June 4, 2020

A message from AWF-UMC Bishop David Graves:

Dear Alabama-West Florida Church Family,

In recent days following the tragic murder of yet another black male, George Floyd, there have been numerous statements written and reports of protests. Most of these were peaceful, yet some turned violent. Images of the officer’s knee suffocating the life from Mr. Floyd and the emotion that has followed leads to haunting cries that enough is enough. I am outraged at the actions I continue to see against people of color. During these times, it is our instinct to write or post on social media. Perhaps some of you have been asking when I would make a statement.

Over the last few days and weeks, the stirring in my spirit has been to listen! I have listened to the feelings of anger, hurt, and pain of my brothers and sisters of color. Some of their anger lies with white people who continue to talk while they need to listen. I have listened to protestors who desperately beg for the generational trauma of persecution and killing to stop. To my dismay, I have listened to the theological rhetoric and the defensive posture of many. I have listened to those who are frustrated with those who abuse their positions of power. I have heard that we need to give space for forgiveness, acknowledge that racism is a sin, and that we need to acknowledge it when we hear it. I have listened to the lack of support for the black church here in Alabama-West Florida. I have listened to white clergy and laity who ask, “Bishop what can we do? I have so many questions and feel paralyzed to know how to appropriately act.”

As I listen, I hear a consistent theme with COVID-19 and the events of the last week: weariness. Yes Lord, we are weary living in a weary land. We have moved from being tired to weary. It is a hard place to be. As I have listened, these words from 2 Chronicles 7:14 resonate within me, “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” Many are calling on God to heal our land, yet it will begin when God’s people turn to what we celebrated this past Pentecost Sunday in Acts 2:21, “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” For God has poured out God’s Holy Spirit on all people for their choosing.

I am asking all people in the Alabama-West Florida Conference to listen and stand in solidarity with people of color! Make no mistake that all lives will in fact matter when black lives matter. This coming Sunday, June 7, is observed as Peace With Justice Sunday in the United Methodist Church. What timing! For as I listen, I hear the cry of where there is no justice there is no peace. I am calling us to listen as we begin this Sunday at 12:00 midnight with a 24-hour prayer vigil, followed by 24 days of prayer.

For the 24-hour prayer vigil, there is an online sign-up with 15-minute prayer slots. Up to five people may register during each time slot. However, as many people who want to pray during a specific time may do so. God will hear our prayers! Please click here to sign up now. I would hope that we would have hundreds of people across this conference to participate and pray over the 24 hours this Sunday.
The remaining days will have focused prayers as you can see on this calendar. During these 24 days of prayer, we are asking people to do virtual prayer walks on their own or with a small group. Additionally, we will be posting daily prayers on social media. Download the prayer sheet so that you can incorporate this focused time of prayer in your daily devotional life.

Next, I would ask us to listen to one another during this time. To be frank with white people, you need to listen much more. Just listen, even when listening is hard. In these remaining days of June, I would ask all of us to talk with one another and to take the posture of listening more than talking. As we listen, God is calling all of us to be a part of ending systemic racism and injustice.

24-hours of prayer and 24 days of prayer are what God has placed on my heart as we listen to what God is calling us to do next. The Holy Spirit is stirring within my heart to take action steps in the coming days. I plan to share that soon, but for now, there is this urging within me that we need to continuously pray and listen. Yes, it will take much more than prayer and listening, as prayer without action leads to death. For today in this Holy Spirit moment, speak Lord, speak!

In loving kindness,
Bishop David Graves
Resident Bishop
Alabama-West Florida Conference