



Western North Carolina Conference

The United Methodist Church

A Video Message of Hope, Peace, and Thanksgiving from Bishop Leeland

Follow Jesus, Make Disciples, Transform The World

NOVEMBER 23, 2020 - Grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the traditional greeting the Apostle Paul shares as he addresses the Church. As we continue to address the fallout from a divided national election, racial injustice and tension, concern about the differences within our denomination, and the global pandemic, these are the words we need to hear; and the words our congregations need to hear – Grace and Peace.

It may surprise some in our churches, but we have been in this place before: the pandemic of 1918, 19, and 20; the racial tensions of the 1960's when our nation witnessed similar demonstrations in our cities, and as a result, the rise of presidential candidates whose platform was Law and Order; and a divided denomination related to whether we would unify the church to create a United Methodist Church.

As people of faith, we move through the uncertainties of our time in hope, faith, and love, believing that ultimately love will prevail, and God's will shall ultimately be done. If there is something we have learned during this "time out" created by the pandemic it has been to refocus us on what is important: the pastoral care of those in our community; the importance of contact and conversation; especially for those who are homebound; and the importance of Christian teaching and worship – even if it is online at the moment.

I have been impressed with our ministers who are visiting their congregational members, sitting on their porches (socially distanced), sitting outside on lawn chairs, making sure classes and members are connecting through technology. We have been reconnected with those things that are important and the message of Christian hope. There is light at the end of the tunnel. I am not surprised to hear our church leaders report that in this worrisome environment there are new people who have become serious seekers of God, hope, and a better future.

As missionaries, each of us step into this newly emerging culture regardless of the culture's disruption, disturbances, and uncertainties. Our message in Jesus Christ – who is the visible image of the invisible God, and is reconciling all things in earth and heaven – has been and is always the same.

I want you to know that while I have been concerned for our clergy, I have also been so proud of them for being champions of the gospel. One visible sign of your faithfulness has been your church's support of the missional needs beyond your immediate congregation. Did you know that because of your financial faithfulness with our apportionments we have:

- Continued our lay servant training
- Provided 500 congregations with zoom accounts
- Continued to plan new congregations, Fresh Expressions, and Dinner Churches
- Continued our support of campus ministries
- Chaplains at our United Methodist Colleges
- Sharing more than \$500,000 with congregations during this pandemic so clergy families did not suffer.
- Continued to recruit and prepare clergy for ordination
- Offered ongoing training and coaching for clergy leadership
- Supported an office for pensions and health benefits
- And partnered with churches who could become full time through equitable compensation.

While these are certainly not all that our apportionments have been doing, it gives you a picture of how we have remained faithful and continued to serve Jesus Christ through the church.

I realize that for some, changes are happening much too slowly; and for others it is happening much too rapidly. Yet, we remain faithful in the gospel.

I began speaking to you with the words of the Apostle Paul and I will close with his words as well: "Keep your spiritual passion, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer" (Rom 12:11-12).