



## **Council of Bishops**

### **African Methodist Episcopal Church**

March 22, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Urgent Request for Relief for Religious Institutions

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Madam Speaker and Minority Leader McCarthy:

The coronavirus pandemic has challenged Americans in all sectors in ways that grow increasingly more difficult every day. The first priority is the health and safety of everyone and churches around the country are prioritizing how to provide critically needed material support and spiritual counsel within the contours

of the restrictions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control, as well as orders issued from state and local governments.

The Black Church, in particular, exercises a vital function within the communities we serve. It is estimated that there are more than 60,000 Black churches in the United States serving communities in the 50 states, making the Black church one of the largest property owners in the Black community. Our denomination, the African American Episcopal Church (A.M.E.), is one of the largest with an estimated 2.5 million members. Founded in Philadelphia in 1787, our church has been a leading voice of spiritual leadership, civil rights, and social uplift throughout our existence.

Sunday morning church services remain at the core of the Black church experience. Per the Pew Research Forum, Blacks attend weekly church services at the highest rate of any racial group in our country. Like almost all Black churches, our operations are funded almost entirely through the tithes and offerings of our members. Those donations are delivered at our Sunday services when we come together for corporate worship and prayer. Although almost all of our churches provide some means for our members to make their donations on-line, in-person Sunday morning donations remain the largest and most consistent source of revenue for our churches. The donations received from our parishioners are the basis upon which our churches make mortgage and rent payments for the tens of thousands of church facilities that anchor so many Black communities throughout our country.

Beginning Sunday March 22, services have been suspended in A.M.E. churches across the country, in compliance with CDC guidance discouraging gatherings of more than 10 people and encouraging social distancing, and “shelter in place” and other restrictions issued by state and local governments. It remains unclear how long these orders will be in place, given the uncertain trajectory of this pandemic.

The suspension of Sunday services means that our churches are poised to suffer a catastrophic loss of income. As April approaches, mortgage and rent payments will come due for our facilities. Many of our churches simply will not have the revenue to meet these obligations. Should the pandemic continue over several months, churches of all denominations will find undoubtedly themselves unable to cover monthly mortgage and rent payments. We are gratified that the Federal Housing Finance Administration (FHFA) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have imposed a moratorium on foreclosures and evictions. We have also been encouraged to pursue forbearance to provide mortgage and rent relief during the pandemic. But forbearance programs will simply delay the mortgage payments that will continue to accrue during this period, attaching them to the end of our loans or leases, and thus further burdening our churches as they struggle to adjust their financial situations after this immediate crisis has passed. Churches need the suspension and forgiveness of mortgage and rent payments during this pandemic.

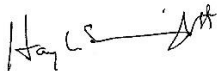
Churches are non-profit organizations which continue to provide material and spiritual support to our members. When we emerge from this crisis, we will need to work to regain our financial footing while serving and supporting our congregations and surrounding communities. Our financial stability will remain dependent on that of our members, who will themselves be in recovery from unemployment, decreased income and many from the overwhelming effects of losing family members to this pandemic. We expect that the Black community will be particularly hard hit. We have seen estimates that the unemployment rate for the country may reach the double digits. We would expect the unemployment rate for Black communities to be considerably higher.

Thus, it our sincere hope that as part of this stimulus package you will include a provision which provides for mortgage and rent forgiveness for religious institutions during the course of the pandemic. We observe the forcefulness with which bailouts for other for-profit industries that have been hit hard by this pandemic have been pursued. But airlines, restaurants and hotels are no more important than our churches to the fabric of our society and will be no more important to the reinvigoration of our communities once this pandemic has passed. The Black church, in particular, is a critical resource. Maintaining the integrity and viability of our churches will be critical to the revitalization of our communities when we seek to rebuild after this pandemic.

As non-profit organizations which provide charitable support and care, and rely on the contributions of ordinary, average, working class Americans to do our work and pay our bills, we are deserving of prioritized consideration in this stimulus bill to ensure that we will not face the loss of our facilities to foreclosure once this pandemic is over.

We encourage every Senator and every member of the House of Representatives to support measures that suspend and forgive mortgage and rent payments for religious institutions during the period in which gatherings are restricted and social distancing is recommended to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

Respectfully Submitted,



**The Right Reverend Harry L. Seawright (9<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)**  
*President*  
*Council of Bishop*

Bishop Adam J. Richardson, Jr. (Senior Bishop, 11<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
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Bishop Wilfred Jacobus Messiah (17<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
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Bishop James Levert Davis (2<sup>nd</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop David Rwhynica Daniels Jr. (15<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
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Bishop E. Earl McCloud, Jr. (14<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop Jeffrey Nathaniel Leath (13<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop Julius Harrison McAllister, Sr. (8<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop John Franklin White (4<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop Clement Willie Fugh (5<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop Reginald Thomas Jackson (6<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop Ronnie Elijah Brailsford (20<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
Bishop Stafford J. N. Wicker (18<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District)  
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Bishop Preston Warren Williams, II  
Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry

Cc: All members of the United States House of Representatives  
All members of the Congressional Black Caucus  
All members of the United States Senate