

FIFTH EPISCOPAL DISTRICT
The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
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**A PASTORAL LETTER FROM
BISHOP TERESA JEFFERSON-SNORTON
REGARDING THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK**

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has many of us on edge as so many unknowns accompany the known facts that the virus is highly contagious and potentially fatal for high-risk individuals. Knowing what to do and not do can be confusing and generate more fears as we as people of faith desire to “do the right thing”.

Over the past several days, I have been in discussions with multiple communities of which I am a part, deliberating about the measures needed to be put in place to safeguard our communities. These communities include Miles College, the Interdenominational Theological Center, the ecumenical community, our own CME College of Bishops and several different groups within the Fifth Episcopal District. I mention them only to let you know how much I have been engaged in serious conversation about the Coronavirus. And to be perfectly transparent, I am also informed by more than thirty years working as a Chaplain in healthcare settings.

The College of Bishops is urging everyone to follow any government directives – at any level – regarding social distancing, cancelling events, and so on. As of now, we have left the decision whether or not to have local church services (unless mandated to suspend by your local or state government) in the hands of the pastor. Likewise, each Bishop is making his/her own decision about whether or not to hold scheduled meetings.

After much prayer and conversation, I have decided to **CANCEL THE FLORIDA REGION SPRING CONVOCATION**, which was scheduled for March 27-28, 2020. Please see the article below with details about our alternate plan for conducting our business.

In addition, I am advising every pastor and local congregation to give serious consideration to minimizing the gathering of its membership, **even if it means cancelling Sunday services and weekday events at the church**. I am not saying to do

this out of FEAR, but out of WISDOM and LOVE one for another. No, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and might.” But WISDOM tells us that our earthly life is governed by science and biological facts that lead us to not touch hot stoves or not go barefoot in the snow.

As believers, we should not abuse the faith of our members by using guilt and shame to put people in harm’s way! We should not use our faith as an excuse not to change our behavior.

The things we know about this virus support the WISDOM of limiting our human contact at this time. We do know exposure to infected persons can lead to becoming infected. We do know that you can be infected and not know it. We do know you can be infected and not feel sick. This is why the spread of the virus is so hard to contain and the pandemic numbers are climbing daily.

Now is the time to realize there is more than one way to do something. Technology like conference calls and video-conferencing, group text messaging and so on give us the ability to communicate with one another and be in community with one another other than face-to-face. If you are worried about your membership, an old-fashioned phone call will keep you in touch with them, even if it takes you all day to call each and every one of them. PASTORS, this is not a time of break or vacation from your ministry, but a time to put in the extra effort to care for your flock!!!!

NOW is the time to stop and rethink and not just do “business as usual”. If you don’t know how to use technology, now is the time to learn. If your church has been resistant to on-line giving, now is the time to set that up. If you have been spending your time preparing for a traditional Sunday service, use that time instead to be creative and relevant to the current crises and needs of your people. Now is the time to embrace new behaviors, try new things, and acknowledge that we do trust in God, but God does not expect us to be reckless, just because we don’t want to change.

If we truly love God, our neighbors and ourselves as the Great Commandment instructs, we will all stop, take stock of what is really important, and invest in behaviors that demonstrate that love, including behaviors related to how we worship, how we pray, how we do outreach and how we attend to God’s business at such a time as this.

In love and in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Teresa Jefferson-Snorton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton