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David C. Teel

August 17, 2020

To the Laity of the United Methodist Church,

This is an extraordinary time in the history of our church and world. As Conference Lay Leaders we gathered in February optimistically anticipating a future guided by vision and filled with action. We returned home to face a modern pandemic that has cancelled local, conference, and denomination-wide activities. Many of us are not gathering in our houses of worship right now. Clergy and laity are learning ways to minister differently. Weddings, funerals, celebrations – even times of breaking bread and fellowship -- have been postponed or reduced to minimized gatherings. Separation has brought challenges to how we meaningfully carry on our ministry and mission.

In the same time frame, the lives of Ahmaud Arbury, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many other Black lives have been violently ended because of the sin of deeply rooted racism. Pain, anger, denial and new realizations have further ripped the already frayed fabric of communities across the world.

Jesus gave us the Great Commandment, to “love one another as I have loved you.” Discomfort, fear, loss, grief or anger do not excuse us from this command.

“But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God’s instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.” (1 Peter 2:9, *The Message*)

We have been called through our baptism to steadfast leadership in this time.

God calls us to stand as witnesses to this dual pandemic. As laity we are 99.2% of the church and our voices matter. We cannot sit as observers to these events. We will not go back to normal. We cannot be silent. We are vital to the unfolding of God’s hope for us, to be people who hold one another and the communities around us, in love. Our acts of witnessing are not those of a spectator or to record history, but to take action and cause change.

God calls us to care for one another during this plague that has taken the lives of over 775,000 people worldwide. Seasons of pandemic and cultural change do not excuse us from being aware and supportive of our neighbors. Rather, they call us to being there for one another, hearing, listening deeply and acting.

God calls us to open our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to the systemic and individual realities of racism. We are called to raise our voices for God's kingdom, for the life we can all live together.

God calls us to acknowledge that when one person is denied freedom all are responsible to raise the voice of faith against systems of oppression. It is past time to use our voices.

We are called to act. As laity, consider actions you can take with your families, congregations, and communities.

- Lead courageous conversations about this dual pandemic. How can we be supportive while isolated? How can we see and understand the systemic racism that is so deeply rooted?
- Hold all of those in prayer who risk their lives to heal the sick and protest against the inequities around us. Advocate and work for God's justice and mercy for those who suffer.
- Shine light on those invisible biases in our relationships, congregations, conferences, and the Church that diminish the voices of some while strengthening others.
- Question our assumptions about the way our church works. Seek ministry and mission that expand our understanding of others. Where can we advocate for justice? How can we reach out to the world and help build God's Kingdom here, for everyone?
- Renew our commitment to love one another, fully embracing the knowledge that sometimes this means we need to let go of old ways and old thinking that may allow us to think that some people are better than others and deserve more, while accepting that other people, ideas or dreams are disposable.
- Collectively use our voices to question, confront, resist, and heal. Every single one of God's Children needs safety, protection, and support. Most of us benefit from larger systems of government, education, health, transportation, recreation and more; are they realistically and equally available to everyone in the community?
- Participate in learning that equips laity to engage with justice and mercy efforts. Learn together through books, movies, listening, and taking the risk to think differently.

If all this seems daunting, let's remember together that God will not give us a task too large nor will God leave us on our own. If we move beyond our comfort zones or encounter disapproval from others, we can think about the late John Lewis whose whole life was grounded in his Christian faith. Mr. Lewis, a great American statesman and advocate for the beloved community once said, **"let's get in some good trouble together."**

The season for change and transformation is **NOW!** In all our own places, let us follow God's call.

God's blessings,

The AACLL Executive Committee