To:  
Bishop Bickerton and the Extended Cabinet, New York Annual Conference  
The Board of Directors of the United Methodist City Society  

From:  
The Vision & Ministry Council of the United Methodist Church of the Village  

Dear Friends in Christ,  

We write this public letter to express our strong support for the intentions and spirit of the statement issued June 29, 2020 by Black Methodists for Church Renewal (New York Annual Conference chapter) titled “Ways to ‘Come Alongside’ the Black Churches of the New York Annual Conference.” Members of our Council have signed the statement in support.  

We write to strongly and unequivocally urge that heed be paid to demands expressed in the Black Methodists for Church Renewal statement. We call attention to the indisputable fact that inequitable Methodist structures and great historical wrongs have created current economic and spiritual suffering for Black and Brown Methodist clergy and communities. This history must be acknowledged as part of addressing the current realities. These decades of inequity have caused the issues the BMCR statement addresses. These current issues include, but are not limited to:  

• UMCS granting and lending to communities of color that, in practice, have taken away resources and ownership or control of property from those communities.  
• Salary inequity to Black and Brown Methodist clergy members, tied to appointment processes that keep many clergy of color at or near minimum salary levels for their whole careers.  
• Lack of preparation both for clergy and congregations for Cross-Cultural/Cross-Racial appointment. When Black and Brown clergy have suffered abuse and racism, the response of the Conference has been woefully inadequate.  

We are in a moment of great opportunity to right the historical wrongs which created these current injustices. The shameful precedents of forcible removal of Black and Brown members from churches, segregation of African Methodist Episcopal congregations from white Methodists, the creation of the Central Jurisdiction grouping Black Methodists by the color of their skin not the location of their
communities, and more still leak toxic remains into today’s Methodist structure. We must acknowledge these inequities if we have any hope of moving together into a just future, not only for Black and Brown Methodists and clergy, but for us all. History is already our judge.

One essential way to address this shameful history is to ensure that Conference leadership consciously, continually, and intentionally include BMCR leadership in the creation and execution of any plans or efforts meant to redress the inequities that the BMCR statement addresses. The voices of those aggrieved and harmed over so many years must be true partners and co-creators of new patterns. The kind of sustainability and vitality we all yearn for must be steeped in justice and equity.

The BMCR statement comes out of the pain of living with systemic inequity from their own faith family for years, and in the context of the months-long mass protests for racial equity and justice. To quote from BMCR’s statement:

“The call for justice reaches far beyond accountability from the police. It reaches into every facet of our communal life including the Church. The time is surely upon us when we must dismantle the ways in which our denomination has been complicit in maintaining and in some cases promoting systemic racism and white privilege.”

At all times, but especially in times of crisis, persons of faith are called to see, to listen, and to respond with grace and by working towards justice. Persons of faith who hold power are called to act. We therefore call on all persons and organizational bodies addressed in this letter to recognize that equity for all Children of God should be our collective goal as Christians. To act in any other way is deny the equal love of God for each of God’s Children. Jesus the liberator, Jesus the defender of the oppressed, Jesus the challenger of injustice did this during his ministry over and over again. Jesus talked with and listened to those without power. Jesus challenged those who had power.

We urge you: do not behave as the Pharisees and Sadducees did in the stories told in our scriptures. Do not turn blind eyes to the injustices of our history, of our current moment. Do not fail to act out of fear-based concern but grasp tightly the demands of love and justice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This will mean sharing your power. There is no other way. Sharing power means making space for voices that will embolden and enlighten the whole. Sharing power means opening your hearts to the possibility that those who have been seen as powerless have gifts, talents and vision that serve God’s lost and forgotten children in a way that has not yet been made possible. We all are missing out on the extreme power and gift of wisdom gained at terrible cost by members of our own denomination. If brought to the table, this precious resource will not only enrich any future that we build, but is absolutely necessary to create an equitable future together. BMCR is ready to lead in conversation and action. By sharing power with them and others, you actually gain more than you give up. Sharing power does mean making room at the table for those with no seat there. This might mean some in power giving up seats at the table. This might mean building a bigger table. Both are possible. It is currently in your power to assist or resist this.

Bishop Bickerton quoted Dr. King in his June 26th correspondence entitled “Steps Towards Dismantling Racism”:

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.”

Creating a diverse and dynamic community centered in Christ’s message of love, justice, and courage to transform the world. Welcome home.
We call Bishop Bickerton to live into these words that he quoted as well as into his own words, quoted below:

“I pledge to come alongside those of you who have, for far too long, felt unheard and marginalized. I pledge to keep the conversation, the words, and the actions in front of us and to not let it fade. I pledge to lead with you and for you. And I pledge, as a part of that leadership, to admit mistakes, seek forgiveness, and listen deeply.”

We urge Bishop Bickerton, all members of the extended Cabinet and all Board members of the United Methodist City Society to act with clarity, grace, and thoughtfulness. Perhaps most importantly, we urge advocacy, action, and attention to the opportunity for creating justice that this moment in time presents for all of us, for the United Methodist Church as a denomination, for our nation, and for the world.

We, your fellow journeyers on the road, are watching and listening to your actions more than your words. We await your actions as your reply.

In Solidarity with Black Methodists for Church Renewal,
With Love and Strength and Courage,

Members of the Church of the Village Vision & Ministry Council

Martha Chapman, Council Chair
Sarah Capers, Lay Leader
Sarah Witman, Chair of Social Justice Committee
Virginia Riker, Chair of Ministers of Care
Katie Reimer, Chair of Worship Committee
Paul Pillitteri, Chair of Finance Committee
John Kleinig, Chair of Personnel Committee
Sam Winfrey, Chair of Trustees
Louis Echevarria, Stewardship Committee Co-Chair
Cassie Hinnen, Stewardship Committee Co-Chair
Amar Rajwani, Member at Large
Louise Fawcett, Member at Large
Alfida Figueroa, Member at Large

Staff:
Jorge Lockward, Minister of Worship Arts
Teresa Concepción, Director of Hope for our Neighbors in Need

Clergy:
Rev. Jeff Wells, Lead Pastor
Rev. Alexis James Waggoner, Minister of Leadership and Congregational Development

Copied:
Black Methodists for Church Renewal – NYAC
Conference Commission on Religion and Race