and non-traditional spiritual versus religious distractions--Choosing God over church! The changing harvest of souls and the dramatic shift of values and priorities demand that after Refocusing on Our Purpose and Reviewing Our Practices, we must Retool our People! The Busters and Bridgers search for our Website, App, Twitter, Periscope, Snapchat, or Instagram account. If you are not clear about what we just said, then it's time to Retool!

The holistic education of our people has been and must continue to be an integral part of our legacy of liberation and transformation. This means that we will continue our financial support of our educational institutions both in America and in Africa. We must continue to insist that our clergy seek credible theological training and encourage our youth to pursue higher education by providing networking opportunities, scholarships, and book awards to help them on the journey. But it also means that our churches must once again become hubs of educational transformation. We cannot afford our buildings being opened only for Bible Study, business meetings, and Sunday Worship Services. We have to be open for family enrichment activities, After-school or Saturday tutoring programs, especially those that are STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) related.

Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster in his book; *There's Power in the Connection*, writes of retooling in the United Methodist Church. However, the message is germane to African Methodism as well. "What might that developmental future look like for the United Methodist Church? How might...congregation, clergy and Wesleyan theology be integrated into a new system and new way of being church? What innovative bold steps must be taken to move us into God's preferred future? Can we merge creative twenty-first century models of leadership and organizational strategy with first century Acts 2 models of church, alongside eighteenth century Wesleyan theology? The answer will be found in bold initiatives that would fundamentally change the institution of the United Methodist Church."¹⁹

This is an invitation to move us away from optimistic thinking that believes and tells itself that all is well, that we can keep doing the same things we have always done, and that it is

¹⁹ Larry M. Goodpaster, *There's Power in The Connection: Building A Network of Dynamic Congregations*; Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN. 2008

permissible to be a dysfunctional, declining church. It is an invitation to a conversation that is centered on the transforming hope of God's grace, mercy, love and power to renew, reform, and revolutionize the church and the world. Time is of the essence. We cannot prolong the decisions while we study the life and energy out of them, analyzing every angle and nuance for the next eight to twelve years--we do not have that luxury. We cannot go about business or church, as usual and expect different results. That insanity is what brought us to this moment in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Again as Robert Quinn demonstrates so well, "no deep change will occur within any organization until deep change occurs within the person, the leader, the membership."

Goodpaster further suggests that going forward, a radical reorientation must exist, within the collective church. The AME Zion Restructuring Commission has taken that challenge seriously, and proposed a fundamental shift in how we do our connectional business with better stewardship of our precious human and financial resources. It proposes important steps that will usher in both envisioning, retooling, and revival.

In *Autopsy of A Deceased Church*, Thom S. Rainer suggests some observations that are common in churches whose best days could be behind them.²⁰ Some of the characteristics are listed with his headings, but our definitions:

- **The church refused to look like the community.** This is certainly true of many of our churches in urban transition zones. The socioeconomic vibrancy of the community is not what it was even two decades ago. The church has become an island of middle-class members and mindsets amidst a sea of lower income residents. Carter G. Woodson in *The Miseducation of the Negro* stated that there was a day when the black intelligencia would be found in the fellowship of a black Methodist church. Unfortunately, our churches are no longer the default setting for church affiliation.
- **The facilities continue to deteriorate.** Building maintenance and utility conservation demand a delicate balance for resource allocation. Can the roof be repaired, the boiler replaced, and yet allow the dwindling congregation to remain current with operational expenses and assessments?
- **The church has no community-focused ministry.** This is often the result of limited income and a perceived lack of an adequate return on the investment. Many churches fail to embrace the reality that evangelism is not about prospects, it's about people! The question should not be what can they do for us, but what can Christ do for them!
- **The pastoral tenure grows shorter.** In an itinerant system, such as ours, the frequent rotation of moderately prepared ministers or long term uninspired and therefore, uninspiring pastors set an atmosphere of complacency and decay. Many of our pastors are seeking larger congregations by receiving a new appointment rather than growing the church where they currently serve.
- **The church rarely prayed together.** Often there is little belief of reliance on God's ability to perform the supernatural. (Ephesians 3:20) We relegate prayer to a once a week gathering of a few of the faithful members, rather than a necessary, expected gathering of all

²⁰ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*; B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN: 2014

members, including clergy and lay officers. It remains true; "Much prayer, much power. Little prayer, little power. No prayer, no power."

- **Members tend to idolize another era.** The core members often reflect on a bygone era as being the church's finest hours. They are afflicted with ecclesial nostalgia. For them, the goal of the future is a successful return to the past - they declare; "Let's make the church (not country) great again!" The reality is that the church has had struggles throughout her history. God does not take us or the church in a backwards direction.

- **The church had no clarity as to why it existed.** It is possible in this "me" oriented culture that the only known purpose many of our members expect is to receive personal edification. It is a consumer mentality that demands of the church; "What have you done for me lately?" Rare is the Christian who embraces the call of Christ that; *"If any man (or woman) would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."* (Matt. 16:24)

The maladies affecting ministry of this generation are diverse and complex. So we inquire which tools can be used to stem the tide of the present reality? First, we acknowledge that any church renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Robert Schnase offers some practical steps in his helpful treatise, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. His experience in the United Methodist Church is transferable to other itinerant systems with a comeback mentality. The tools are profoundly simple and yet, simply profound; 1) **Radical Hospitality** 2) **Passionate Worship**, 3) **Intentional Faith Development**, 4) **Risk-taking Mission and Service** and 5) **Extravagant Generosity**.²¹ A word of caution and instruction is helpful concerning the five practices.

~~Without a warm and engaging environment, "Radical Hospitality" is oxymoronic. Everyone today from Walmart to the Waffle House have assigned employees with the task of saying "Welcome to..." However, the welcome is hollow when the action is perfunctory. Hospitality must become core to who the congregation is and how they do everything they do.

~~Similarly, spirited worship devoid of authentic Spirit, resonates as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals!

~~"Intentional Faith Development" requires a plumblane or Biblical understanding and application, Absent the God standard, we become victim to the practice of ancient followers recorded in Judges 17:6. *"In those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes."*

~~Unless one is clear on one's mission aligned with purpose, it is possible to be lured off task by what E. M. Bounds refers to as the "seduction of good works." This occurs when a primary task is supplanted by an immediate one.

~~Finally, extravagant generosity is truly a matter of the heart. Shakespeare's Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* said, "Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind!" Perhaps Paul provides the most compelling argument for giving from a full heart in 2 Corinthians 9:7, *"You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully."*

²¹ Robert C. Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* Abington Press, Nashville, TN: 2007, pp.131-132.

THE FREEDOM CHURCH: REACHING OUR POTENTIAL

*“I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us”
(Philippians 3: 12-14 NLT)*

Due to the demands and necessities of travel, many of us spend far too much of our time in airports. Because of this, it is quite likely that a significant but obvious reflection on air travel should be examined. Although there are many people in or around the airport, not everyone at the airport is going somewhere. Even though the airport is designed to be a place of departure and elevation, the truth is that not everyone at the airport is embarking on a journey. Some people drive to the airport to pick up or drop off someone else. Some people work at the airport. Others simply come to the airport to observe planes takeoff and land. They are not going anywhere. But then there are always some people who are on their way some place. They have their tickets; they’ve packed their bags; they’re at the gate; they know their estimated time of departure, and they’re ready to go. It would surely be unfortunate if you arrived at the airport and did not know whether or not you were supposed to stay or depart, whether or not you were supposed to pack a bag, whether or not you had a ticket, a reservation, a gate number, and even more sadly, you had no clue as to where you were headed.

In many ways, life is like an airport. There are those who are staying put and those who are moving on. How unfortunate if we fail to recognize God’s call to move on. The call of the Lord has always been towards a greater future and fulfilling our potential. Abram was called to leave the Ur of the Chaldea and to venture to a land that the Lord promised for him and his heirs. Lot’s wife moved forward but when she looked back, when she focused on her past, when she mentally concentrated on where she had been, rather than where God was taking her, she was turned into a pillar of salt. The children of Israel were called to move out of Egypt, Joseph and Mary were called to move on. They moved to Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth; then they were told by an angel of God to escape to Egypt because King Herod was intent upon killing the baby Jesus. John and Charles Wesley set out, not to establish a new church, but to begin a reformation that became known as The Methodist Movement. Abraham Thompson, June Scott, James Varick, and other members of Class 31, moved out from John Street and marched into what would become the AME Zion Church.

God has a plan of movement for everyone; God will close some doors so that you will find the new door He has opened for you. Sometimes God requires you to stay still while you receive clear directions where you are and sometimes God wants you to move on to a higher level, a better place. We must stay connected to God, stay in touch with God, and stay in tune with God so that we can recognize God’s call to move on.

Our main objective is not to preserve the church as if it was a museum. Our God is a God on the move; we do not want to find ourselves where God was. We are journeying with God towards a promise, and we cannot afford to get stuck in some yesterday of our liking and miss the purpose of God’s call upon our lives. Ministry is bankrupt when it is entirely inward focused. A living organism inhales and exhales. Likewise, a vital congregation cultivates fellowship among its members, but also reaches out to its community and enthusiastically welcomes new people into

the fellowship. Every church will not be a large church, but every church should be a healthy church and healthy things grow.

In a sincere effort to maintain the great church and the rich traditions that we inherited from our fore-parents, we have in too many instances become insulated and isolated. Many have become comfortable with just seeing the same faces in our pews week after week. We blame people for not coming to our churches, but have we come out of our churches to connect with those in our communities? Many of our congregations no longer reflect the communities in which they are located. We face a clear yet difficult challenge. Like the dilemma that the leprous men faced in 2 Kings, chapter 7, we must ask ourselves; “*Why should we sit here waiting to die?*” Better that we would get up off our pews of comfort and complacency and move into the communities where the people are. To keep doing what we’ve always done expecting different results is not only a definition of insanity, it is a prescription for certain congregational death. We say; “Let’s choose to live!”

As we move by God’s grace into a new quadrennium, we hear God’s voice calling us to “step up our efforts,” to reach our potential, to seize the opportunity to move in a new dimension, to another level, to a different horizon. The call of God beckons us out of our comfort zones and established boundaries. God’s call also demands of us that we live more boldly than we otherwise would. And although we are unworthy, God is not going to wait for us to be “better” as individuals or as a church before calling us. Karl Barth once said, “God does not choose a people which has something to give but one which has everything to receive.”

Thomas Kelly wrote these words that embolden, encourage and reassure us;

*Zion stands by hills surrounded,
Zion, kept by power divine;
All her foes shall be confounded,
Though the world in arms combine;
Happy Zion, what a favored lot is thine!
Happy Zion, what a favored lot is thine!*

We, as members of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church - The Freedom Church, have been the benefactors of a great legacy and heirs to such a rich heritage. The profound sense of justice and liberation that has been imbued in us by our founders, let’s pass it on. The spiritual fervor experienced in our worship, our preaching, and our songs, let’s pass it on. The opportunities for a good education that we’ve been blessed to receive, let’s pass it on. The presence of a committed, caring adult who was there to mentor and encourage us, let’s pass it on. The gift of a vibrant church and an engaging Sunday School that taught us important Christian values and skills for living, let’s pass it on. Ours is a cherished history but it must not end with us, it must be passed on to the generations yet to be born.

Therefore, beloved brothers and sisters, our mission, should we choose to accept it, is clear. Our mission as The Freedom Church is the **Great Commission** (GO!) and our motivation is the **Great Commandment** (LOVE!). Let each of us become recommitted to be active in sharing the Good News about the hope we’ve experienced in Christ Jesus. We have no other choice, because

we know that the hope of the world is not government, academia, or business, but the hope of the world is Jesus Christ and that message is what only the Church offers. Whether they realize it or not, the world needs Christ and the Church! America needs Christ and the Church! Africa needs Christ and the Church! Asia and Europe need Christ and the Church! Young and old, rich and poor, and people everywhere need Christ and the Church! But it needs a church that is dynamic and relevant. It needs a church and Christians who are passionate about telling the Good News of the love of GOD, the hope in the Resurrected Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives.

*The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is his new creation
By water and the Word:
From heav'n he came and sought her
To be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her,
And for her life he died.*

*Elect from ev'ry nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food.
And to one hope she presses,
With ev'ry grace endued.*

*'Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation
Of peace for evermore;
Till with the vision glorious
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great church victorious
Shall be the church at rest.*

*Yet she on earth hath union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
Like them, the meek and lowly,
On high may dwell with thee.*

Submitted By the Grace of God and in the Love of Christ Jesus!
Your Chief Pastors;

The Board of Bishops of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

The Right Reverend George E. Battle, Jr. - Senior Bishop

The Right Reverend Louis Hunter, Sr. - President

The Right Reverend Richard K. Thompson

The Right Reverend Roy A. Holmes (Deceased)

The Right Reverend James E. McCoy (Deceased)

The Right Reverend Kenneth Monroe

The Right Reverend Darryl B. Starnes, Sr.

The Right Reverend Dennis V. Proctor

The Right Reverend Mildred B. Hines

The Right Reverend W. Darin Moore

The Right Reverend Seth O. Lartey

The Right Reverend Michael A. Frencher

The Right Reverend Joseph Johnson (Retired)

The Right Reverend Marshall H. Strickland (Retired)

The Right Reverend Nathaniel Jarrett (Retired)

The Right Reverend George W. C. Walker, Sr. (Retired)

The Right Reverend S. Chuka Ekemam (Retired)

The Right Reverend Warren M. Brown (Retired)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. We issue a renewed call for a Faith and Order Conference to be held in conjunction with the General Convention on Christian Education.** As we implement the section of our theme that calls for “Reviewing Our Practices”, it is imperative that we convene Zion’s leadership, along with our theologians and other scholars to examine our liturgy and protocol. This is best accomplished in conjunction with the gathering of our Christian Education Department.
- 2. Pastors and local churches are challenged to expand our teaching ministries with the goal of offering relevant biblical principles that youth, young adults, adults, and seniors can successfully apply in their daily living and more effectively navigate a complex world.** People want, need, and are searching for ways to do more than merely hear the word, enjoy the music, or experience a Sunday morning “high” without substantive ways to bring their faith in Christ to bear on the problems they encounter in the world.
- 3. The AME Zion Church will make young adult leadership development and mentoring a major priority at every level.** Millennials have grown up exploring and experiencing the dramatic changes in the world. They operate in a knowledge or information-based society which means that, in spite of their youth, they are seen as valuable because of what they know rather than how long they have been on a job or part of an organization. Our tendency to want Millennials to “wait their turn” to have a voice in the church is diametrically opposed to how their world works. While they absolutely desire and need our wisdom and experience, they really need us to engage *with them* in ways that will allow them to apply their gifts and graces in the church—NOW! If we want to be relevant and effective in ministry, we will make it our business to build and sustain ministry models that enable us to share leadership with young adults.
- 4. Churches must discover innovative ways to provide practical, hands on ministry opportunities.** People are simply not interested in the “meet, greet and eat” culture that church traditionally offers. Instead, most people want to practice their faith by making a difference in their community and the world. While they may not attend a three-hour meeting (with no agenda or clear outcomes), they will tutor elementary school children, teach a fitness class for seniors or volunteer at a local shelter. This kind of ministry allows people to practice an active, outwardly focused and high impact kind of faith. Worship—no matter how powerful—is not enough to maintain a strong connection to our youth, young adults, and the wider community.
- 5. In order to engage the unchurched, reach Millennials, and cultivate a deeper Christian maturity of our members, we must make intimacy with God through Jesus Christ and healthy relationships with one another the focus of all ministry.** The uncomfortable truth is that a significant portion of those who are unchurched view people in the institutional church as superficial, hypocritical, and disinterested in

anything more than adding members or raising money. Seven in ten of those who dropped out of church did NOT have a close relationship with another member at the church. People, especially young people, who do not feel accepted or engaged—leave. Those who remain active and connected in church are more likely than those who drop out to say that they believe God speaks to them personally in ways that are real and relevant. For an increasing number of people today, church membership is not what is most important—it's an authentic relationship with Christ.

6. **We strongly encourage the revitalization of the Class Meetings.** Others have borrowed from our Wesleyan heritage and adopted the Class Leader System even if they call it by another name; such as, Cell Groups, Perfecting Classes, Discipling Groups, etc. It is our conviction that church renewal is the result of spiritual renewal of those who are disciples of Jesus. This is best accomplished through small group ministry - The Class Meeting. The book; *"Perfecting the Saints"* by Bishop Darryl B. Starnes is a valuable resource that we commend to you for study, reflection, and implementation.
7. **Every church will designate a Voter Education/Mobilization Coordinator.** This person will provide the membership of the local church and the community vital information regarding registration, policy issues, and candidate profiles for all levels of elections; including School Board, local, county, state, and national.
8. **The AME Zion Church will fully embrace our legacy and our mantra as The Freedom Church.** We encourage the mantra be included in church bulletins, letterhead, and on church signage. This effort should be about more than symbolism, it must be matched with substantive ministry that offers liberation and transformation.
9. **We recommend that the 50th Session of The AME Zion Church General Conference officially endorses the following legislative and policy initiatives:**
 - a. We applaud the program founded by President Barack Obama called, "My Brothers Keepers" and encourage our congregations to partner with their local communities to implement it's strategies.
 - b. We support efforts at local government levels to raise the minimum wage and call upon the federal government to establish a national minimum "living wage."
 - c. We endorse renewed calls for reasonable and responsible Gun Control legislation, specifically to enhance background checks and to reduce easy access to assault weapons.
 - d. We endorse the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (SRCA) which has been passed by the Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate and is now scheduled to go to the Senate floor. SRCA addresses the mass incarceration crisis by:
 1. Reducing mandatory minimums for non-violent drug crimes
 2. Increasing judicial discretion to sentence below mandatory minimum

guidelines

3. Providing additional diversion options such as drug, mental health, and veteran courts to avoid prison sentences
4. Boosting opportunities for people in prison to earn time off for completing skills programming and drug treatment
5. Improving accuracy of federal criminal record keeping used by employers as a screening tool

10. We suggest that pastors and lay leaders offer Life Enrichment Classes or Ministries for their churches and invite persons from the community to participate. As a part of our strategy to “Retool Our People” we advocate empowerment sessions at the local, District, and Annual Conference levels that equip people. Examples would include but not be limited to: Marriage Ministry, Singles Ministry, Financial Management Workshops, Seniors Ministry, Health and Fitness Ministry, etc.

11. We must practice Lifestyle Stewardship of our time, talents, temple, and treasure. As such, every church should encourage their members to tithe, to adopt healthy life habits (healthy eating and exercise), and to reduce financial indebtedness, as we move away from a consumer mentality to a prudent investment strategy.

Addendum I

May 1, 2014

Open Letter from the Board of Bishops of The AME Zion Church

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8 NKJV)

A series of recent events have punctured the myth purported by some that we are living in a "post-racial" America. The statements by Cliven Bundy, questioning whether "negroes" were better off during slavery, coupled with the publicly released tape recordings of vial, racist comments by Donald Sterling have offended the majority of Americans regardless of ethnicity, race, or religious affiliation.

As reprehensible as these blatantly offensive remarks are, we must not become so obsessed by these aberrations that we ignore the insidious, yet subtle ways that racial discrimination remains intricately woven throughout much of our society impacting our people on a daily basis. Most in our communities are not wealthy or famous so their struggles against racially biased attitudes and actions fail to garner the outrage of the broader society and the resultant universal condemnation like these recent events.

So, while we join the myriad of voices which strongly condemn the racists rants of Donald Sterling, the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, and we applaud the sanctions imposed upon him by the NBA; our concern is a much deeper one. Our country must acknowledge that racial discrimination remains systemic and pernicious. The racial impact of such policies as voter suppression, mass incarceration, the stubbornly segregated public and private educational systems, the housing discrimination in communities across the country, and the remaining disparities in employment opportunities and quality healthcare all impact our people far more than ignorant statements by those who get caught saying what some others may only think, but would never say in public.

In her blistering dissent in the recent decision by the United States Supreme Court that upheld a ban on affirmative action in university admissions by the State of Michigan, Justice Sonia Sotomayor writes; "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the Constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination." We wholeheartedly agree.

The Board of Bishops of African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, known as "The Freedom Church", calls upon all Christians to break the appalling silence surrounding the issue of race. In an effort to begin this extended conversation and strategic actions, we propose the following:

1. A session be held during our July 2014 Connectional Council that will include a multiracial panel of scholars and community leaders to discuss the issues of race and reconciliation. This presentation should be open to the public.
2. We encourage our pastors, lay leaders, and Christian Education leaders to organize special Bible Studies and Adult Sunday School Classes inviting participation of persons of all races to

foster deeper conversations and nurture Christian relationships. Our Christian Education Department will be tasked with identifying appropriate resources.

3. We recommit ourselves, clergy and laity, to work vigorously in all our communities against voter suppression efforts, partnering with the NAACP to push back against any legislation that creates obstacles to the fundamental right of every citizen to vote.

4. Every congregation is encouraged to appoint a coordinator of voter registration and education to train and mobilize our members.

Your Chief Pastors,

The Right Reverend Seth O. Lartey, President of the Board of Bishops The Right Reverend George E. Battle, Jr., Senior Bishop
The Right Reverend Richard K. Thompson

The Right Reverend Louis Hunter, Sr.
The Right Reverend Kenneth Monroe
The Right Reverend Darryl B. Starnes
The Right Reverend Dennis V. Proctor
The Right Reverend Mildred B. Hines
The Right Reverend W. Darin Moore
The Right Reverend Michael A. Frencher, Sr.

The Right Reverend George W. C. Walker, Sr. The Right Reverend S. Chuka Ekemam, Sr. The Right Reverend Joseph Johnson The Right Reverend Marshall H. Strickland III The Right Reverend Nathaniel Jarrett The Right Reverend Warren M. Brown

Addendum II

June 29, 2015

Statement from the Board of Bishops of The AME Zion Church regarding the
recent ruling from the Supreme Court on Marriage Equality

*“**And** may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from **God.**” (Eph. 3:18,19)*

In the aftermath of the ruling by the United States Supreme Court which grants the right to marry to all citizens including same-sex couples; it is necessary for us to reaffirm for some, and clarify to others the position of The AME Zion Church on the issue of human sexuality and marriage.

God made humans to live our lives holistically and fully. Our sexuality is integral to who we are, however, it is not the totality of who we are. Because how we see ourselves matters, we do not believe that we can limit ourselves to descriptions that define human beings merely by sexual identity. We are - all of us - loved as God’s precious creation, bearers of God’s image.

We recognize that much injury and pain has been caused by the sometimes caustic language used to describe children of God who deserved to be valued and treated justly. As "The Freedom Church" we cannot condone injustice against any of our fellow humans regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or sexual preferences. Social justice is a part of our spiritual DNA as we continue our more than 200 year struggle for the recognition of the full, albeit flawed, humanity of us all.

With sincere hearts of contrition, we must confess an unhealthy and often hypocritical approach to human sexuality. The church has often engaged in labeling and ostracizing instead of loving and welcoming. There are no "big" vs. "little" sins. And "since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy" (2 Corinthians 4:1), we do not presume to deny this same grace and mercy we have received and from which we have all benefited to anyone. All humanity, in light of our shared brokenness, stands in need of God's radical and amazing grace.

America is a multicultural, democratic republic with diverse religious, non-religious, and political perspectives, all of which must be respected and not judged unfairly. Many voices and viewpoints clamor to be heard, and democracy guarantees them that right. As such, we insist that our voices, informed by our faith, be included and respected in the public square in a manner that protects human rights in a pluralistic society.

The Supreme Court interprets the U.S. Constitution and that interpretation becomes the law of the land. We accept and respect that reality; for us however, there remains an authority higher than the Constitution and it is our conviction that divine law must guide our position and stance as the church of God.

It is our task, as your Chief Pastors, to accept the weighty responsibility, in the interim of the General Conference, to state the official position of The AME Zion Church. Our position is shaped in light of the fact that Christian theology draws upon four sources: 1) Scripture, as our privileged source of authority, 2) Tradition, 3) Reason, and 4) Experience. This understanding,

upon which we base our theology, is the synthesis of all these, and each acts as a "check and balance" of the other.

The position of your Board of Bishops is not an attempt to win a debate, be it sociological or political; nor is it designed to impose our view upon others, demeaning those who have thoughtful opinions that differ from ours. It is, however, the stance of our Church; and as such, it is incumbent upon all of our clergy and lay leadership to conduct themselves, and ensure that our church facilities are used, consistent with this position.

We continue to affirm as consistent with our scriptural and Christian tradition the understanding of marriage as being a sacred covenant between one man and one woman. While we acknowledge that each of us as Christians often fall short of that ideal, and that even as norms and standards evolve over time; it is not for us to negotiate the teachings of scripture to our proclivities, but to aspire to the high values to which we believe scripture invites us all.

We call upon Christians everywhere, and especially across the AME Zion Church, to live our faith grounded in the ethic of love. We strongly encourage our members to foster a spirit of radical hospitality in our congregations, welcoming all persons with the amazing love of Christ. As followers of Jesus, we must model authentic love, grace, and integrity in all our relationships, speaking the truth in love to one another.

May we all be both humbled and encouraged by the words of the Apostle Paul;

***"Now** we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is **love.**" (1 Corinthians 13:12&13)*

Your Servants in Christ;

The Board of Bishops of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

The Right Reverend George E. Battle, Jr. - Senior Bishop and President

The Right Reverend Richard K. Thompson

The Right Reverend Louis Hunter

The Right Reverend Kenneth Monroe

The Right Reverend Darryl B. Starnes

The Right Reverend Dennis V. Proctor

The Right Reverend Mildred B. Hines

The Right Reverend W. Darin Moore

The Right Reverend Michael A. Frencher

The Right Reverend Seth O. Lartey

The Right Reverend George W. C. Walker, Sr. (Retired)

The Right Reverend S. Chuka Ekemam (Retired)

The Right Reverend Joseph Johnson (Retired)

The Right Reverend Marshal H. Strickland (Retired)

The Right Reverend Nathaniel Jarrett (Retired)

The Right Reverend Warren M. Brown (Retired)

December 5, 2015

**STATEMENT FROM THE BOARD OF BISHOPS OF
THE AME ZION CHURCH**

“This is what the Lord Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.’ - Zechariah 7:9 (NIV)

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church has been known for more than 219 years as “The Freedom Church.” As such, our members, clergy and laity alike have a powerful legacy of advocacy and action for social justice and the liberation of oppressed peoples. We are heirs of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Bishop Jermain Loguen, Bishop James Walker Hood, and Bishop Alexander Walters, all great members of the AME Zion Church who refused to remain silent and idle in the face of injustice. We dare not betray this weighty and rich legacy with either inaction or muted voices in the face of the continuing tragedy unfolding in Chicago.

The recently released videotape of the murder of Laquan McDonald, that had been withheld from public scrutiny for thirteen months, has ripped a scab off a deep, festering problem within the Chicago Police Department and contributes to the enormous distrust of law enforcement agencies existing in communities of color throughout this country. While we acknowledge and support the vast majority of police who are men and women of honor, some of whom are members of our congregations, we must demand greater accountability and transparency from those who are vested with lethal authority to “protect and serve.” The scriptures instruct us that “to whom much is given, much is required.”

Although an individual police officer fired the bullets that killed Laquan McDonald, we condemn not only that officer, but the co-conspirators manifested in the systemic devaluing of the lives of those who are young, black and brown, the culture of corruption and code of silence that demands the protection of officers who commit criminal acts, and the political dysfunction that either fosters or ignores such a toxic climate. Change can no longer be denied nor delayed. Blue ribbon panels conducting further research, politicians offering empty platitudes, and religious and civic leaders becoming apathetic are unacceptable. How many more senseless losses of life to violence, whether by troubled youth or by improperly trained and supervised police must we mourn? How many more mothers and fathers will have to bury their children and then be forced to take to the streets demanding justice for their loved ones? We’ve heard the refrain; “All lives matter” but the reality is that **all lives will only truly matter when Black lives fully matter.**

We are praying for healing in our land, but our prayers and faith must be accompanied with collective, sustained action. The AME Zion Church endorses the demands for action outlined by the Pan Methodist Coalition of Chicago and applauds their continuing

leadership in this effort. We stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of all faiths, ethnicities, and political affiliations who are striving for justice, community transformation, and a righteous peace. Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us!

Your Servants in Christ;

The Board of Bishops of The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
The Right Reverend Richard K. Thompson - President
The Right Reverend George E. Battle, Jr. - Senior Bishop
The Right Reverend Roy A. Holmes (Deceased)
The Right Reverend Louis Hunter, Sr.
The Right Reverend James E. McCoy (Deceased)
The Right Reverend Kenneth Monroe
The Right Reverend Darryl B. Starnes, Sr.
The Right Reverend Dennis V. Proctor
The Right Reverend Mildred B. Hines
The Right Reverend W. Darin Moore
The Right Reverend Seth O. Lartey
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The Right Reverend Nathaniel Jarrett (Retired)
The Right Reverend George W. C. Walker, Sr. (Retired)
The Right Reverend S. Chuka Ekemam (Retired)
The Right Reverend Warren M. Brown (Retired)