



The United Methodist Church

Alabama-West Florida Episcopal Area
Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference

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Resident Bishop

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February 2009

Dear Colleagues in Ministry,

The election and invitation to serve our Annual Conference as a Bishop consecrated to exercise oversight of the Church in its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ continues to humble me. I confess, no one is worthy of this responsibility, and it is only through God's grace extended through the Church that I seek strength and wisdom for this task.

One aspect of my role as a Bishop is to uphold the discipline and order of the Church by consecrating, ordaining, commissioning, supervising and appointing persons in ministry to the Church and world. This is exactly why I see your ministry as a partnership in the ministry of our Annual Conference. In your desire to make disciples of Jesus Christ through Word, Sacrament, Service and Order, I do not want you to neglect your responsibility to order the life of the church by modeling generous Christian giving, with special attention to teaching the Biblical principles of giving.

When the Book of Discipline 2008 reminds us, "The annual conference is the basic body in the Church" (par. 33), it affirms the Apostle Paul's understanding that even while he visited the churches of Corinth, Galatia, and Ephesus, there was no question he believed in only one Church. You and I have a mutual responsibility to order the life of the larger Church as we guide our local congregations in the great advantage found in our strong connection, especially during this national and local financial crisis gripping every community. We trust God's providential care over our lives, and the life of the Church, as we affirm the crisis will not be eternal.

The financial crisis has placed great restraints upon what we had hoped to do in mission as a connected Church, just as your local congregations are facing difficult choices of how best to continue in ministry with reduced resources.

It might be helpful as you order the life of the Church through your teaching and example to help your local congregational leadership know that our Annual Conference leadership is also acting responsibly in the midst of this current financial crisis. As an Annual Conference we are moving aggressively to model responsible choices:

- All District Superintendents salaries are requested to be frozen until 2011.
- Placing a "freeze" on spending for programs and ministries through our Conference Congregational Development Office.
- Holding off on the decision to re-fill the position of Director of Congregational Development and New Churches until the Fall of 2009 (or later) thus cutting the amount appropriated for this ministry by one half.
- Intensely reviewing all travel policies to cut travel expenses.
- Informing the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry that any reduction in membership will not be replaced with new persons this quadrennium (membership is elected by the Annual Conference for the entire quadrennium and cannot be changed unless persons voluntarily withdraw their membership).
- Reducing the Board of Ordained Ministry from 70 members to 50 when new nominations are put forth for the 2012 quadrennium. This decreases cost for meals, hotel rooms, and travel.
- Renegotiating all contracts for conference services to reduce spending on an annual basis.
- Requesting every conference board and committee to reduce its operating expenses.

The immediate impact of our current financial environment has been a drastic reduction in monies offered to our conference ministries. No doubt, you have heard how some of our most cherished ministries have been badly hurt with the reduction of funds. Some may be in danger of being permanently crippled.

In the mean time, the average pastor's salary increased this year in our Alabama-West Florida Conference, meaning that increased funds will be passed on through our conference mission and ministry giving, sometimes referred to as apportionments, in order to fund their individual pensions. Health care premiums have also increased and will also be collected through our conference apportionments. Currently this is the only means of collecting these funds and we cannot endanger your health care insurance, or your retirement, by failing to receive these funds. I regret this because it will mean preparing our churches for increased connectional costs while vital ministries related to student education, our children's home, camping ministries, retirement homes, Huntingdon College, and cherished conference missions suffer continued short falls.

What does it mean to order the life of the Church? It certainly does not mean leading our individual local congregations while our connected life as the larger Church deteriorates. It does mean trusting in God to value our spiritual partnership in building up the Body of Christ, expressing gratitude for our common leadership, and embracing generosity and faithful stewardship. No local church could accomplish the ministries to which we are committed in Alabama-West Florida by itself. Every church within the bounds of our conference was started and given life through the Annual Conference.

During this recessionary environment, I simply want to remind us of our common ministry and to share the responsible ways in which our Annual Conference leadership is seeking to be wise stewards of all that has been entrusted to us for ministry. Your faithfulness in teaching and ordering the life of the church is critical. Generosity is truly a spiritual gift. This year, even in the midst of financial shortfall, over 350 churches in our Alabama-West Florida Conference contributed 100% to the mission and ministry adopted at Annual Conference. Thank you! Our connection is our strength.

Bishops, and pastors in our tradition, are set apart to oversee the spiritual and temporal affairs of The United Methodist Church which confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and particularly to lead the Church in its mission of witness and service in the world. Pray for me. Let us pray for each other.

May God strengthen us with His Divine Presence.



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