Proposed Position Paper General Conference

African Methodist Episcopal Church

Climate Change

There has been much discussion and debate regarding the issue of Climate Change. The overwhelming majority of scientist affirms the reality and existence of climate change, which is due primarily to the human use of fossil fuels, which releases carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the air. The gases trap heat within the atmosphere, which can have a range of effects on ecosystems, including rising sea levels, severe weather events, and droughts that render landscapes more vulnerable to wildfires. Primary causes of climate change are the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal and oil, which emits greenhouse gases into the atmosphere- primarily carbon dioxide.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration agree that climate change is indeed occurring and is almost certainly due to human activity. Yet, there are some in this country who insist that climate change is not real and has not been proven. They dismiss the science which has been used to argue the existence of climate change, and criticize the impact on the economy of efforts to deal with climate change, while the effects of climate change continue to be evident. The earth’s average temperature has increased 1.4 F over the past century and is expected to rise as much as 11.5 F over the next century. Rising sea levels due to the melting of the polar ice caps contribute to greater storm damage; warming ocean temperatures associated with stronger and more frequent storms; additional rainfall during severe weather, and an increase in the severity of wildfires.

During his term President Obama has made climate change one of the major goals of his administration. In June 2015 President Obama issued Executive Orders setting the following goals:

1. Goal of keeping warming below 2 degrees Celsius and for the first time agrees to pursue efforts to limit the increase in temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius.
2. Reduce emissions by 17%, below 2005 levels
3. Eliminate six billion tons of carbon dioxide by 2025
4. 30% reduction in carbon pollution by the power sector by 2030
5. Install 100 megawatts of renewable capacity across federally subsidized housing by 2020
6. Expand and modernize electric transmission grid

The African Methodist Episcopal Church believes that climate change is real and that the nation must act to reduce the causes and effects of climate change. Further we support the Obama Administration’s goals to reduce climate change.

Immigration

The United States has had a broken immigration for years. Several presidents have promised to address the problem, including President Obama. The last president to address the immigration issue, and it was only piecemeal was President Ronald Reagan. The United States Senate passed immigration legislation two years ago, but the United States House of Representatives refused to act it. Much of the objection to the immigration legislation has come from conservative Republicans who charge that it provides amnesty for over 11 million illegal immigrants. Some of these leaders, particularly in this election season have called for the deportation of all illegal immigrants, including their children who were born in this country. They have also proposed building a wall across the US and Mexican border to keep Mexicans from crossing into the United States. It is unfortunate that the House of Representatives refused to act on the legislation passed by the Senate, which has only aggravated a major problem and polarized the nation even more. The nation is even more polarized by some of the candidates for president of the United States who have called for a temporary ban on allowing Muslims to enter the country, as well as refugees from war torn Syria.

We believe the failure to act on immigration, the call to deport more than 11 million illegal immigrants and the temporary ban on Muslims entering the country, is about more than amnesty and fears about terrorism. It is our belief that at the heart of the problem is the desire to maintain the status quo in this country. In a few years with immigration at its current pace, it is projected that the majority population in the United States will no longer be white, but people of color. This is frightening and unacceptable to some in the current majority population. Thus the call to deport more than 11 million Hispanics and other people of color, who while here work, many at menial jobs, and support the nation in many other ways. It is important to note that no one is proposing to build a wall, a fence or any other measures to halt or slow immigration across the northern border or address immigrants from European and other areas.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church calls for the reintroduction of the legislation passed by the Senate in the last Congress, and for it to be debated, amended and acted on by both houses in the 115th Congress to be seated in January 2017,and oppose any efforts to depose the 11 million illegal immigrants presently in the country, impose a temporary ban on Muslims entering the country or a ban on Syrian refugees who clear investigation and complete the visa process.

Criminal Justice Reform

The criminal justice system in the United States is in need of major reform. If we are honest, our present criminal justice system is not just. The United States which makes up less than five percent of the world’s population, incarcerates more than 2.3 million people, nearly a quarter of the world’s prisoners. This results in monumental economic and social cost across the nation.

Much of the increase in the prison population can be attributed to laws passed and signed under the Clinton Administration. These laws had a major negative impact on minorities, especially black males, where one in every three black males had some participation in the correction system. These laws included “three strikes” and you go to jail for life. Many of these laws were to project “law and order”, with the result of mass incarceration. For example blacks make up less than 15% of the national population but almost sixty percent of those who are incarcerated, most of them for non-violent drug offenses. And while whites are the majority of drug users in the nation, most of them see no prison time because their primary drug of choice does not carry the same penalty as drugs used by blacks. Additionally, drug laws require use of drugs in cities almost mandatory jail time, as opposed to use in the suburbs and rural areas. The prison industry became one of the most profitable industries in the nation, as the US spent more to lock people up than it did to educate them.

The injustice and race bias of the criminal justice system is also evident in present attitudes regarding changing drug laws. Most political leadership now declares that drug use is not a crime, but a disease. What makes this change of attitude suspect is that the nation is now facing a “heroin epidemic”, the primary choice of white drug users. It appears drugs is now a “disease” because of the use and impact on whites.

The criminal justice system also needs reform as it relates to policing. Over the last several years there have been an alarming number of blacks injured or killed by law enforcement, many of them unarmed. The issue exploded with the shooting of Michael Brown an unarmed black male in Ferguson, MO., the lack of an indictment of police in the choking death of Eric Garner, again unarmed in Staten Island, New York, the death of Freddie Gray also unarmed and who committed no crime in Baltimore, Maryland, Tamir Rice, a twelve year old boy killed by police because he had a pellet gun, Laquan McDonald, unarmed, shot 16 times by Chicago police, Akil Gurley, unarmed, shot and killed in New York City coming down the steps because the police officer was afraid in the dark. The list goes on and on, where every twenty six hours a black is shot or injured by law enforcement. Much of this because of the mindset of law enforcement who engages in racial profiling, automatically believing that blacks are to be suspected of something illegal, and use to justify their shooting or physical abuse, “I feared for my life.”

Injustice in the criminal justice system is also seen through the legal system which seldom takes action against law enforcement, with county prosecutors failing to seek indictments, juries failing to convict or police departments not disciplining officers. Just a few weeks ago in the Gurley case in New York, where the officer was convicted, but the US Attorney has recommended to the judge that the officer not be sentenced to jail time, but to probation and 500 hours of community service.

It is further demonstrated by the sentencing of judges. Numerous studies conducted over the last twenty five years show that sentencing of blacks and whites in like cases are greatly disparate, with blacks getting prison more than twice the rate of whites, and when both are sentenced to prison, blacks get far longer sentences. Additionally, when whites are killed by a black, the overwhelming likelihood is that the black defendant will receive the death sentence.

There are a multitude of problems and injustices in the criminal justice system. In a word the present criminal justice system is just unjust, particularly toward blacks and other minorities.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church supports reforms proposed by a bipartisan Congressional coalition which would reduce the length of mandatory minimum sentences, limiting them to serious drug felonies and violent crimes, ban solitary confinement for juveniles and allow them to apply for parole after a maximum of 20 years, grant judges more flexibility in sentencing for a range of crimes and bolster re-entry programs in federal prisons aimed at reducing recidivism. Additionally we call for legislation at both the federal and state level which would require the appointment of a special prosecutor in cases involving shooting or injury by law enforcement personnel. Finally we call for the federal government and other states to join the state of New Jersey in passing legislation making racial profiling a crime.

Gun Control Reform

Gun violence in the United States continues to increase year after year, resulting in death, injury, broken families and tragedy all across the nation. The United States has the highest percentage of death by gun violence in the world, with more than 50,000 deliberate and more than 25,000 accidental gunshot injuries a year. The number of mass shootings has become common place with more than 355 in 2015 alone, causing the slaughter of thousands of everyday citizens, in their homes, cars, at the grocery store, movie theatre, restaurants, schools, and college campuses, houses of worship and on the street.

It is easier to get a gun, than it is to get a driver’s license, causing there to be 9 guns for every 100 persons in the United States, many of them obtained illegally or without background checks. The proliferation of guns in the United States has caused an average of 289 people to be shot every day, 31 Americans to be killed daily by guns and 151 people to be treated every day in an emergency room for gun assault. Everyday 55 people kill themselves with a firearm, and 46 people are shot or killed in an accident with a gun, and an average of seven children and teens under the age of 20 are killed by guns every day.

The increase in gun violence has demonstrated the critical need to increase resources and access for mental health evaluation, treatment and programs, and for parents and families to monitor their children’s exposure and influence by video games, movies and other technology which promotes violence and other inappropriate behavior.

The gun lobby in this country has resisted all efforts to regulate and provide accountability for guns, arguing that any effort to require background checks and other measures for gun possession, violate rights guaranteed by the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, and vow to block any and all efforts to reform gun laws, instead arguing to arm teachers and provide more citizens more guns. Their response to act of gun violence is more guns, arguing that everybody should have a gun.

It should be clear to every rationale American that the United States desperately needs to reform its gun laws. Polls show that an overwhelming majority of Americans support some gun reform proposals, specifically background checks.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church deplores the increasing gun violence in the United States and calls the Congress to support gun reform proposals called upon by President Obama and legislation proposed by Senator Michael Blumenthal of Connecticut and Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland that will meet the need of common sense gun legislation.

Same Sex Marriage

A deeply divided United States Supreme Court by a 5 to 4 vote, in the case Obergefell v. Hodges ruled that the United States Constitution requires that same-sex couples be allowed to marry no matter where they live and that states may no longer reserve the right only for heterosexual couples. This decision effectively and immediately makes same sex marriage across the United States legal. Same sex marriage has and continues to divide the nation, however polls indicate that a majority of Americans now support sex same marriage. While the Supreme Court decision makes same sex marriage legal, it does not require churches and other faith communions who do not believe in same sex marriage to violate their faith or beliefs.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church believes that marriage is between a man and a woman. Our position is not based on human or civil rights, nor is it because of bias or homophobia; it is based solely on our reading and understanding of God’s Word. We do not condemn nor do we judge those who believe or are involved in same sex relationships. Further, we acknowledge that in many of our congregations, we have members who are gay and involved in same sex relationships. They are members of the church, as any other individual member of the church, and are permitted to hold or run for offices at the local, presiding elder district, annual conference and connectional levels of our church. While we do not believe in same sex marriage, we oppose any and all prejudice against those who are gay. This remains a divisive issue, even for people of faith, who ourselves are divided on this issue. We continue to seek God’s guidance and understanding on this issue.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church reaffirms our belief that marriage is between a man and a woman, and forbids our ministers from uniting in, performing or participating in same sex marriage ceremonies, or the use of our facilities for such events.

Voting Rights

We are rapidly approaching November 6th, the day for national elections, when the nation will elect a president, members of Congress, governors, and a host of other state, county and municipal officials. This election more than any other in most of our lifetimes, offers voters a clear choice between the candidates and their position on issues. Unfortunately this election is also showing us something else, something it was our hope that we would not see again in our lifetimes. That is the effort to deny and prohibit people from exercising their right to vote. The deeply divided 5 to 4 Supreme Court decision in the case Shelby County v. Holder gutted Section 44 of the Voting Rights Act opening the door for states to change voting laws in a detrimental way. As a result nineteen states (19) have in place attempts to put in place laws and requirements which make it more burdensome and problematic to vote.

The ones who would be most negatively impacted if these laws and requirements are upheld will be Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos, and the young. This is not by accident, but is designed and intentional to dilute and reduce our vote. In the 2008 election there was record turnout among these groups which in large measure determined the outcome of many races, particularly the presidential contest. It was expected that the turnout of Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos and young people in 2012 would not be as great as their turnout in 2008, but records show it exceeded the turnout in 2008. This angered and troubled some, prompting new laws and efforts to suppress their vote.

Some of the laws and requirements would require voters to have government photo identification that many people don’t have, for example those who don’t drive, other laws would shorten the time for early voting, which would impact minorities who more than others vote early. In other states some photo identification would not be valid while photo identification such as a gun license would be valid. Those who are pushing these laws argue they are pursuing them to decrease or end voter fraud. This claim itself is fraudulent because in states all across the nation the instance of voter fraud is less than one half of one percent or non-existent. In light of this clear and disingenuous attempt to diminish and suppress the minority vote it is imperative that we do all we can do to ensure that every citizen’s right to vote is honored.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church abhors attempts to suppress the vote of Blacks, Hispanics/Latinos and young people, as well as the Supreme Court decision which gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We call upon the Congress to keep it’s word and act to amend the Voting Rights Act, and we support legal and other efforts to stop attempts to suppress our votes. We also commit ourselves and call other faith communions and organizations to register, educate and motivate as many people as possible to vote.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter Movement is a national organization working to affirm the value and importance

of Black life in the United States. Founded after the shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012

the movement is a call to action and a response to anything and everything that that undermines, denies and seeks to dehumanize Blacks and our progress and advancement. It grew out of, but is not limited to the unjust killing of blacks by law enforcement. It includes all of the ways Black people are intentionally left powerless, and deprived of basic human rights and dignity. Black Lives Matter is working for a world where Black Lives are no longer systemically and intentionally undermined, restricted and destroyed. Black Lives Matter invites all who strive and seek liberation.

There are many in this country that oppose and reject the Black Lives Matter Movement. Many white, and a significant number of Blacks. They oppose Black Lives Matter because they argue that “all lives matter”, as if to argue that Black Lives Matter negates the importance of other races and their lives in the United States. We do not believe this is the claim or the intent of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Rather we believe the claim that “all lives matter” for some is a ploy not to have to face or confront the legitimate issues that the Black Lives Matter Movement raises. If Black Lives Mattered, why is there a dual public education system in the United States? For example, one system which is rural and suburban, which is predominantly white, where children get a good education, and another urban, and predominantly Black, where children get a poor education. Or a criminal justice system where Blacks make up less than 15% of the population, but over 50% of those incarcerated. There are a host of other examples, including the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. If Black Lives really mattered the nation would act on these issues, but has not. Why? Others are reserved about Black Lives Matter because of the outspokenness and activism of the movement, such as protest, confronting political leaders, and even criticism of institutions such as the Black Church and political leaders who they perceive as not being committed, involved or relevant. These are the same criticisms some of us had about the same institutions and political leaders when we were younger.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church supports the mission of the Black Lives Matter movement and supports its efforts to enhance the progress and advancement of African Americans in the United States, fighting against racism, mass incarceration, poor education, disparity in the criminal justice system, income inequality and other areas which prohibit equality, fairness, and opportunity for African Americans.

Race and Racism

The United States is in denial about the problem of racism. Following the election in 2008 of Barack Obama, the nation’s first Black president, it was said that the United States is now living in a post racial period. The last eight years have shown that this was absolutely untrue. To the contrary we began to hear the cry, “we want our country back”, although we have never been told from whom. It inferred that when the nation’s first Black president was elected the country was taken, but again we not told from whom? The inference is that it was taken from whites, particularly white males.

While racism has always been a problem in the United States, it had been subtle for many years. However, over the last eight years racism has become more blatant and obvious. Some obvious examples are, with the election and re-election in 2012 of President Obama, we have seen over nineteen states enact laws with the intent of suppressing and reducing the voting strength of blacks, increasing racial profiling of blacks by law enforcement, which has resulted in unarmed blacks being unjustly killed by law enforcement, with few law enforcement officers being indicted or convicted. It is also seen in a criminal justice system that disproportionately sentences blacks to prison at a much higher rate than whites. Racism is also evident in the public school system in this nation, where a dual public school system exists. Rural and suburban schools that are predominantly white, and where children get a good education, and urban schools, which are predominantly black, and minority, and children get a poor education. The urban schools have become the feeder system for the correction system, and exacerbate the problem of black unemployment, poverty, and family breakup.

Over the last eight years the mindset of racist has been emboldened. There has been an increasing number of hate crimes and hate groups, who have become more vocal and open in their expressions. The blatant mindset of racism was seen June 17,2015 in Charleston, South Carolina at Mother Emanuel AME Church when Dylan Roof, a young white male was welcomed and sat in Bible Study for one hour, and then shot and killed nine people, including the pastor. Before shooting them he said he had to do it because, “we want our country back.”

With increasing racial strife, there is a contradiction among the American people regarding race. In national polls most Americans, despite the facts which show it, say that there is not racism or disparity in law enforcement treatment of blacks, and at the same time in other national polls say that race relations in the country have worsened during the presidency of Barack Obama.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church believes that the number one domestic problem in the United States is racism, and that racism is domestic terrorism. In September of 2015 the African Methodist Episcopal Church called Methodist communions from across the country to meet in Washington, DC at the National Press Club to call the nations attention to the problem of racism. We called upon the Congressional leadership to address the issue and made specific proposals to address the issue. Neither Sen. Majority Leader McConnell or new House Speaker Ryan have responded. We will again seek action by Congressional leaders and the new president following the November elections.

Education

The most important issue for African Americans and people of color in Africa and around the world is education. Education is the great equalizer. Without a good education people will not have opportunity and will be unable to be their best selves. In the United States there is a dual education system, where urban schools provide far too African Americans a poor education, and in Africa, particularly poorer countries in Western and Central Africa a quality education is a scarcity, due to inability to pay. Yet, some of the better performing schools anywhere are in certain parts of Africa. Reports indicate that too many schools in the Caribbean and West Indies do not provide a good education compared to other schools around the world.

While the United States prides itself on being the most advanced country in the world, its schools are in decline compared to other countries around the world. It ranks 17th among other nations in Math and reading, and 21st in Science. Among African nations for literacy, Zimbabwe ranks first, South Africa ranks third, Kenya is fourth, Swaziland, 11th, Zambia is thirteenth, Malawi is twenty fourth, Liberia is twenty eighth and Mozambique is 40th. Many of the countries in Africa face financial challenges to providing students a quality education. They do not have the resources to build adequate buildings. Funds to train teachers or provide them with livable salaries, and nor do they have funds for books and other supplies. The United States however, is different; it is a question of priorities. It does not speak well that the United States spends more to incarcerate someone, than it does to educate someone. Even more troubling is that the quality of education in the United States depends upon zip code and race.

The quality of life and advancement of any nation is dependent upon the quality of education of its people. This is particularly true of nations in Africa, the Caribbean and West Indies.

The importance of a quality education should not be under estimated. Without a quality education you can’t get a good job, without a good job you can’t provide for your family, when you can’t provide for your family, families break up, when families break up social and community problems increase, and when social and community problems increase more jails are built.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church affirms the importance and commits itself to promote quality education in all the countries where our churches are located. We call upon the administration of the next US president to make quality education, particularly in urban areas all across the nation a priority and champion education reforms that will accomplish this goal. We also call upon nations in Africa, the Caribbean, West Indies and India to make education a priority that is reflected in their national budgets. Further, we call upon the United Nations to work with third world and other nations to provide grants and other funding to advance the cause of quality education. Quality education must be a priority of the world community. It will help alleviate world poverty and aid in the fight against terrorism.

Healthcare

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, referred to as “Obamacare”, was signed into law by President Obama on March 23, 2010. It is the signature domestic achievement of the Obama presidency. Despite consistent criticism from some politicians, the Affordable Care Act is accomplishing most of its goals. The number of people without health insurance has been reduced by 25 percent or 8 to 11 million people. It is estimated that by 2017, 32 million more Americans will get insurance through this law. President Obama claimed that the law would protect Americans from destructive high medical bills and guaranteeing access to comprehensive and affordable coverage. Eighty five percent of those who signed up during the enrollment period qualified for federal subsidies to help pay premiums, and 7.3 million Americans remain enrolled in private coverage through the laws online market places. Those who qualified for subsidies through the federal exchange had their subsidies lowered by 76 percent. Some who already had insurance have seen their premiums increased as insurers were required to provide a broader array of benefits and to cover people with pre-existing conditions. Dire warnings that premiums for most people would rise sharply have proven untrue. The greatest claim of the Affordable Care Act was that it would make the nation healthier. It is too early to know if this claim is true, however early data suggest that the law is having a positive impact on the healthcare of young people.

Since the law’s passage there have been over 70 attempts by the Congress to repeal the Affordable Care Act, all have failed. Republicans in the Congress have promised if a Republican president is elected and they retain control of both houses of the Congress that they will repeal the Affordable Care Act. It should be noted that they have promised, but have not provided an alternative to the Affordable Care Act.

In Africa and the Caribbean we are concerned that most of the people have little or no access to healthcare. The result tragically is that life expectancy is many of these countries is very short, for many adults between 50 to 60 years, often times still shorter. Many of the young people particularly because of food shortages suffer from many illnesses. Most of these countries are poor and do not have the means to provide or improve the quality of healthcare.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church has supported the Affordable Care Act since it was presented to Congress and signed by the president. We went further and participated in enrolling people in the Affordable Care Act. Prior to it’s passage the United States was the only industrialized nation in the world that did not provide it’s citizens national healthcare, while this Act does not cover 100% of Americans, it comes close, and we support efforts to improve this Act, including insuring 100% of Americans and strongly oppose any effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Further, we again appeal to the United Nations to convene an international conference to address the lack of healthcare and health crisis in third world and other poor nations around the world. We also call upon the industrialized nations of the world to work together to improve health in third world and poor nations.

Foreign Affairs

United States Foreign Policy is being questioned and criticized at home and abroad. This is because the United States is presently engaged in conflict or offering military assistance all around the globe. The criticism claims that the United States is not as strong, is not projecting leadership or has the confidence of allies, or the fear of our enemies.

The United States current military involvements began during the administration of President George W. Bush, following the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001. Involvement of US troops in Iraq were based on false information claiming that Iraq was connected with Al Queda in attacking the US and that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. In addition the United States sent military forces into Afghanistan believing that this was where Osama Bin Laden, mastermind of the 9/11 attacks was hiding, and to seek to destroy Al Queda. US military action in Iraq toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein, but was replaced with a weak government, that also plunged Iraq into a civil war between the Kurds, the Shia’s and the Sunni’s. More troubling is that laid the foundation for the creation of ISIS, another terrorist group, committed to destroying the United States and other European countries. Today Al Queda, ISIS and other terrorist groups have caused upheaval, fear and international chaos, beheadings, blowing up airplanes, airports and other significant targets. They have also recruited inductees from Western and European nations, undermining efforts to halt their growth.

The Middle East continues to be a kinder box, with Israel the center of unrest. Much of the conflict is the result of some Arab nation’s determination that Israel should not exist, and Israel’s refusal to yield to Palestinian desires for a homeland. Adding to uncertainty and tension in the region is Iran, an avowed enemy of Israel who has expressed its determination to destroy Israel, and a civil war in Syria, where Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has used chemical weapons on his own people, killing hundreds of thousands.

Relations between the United States and Russia have been strained because of Russian involvement in Ukraine, Syria and Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought to project himself as a strong leader, intimidating and daring other world leaders to stop him. The United States and other world leaders have imposed sanctions upon Russia for its interference in Ukraine, but thus far those sanctions appear to have little impact, or to halt President Putin’s arrogance.

There is increasing concern about corruption, poverty and lack of development in Africa. Corruption in South Africa is undermining much of the progress made since the end of apartheid, leading to division and polarization in the country. Much of the corruption appears to lay right at the doorstep of the leader of South Africa’s government. Other countries have seen slow development, as well as poverty and lack of development. Millions of people in much of the continent lack electricity and running water, and unemployment is at extremely high levels. Hurricanes and flooding have aggravated the situation, causing hundreds of thousands of people to be misplaced. Parts of Nigeria are very violent and dangerous, seeing hundreds of young girls and women kidnapped and people killed by terrorism.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church calls for the United States to withdraw its military forces from both Iraq and Afghanistan, and to only maintain advisors and support personnel to advise and train Iraqi and Afghanistan forces. Each of these countries must be willing and able to defend themselves. We also support President Obama’s goal in seeking to destroy Al Queda, ISIS and other terrorist groups. Further, we defend Israel’s right to exist and commitment to defend her security, however, we also support a Palestinian homeland and call upon Israel to commit to the same. We support the agreement reached between the United States and Iran, however, we are also opposed to Iran being able to develop a nuclear weapon. We also are disappointed that the United States has not given and done more to support the development of Africa, nor to hold African leadership accountable for corruption on the continent.

The Economy

Following the 2008 recession which saw the US and economies all over the world decline, causing economic upheaval and turmoil, we have seen, almost seven years later, the US economy, more than other economies around the world begin to rebound. While the rebound has not been as great as previous economic recoveries previous recessions were not as deep as the 2008 recession. Yet, there can be no doubt that the US economy is recovering. In 2015 the American economy averaged 200,000 jobs created every month, and more than 14 million new jobs since 2010, cutting the unemployment rate in half. Also consumer confidence last year was 92.9, the highest since 2004, and a big increase from 55 recorded in 2008. The increase in consumer confidence has led to an increase in home buying, causing the housing industry which was on the verge of collapse in 2008 to rebound. Adding to the economic recovery is a decrease in consumer debt.

While the economic recovery cannot be questioned, it also cannot be questioned that the recovery has not seen an increase in wages. This has created much anger and pain because of economic inequality. While the income of low income and middle income Americans has remained stagnant, the income of the wealthiest, particularly the top 1% of income earners has grown by over 40%. Fewer and fewer Americans remain in the middle class. While the gap between the wealthy and middle class widens, there is an ever growing increase in the number of poor in the US. Today 46.9 million Americans live in poverty, including one out of every five children. Despite the inequality gap in income there is little action being taken at national or state levels to address this problem. In fact it is just the opposite. While there is an outcry over income inequality, it is easier for political leaders to pass legislation to benefit the well to do than it is to pass legislation to help the poor and the middle class. For example no legislation has been passed to increase taxes on the wealthiest for whom there are major tax loopholes, and whose tax percentage is lower than those who make much less, while the Congress has cut several times programs such as food stamps, which benefit the poor, and refuses to increase the federal minimum wage to make it a living wage. Additionally Congress could create millions of good paying new jobs and strengthen the economy if it would pass legislation to address the nation’s infrastructure needs, which cry out for attention. Bridges, roads and other infrastructure are a risk to Americans. The president has proposed such measures and called on Congress to act, but it hasn’t.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church while pleased that the US economy is in recovery, believes that the recovery could and should be stronger, and that every segment of the US population should benefit. This means income inequality must be addressed. The African Methodist Episcopal Church calls for and supports the following to strengthen the recovery:

1. An increase in taxes for the wealthiest 1% of income earners
2. Fair tax rate for the wealthiest income earners, who currently pay less than those who earn much less
3. An increase in the federal minimum wage to 15% and an increase in each of the 50 states to 15%
4. Passage of infrastructure legislation which would repair bridges, highways and other infrastructure across the nation, which would create millions of good paying jobs
5. Penalize companies that move jobs overseas to pay low salaries and increase profits, while laying off Americans

Supreme Court Nomination

Following the unexpected and tragic death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, in February of this year, President Obama exercised his constitutional responsibility and nominated Judge Merrick Garland to fill the newly created vacancy on the nation’s highest court. Judge Garland currently serves as the Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. The United States Constitution also requires the United States Senate to dispose of the president’s nomination. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles Grassley have stated that they will not afford Judge Garland a Senate confirmation hearing. Many Senate Republicans have gone so far as to state that they will not even grant Judge Garland a meeting. They say they take this position because with President Obama having less than a year remaining in his term, that the American people should have a say in who fills the Supreme Court vacancy. This vacancy leaves the Supreme Court ideologically divided with four conservative and four liberal to moderate judges. As a result there is a great probability of many important cases before the Court resulting in a four to four tie vote. If this happens the ruling of the lower court in the case will be upheld. There are a number of major cases presently before the Supreme Court.

The argument of Majority Leader McConnell and Chairman Grassley raises several important questions. First, the term of the current president ends in January 2018, why then shouldn’t the president fulfill his constitutional responsibility to nominate someone to fill the vacancy? In fact wouldn’t he be neglecting his constitutional authority if he didn’t, especially with almost a year left in his term? Second, did not the American people speak when they elected the president in the 2012 national elections? If we wait until after this November elections, it will be well into next year before the Senate votes on a nominee. The new president will have to either resubmit the name of Judge Garland or select and submit a new nominee.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church calls upon the United States Senate to exercise its Constitutional responsibility and hold confirmation hearings for the nominee to the United States Supreme Court submitted by President Barack Obama. It does not have to confirm the nominee, but it does have a responsibility to act on the nominee. We call upon Senator McConnell and Chairman Grassley to schedule hearings for Judge Garland.

Obama Presidency

President Barack Obama is preparing now to come to the close of his historic presidency, the first Black to be elected President of the United States. He became president at a very difficult time in the nation’s history. The nation was in the throes of a recession, threatening to become a depression. Banks and Wall Street, the automobile and housing industry were all about to collapse. Unemployment was over 10%, with 750,000 people losing jobs every month. Consumer confidence was very low. The United States was fighting two wars and terroristic threats against the United States were on the rise. President Barack Obama had more on his plate than any presidents except Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. Making his task more difficult was that Republicans had decided to oppose everything he sought to do, with then Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell saying his number one priority was to make Barack Obama a one term president. The president’s task became even more difficult when Republicans won control of the House of Representatives in 2010 and the Senate in 2014. His legislative agenda faced gridlock, there was a government shutdown, and the president was publicly disrespected by members of Congress, talk radio and conservative organizations, much of it due to racial motivations. Despite all of this President Obama to the surprise of many was re-elected to a second term by a larger than expected margin.

As President Barack Obama comes to the close of his administration we take this opportunity to review his presidency. To see where he started and where he has brought the nation during his presidency. When he started Wall Street and the banking industry were about to collapse, today Wall Street is doing better than before the recession and banks have rebounded, the automobile industry is stronger than it has ever been, the housing industry has rebounded, the economy has created more than 14 million jobs and unemployment is 5%, consumer confidence has rebounded, and wages are finally beginning to increase. Additionally the president achieved what many of his predecessors could not, the Affordable Care Act, national healthcare which has provided insurance for millions who were previously unemployed. It is the signature accomplishment of his presidency. President Obama has also reduced the number of military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, whose role is now as advisors, rather than combat forces.

As we commend President Obama for his leadership over the last eight years, we acknowledge some disappointments and failures. We are disappointed that no progress was made on gun reform, that more progress was not made in improving education, particularly in urban schools, nor reducing poverty, that during his presidency we did not become a post racial America and that we were not able to end terroristic threats against the United States.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church which welcomed Barack Obama as the Democratic Party nominee at our General Conference in St. Louis in 2008, now commends and congratulates him as he comes to the close of his historic presidency. President Obama as he leaves the presidency, leaves the nation better than he found it. We also salute and thank First Lady Michelle Obama who has made the wellbeing of families of military soldiers, and the health of children and youth a priority. Together, the First Family has provided the nation an example of which we can be proud. We thank you for your leadership and service, and pray for you all God’s best in the future.